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‘Something Akin to Freedom’: Harriet Jacobs and the Feminist Tradition

Susan Hays Bussey

[I]t chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. He knew my grandmother, and often spoke to me in the street ... He expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me. He constantly sought opportunities to see me, and wrote to me frequently. I was a poor slave girl, only fifteen years old.

So much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all. I also felt grateful for his sympathy, and encouraged by his kind words. It seemed to me a great thing to have such a friend. By degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart. He was an educated and eloquent gentleman; too eloquent, alas, for the poor slave girl who trusted in him. Of course I saw whither all this was tending. I knew the impassable gulf between us; but to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master, is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment. 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. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be made unhappy. 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 (46–47).¹

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* appeared in 1861 after several years seeking a publisher, and met with favourable reviews but limited sales. Despite the preface and editorial efforts of well-known abolitionist and

author Lydia Maria Child, the outbreak of the American Civil War made Jacobs' story less pressing – she missed the moment for telling a slave's experience. The work was largely forgotten or dismissed as fiction until 1981, when, through the dual operation of the emergence of the women's movement and the efforts of Jean Yellin, who was able to both prove Jacobs' authorship and verify some of the unlikely events the text described,² this pivotal work was rediscovered and newly reread. The popularity and strength of *Incidents* in today's canon suggests that Jacobs' story functions in ways male slave narratives cannot: her acts of sexual independence and dedicated motherhood are in direct defiance of the traditional narrative of the female slave, raped and denied her children. Furthermore, her text presents a definition of womanhood accessible to her as a formerly enslaved African-American whose past made it difficult to adopt the behaviours and attain the status associated with the white feminine ideal commonly known as the cult of true womanhood.³ Jacobs' narrative seeks to reach a white and middle-class readership, and on the surface, she affirms the values of that patriarchal bourgeois social system; nonetheless, she frames her experiences in a way that challenges not only slavery but the normative ideal available to free women at the time.

Jacobs begins her narrative with a wistful account of the happiness of her childhood. Although born in an enslaved family, Jacobs' grandmother enjoyed some independence and respect in the white community: she belonged to the same white family that owned all her children and their children, but she also had her own business baking crackers and lived free from any abuse. Likewise, Jacobs recalls living with her parents and brother as a nuclear family during her early years, unusual in American slavery where the plantation system frequently separated children from parents after infancy and also required many house servants like Jacobs' mother to live adjacent to the owner's residence. Despite this seemingly positive beginning, Jacobs acknowledges how her relatives were one by one sold away from their family, and no saving by her grandmother could ever meet the high price of her children and grandchildren.

This contradiction between a normalized, relatively humane childhood and the inhumane abuses occasioned by slavery establishes a primary theme of Jacobs' story. She demonstrates for the reader her family's ability and desire to live according to the nineteenth-century social mores that were held up by patriarchal white society as both morally necessary and foundational to citizenship. For example, her father is industrious and commanding, insisting on obedience from his children; mother and father live 'together in a comfortable home' (9). Jacobs' description of her grandmother as an

'indispensable personage in the household, officiating all duties,' (9) notably ties her to the idealized woman of the nineteenth century, which Jane Tompkins describes in her *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860*.⁴ These familial depictions give readers the impression of Jacobs as a child of what was then considered a morally superior domestic situation, where a woman's role in the home is socially important and influential. The opening of Jacobs' narrative establishes that she understands these values, but that her understanding will be rendered moot by her constricted status as a slave. As she reveals her experiences, she not only illustrates how she is denied the ability to participate in the white domestic hierarchy, but also questions whether that system is desirable for women after all.

From the relative childhood stability that characterizes the opening of the text, the narrative changes drastically, relating three separate deaths that turn Jacobs' life into one of a typical slave. Jacobs' mother dies when Jacobs is 6, and she is removed from what was, at least superficially, a family home (for no home vulnerable to the sudden sale of its members can truly be such). Like most household slaves, Jacobs is now required to live with her owner, a woman who teaches her to read and write. That loving owner dies when Jacobs is 12, bequeathing her to a young niece. In this way, on the edge of womanhood, Jacobs finds herself living with Dr Flint and family. Now considered the property of Flint's 5-year-old daughter, Jacobs becomes the de facto property of the male head of household, Dr Flint. Jacobs recounts her time with them as a period full of mistreatment and degradation. When her father dies, she is forbidden to go to his bedside, and she worries for her rebellious brother. Over the first few chapters, she provides stories of Flint's cruelty to her own family along with various tales of local brutality, communicating a sense of owners as unattached to their slaves and herself as isolated. Her voice in these opening chapters is effectively childlike: she tells her brother that 'we must be good' and expresses confusion rather than malice as a response to her mistress's cruelty.

In adopting this innocent tone, Jacobs aligns her position with that of women unprepared for abuse and sheltered from any knowledge of sexual impropriety in their own society; she adopts a voice which would speak directly to the white women who would have been her primary audience.⁵ Her strategy is not to use the worldly, knowing voice that, in the light of her later experiences, she might well have appropriated, but instead a tone of assumed naivety, within which framework she tells how when she reaches the age of 15, she experiences a new level of privation and despair. Flint, at that time, 'began to whisper foul things in my ear' (26); Jacobs' explanation

of this sexual aggression from her master is oblique, for even acknowledging sexual suggestions was bold from a female author in the time when she wrote: male slave narratives often gave graphic accounts of violence and addressed the issue of rape, but the small number written by women tended to avoid the issue.

Jacobs reveals the first-person experiences of a woman who is expected to serve a man's physical desires without consent or redress. She depicts her owner as a man who wants female subjugation to be complete: while Flint could legally rape Jacobs, he also requires her mental submission to his control. She portrays Flint tormenting her with attempts at seduction: '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' (26). Rhetorically, this suggestive lacuna, where Jacobs tells us the nature of the image ('unclean') but not its content, aligns her reader with the position of the young narrator: her reader must fill in the blank with her own imagination, just as the adolescent Jacobs must make sense of 'unclean images', unwanted and unfamiliar sexual ideas.

In the excerpt from chapter X, Jacobs addresses her readers directly to ask for forgiveness and understanding and then confesses to her own act of sexual impropriety. She describes the actions of the white, unmarried Mr Sands (who will become the father of her illegitimate children) in terms which resonate with the conventions of courtship: he speaks to her on the street, he writes to her frequently, he is 'educated and eloquent' and his attention 'flatters her'. Much of her description of him here echoes the tropes of nineteenth-century literary narratives of courtship, just as, on the surface at least, Jacobs' modesty might appear to mirror the conventional self-deprecation thought appropriate to the female voice from Christine de Pizan and Anne Bradstreet on.⁶ This apparent adoption of literary convention, however, is complicated in Jacobs' case by an underlying economic reality: Jacobs is literally, not figuratively, 'a poor slave girl'. On the one hand, this reminder might seem to indicate a distance in status that could make Sands's attention more flattering, rather than unsavoury, since nineteenth-century fiction is filled with scenarios of modest, relatively unprivileged young women capturing the eyes of proper gentlemen: in many narratives, female beauty, charm and especially purity overcome social status to result in marriage.⁷ Jacobs has already related how her courtship with an African-American freeman was ended by Flint's orders, and this new male suitor seems to fall into place in a marriage plot

narrative; her descriptions of his attention reflect the norms of a courtship novel. 'Of course I saw whither all this was tending', she warns – but some of her readers might have failed to understand the inevitable outcome of what has been presented as a romantic prelude. Could we hope that this *unmarried* white man had honest intentions and could free Jacobs from Flint's predatory ownership? Any such illusion is dispelled by the introspective yet shamed tone of the explanation that follows. There will be neither proposal nor wedding, and Jacobs thereby changes tone from the shared confusion of a girl to the imparted experience of a slave from whom illicit sexual acts will inevitably be required. All her potential future *will* be degrading, rather than rewarding; therefore, she finds it 'less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion'. Her previously confessional voice now shifts to one of authority as she explains the impossibility of condemning her moral choices at the same time that she acknowledges them as wrong.

Jacobs' act of adultery goes against the key requirement of purity for nineteenth-century womanhood, but it simultaneously serves as a proto-feminist declaration to seize what control is available to the female in an oppressive patriarchal system. As several early critics have pointed out, Jacobs' relationship with Sands gives her, for example, a crucial measure of control over the children she bears him, since he buys the children and her brother, and eventually the children are freed.⁸ Jacobs does not frame her act as one of power – she terms it a 'sin' multiple times – but she fully acknowledges how it is an act of defiance *against Flint*, who is both her owner and the male figure who represents the sexual crimes of slavery. When he confronts her about her pregnancy with Sands's child, she defies him: "I have sinned against God and myself," I replied; "but not against you".

Jacobs demonstrates the difference that her slave status makes to her life choices, but she rejects the idea that sexual submission is the defining difference between white and black. Instead, Jacobs' choice to succumb to an *out-of-wedlock* sexuality separates her experience from that of the hegemonic female. The feminist historian Catherine Clinton has argued that both black and white females of the antebellum South were subject to oppression related to property: while the black slave female must produce capital, the white female was bound in a duty to produce heirs to that property.⁹ Jacobs declares the limits of her power as a slave while exposing the limits of power for all women with her confession and its rationalizations. Comparing her relations with Sands to what might have been with Flint, Jacobs indicates Sands is a

better sexual choice because he does not 'control' her, but that such a lover can only offer 'something akin' to freedom, because in a slave's case that control still operates elsewhere, in the form of her owners.

But, this in turn raises questions for free, married women. Even a Northern white woman could not claim to be fully in control of her own life, and while she might speak against her husband's treatment, that would not guarantee protection from abuse. Jacobs' reflection on her illicit affair as a freedom, even a false one, potentially posits an advantage over the women caught in the hegemonic cult of true womanhood, with their personhood and property legally bound to fathers and husbands. Jacobs' situation seems unusual and extreme, and both she and her editor Childs introduce her story as an 'indelicate' one. Yet, the oppression she experiences has its correlation in the situation of nineteenth-century women who attempted to wrest some measure of control by elevating the importance of the domestic sphere. Jacobs' avoidance of Flint and attachment to Sands exposes the way in which 'purity' was an impossible standard by which to measure a woman. Jacobs manages a similar negotiation of conventional morality on the matter of childrearing. The remainder of her narrative focuses on protection of her children against all odds, where, again, she appears initially to embrace the hegemonic notion of domestic ideology but proceeds to illustrate not only how it is in practice unavailable to her, but also fundamentally flawed, even for free women.

Jacobs' efforts to protect her children exemplify ideal motherhood, wherein women exist to raise the future citizens of their society, but since Jacobs knows her children will not be citizens, but chattels, her goal must shift accordingly: in her peculiar case Jacobs must abandon her children in order to save them. Her time as the concubine of Mr Sands is brief: he marries a white woman, leaving Jacobs and their children, Ellen and Ben, as the possessions of the Flints. Ellen and Ben increasingly run the risk of abuse from Flint, so Jacobs decides to 'escape' by hiding herself in an attic crawl space at her grandmother's, a decision she characterizes as dangerous, traumatic and absolutely necessary.¹⁰ According to Jacobs, only by disappearing can she convince Flint to sell her children, who, once put up for sale, can fall into possession of their father, who promised to free them. As Hazel Carby explains, 'Jacobs developed an alternative set of definitions of womanhood and motherhood in the text which remained in tension with the cult of true womanhood.'¹¹ Jacobs explains her deep attachment to her children in terms that endorse accepted standards of white women's domestic duties, but she simultaneously must revise those duties to meet the strictures

of enslavement: not only does she face the loss of her children through sale, she is also disadvantaged by her lack of legal attachment to any male, including the father of her children. When acting as a mother, she does so as the only parent they have.¹²

Jacobs' means of escape – intense confinement – is again an event with literary precedents: a discourse of confinement marks much nineteenth-century female writing.¹³ And in this confinement, as with her acceptance of Sands, Jacobs chooses one type of submission over another she considers worse. She accepts a trapped, isolated and physically crippling life so as to oversee the safety and eventual manumission of Ellen and Ben. Through conniving false letters that manipulate Flint into trips North seeking her recapture, Jacobs eventually succeeds in getting the children into their father's possession. Jacobs expresses her complete devotion to the cause of freedom for her children once the sale she has engineered through cunning is complete: 'The darkest cloud that hung over my life had rolled away. Whatever slavery might do to me, it could not shackle my children. If I fell a sacrifice, my little ones were saved' (88). Jacobs hereby not only fulfils her own wishes to see her children freed from male owners, but also fulfils expectations of maternal duty central to true womanhood, resisting one set of immoral and patriarchal laws to fulfil a singularly feminine moral duty.

Throughout the narrative, Jacobs follows just this proto-feminist pattern. She shows herself to be obedient and submissive to a female code, always respectful of her grandmother, and trying hard to meet the requests of her white mistresses. In contrast, she directs resistance and defiance to the men who seek to control her, notably Flint but also Sands when he is slow to act in the interests of their children. The later sections of the text feature a well-defined and adult voice in full contrast to the naïve girl who seemed at a loss for how to resolve her situation. In fact, she rebuffs suggestions that she move to Canada for safety when it would separate her from Ellen. Jacobs also tells of refusing (unsuccessfully) to let her freedom be purchased legally, since 'to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my sufferings the glory of triumph' (155).

When she concludes the narrative with a direct address, Jacobs points out to readers that her story ends with 'freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage' (156). She thus offers a subtext that an ending of marriage could not offer exactly the freedom she desires – it seems the 'principles of morality' that she finds most useless are those that oppress her not just as slave, but as female.

Marriage is the 'usual way' to end a woman's story, a traditional literary closure, but her account demonstrates that that ending is antithetical to 'freedom'. Like the other feminine ideals depicted in white sentimental fiction and embraced by the white culture that oppresses her – sexual purity, pious practice, nuclear and financially stable motherhood – marriage would be a false promise: false because an African-American female cannot expect marriage under the same terms, and also false because marriage offers no real freedom even to the women who are permitted it.