

# India and the Antiquarian Image: Richard Payne Knight's *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*

Sarah Carter

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À l'aide du livre infâme de Richard Payne Knight, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (1786), cet article révèle les moyens entrepris par les antiquaires pour lutter à l'échelle mondiale contre la culture matérielle ancienne. Knight se sert du corpus classique et des techniques de création d'images des antiquaires pour interpréter de manière emblématique les actes sexuels représentés sur les artefacts rapportés en Grande-Bretagne par les employés de la Compagnie britannique des Indes orientales, dont un fragment sculptural associé aux grottes d'Elephanta. En collaboration avec son graveur, Knight transpose le fragment du temple fait de grès en une gravure, un processus qui donne à l'exotique un caractère familier par le recours au langage visuel néoclassique. Knight impose également au lecteur/spectateur de reconsidérer le sens et le mérite esthétique d'œuvres d'art sexuellement explicites. Bien que son livre *Discourse* ait renforcé les partis pris coloniaux envers l'Inde et son patrimoine culturel, la méthode comparative de Knight confère une base philosophique à l'érotisme caractérisant l'architecture sacrée en Asie du Sud et souligne l'importance du désir sexuel dans les traditions artistiques anciennes, tant orientales qu'occidentales.

Sarah Carter is a PhD candidate in the Art History and Communication Studies Department at McGill University. Her research is funded by a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship.  
—sarah.carter@mail.mcgill.ca

In his 1786 publication, *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, antiquarian and member of the Society of Dilettanti Richard Payne Knight ventured to explain the emblematical significance of a “curious Oriental fragment” which he noted was “lately brought from the sacred Caverns of ELEPHANTA, near BOMBAY... and now belongs to the Museum of Mr. TOWNLEY.”<sup>1</sup> | fig. 1 | Arriving in London on the Cumberland man-of-war during the 1780s, the profits from the sale of this eleventh-century sandstone fragment depicting figures in the act of reciprocal oral sex belonged to the topographer and British-born captain in the Madras army, Alexander Allan, whose commercial activities abroad included the export of Indian antiquities.<sup>2</sup> Consigned to auction, it was subsequently purchased by Charles Townley and installed in his residence on Park street, where visitors were invited to admire it alongside his vast collection of classical sculpture. Whether South Asian artifacts reached British soil through transoceanic commerce or were circulated in print, late eighteenth-century antiquarians had to contend with a rapidly expanding corpus of material evidence. One response to the influx of exotic objects was to extend conversations concerning “the ancients” to cultures outside of Europe. Knight had Townley’s “erotic group” engraved for inclusion in the *Discourse*, where it served as evidence for his claim that Eastern and Western religions evolved from phallic veneration, the phallus being a universal emblem of “generative and prolific power.”<sup>3</sup> | fig. 2 |

Knight’s infamous disquisition on the pervasive use of erotic emblems in ancient art has conventionally been discussed as a burlesque intended to amuse an elite group of homosocial libertines, but more recent studies have explored the philosophical and anthropological dimensions of the text.<sup>4</sup> While the text certainly contains elements of both, this paper builds on the latter framework to suggest that the *Discourse* allows us to apprehend anew the cultural politics in which “exotic” works of art were increasingly entangled. Building on the key insights of the art-historiography of the British empire, I first read the *Discourse* as an intellectual conquest that coincided with the material ambitions of British colonialism in the late eighteenth century—a superstructural echo of the forced movement of Indian antiquities from their place of origin to the imperial metropole.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, I reconsider the arguments outlined in the text in light of recent scholarship on Indian erotic art to reveal how Knight illuminates aspects of ancient Hindu cosmology to substantiate a philosophical basis for the unrestrained eroticism found on medieval monuments across South Asia.

1. Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus, lately existing at Isernia, in the Kingdom of Naples: in two letters; One from Sir William Hamilton, K.B. His Majesty's Minister at the Court of Naples, to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. President of the Royal Society; And the other from a Person residing at Isernia: to which is added, A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus, And its Connexion with the mystic Theology of the Ancients* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786), 80. Hereafter referred to as the *Discourse*.

2. Hermione de Almeida and George H. Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance: British Romantic Art and the Prospect of India* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 52.

3. Knight, *Discourse*, 26.

4. See Alain Schnapp, "Antiquarian Studies in Naples at the End of the Eighteenth Century: From Comparative Archeology to Comparative Religion," in *Naples in the Eighteenth Century: The Birth and Death of a Nation State*, ed. Girolamo Imbruglia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Bruce Redford, "Richard Payne Knight's *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*," in *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008); Whitney Davis, "The Universal Phallus: Hamilton, Knight, and the Wax Phalli of Isernia," in *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) and Andrei Pop, *Antiquity, Theatre, and the Painting of Henry Fuseli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

5. Tim Barringer, Geoff Quilley and Douglas Fordham, eds., *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007); Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Empires of Vision: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also P. J. Marshall, "Taming the Exotic: the British in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," in *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 46–65; W. J. T. Mitchell, "Empire and Objecthood," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Sarah Monks, "Making Love: Thomas Banks' *Camadeva* and the Discourses of British India c. 1790," *Visual Culture in Britain* 11, no. 2 (2010): 195–218; Holly Shaffer, "Take All of Them": Eclecticism and the Arts of the Pune Court in India, 1760–1800," *The Art Bulletin* 100, no. 2 (2018): 61–93; Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory*

Knight recast the fragment as an episode in the progression of art from East to West, emblematic to figural, ancient to modern, but his engraver facilitated its material conversion from stone to print.<sup>6</sup> Reimagined on copperplate, the Indian temple fragment was no longer a singular object but one component in a polished illustration, presented alongside a Parian medal and other coins from ancient Greece. Seen in dialogue with Western material culture, the image suggested that erotic emblems were themselves promiscuous and could be found in such disparate places as archaic Greece, ancient India, and modern Abruzzo.<sup>7</sup> The arrangement of objects suggested a comparative logic that the text expanded and supported theoretically.

The findspot of the artifact was assumed to be the sixth-century rock-cut cave temple on Elephanta island (Gharapuri) near Mumbai.<sup>8</sup> The cave temple was well known in the eighteenth century for its elaborate sculptural program depicting scenes from the life of Śiva to whom it was dedicated.<sup>9</sup> The cave itself was an innovation. Open on three sides, the site combined carving techniques used in freestanding sculpture with those of rock-cut architecture.<sup>10</sup> While it is more likely that the fragment was collected from one of the numerous rock-cut temples in the region of Mahārāstra, Knight found no reason to doubt Allan's archeological fieldwork and highlighted the context in which the fragment was found and its relationship to the present populace. He observed that the cave temple was "now neglected" but allowed that,

others of the same kind are still used as places of worship by the Hindoos, who can give no account of the antiquity of them, which must necessarily be very remote, for the Hindoos are a very ancient people; and yet the sculptures represent a race of men very unlike them, or any of the present inhabitants of INDIA.<sup>11</sup>

In his initial appraisal, Knight impressed upon the reader a discord between the peoples of ancient and modern India. The inhabitants could not account for the age of the temple and did not appear to be of the same race as the carved figures. This lapse in sacred and historical knowledge was not particular to the Indian subcontinent, as Knight would later articulate, but here undermines an indigenous claim to the ownership of the site. The impoverished state of knowledge concerning local antiquities was a common theme among late eighteenth-century accounts of India.<sup>12</sup> Despite the "immense labour and difficulty" required to construct these ancient places of worship, "hewn in the solid rock," Hindu cave temples were commonly described as monuments without histories.<sup>13</sup> These ideas were not based on personal observations but those of British commanders, surgeons, and other East India Company professionals whose impressions, collected from service in the region, antiquarians uncritically reproduced.<sup>14</sup>

British speculators to the site agreed that time had obscured all visible signs of the technologies used to transform the rock into such extraordinary architecture, as well as indications of either the age or patron of the temple. With the rise of enthusiasm for Indian studies, which produced an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in 1785 and prompted discoveries linking Sanskrit to European languages, British scholars perceived themselves well positioned to restore this lost knowledge. Drawing from travel literature and increasingly available English translations of Sanskrit texts, Knight capitalised on successes in historical linguistics to propose a comparative approach to

Fig. 1 Sandstone Architectural  
Fragment, 11th century, South  
Asia, probably western India.  
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Fig. 2 Plate x from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786). RB 400897, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.



in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

6. The authorship of this engraving is unknown, but the Society of Dilettanti Minute Books reveal that the *Discourse* was a collaborative production involving three engravers, William Sharp (1749–1824), Conrad Martin Metz (1749–1827) and James Newton (1748–1804). Although Newton is often referred to as the principal engraver for the volume, only seven plates in the *Discourse* bear his signature. A receipt detailing the “Cost of the Cult of Priapus” records that Conrad Metz was paid for seven engravings, William Sharpe for at least two, and Newton for various. See May 4th, 1788, Minute Book of the Society of Dilettanti 1777–1798, vol. 4. Society of Antiquaries Library, MR 400-E B4.

7. The *Discourse* begins with a letter from Sir William Hamilton to Sir Joseph Banks, dated December 30th, 1781. It describes a peculiar “pagan” festival celebrated in rural Abruzzo wherein female parishioners offered phallus-shaped wax votives to Catholic shrines to enhance their fertility. Knight used the episode as the impetus for his survey on phallic worship which considers both ancient and modern practices.

8. Walter Spink has suggested that the temple was constructed in the mid-sixth century, a date still widely accepted among scholars. Walter M. Spink, *Ajanta to Ellora* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1967).

9. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 31–48.

10. Carmel Berkson, “The Historical Context and Evolution of Style at Elephanta,” in *Elephanta: The Cave of Shiva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6.

11. Knight, *Discourse*, 80–81.

12. Thomas R. Trautmann, “Does India Have History? Does History Have India?” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 1 (2012): 174–205. Trautmann considers the origins of the idea, perpetuated in British Orientalist scholarship, that India “had no historical consciousness.” See also Rama Mantena, “The Question of History in Precolonial India,” *History and Theory* 46, no. 3 (2007): 396–408.

13. Knight, *Discourse*, 80.

14. William Pyke, an East India Company (hereafter EIC) military cartographer first drew and measured the temple in 1712. His findings were presented to the Society of Antiquaries in 1780 by Alexander

phallic imagery, the visual counterpart to the linguistic link that Sir William Jones substantiated in the 1780s.<sup>15</sup> However, even as these studies grew out of a growing appreciation for Indian culture, colonial thinking maintained a formative role in intellectual encounters with the East.

Knight’s interest in the eroticism of Indian art was facilitated by the expansionist policies of both the EIC and the Society of Dilettanti, a gentleman’s club for former grand tourists whose meetings were described as equal parts erudite conversation and alcoholic revelry. The Dilettanti began sponsoring expeditions to Greece, Turkey, and other parts of Asia Minor in the mid-eighteenth century, and Knight became involved in his first Dilettanti publishing project in 1782, shortly after his election to the Society.<sup>16</sup> He joined a committee responsible for bringing the remaining unpublished drawings of the explorers James Stuart and Nicholas Revett before the public.<sup>17</sup> In the texts associated with these expeditions we can discern several of the qualities that Bruce Redford ascribes to early Dilettanti publications, namely nationalism and a “neo-Baconian empiricism” that together promoted the intellectual ambitions of the “private British gentleman.”<sup>18</sup> According to one of the explorers, he and his companions were to “procure the exactest Plans and Measures possible” of ancient buildings.<sup>19</sup> The members were also asked to “be exact” in marking the distances and directions in which they travelled as well as encouraged to frequently observe their “Watches and Pocket Compasses.”<sup>20</sup> Such strict standards of data collection were the result of cross-pollination between scientific and historical methodologies (the Royal Society shared members with the Society of Antiquaries and the Society of Dilettanti), but I would like to suggest that the penchant for calculating dimensions that began in earnest during the mid-eighteenth century gathered political charge as the East India Company became further entrenched in India.

Where precise drawings were valued as vital evidence for the antiquarian who set out to order the past systematically, one monument at a time, accurate geographical representations were equally important for the company servant, since familiarity with the territories that one wished to govern was an obvious advantage.<sup>21</sup> It proceeded from the same colonial acumen that French historian Claude Nicolet ascribed to the Romans. Accordingly, one needed to know:

the physical space that one occupies or that one hopes to dominate, to overcome the *obstacle of distance* and to establish regular contact with the peoples and their territories (by enumerating the former and by measuring the dimensions, the surfaces and the capacities of the latter).<sup>22</sup>

The commitment to measurement and data found in *Antiquities of Athens* (1762) and *Ionian Antiquities* (1769) is also present in the *Discourse*, but because of its transparent reliance on the firsthand accounts of EIC officials, I argue that it reveals more readily the shadowy effects of imperialism on classical scholarship.

In his debut publication, Knight was careful to meet the procedural expectations laid out in the earlier Dilettanti folios.<sup>23</sup> He first described the caverns in which the Indian temple fragment was found. “That from which the fragment in question was brought,” he wrote, “is 130 feet long by 110 feet wide, adorned with columns and sculptures finished in a style very different from

Dalrymple. In 1785 Pyke's notes and drawings were published in full in the journal *Archeologia* alongside the observations of William Hunter, a surgeon in the EIC, an avid Orientalist and a longstanding Secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

15. In 1786 Sir William Jones presented the argument that Sanskrit shared linguistic aspects with certain European languages (now called "the Indo-European relationship") to the members of the *Asiatic Society* in Calcutta. See James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 97.

16. Frank J. Messman, *Richard Payne Knight: The Twilight of Virtuosity* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1974), 42.

17. Messman, *Richard Payne Knight*, 42.

18. Redford, *Dilettanti*, 72, 44.

19. Richard Chandler, *Travels in Asia Minor: or, an Account of a Tour made at the Expense of the Society of Dilettanti* (Oxford, 1775), viii.

20. Chandler, *Travels in Asia Minor*, ix.

21. Redford, *Dilettanti*, 44–45. Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

22. Claude Nicolet, *Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 2 [my emphasis]. Edney uses Nicolet's passage to argue that the British mobilised cartography among various "scholarly" tools to conquer foreign territories, intellectually and physically: Edney, *Mapping an Empire*, 1.

23. Redford, *Dilettanti*, 87. Redford argues that Knight also does this in "Expedition into Sicily," his first attempt at a publication.

24. Knight, *Discourse*, 80.

25. Knight's measurements are borrowed from William Hunter, "An Account of some artificial Caverns in the Neighborhood of Bombay," *Archeologia, Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity* (London, 1785), vii:289.

26. Edney, *Mapping an Empire*, 32. Edney argues that scientific studies were synonymous with British methods of knowledge production.

27. Knight, *Discourse*, 81–82.

28. [My translation]. "Il doit, sans doute, paroître étonnant de trouver dans la Grèce des monuments impossible à expliquer par sa mythologie, mais qui s'expliquent par l'ancienne Théologie des Indiens." Baron D'Hancarville, *Supplément aux Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit*

that of the Indian Artists."<sup>24</sup> Although Knight had not seen the temple himself, he was able to provide an imaginative reconstruction with exact measurements and visual details borrowed from the accounts of military cartographer William Pyke and the EIC surgeon, William Hunter, as published in the Society of Antiquaries journal *Archeologia*.<sup>25</sup> The description does two things. First, the act of measurement is itself ideologically charged since the use of scientific method was thought to differentiate Europeans from native Indians who were frequently described as being in both technological and cultural stasis.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, Knight points to a stylistic divide between the arts of modern and ancient India. He continues,

The Hindoos still represent the creative powers of the Deity by these ancient symbols, the male and female Organs of Generation; and worship them with the same pious reverence as the Greeks and Egyptians did. Like them too they have buried the original principles of their Theology under a mass of poetical Mythology, so that few of them can give any more perfect account of their faith, than that they mean to worship one First Cause.<sup>27</sup>

This comparative discourse turns on cultural difference; the Indians are like the ancient Greeks, but unlike modern Europeans. Furthermore, the sexual content of the Indian fragment is advanced to explain the occult meanings of erotic forms across cultures. In fact, Knight argues that it provided unique insight unavailable in the classical corpus. Similar to the circumstances which revealed the bull breaking the egg of Chaos as found in Japanese sculpture, which had previously only been known through fragments, the Indian artifact was "a complete representation" of an emblem only partially and enigmatically expressed on western coins, examples of which were included on Plate x. It was an argument that allowed the French antiquarian the Baron d'Hancarville, on whose text Knight modelled his own, to make the following straightforward claim: "It must, no doubt, seem astonishing to find that monuments in Greece, which are impossible to explain using Greek mythology, are explained by ancient Indian theology."<sup>28</sup> Knight likewise created a circular interpretative framework, where the monuments of one culture were used to explain another.

But in order to validate his own interpretation, Knight needed to overturn rival claims concerning the artifact. Using iconographic affinities to prove his model of artistic diffusion across geographical and temporal boundaries, Knight begins with images of the hooded snake, a species peculiar to Asia found in the sacred caverns of India and on Mediterranean monuments. Knight confidently maintained that the emblem derived from a prehistoric culture, no longer extant, "who dwelt on the other side of the Erythraean Ocean."<sup>29</sup> He relates that the serpent must have been copied, and thus cautions his readers to ignore the "absurd tales" of modern Hindus concerning its meaning and advises tracing connections between cultures using accurate drawings of classical ruins instead.<sup>30</sup> These images, the product of "disciplined observation" and impartial reproduction, were elevated above other forms of knowledge transmission, in this case, oral histories.<sup>31</sup>

As scholars have argued, this preference for the optic was based on the supposition that visual evidence was unmediated and therefore more accurate.<sup>32</sup> Antiquarian images conformed to this idea; "representational truths" transmitted via taxonomic arrangements or comparative diagrams operated under



Fig. 3 Additional Plate from Richard Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (London: Printed by T. Spilsbury, 1786). © Trustees of the British Museum.



*This fragment in alto Relievo 2 feet 6 inches long and 1 foot 6 inches high, was detached from one of the ancient temples which are excavated in the solid rock upon the island of Elephanta near Bombay, and was brought to England in the Year 1784 by William Allen Esq<sup>r</sup> Captain of his Majesty's Ship the Cumberland.*

*Accounts of these temples in the islands of Salsette & Elephanta are given by the following Authors.*

*Tand Avesta by Anquetil du Perron Vol. 1. — Cap. 2. Pythe's Account & Archaeologia Vol. 7, p. 333. — M<sup>r</sup> Hunter's Account *ibid.* p. 286. — Niebuh's Voyage en Arabie Tom. 2.*

Et Quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non?

*Hor.*

et le progrès des arts de la Grèce; sur leur connexion avec les arts et la religion des plus anciens peuples connus; sur les monumens antiques de l'Inde, de la Perse, du reste de l'Asie, de l'Europe et de l'Égypte (London: B. Appleyard, 1785), 90. For a discussion of d'Hancarville's theories see Francis Haskell, "The Baron d'Hancarville: An Adventurer and Art Historian in Eighteenth-Century Europe," in *Oxford, China and Italy: Writings in Honour of Sir Harold Acton on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Edward Chaney and Neil Ritchie (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 187–188.

29. Knight, *Discourse*, 90.

30. Knight, *Discourse*, 91.

31. Sam Smiles, *Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain 1770–1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2000), 14.

32. On the growing importance of visual evidence in Enlightenment scholarship see Smiles, *Eye Witness*. See also Stephanie Moser and Sam Smiles, *Envisioning the Past: Archaeology and the Image* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

33. Smiles, *Eye Witness*, 4. Nicholas Thomas, "Objects of Knowledge: Oceanic Artifacts in European Engravings," in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, ed. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 143.

34. In addition to having reservations about the trustworthiness of local informants, Hunter and Pyke both highlight instances where no information can be gathered at all. This distrust and disavowal was consistent with the dominant British attitude toward Indian learning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. See Mantena, "The Question of History in Precolonial India," 398–400.

35. Knight, *Discourse*, 82.

36. Kevin M. McGeough, discussing Egyptian antiquities in a broadly European context, demonstrates that this process was pervasive. Kevin M. McGeough, "Imagining Ancient Egypt as the Idealized Self in Eighteenth-Century Europe," in *Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory in a Global Context: From Consumerism to Celebrity Culture*, ed. Ileana Baird and Christina Ionescu (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 90.

37. Quoted in Mitchell, "Empire and Objecthood," 145. Natasha Eaton has similarly argued that "collecting could and did motivate empire." Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis Across Empire: Artworks and Networks in India, 1765–1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 29.

38. Flaxman's plates first appeared in Rome in 1793. *The Iliad* Of

the assumption that images ensured greater veracity than other media.<sup>33</sup> In the context of the *Discourse*, the primacy of the visual can also be linked to a mistrust of indigenous knowledge. Many of the commentators on whose accounts Knight relies explicitly note that the natives were unable to provide adequate information about the caves.<sup>34</sup> The empirical data collected and visualised under the auspices of Europeans was considered more reliable.

Indian material culture becomes legible through ancient Egyptian, archaic Greek and other South Asian cultures coming to light under the aegis of British expansionism. This is how Knight explains Krishna, an Indian god whose mythos is only revealed through Virgil. He writes,

KRESHNA, or the Deity become incarnate in the shape of man, in order to instruct all mankind, is introduced, revealing to his disciples the fundamental principles of true faith, religion, and wisdom; which are the exact counterpart of the system of Emanations, so beautifully described in the lines of VIRGIL before cited. We here find, though in a more mystic garb, the same one principle of life universally emanated and expanded ...<sup>35</sup>

Comparing Eastern and Western emanations, Knight asserts his classical learning as the conduit through which Indian art can be rationalised. In arguing that modern Hindus were neither the racial nor the cultural heirs to the temple, the *Discourse* necessitated a British intervention; an obligation to collect and restore the material culture and lost knowledge of ancient India.

Although interpreting antiquities from abroad signified the "mastery" of a collective past, their placement in private and later public collections in Britain materialised it.<sup>36</sup> In circumstances where such art objects were seen as "neglected" or misunderstood, this rhetoric justified the material motives of the colonial project. Blake's often cited dictum that "Empire follows Art, and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose," is appropriate here, since the transfer of the temple fragment from India to London made such intellectual requisitioning possible and opened the door for other forms of colonization.<sup>37</sup>

The *Discourse* promulgated an antiquarian gaze through which Indian antiquities were scrutinised. Preserved in a select few volumes of the *Discourse* is an additional plate that was sometimes (but not always) delivered alongside the elusive volume. | fig. 3 | As rendered by one of the *Discourse*'s illustrators, light glances off the splayed torso of the topsy-turvy deity at left, her legs wrapped around the head of her paramour as she twists her body to fellate him. Where the architectural fragment terminates at the standing figures' waist-height, Knight's artist has extended the scene via dotted outlines indicating the lithe limbs and massive phalluses lost to the artifact's viewer.

If we compare this version with the detail on Plate x, we observe the extent to which the engraver has taken advantage of both his medium and the damaged state of the original to enhance the liveliness of the figures. Reimagining both missing sections and lost surface detail, the reconstruction increases both the visual impact and erotic force of the artifact. The missing limbs are reinstated with an "absolute linear purity" that looks forward to the third volume of *Antiquities of Athens* and Flaxman's outline drawings of Homeric scenes.<sup>38</sup> This combination of the familiar and the exotic was a common feature of British responses to Indian art in this period.<sup>39</sup> In this composite image, the learned devotees of Śiva are completed through the visual language of neo-classicism. It is thus not "between the lines" but through line itself that the



intellectual conquest of India is made visible. Where European geographers translated the varied landscape of the subcontinent into the linear grid of the map used to overcome the obstacle of distance, Knight's engraver transformed the fragment into an object of neoclassical beauty, restoring its ragged edges with clean lines. It is an image that elicits what one scholar has described as "contradictory assertions of affection and coercion," affection because both Knight and the engraver embrace and give definition to the spirited sexual excess of the original and coercion because both render the object "comprehensible" through neoclassical discourse.<sup>40</sup> Rethinking the temple fragment not as the material culture of a monstrous Other but a sacred object that could be explained using the Orphic litanies and other archaic and classical texts, Knight transformed it from an irrational idol into a "unit of knowledge."<sup>41</sup> This process, however, is not necessarily reductive since it creates a space for novel and serious engagement with erotic art.

The interpretative possibilities thus expanded, Knight also demands his reader/viewer to reconsider the aesthetic merits of marginal artifacts. This secondary objective is clearly articulated in the paratext that accompanied the engraving, a Latin quotation adapted from Horace's *Epistles*. Printed below the plate, the quotation reads: "Et Quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non?" (What is beautiful? What is base? What is useful? What is not?). Knight chooses the passage in which Horace encourages his friend Lollius Maximus, a young man with political aspirations, to read Homer instead of the Stoic philosophers for a more appropriate moral paradigm. In Horace, the phrasing is less equivocal: "While you declaim at Rome, Lollius Maximus, I've been at Praeneste rereading the author who wrote about the Trojan War, who tells us what is fine, what is base, what is useful or not, more clearly and better than Chrysippus and Crantor do."<sup>42</sup> Knight reframes the original text as a question, and in so doing changes the meaning of the engraving. Homer no longer tells us what is fine or what is base, but rather we, as readers, are called upon to think for ourselves. Using our own faculties and discretion, we are also compelled to see reason embodied in erotic images.<sup>43</sup> Positioned above a question, the image is intended to provoke a moment of contemplation, one that parallels the "pensive withdrawal" from public life that Horace pursues in his retirement. In the *Discourse*, as in the *Epistles*, art invites philosophy.

As scholars investigating the historical reception of Indian art have demonstrated, Knight was not alone in outlining correspondences between Eastern and Western religions; he was among a group of European antiquarians who noticed compelling parallels between the divine dualism found in ancient Orphism and that of Śaivism.<sup>44</sup> We learn from Knight that "the first-begotten Love" of Hesiod and Orpheus "first appeared in splendour; of a double nature, as possessing the general power of creation and generation, both active and passive, both male and female," qualities which he argued were similar to those associated with Śiva's *Lingam* (phallus), an emblem of "the union of the male and female Organs of Generation," which appeared on a second Indian artifact in Townley's collection, a portable temple from the Rohilla region.<sup>45</sup> Accounts of the meaning and function of this phallic attribute and its female aspect confirm that Knight was correct to recognise the importance of opposing forces in sacred Sanskrit texts and to suggest that the magnet-

Homer Engraved By Thomas Piroli From The Compositions Of John Flaxman Sculptor Rome, 1793 (London: J. Matthews, 1795). Ery Contogouris notes Flaxman's "absolute linear purity." Ery Contogouris, *Emma Hamilton and Late Eighteenth-Century European Art: Agency, Performance, and Representation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 71.

39. Shaffer, "Take All of Them," 63.

40. Monks, "Making Love," 197.

41. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 67.

42. Quoted in Catherine Keane, "Lessons in Reading: Horace on Homer at 'Epistles' 1.2.1-31," *The Classical World* 104, no. 4 (2011): 429.

43. Pop argues that not only are reader/viewers forced to confront the prejudicial basis of their own thinking but that the adapted quotation asserts the artifact as an alternative, albeit erotic model for moral and aesthetic virtue. Pop, *Antiquity, Theatre, and the Painting of Henry Fuseli, 198-199*. Monks similarly argues that the juxtaposition of image and text suggests Knight's ability (and perhaps desire) to transcend his own culture's moral limits. Monks, "Making Love," 209.

44. Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, 73-104. Mitter's important chapter entitled "Eighteenth Century Antiquarians and Erotic Gods" emphasises that European scholarship in the late eighteenth century was not wholly dismissive of Indian erotic art, but rather engaged in exploring its philosophical and mythological basis as well as its relationship to Western religious thought. Mitter discusses the Baron d'Hancarville, Charles Dupuis, and Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal as being among Knight's contemporaries investigating the erotic origins of sacred imagery. De Almeida and Gilpin likewise note Knight's aptitude for reconciling the erotic and sublime elements of Indian art. De Almeida and Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance*, 52-53.

45. Knight, *Discourse*, 29, 84.

46. Mulk Raj Anand, *Kama Kala: Some Notes on the Philosophical Basis of Hindu Erotic Sculpture* (Geneva: Nagel Publishers, 1963), 18.

ic pull between the sexes, sexual desire, was used allegorically to express the creative power of the divine. A passage from the Vātulaśuddhāgama explains that male and female genitalia pictured as the “Yoni and the Lingam” when united “symbolise[d] the creation of the world.”<sup>46</sup> Conjoined, these forms were “the manifestation of duality ... [and] the earthly symbols of manyness and procreation.”<sup>47</sup> Thomas E. Donaldson likewise uses a passage from the medieval Sanskrit text, the Śilpa Prakāśa, to explain the cosmological significance of desire in the doctrine “espoused by the Kaulācāras,” a sect devoted to Śiva and his consort Śakti. “Desire is the root of the universe,” it reads, “From desire all beings are born. Primordial matter (mūlabhūta) and all beings are reabsorbed again through desire.”<sup>48</sup> Knight similarly posits that the deity of the Orphic Litanies is described as the “principle of attraction; and the Deliverer” an active agent who gives “liberty to the innate powers of Nature, and thus fertilis[es] matter.”<sup>49</sup> According to this exegesis each culture has adapted this “system of attraction” to their specific needs. What emerges from both contemporary accounts of Indian erotic art and the *Discourse* is the importance of sexual desire as an animating force in and of the world, one that Knight insists transcends conventional cultural divides.

Returning to the temple fragment, there are several possible interpretations for depictions of figures engaged in “acrobatic kākila [or] mutual oral-genital congress.”<sup>50</sup> One scholar explains that this posture might have been associated with the skilled women who assisted kings through kāyāsād-hana (Hatha yoga) for “magico-medical purposes,” or as a Tantric ritual.<sup>51</sup> In instances where these images appeared on Tantric temples, David White has argued that the female figures were Yoginis, embodied deities who engaged in acts of oral sex to transmit “the germ plasm of the godhead” via sexual fluid among the male practitioners of their clan.<sup>52</sup> Knight does not explain the figures in such terms, but rather looks for similar images on Greek coins. The action, he states, is a “symbol of refreshment and invigoration ... mutually applied by both to their respective Organs of Generation, the emblems of the active and passive powers of procreation, which mutually cherish and invigorate each other.”<sup>53</sup> It is the Eastern counterpart to the Western image of a Bull or Cow “represented licking itself ... invigorated by the exertion of its own nutritive and plastic power upon its own being.”<sup>54</sup> While Knight misinterprets the erotic action, he nonetheless gives it abstract meaning. He emboldens his readers to resist evaluating the sculpture from a modern perspective and turns to the “moral and metaphysical” work the “*Bagvat Geeta* [*Bhagavad Gītā*],” recently translated into English, to explain its religious significance.<sup>55</sup> While limited to a select few Sanskrit texts in translation, and perhaps overconfident in his comparative method, Knight nonetheless provides a philosophical basis for erotic imagery and sets in motion a profound dialectic between opposites: male and female, creation and destruction, the earthly and the aethereal.

The *Discourse* encourages us to reconsider the multifarious ways in which antiquarians expropriated, evaluated, and embraced South Asian antiquities. Reading it as a nexus between imperial, aesthetic and art historical discourses provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between art and empire in the late eighteenth century. Mobilising text and image, the *Discourse* justified theoretically the material movement of Indian antiqui-

47. Anand, *Kama Kala*, 18.

48. Thomas E. Donaldson, “Erotic Rituals on Orissan Temples,” *East and West* 36, no. 1/3 (1986): 169.

49. Knight, *Discourse*, 68–69. Knight would put the same idea in different words in a much later publication entitled *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology* in which he explained that the “Infinite Being” was rendered comprehensible through “personified attributes, signifying the various modes of exerting his almighty power; the most general, beneficial, and energetic of which being that universal principle of desire, or mutual attraction, which leads to universal harmony, and mutual co-operation.” Richard Payne Knight, *An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology* (London: A. J. Valpy, 1818), 25.

50. Donaldson, “Erotic Rituals on Orissan Temples,” 173.

51. Donaldson, “Erotic Rituals on Orissan Temples,” 173.

52. David Gordon White, *Kiss of the Yogini: “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11.

53. Knight, *Discourse*, 81.

54. Knight, *Discourse*, 78.

55. Knight, *Discourse*, 82.

ties from sacred spaces to private collections. It assumed the qualities that Knight ascribed to erotic emblems. It was an active and passive agent, one that expanded the scope of neoclassicism to assimilate ancient South Asian art, but also replicated assumptions about India, its people and its historical imprint. Yet, Knight's infamous dissertation on erotic art called into question modern sensibilities and created a space for critical interrogation. It privileged the cosmological and placed an appropriate emphasis on sexual desire in ancient Indian visual culture. The viewer was made to see eroticism differently. That is, not as the expression of the irrational concupiscence of artists, but of an ancient and universal *ethos* that expressed the dual nature of the divine and a natural human desire for progeny. ¶

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