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DOUBLE SEDUCTION:
LINDA BRENT, HARRIET JACOBS,
AND WHITE WOMEN READERS

Sonia Di Loreto

Since its recognition as an authentic slave narrative – and not a fictional account – and the scholarly attention that followed¹, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* by Harriet A. Jacobs, has been lauded for its control and mastery of genre conventions. This slave narrative, written in the 1850s after Harriet Jacobs escaped to the North, and published in 1861 with an introduction by Lydia Maria Child, is the story of a young woman who, desperate to flee her master's insistent sexual requests, and in order to protect her two children, decides to escape by hiding in her grandmother's garret for seven years. After this ordeal, she moves to the North and tries to build a life for herself and her children.

As a number of critics have noticed, Jacobs turns to different literary genres with the intent to find a combination of styles, imagery, and vocabulary, capable of telling her story and expressing her point of view about her struggles. She resorts to gothic imagery, domestic values, sentimental modes and the conventions of the seduction novel because those were easily recognizable literary traits, thus showing her literary expertise, while simultaneously producing a shared structure of affect and sympathy with her readers. By creating Linda Brent (the author's first person narrator, and her alter ego) in her autobiography, Jacobs builds layers of identity and levels of introspection, which, on the one hand, allow her to show how her character evolves, and, on the other hand, they reveal different aspects of life in slavery that would otherwise remain untold. As Sandra Gunning clarifies: "Jacobs's commentaries are strategically embedded within Linda Brent's

¹ Jean Fagan Yellin authenticated Jacobs's work in 1981. See J. FAGAN YELLIN, *Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative*, "American Literature", LIII (1981), pp. 479-486; J. FAGAN YELLIN, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2004; J. FAGAN YELLIN, *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

language of domesticity, a language imported into the text to highlight the black female slave as mother, all in an effort to make her acceptable to a Northern audience”². In order to make credible claims and convincing appeals, Harriet Jacobs has to insist on her sound moral character, in a context where morality was hard to define.

In what follows, I would like to concentrate on Harriet Jacobs’s careful handling of her readership, intending to illustrate how, by revisiting and reversing the classic seduction plot, she manages to address ethical and moral questions concerning slavery and patriarchy.

Already in the prefatory material the reader is alerted that the story contains some delicate, or in fact indelicate topics, very painful to recollect, as Linda Brent claims, “it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history”³. Addressing the question of silence, Lydia Maria Child, the editor of the text, in her “Introduction by the Editor” counteracts the possible criticism with a preemptive declaration: “I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate”⁴. Therefore, even before disclosing the details of the story, the author and the editor are shaping the audience’s expectations, preparing the reader for some kind of sexual content.

By doing so, *Incidents* positions itself in the long American (and British) tradition of seduction tales, which were, in the words of Leslie Fiedler, “a kind of conduct book for the daughters of the bourgeoisie, aimed at teaching obedience to parents and wariness before potential seducers”⁵. By the 19th century, seduction novels, such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*, or Hannah W. Foster’s *The Coquette*, were not only extremely popular, but they had also acquired a veneer of didactic respectability. However, those novels, while arguably written for the edification of young women, were also instructing their readers about the rhetorical moves,

² S. GUNNING, *Reading and Redemption in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. by D. M. Garfield and R. Zafar, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 134.

³ H. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁵ L. FIEDLER, *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New, Revised Edition, New York, Delta Books, 1967, p. 45.

and the power struggles inherent in every seduction attempt. Every 19th century reader knew and understood the rhetorical strategies and the negotiations over control, influence, coercion, consent, and submission, intrinsic to seduction.

But *Incidents* does not only establish itself as a seduction story. In fact, while implicitly claiming a place in the tradition of the seduction novels, Jacobs's text reveals itself as an authentic autobiography, thus redefining the classic plot that was familiar to her audience. Indeed, both the first sentence of the "Preface by the Author" ("Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction")⁶, and that of the "Introduction by the Editor" ("The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me")⁷ are claims to the text's authenticity as an autobiography. Although some of its predecessors were advertised as authentic stories and not novels, by promising authenticity they were following the novelistic conventions of the times: *Pamela* was published in 1740 with the pretense that the letters were genuine; and readers of *Charlotte Temple*, published in 1791, visited the supposed grave of the fictional Charlotte in Trinity Churchyard, New York, believing the story to be "a tale of truth", as assured by the author.

Differently from other instances of the seduction plot, Harriet Jacobs's story is told – and written – by the person who in any other case would be the victim of the seducer. If in *Pamela* and in *The Coquette*, for example, the epistolary structure allows for the point of view, and the voice of the heroine, in *Incidents* the autobiographical narrative provides only the unmistakable perspective of Linda Brent, aka Harriet Jacobs. The presence of these two figures, Harriet Jacobs and Linda Brent – two individuals who are not quite the same, but also not quite different – allows for some space where the author and the narrator can speak from two separate standpoints. If their two voices sometimes merge, it is the distinct voice of the author that retains the control over the narrative, as she engages in frequent pleas to the readers: by using a rhetoric embedded in the vocabulary of seduction Linda Brent is made to appear to her readers as a different kind of victim, not as the hapless female, but as the cunning strategist. The fact that *Incidents* is an autobiography is a challenge to the very premise of any traditional seduction story: the rhetorical power, in fact, is firmly in the hands, and in the pen, of the author, who, by the sheer action of

⁶ H. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, p. 1.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 3.

writing, establishes herself not as the victim of a power struggle, but as somebody who at least is not completely subjugated by her persecutor, and who is, in point of fact, having the last word.

Once we take this aspect into consideration, it is clear that the cautionary words uttered by the editor about delicacy and indelicacy, are not about the seduction plot itself, which was an established literary genre, but about the defiance of the victim, who, instead of silently declining and dying, makes sexual choices that would not be well received by the white audience of the North and, what is more, is so bold to write about them. What happens in Linda Brent's story, in fact, is an interesting twist: the young heroine, the virtuous and morally irreprehensible slave, after being the object of her master's illicit desires for quite some time, and while struggling not to be subjected to his advances, decides to enter a liaison with another white man, with whom she goes on to have two children. By addressing what was considered taboo in 19th century America (sex not only unsanctioned by marriage, but between a white man and a slave woman), Jacobs on the one hand opts to disrupt the idea that there is a clearly defined moral ground commonly acknowledged, and on the other hand, she challenges the benevolent aura still surrounding the seduction plot, according to which women, through their weaknesses and influence, could convince men to be honorable and offer marriage, hence respectability and happiness (as in *Pamela*). Clearly the marriage option was precluded to black women (and not only marriage to white men but to black men as well, as Jacobs explains in the chapter "The Lover"), and the fantasy of seduction in slavery is revealed for what actually is: attempts to violence and rape.

Because of her readership's familiarity with the vocabulary of seduction, Jacobs is able to depict Linda Brent's master, Dr. Flint, as the identifiable figure of the relentless seducer, while at the same time adding the legal layer to this power struggle. When she starts describing the attempts made by Dr. Flint, Jacobs gradually approaches the crucial question of the lack of legal status for slaves: "But I now entered on my fifteenth year – a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. [...] He was a crafty man, and resorted to many means to accomplish his purposes. [...] He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. [...] He told me I was his property; that I must

be subject to his will in all things”⁸. Like other seducers, Dr. Flint employs different strategies available to him in a patriarchal society – age, influence, power – but ultimately he resorts to the added weapon provided by the slavery system: Linda is his property and she lacks legal protection. This scenario makes clear the terrible paradox of slavery: “as the enslaved female is legally unable to give consent or to offer resistance, she is presumed to be always willing”⁹. Immediately after this passage, narrated from the point of view of the teenager slave, the readers are offered one of Jacobs’s commentaries, where her adult voice is clearly audible: “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men”¹⁰. Because she can use Linda Brent as the victim of a well known seduction plot, with the added cruelty of the lack of legal protection, Harriet Jacobs can reflectively engage her readership in a dialogue against the evils of slavery for women. If, in fact, both the sentimental mode and the seduction novels had made the address to the readers the norm, clearly stating their didactic purpose from the inception¹¹, in *Incidents* Jacobs employs the double voices of Linda Brent (as the character victim of a seduction attempt), and herself (as the escaped woman slave) in order to convince her readers of the relation between legal status and moral ground, where the absence of the former does not allow for the presence of the latter. While in novels such as *Charlotte Temple* or *The Coquette*, the moral ground on which to stand is the unassailable patriar-

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 27

⁹ S. HARTMAN, *Seduction and the Uses of Power*, in “Callaloo”, XIX, 2 (1996), p. 539.

¹⁰ H. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, p. 27.

¹¹ In the “Preface by the Editor” to *Pamela*, S. Richardson writes: “If to divert and entertain, and at the same time to instruct, and improve the minds of the youth of both sexes: if to inculcate religion and morality in so easy and agreeable a manner, as shall render them equally delightful and profitable to the younger class of readers, as well as worthy of the attention of persons of maturer years and understandings [...] the editor of the following letters, which have their foundations in truth ad nature, ventures to assert, that all these desirable ends are obtained in these sheets.” S. RICHARDSON, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* [1740], Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971, p. 3. Similarly, Rowson in her “Author’s Preface” states: “If the following tale should save one hapless fair one from the error which ruined poor Charlotte, or rescue from impending misery the heart of one anxious parent, I shall feel a much higher gratification in reflecting on this trifling performance, than could possibly result from the applause which might attend the most elegant finished piece of literature whose tendency might deprave the heart or mislead the understanding”. S. ROWSON, *Charlotte Temple. A Tale of Truth* [1791], New York, Penguin, 1991, p. 1.

chal system, where young women who drifted from the paternal and domestic protection were destined to be ruined and die, in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* the moral ground is shakier, and its boundaries hazy and blurred.

In writing her autobiography Jacobs's intention is to convince her readers, mostly white women in the North, of the evils of slavery for black women, and she accomplishes it by showing Linda Brent dealing with different versions of seduction, in the context of an absent legal frame. While in other seduction plots the young woman always starts from a standpoint of familiar security where there is usually an authoritative figure who can lend protection, in Linda Brent's case the authoritative figure – her grandmother – can only provide moral guidance, but no legal protection, as she is shown to be divested of all her means when, in the first chapters of the autobiography, Jacobs describes the wrongs her grandmother was subjected to. In order to carry her point across, Jacobs keeps Linda Brent's story on the foreground, but at the same time she maintains a constant conversation with her readers, trying to move them thanks to her own power of rhetorical seduction. Once she establishes Linda Brent as a model of chastity and in possession of the right feelings according to the 19th century *cult of true womanhood*, Jacobs illustrates to her readers how, in slavery, the only resort available to a young slave woman, engaged in a power struggle where she is incommensurably weaker, is to choose which seduction to surrender to: "I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospect of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do any thing, every thing for the sake of defeating him. What *could* I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss"¹².

With the perfect metaphor for her becoming a fallen woman ("a plunge into the abyss"), Linda Brent describes to her readers the lack of options for a woman slave: if she does not want to submit and become "a victim under his feet", if she wants to defeat him, in a space where there is no legal recourse, she can only attempt a jump into the abyss. After Linda states her tribulation in the vocabulary of seduction, Harriet Jacobs's voice emerges to address directly the reader, and to convince her of Linda's (and Harriet's) morality. She expresses her

¹² H. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, p. 54.

feelings as an adult woman (sorrow, shame, truthfulness) while at the same time showing Linda's capacity for deliberation:

And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrows and shame. It pains me to tell you of it; but I have promised to tell you the truth, and I will do it honestly, let it cost me what it may. I will try not to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness. For years my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother, and the good mistress of my childhood. The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowing, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation¹³.

Thanks to her careful calibration, Jacobs can claim to have both feelings and a power of resistance, since she does not plead innocence for being naïve, rather she insists on the polluted atmosphere of the slavery system, where the path for a woman is predefined for her. Once she does not shy away from her responsibility, and in fact, she argues about her retaining some control over her situation (“I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation”), Jacobs again makes an appeal to her readership: “But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affections, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!”¹⁴ What is interesting in this conventional sentimental address is the juxtaposition of the terms “law” and “judge”. By invoking the presence of some kind of legal protection for white women, Jacobs clashes the realms of legal jurisdiction and moral judgment: when there is no law there cannot be any judgment. By once again using the sentimental vocabulary of seduction (“purity sheltered from childhood”, “objects of affections”), Jacobs sneaks in what is tantamount in her intention, that is to re-establish a link between legal system and moral behavior. As noted by Christina Accomando, “Their “purity” is not inherent, but “has been sheltered”; their “homes” are not automatically intact but “are protec-

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

ted by law.” Jacobs uses a legal model for her appeal and subverts it”¹⁵. Because she couches her claims in a language of seduction, Jacobs is able to advance her political agenda by showing white women also how their own protection is provided to them, hence always in danger of being denied.

The rest of this section is dedicated to show how the slavery system confuses realms that otherwise would remain separate: as it is impossible to maintain some rules in seduction within the context of slavery, similarly it is unrealistic to maintain moral laws where there is no legal status. When trying to explain her choice of taking a white lover, Jacobs once again speaks in terms of yielding to seduction, immediately reminding her readers of the inherent confusion generated by the slavery institution: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. [...] There may be sophistry in all this, but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible”¹⁶.

Although the principles of morality are impossible to uphold, Jacobs nevertheless uses a confessional language with her readers, asking on the one hand to be pitied and forgiven, and on the other, not to be judged: “With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made the headlong plunge. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave, to be entirely unprotected by law or custom”¹⁷. If the white women of the North never knew what it means “to be *entirely* unprotected by law or custom”, they might know what it means to be *partially* unprotected, as it has been made clear by a long tradition of seduction fiction. For exactly this reason, by reminding white women of their potential status as victims, Jacobs is able to assert her final consideration: “Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others”¹⁸. With the security of an adult woman, and in the light of a common knowledge about the power and pitfalls of seduction, Jacobs can assert her moral authority asking for a diffe-

¹⁵ C. ACCOMANDO, “*The Laws were Laid Down to Me Anew*”: Harriet Jacobs and the Reframing of *Legal Fictions*, in “*African American Review*”, XXXII, 2 (1998), p. 238.

¹⁶ H. JACOBS, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, p. 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 56

rent standard, hence a different system of moral references accorded to black women.

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