

# Blackness and Identity in Sarah Harriet Burney's *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808) and *Traits of Nature* (1812)\*

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**Abstract:** One of the latest rediscoveries within the field of the Burney Studies is the *oeuvre* of Frances Burney's half-sister, Sarah Harriet Burney, who also was a famous novelist during her lifetime. This paper focuses on two black characters in *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808) and *Traits of Nature* (1812). By using a gender and postcolonial criticism, I analyze Sarah Harriet's portrait of blackness and how this author approached the marginalization of the blacks in early nineteenth-century Britain, which is closely related to the oppression suffered by the heroines in her works.

**Keywords:** Nineteenth-century studies; gender studies; Sarah Harriet Burney; blackness; British literature.

**Summary:** Introduction. Blacks and ladies. *Geraldine Fauconberg*: Impertinent gallantry repressed. Amy Price and the subversion of beauty in *Traits of Nature*. Conclusion.

**Resumen:** Uno de los últimos redescubrimientos en el campo de los estudios sobre la familia Burney es la obra de la hermanastra de Frances Burney, Sarah Harriet Burney, quien también fue una famosa novelista en vida. Este artículo se centra en dos personajes negros que aparecen respectivamente en las novelas *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808) y *Traits of Nature* (1812). Mediante los estudios de género y la crítica poscolonial, analizaremos el retrato que Sarah Harriet hace de la negritud y el modo en que esta autora abordó la marginación de los negros en Gran Bretaña a principios del siglo XIX, algo que está estrechamente vinculado con la opresión que las heroínas de sus obras sufrían.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios del siglo diecinueve; estudios de género; Sarah Harriet Burney; negritud; literatura británica.

**Sumario:** Introducción. Negros y damas. *Geraldine Fauconberg*: represión de la galantería impertinente. Amy Price y la subversión de la belleza en *Traits of Nature*. Conclusión.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of literature records Frances Burney's success in the field of the novel, but it does not usually pay attention to the other literary daughter of the musicologist Dr. Charles Burney, Sarah Harriet Burney (1771–1844). “Little Sal”—as she was called—struggled to earn her living in England, which led her to work as a governess and as a companion to an invalid, and she also travelled to Switzerland and Italy. After her continental stay, she returned home and nursed her father at the end of his life. Their relationship was very tense due to Sarah Harriet's elopement from home with her brother, James Burney, who was married to the daughter of the editor Thomas Payne at that time. As a writer, Frances's half-sister produced quite a prolific corpus ranging from *Clarentine* (1796), *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808), *Traits of Nature* (1812), and *Tales of Fancy* (1816–20)—including *The Shipwreck* and *Country Neighbours; or The Secret*—to *The Romance of Private Life* (1839)—consisting of *The Renunciation* and *The Hermitage*. She had the same publisher as Jane Austen, Henry Colburn, who punctually sent her copies of Austen's novels (Clark, *Letters* lxi). The two writers knew each other's work very well, and recent research precisely insists on the affinities between the *oeuvre* of Frances's youngest sister and Austen to the point of mutual influence (Fernández, “Another Mistress”; “Anne Elliot's”). Now scholars in the field of Burney Studies and eighteenth-century women novelists have lately renewed interest in Sarah Harriet's merit, and thus Lorna J. Clark has edited her correspondence and last novel, and *The Burney Letter* dedicated one monograph to Frances's half-sister in 2010.

This article is inserted within the framework of gender studies and focuses on a topic which has never been studied in Sarah Harriet's fiction: her approach to blackness through the portrait of two secondary characters in *Geraldine Fauconberg* (1808) and *Traits of Nature* (1812). I suggest that Sarah Harriet directly addresses racial discrimination in these works whose publication coincided with the success of the campaign for the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807–08. It was by no means strange that Sarah Harriet linked the patriarchal oppression with the racial one since her subversive and unconventional attitudes are close to those of abolitionist writers. Burney scholars, in fact, have insisted that she was a rebellious daughter in search of her father's

attention and that in her works she frequently reflected this conflict (Fernández, “The Quest”). I will take as a reference the work of feminist and postcolonial scholars, such as Moira Ferguson or Felicity Nussbaum, who have emphasized the role of race in British women’s writing. I draw on Ferguson’s concept of Anglo-Africanism, defined as the colonial discourse about Africans and slaves which was constructed by British women (3), and on Nussbaum’s connection of monstrosity and race. Besides, I also bear in mind that, though Sarah Harriet must have a place of her own in academia, it is impossible to dissociate her from the *oeuvre* of her eldest half-sister and from the research existing in the ever-expanding field of Burney Studies. Taking all these matters into account, the present article will provide the context of black people’s circumstances in England, as well as of the connection between abolitionism and the proto-feminist movement, to finally address Sarah Harriet’s works more specifically.

## 1. BLACKS AND LADIES

Since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, blacks were regarded in derogatory terms and as exotic items in aristocratic households in Britain, while the human tragedy underlying slavery was ignored. Anthony Markley (88–89) and Beth Fowkes Tobin (176–78) point out that wealthy British families saw black servants as property and almost as commodities taken from faraway countries. As the slave trade between Europe and Africa intensified, the number of blacks living in Britain increased, but prejudice and racial discrimination also became more noticeable. Used as scapegoats for social evils, blacks were considered infidels, and prejudices about them as mischievous and dangerous pervaded Britain all along the eighteenth century as London was swamped by images of blacks in signboards. Social unrest grew in the cities despite the work of leading black activists: Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano demanded that blacks be freed from slavery. As a result of Lord Mansfield’s decision on the case of the runaway slave James Somersett, slavery was abolished in 1772 in England and Wales, but not in the rest of the British Empire.

The social status of blacks had a correspondence with their representation in eighteenth-century literature and painting, which were two realms where black people featured as inferior to whites and where a hierarchy of power relationships was revealed: the superior white

surrounded by inferior creatures. In eighteenth-century art blacks became associated with beggars, prostitutes, fairground performers, musicians, peddlers, sailors and servants in various works by painters such as William Hogarth (“A Rake’s Progress,” 1733–74, “Marriage à la Mode,” 1743–45), Thomas Gainsborough (“Portrait of Ignatius Sancho,” 1768), Sir Joshua Reynolds (“Study of a Black Man,” c.1770), or Johann Zoffany (“Dido and Lady Elizabeth Murray,” c.1799), while the potter Josiah Wedgwood created the famous medallion “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (1787). Blacks also appeared on the stage in William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1603), Isaac Bickerstaff’s *The Padlock* (1768) or George Colman the Younger’s *Inkle and Yarico* (1787), and they were usually introduced as comic characters that sentimental fiction will later develop.

When Sarah Harriet wrote, black people were still being stigmatized on moral and sexual grounds. Popular opinion debated on whether or not blacks had a soul and even on their demoniac nature. According to David Davydeen, the moral justification of the slave trade rested largely on the refusal to classify the black as a human being, and Lord Chesterfield branded Africans as “the most ignorant and unpolished people in the world, little better than lions, tigers, leopards, and other wild beasts, which that country produces in great numbers” (30). However, from 1700 to 1837, the English racial attitude evolved from a naïve curiosity into surprisingly modern and complicated beliefs about race and humanitarianism lost to commerce under the guise of philanthropy (Gerzina 25). Moira Ferguson argues that the homogeneous conceptualization of Africans as pious converts, moribund slaves, collaborators, and rebels was bound up and overlapped with projections of patriarchally prescribed female roles and idealized self-images, which ranged from abused victim, orphan and giving mother to altruist and loyal “servant” (4). Black people were frequently depicted as actively participating in the subculture of the lower classes, sharing in their experience of violence and vulgarity, since it was believed that they felt pleasure, companionship and protection among the common people. Regarding gender, it was accepted that black women who gained their freedom in Britain in this period became paid servants (Migley 90), though, from a Western perspective, they represented corrupting Others, as Nussbaum states. A black woman could be seen as a monster, a racialized femininity menacing Imperial England and outside the limits of the human, while British ladies were designated “guardians of their

country's distinctive complexion" (Nussbaum, *Limits* 12). Furthermore, two major cultural fears intensified in the later eighteenth century: that miscegenation brought contamination to a nation seeking a purified identity distinctly different from its imperial peoples and that burgeoning numbers of free blacks arriving in the country could take the jobs of English domestics (Nussbaum, "The Theatre" 74).

This view prevailed at the same time that late eighteenth-century English abolitionists used books and pamphlets and worked to win support in the general press. Many female authors were anti-slavery: Hannah More ("Slavery, a Poem," 1788), Helen Maria Williams ("Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade," 1788), Mary Leadbeater ("The Negro: addressed to Edmund Burke," 1789), or Anna Laetitia Barbauld (*Epistle to William Wilberforce on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade*, 1791), just to name a few. According to Claire Midgley, women identified with the sufferings of their own sex and there was a close relation between antislavery movements and the development of feminism in Britain (*Women* 154). Mutual influence existed, so, in her paramount book on the same subject, Ferguson maintains that white British women constructed a colonial discourse about Africa in general and slaves in particular called "Anglo-Africanism" and that the historical intersection of feminist impulse with anti-slavery agitation helped secure white British women's political self-empowerment, though it had negative consequences as well, since it consolidated nineteenth-century British imperialist and domestic-racist ideology (*Subject* 5–6).

Sarah Harriet did not ignore the social discomfort of both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, and she took sides. She wrote that William Wilberforce, who had served in Parliament since 1780 and took up the twenty-years drive to end the slave trade in 1787, deserved "the most sincere applause" ("To Elizabeth Carrick," 6 Dec. 1813). Besides, in another letter, she referred more widely to the oppression felt by the Greeks in the hands of the Turkish Empire and she added: "But with humiliation I now recollect that some of our christened dowdies, when we have the absolute command of an establishment of slaves in the West Indies, can be almost as infernal as the Spartans to their Helots. Absolute power I fear will always be murder to the morality of vain, and selfish human creatures" ("To Charles Frances Barret," 1 Aug. 1811).

## 2. *GERALDINE FAUCONBERG: IMPERTINENT GALLANTRY REPRESSED*

After the success of *Clarentine*, Sarah Harriet produced an epistolary novel, *Geraldine Fauconberg*, whose heroine was recommended by the *Critical Review* as a pattern worthy of imitation to “any lady, who wishes her daughter to excel in that quiet elegance and correct *maniere* for which the heroine of this novel is famed” (qtd. in Clark, *Letters* 103), and the work was also seen as “a correct and faithful picture of genteel life” (qtd. in Clark, *Letters* 93). The novel deals with an orphan heroine who goes to spend the summer with her beloved cousins, the Lesmores, in Highgrove Park. Geraldine loves the Lesmores’ heir, Ferdinand, and their marriage would certainly be approved of if he communicated his feelings to Geraldine and abandoned his obsession with the seductive widow, Mrs. Neville. As a matter of fact, Ferdinand is accepted as Geraldine’s husband only after Mrs. Neville herself has informed about the nature of their liaison.

In *Geraldine Fauconberg* it seems difficult to associate the heroine with the black slave since the young girl is Mr. Archer’s niece and feels comfortably inserted in the family. However, both are newcomers in the Lesmores’ household and Geraldine is instrumental for the black man when he first appears in the novel. The scene recalls the first pages of Frances Burney’s last novel when “a voice of keen distress” (*Wanderer* 11) praying admittance in a boat to Dover is heard and the heroine’s identity becomes a matter of speculation for those present, who think that she could be a black woman. Frances’s scene has been interpreted as connected with the plight of the enslaved and as containing broad implications for the oppression of women in late eighteenth-century society, as well as reflecting the anxious efforts of the upper echelons of society to ensure their superior status by positing a race of unnamed and unnamable wanderers (Czechowski 214; Salih 308). Instead of Robespierre’s France, Sarah Harriet adds tension to the relaxing atmosphere of an English pleasure boat by introducing a black man who is not physically well. The party of people stop on the bank of the river as they hear a “heart-rending moan” (*GF* I: 202).<sup>2</sup> Human distress only moves the heroine, who hurries to a gate. With the help of Ferdinand, Geraldine manages to rescue a human being in conditions which are far

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<sup>2</sup> From now onwards, *Geraldine Fauconberg* will be referred to as *GF* and *Traits of Nature* as *TN*.

worse than Juliet, the protagonist of *The Wanderer*, whose nationality and race are in doubt when she arrives in England: an “emaciated, bruised, and half-naked negro, apparently bereft of sense, and in the last faint convulsions of expiring misery” (*GF* I: 203). Illness meets racial difference and Geraldine’s role changes from a passive witness to an active participant in a black man’s fate.

The black man becomes a colonial doubling, “a strategy of displacement of value through a process of the metonymy of presence” in Homi K. Bhabha’s theory (171), and Sarah Harriet challenges patriarchy through him since he is a discriminated object which is asserted. The black man’s function in *Geraldine Fauconberg* is to reflect other people’s reactions to blackness, which range from pity to disgust and rejection, as Julia, the main correspondent in the novel, points out. These reactions reveal a great deal about each individual and are in consonance with eighteenth-century humanitarianism and negrophobia: “Lord Litchmere, more than usually serious, contemplated the transaction with the sort of meditative attention. . . . His sister, Lady Elizabeth, looked disgusted and supercilious; Colonel Courtville seemed good-naturedly concerned for the grievous state of the helpless stranger” (*GF* I: 206). Geraldine is singled out from the rest in that she does something for the black man by chafing his temples and rubbing his hands until he opens his eyes and is reanimated. He transits from being a thing to being a living thing. Mrs. Nelville, the temptress and a figure marginalized by many in the novel (Fernández, “Another Mistress”), takes advantage of the scene to give it a dramatic turn and she prays: “Oh, how touching a lesson of humanity have we been taught! Come, dear madam, and behold, proudly behold, the child of your well-rewarded care, performing, with pious tenderness, the lowest offices of charity and benevolence!” (*GF* I: 206). Despite her sentimental rhetoric and passivity to alleviate the black man’s suffering, Mrs. Nelville does mediate between him and Geraldine. Inadvertently or not, she points to Geraldine’s peripheral position in the family; Geraldine is freer than any other lady to assist the black man. By doing this, she precipitates the empowerment of the heroine as the black man’s savior.

If Geraldine is a new member of the Lesmores, the black man is placed a stage below her, inasmuch as he becomes an appendage to Geraldine and an excuse to highlight a woman’s merit. As Geraldine’s fetish, he simultaneously mimes and deauthorizes authority, just like mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its otherness, “that which it

disavows” (Bhabha 130). The negro cries with gratitude and Mr. Archer orders that he be carried home to Highgrove Park, where a debate arises on how he should be treated and to what extent he should be welcomed in a scene which reminds of Fanny Price’s arrival at Mansfield Park. Lady Elizabeth simply dismisses any possibility of integration: “a more filthy looking object I never beheld!” (*GF* I: 211). Lord Lichtmere, who is Lesmore’s rival for Geraldine’s heart in the novel, sees her humanitarian gesture: “Money in this case would have been of no avail; nothing but immediate personal succor [sic] could have saved him” (*GF* I: 211), and Mrs. Neville’s attention shifts again from the black man to Geraldine, whose moral value is celebrated. Unlike Lichtmere, who sees the practical effects of Geraldine’s kindness, Mrs. Neville is unable to dissociate the heroine from sentimental literature:

We see what she is capable of doing; in the cause of humanity; how tenderly she sympathizes in the miseries of the lowest of her fellow-beings; yet cheerfulness seems to be the habitual disposition of her well-regulated mind. We think . . . of that truly beautiful passage in one of Richardson’s works, where, speaking of some favourite character, he says, “The features of her lovely face, and the turn of her fine eye, are cast for pity!” (*GF* I: 211)

Once rescued, the black man is given a voice. However, the negro’s direct speech is not always reproduced but indirectly characterized by Geraldine’s cousin, Julia Lesmore, the main correspondent in this epistolary novel. When the black man has the opportunity to speak, his language is not easy to understand, becoming an example of hybridity, that is, a language that is similar, but not the same (Bhabha 89). He shows the effects of civilization in his speech by managing to give an account of his story to Ferdinand “in faint accents, and bad English” (*GF* I: 207), and later the Welsh maid is appalled at Caesar’s “colour and his jargon” (*GF* I: 246).

The black man’s partial insertion in British culture is not only represented in his incorrect English (*GF* I: 207), but also in other departures from Englishness and even from his condition as a human being. The first one is that in England he becomes an inverted Robinson who has travelled from America to civilization and has a story that he wants to reveal. Retrospectively, he tells that he has a name, Caesar, and that he is a native from the West India islands, where he worked for an



English merchant before surviving a shipwreck. Caesar was a conventional name for a black slave, which was used in Maria Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro" (*Popular Tales*, 1804) and Mariana Starke's *The Sword of Peace; Or A Voyage of Love* (1788). Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) probably started this tradition since Caesar was the protagonist's "Western" name. In Edgeworth's tale, Caesar is the best negro of Jefferies, a cruel planter from Jamaica, and he prevents a massacre by telling Mr. Edwards, a benevolent landowner, that one of his friends, Hector, has planned a conspiracy against the whites. Sarah Harriet's Caesar provokes rejection when he reaches an English cottage and people escape from him, but he himself is also scared at approaching a fierce dog in a farm with the singularity that Caesar cannot share his fears. His alienation is coupled with his lack of identity, his disempowerment and unprovided state. He was so tired that he had fallen down where Geraldine found him, and Mr. Archer's taking Caesar under his protection might have consequences: there were many black criminals in Great Britain and many slaves escaped from their masters. Caesar could have been a slave or a criminal and his story a fake, so Mr. Archer does not offer Caesar a post as a butler with the prospect of making him Geraldine's lacquy until he has confirmed the negro's story: it seems that he was a house slave and was about to become a footman (*GF* I: 272–73).

In spite of his status as an attribute of Geraldine, Caesar's difference pervades the text. Initial rejection by servants evolves into kindness as he can also inspire sympathy, which is promoted only as long as Geraldine protects Caesar. Julia thinks servants will treat him well on Geraldine's account. Meanwhile, Caesar admires Geraldine, who turns into an angel for him. As the narrative progresses, the black man is loved by people for his own merit: "the servants all declare he is the merriest and the best tempered creature that ever existed: and his behaviour in the drawing-room is so humble and respectful, his countenance so honest and happy, that, black as he is, I begin to think him almost handsome" (*GF* II: 51). However, total cultural assimilation never takes place, so in volume two Lady Tresilian's delicate daughter Emma is going to celebrate her birthday with a party and Caesar would sing and dance. At that point Julia tries to exhibit Caesar's otherness and exotic nature as "one of those wild specimens of national talent" (*GF* II: 50–51). The black man exists merely to reflect upon the superiority of the white and he frequently feels lonely and humiliated in white aristocratic company. Caesar's cultural

affiliation is valued only for entertainment purposes, but never taken seriously, and Sarah Harriet gives it an ironic turn in the scene where Caesar becomes the unexpected friend of an enormous dog called Pompey, Caesar's enemy in ancient Rome. The author follows the usual practice to name slaves and animals after Roman emperors in an attempt to anthropomorphize the pet world. The black man and the dog were mirror images of each other in painting and here they become a binomial and a potential challenge: "it would do your heart good, after the terrible grudge there has been between them these thousand eight hundred and odd years, to witness the amicable terms upon which Caesar and Pompey now walk about together!" (*GF* II: 51).

Music had a special role in Sarah Harriet's life and it usually features in her works as an artistic manifestation of the self. In *Geraldine Fauconberg*, Caesar is musically gifted and a creator able to make something different out of a song. On one occasion, Caesar is singing and he suddenly stops, so Julia Lesmore adds: "What it most resembles is the vile twanging of a Jew's harp; and yet it is altogether different from that, and from everything else which European ears ever heard" (*GF* II: 158). Symbolically, Mr. Archer and Geraldine have some authority over Caesar, who continues singing because the latter is pleased and Mr. Archer gives him permission to do so. For the rest of the company, he is just funny and is compared with a grotesque figure who, again, provokes detachment and amusement like "a certain Monsieur Poussatin, mentioned, I think they said, in the *Memoires de Grammont*" (*GF* II: 159). In Grammont's book, Chaplain Poussatin dances before the prince as if he were really mad:

Poussatin performed wonders before the Queen; but as he danced with great sprightliness, she could not bear the odour which his violent motions diffused around the room: the ladies likewise began to pray for relief; for he had almost entirely got the better of all the perfumes and essences with which they were fortified: Poussatin, nevertheless, retired with a great deal of applause, and some louis d'or. (Hamilton 153)

Sarah Harriet depicts the approach to blacks of both the high and the low classes. There existed the image that Africans lacked in morality and intelligence, being perpetually childlike, demonic, and practicing outlandish, barbaric customs. By comparing Caesar with the devil, his sexual impulses are condemned on the basis of his blackness. Though

black footmen might and did marry white serving maids without eyebrows being raised, Caesar's amorous behavior is condemned. In volume three Caesar grins to a Welsh maid, Jane, who is wearing no shoes and she takes him for the devil: "whenever she saw him coming, as if she was bewitched, and trembled from head to foot if she only spied him at the distance of a hundred yards" (*GF* III: 244). The episode continues when Caesar meets her again along cold stone passages and attempts to kiss her (*GF* III: 245). The black man and the Welsh servant are placed at the same level and his violence meets hers. The scene cannot be more grotesque: Cesar's sexual advances defy sanctioned norms and cross the racial divide. Jane faces Caesar's hypersexuality:

She screamed, scolded, scratched, and clawed him, worse than you ever saw a cat claw a dog; pulled handfuls of wool off his poor head, and was in such a bitter passion, that even after he let her go and would have been glad to sneak off, she continued to pummel and thump him with so little mercy, sputtering Welsh all the time, that Mrs. Gwyn, lame as she is, was forced to go and part them. (*GF* III: 244–45)

Instead of harming a woman, Caesar ironically ends up attacked by the Welsh "dragon of virtue" (*GF* III: 246) and not in a heroic position: his face "was running down with blood in two or three places; his neckcloth was torn in tatters, one of his eyes was sadly bruised, and his silver shoulder-knot hung by a single thread to his coat" (*GF* III: 246). Jane feels triumphant and, according to Julia, reveals her prejudices: ". . . an admirer, his colour and his jargon prejudice her so violently against him, that I dare say she thinks his presumption, in daring to raise his eyes to a Christian Englishwoman little less than wicked" (*GF* III: 246).

### 3. AMY PRICE AND SUBVERSION OF BEAUTY IN *TRAITS OF NATURE*

*Traits of Nature*, published in 1812 was Sarah Harriet's third work and sold out very quickly to the point of having a second edition in that same year, as well as an American edition and a translation into French (Clark 159). It revolves around Adela Cleveland, the second child of her father's second marriage, who is neglected by Mr. Cleveland believing that the girl is like her mother, the sentimental Lady Rosalvan, although the protagonist has been brought up by her grandmother, Mrs. Cleveland. When she goes to live with the Hampdems, Adela meets Algernon

Mordington, an orphan who only has a sister, Eudocia. Algernon unexpectedly becomes his uncle's heir and attains an earldom. Though the hero becomes Lord Ennerdale and gets married to a wealthy woman, he is very miserable and his wife dies leaving two children, little Algernon and Harriet.

There is not a detailed explanation of Amy's connection with the Clevelands, only that she is protected by the family and becomes Adela's confidant: "Mrs. Cleveland had been induced, at the request of a dying friend, to admit this honest creature, when quite a girl, into her household, and to promise her protection whilst she lived, and a moderate provision at her death" (*TN I*: 47–48). In *Traits of Nature*, Amy is more integrated into the family than Caesar. What is more, Adela trusts her companion more than the white people who should support her. At the same time, Amy is sufficiently anglicized, so she shares values and interests with the target audience of white middle- and upper-class women. In that sense, she becomes a new version of the "Angel in the House."

Both Caesar and Amy have conflicts within the family and the violence against animals is coupled with violence against women. In spite of Amy's inclusion in the family, nine-year-old Julius hates her and accuses her of having struck him. In a way, Amy gets more attention from others than Adela's brother does and Julius is jealous of her reliance on Amy, which gives rise to an uncomfortable episode revealing Julius's character as whimsical and sadistic. Amy explains "in very imperfect language" (*TN I*: 51) that the conflict began when they refused to play with Julius and he got angry. Though Amy remained at some distance, he seized a dog by the collar and mistreated it by trying to cut its eye-lashes with some scissors in a scene that surpasses animal abuse if we turn to the author's correspondence. Sarah Harriet's original idea was carefully rearranged, as her letter to Charlotte Frances Barret reveals:

I have largely profited [sic] by your slight and too cautious hints for my old Ad:—Julius no longer gashes the dog's ear, but *throws the scissors* [sic] *passionately at Amy* when he sees her approaching to take them away,—and they fall by accident upon Frisk, who is wounded by their sharp points. This is not so Zelucoish and yet answers my purpose of describing a spoilt, vehement brat. ("To Charlotte Frances Barret," 4 Oct. 1811; my emphasis)

In the published version, Amy succeeds in taking the scissors from Julius, who almost hit his target. As a result of this episode, one of the legs of the dog, which is called Frisk, is injured and Julius becomes unbearable. Only Amy knows how to manage him: “He struck his head, his feet, his hands against the door with frightful vehemence; raved for readmission till his own outcries made him hoarse” (*TN I*: 50). After considering the accident as “wholly unpremeditated” (*TN I*: 50), Amy holds him in her arms and places him outside the room. Julius complains to his father later, and Mr. Cleveland reveals his prejudices by labeling the incident “nursery squabble” (*TN I*: 51) and saying to his wife: “I have never interfered in what relates to the management of the objects to whom *you* are attached, and I should be happy if you would observe the same rule with regard to those *I* love” (*TN I*: 52) in reference to Mrs. Cleveland’s “black pet” (Amy) and “white pet” (Adela), where both the black woman and the protagonist are placed at the same level.

Amy indirectly characterizes other individuals and she is always related to the issue of education in *Traits of Nature*, becoming Adela’s foster mother or counselor when she is practically alone in the world. When she is introduced to the Hampdens, the heroine feels as lonely as Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* two years later: “the bashful little creature, though now evidently recovered from her first apprehensive feelings, could not be prevailed upon to utter more than a monosyllable at a time; and that, in so low a voice, as scarcely to be heard” (*TN I*: 74). According to Clark, Adela “lacks any status in society which only paternal sponsorship could give. The virtues she boasts are those which allow her to survive her exiled state and consist of negations” (127). As a matter of fact, Adela’s mother ran away to Scotland after her marriage and later she got divorced. Adela’s subsequent encounter with the mother provides the opportunity to know Lady Rosalvan’s story, but also to condemn her behavior: “whatever might be the rights and privileges of a parent, it was impossible they should be so unlimited as to authorize the contamination of that mental purity which it was every young woman’s duty to preserve unblemished” (*TN I*: 280). Sarah Harriet was very critical both of the parents’ role in education and of female instruction at the time.

The only maternal figure in the novel is Amy, who says very serious things and quickly realizes that Algernon really loves Adela: “he always say, you prettiest girl in the world; he make you kind, and good-tempered, merry, nice husband; and me very, very sorry he go throw

himself upon proud, fine cousin” (*TN I*: 229–30). She also sees through the Mordingtons, Algernon’s in-laws:

The servants at Mordington Castle, no mind what they tell; no case either for lord or lady; and they say, and me hear all what they say, down stairs— they say one of the young Missys, she make love to Massa Algernon; and when he by, O, she smile so sweet, and speak so kind; and when he not by, she so cross, and buff her sister, and pout her father, and vex her mother, and make all the servants run, and give nothing but trouble to the whole house! (*TN I*: 230)

Amy foretells Algernon’s discomfort at Mordington Castle and discovers the villains in the narrative by delivering to the heroine two revealing letters. In the first one, where Amy tells Adela that little Algernon’s governess is not getting better, we know that her name is Amy Price (*TN II*: 139). The second letter from Mrs. Temple was obtained by “chance and good-luck” (*TN III*: 284) and explains what Norris is like and his intentions concerning Lady Rosalvan:

The man is a profligate, and a needy, low-minded adventurer. He will not leave my lady a guinea; and the disgrace of such a connection, will be worse than anything that has yet happened . . . the wretch to whom she would entrust her person and property, bears the most notorious bad character . . . he is completely worthless. (*TN III*: 285)

Amy is a black woman purged of some of the undesirable qualities attributed to blacks and provokes a debate on beauty similar to the one about deformed Eugenia in Frances Burney’s *Camilla* (1796), who is also kept in the dark regarding her looks. Sarah Harriet is interested in ugliness and beauty, a feminine asset defining eighteenth-century ladies’ marriageability and social value together with virtue, as it was promoted by literature of the time. Nussbaum states that English women were seen to possess the ideals of reciprocal affection, refined sexuality, and private domesticity which were equated to the highest level of civilization (*Torrid* 13). This scholar goes on to argue that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries femininity itself was represented as a deformity or disability, a “fair defect,” while blackness of “complexion” was imagined as not just a sign of “visible difference” but also of degeneracy (Nussbaum 17–18). In Amy’s case, beauty has no meaning because her

looks do not conform to British standards and she is also far from the European image of a sensuous black woman. Amy makes a funny impression on young Algernon: “The countenance, however, invested with so sable a hue, displeased less than it diverted—repulsed less than it attracted him. Its expression was congenial to his own gay nature—so mirthful, yet so gentle, that he felt an immediate impression of cordial good-will in her favour” (*TN I*: 59–60). He later disapproves of Amy’s looks and his offensive comments to Mrs. Hampden turn Amy into a deformed creature or a monster. The hero deconstructs the traditional idea of a beautiful woman on the basis of race:

Oh, she is the most delightful piece of ugliness I ever beheld! She never looks at you without a grin; she has teeth as white as snow; lips as thick as the broad wheel of a wagon; a fine fleece of black wool upon her head, and so comical a countenance, that she almost tempted me to give her the preference in my good graces, to the former object of my devotion, old Nurse Brown. (*TN I*: 66–67)

In *Camilla*, stoic Eugenia is aware that she is despised for being ugly and that no one would like to be in her position. Eugenia aims to write a book where she defiantly addresses the lords of creation to the point of affirming that her deformity is not the product of her sex or littleness of soul: “the value you yourselves set upon external attractions, your own neglect has taught me to know; and the indifferency [sic] with which you consider all else, your own duplicity has instructed me to feel” (*Camilla* 906). Despite her uncomfortable position, Amy is also more resolute than it may seem and defends herself when Julius mockingly considers her a linguist and introduces Amy to Miss Barbara Cleveland as somebody who is “a model of grace, and a pattern of all female elegance [that] she may bestow a finish upon your carriage, and communicate a dignity to your movements, which no dancing-master could equal” (*TN I*: 168). Indirectly, insults are extended to Adela because Amy is called her inseparable friend. The female servant refuses to hold her tongue before male abuse. Aware of herself and her singularity within the household, Amy responds to Julius’s comments: “Me no mind their jeers; me do no harm to nobody; me say no rude thing to nobody; me only black, and not pretty, and not tall—they laugh for that? Let them laugh, and me laugh too, and think them foolish people!,” and Adela feels delighted with Amy’s “untaught philosophy” (*TN I*: 170).

When Adela is getting ready for a ball and her cousin Cristina watches her lovely outfit, the latter regrets “her little queer figure” and envies Adela. Amy articulates a very strong feminist vindication when she alerts Cristina of the dangers of believing that a woman is devalued if she has no pretty looks and refers directly to herself, who is not only ugly but also black:

You no queer-looking; you very pleasant-looking!—Me like your face better every time me see it.—Ah, once Massa Julius, he make mock at poor Amy, and call her blacky, and stumpy, and laugh if she only come in sight! But he laugh no now; he forget to think me blacky—and tall men and women, they forget to think you little! (*TN II*: 152)

## CONCLUSIONS

Sarah Harriet’s antislavery feelings found expression in her fiction as related to gender issues and female protagonists who always voiced as much discomfort and alienation in her works as the author felt personally. In the two works, blacks are as alienated as the heroines. Unlike her celebrated sister Frances Burney, who only hinted at racial difference in *The Wanderer* (1814), Sarah Harriet engages more openly with questions of race and identity since black characters are partially anglicized and assimilated into British households. Still, they are marginalized and their difference is continually made visible through their uncomfortable position in the family.

In *Geraldine Fauconberg* Caesar represents the speculum reflecting not only the social prejudice towards the black man, but also the heroine’s moral value. By helping a dispossessed black man, Geraldine becomes more visible and worthy as a heroine. At the same time, characters are morally defined by their attitude to Caesar and their (in)capacity to accept black skin. Sarah Harriet traces the long path to dignity and subjectivity, so Caesar slowly comes to life, transiting from being a thing to having a voice and a name.

*Traits of Nature* features a black woman who is closely linked to education and the feminine sphere, and who becomes very significant at a more private and domestic level. Like Caesar in *Geraldine Fauconberg*, mercurial Amy reflects the protagonist’s merit and also compensates Adela’s lack of female support. Paradoxically, Amy takes care of a white lady who finds in her what the patriarchal family (and



even her biological mother) denies to her and who feels as oppressed and lonely as the black servant. Courageous Amy faces male violence and is condemned by men, who treat her with disrespect for being black and ugly, but she is strong enough to verbalize some truths which are not expressed by the protagonist, thus subverting the image of a passive victim of oppression.

Sarah Harriet's censure is in consonance with her liberal views. In that sense, the appearance of these secondary characters is not a coincidence but a well-engineered device with a powerful effect, and abolitionist literature cannot ignore Sarah Harriet's realistic portrait of black characters. By showing the other side of the colonial project, she denounced the injustice of using human beings as "colonial" objects. Her achievement consists in that, instead of introducing black characters as a danger, Sarah Harriet places them as defeated Others with fears and desires, as vulnerable individuals who must be respected and honored by all.

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