

Enlightened Deception: An Analysis of Slavery in Maria Edgeworth's *Whim for Whim* (1798)

Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez

EOI A Coruña/ University of A Coruña (<c28fernandez@gmail.com>)

Abstract

Within the realm of Edgeworth studies, *Whim for Whim* (1798) has been a play unexplored by researchers until it was brought to light in 1999 thanks to the complete edition of Edgeworth's *oeuvre*. This article focuses on three points in this comedy: drama represented a new genre for the Anglo-Irish author; *Whim for Whim* contains many topics later developed in Edgeworth's canon; and Edgeworth deals with a very controversial issue, abolitionism, by featuring a black character for the first time in her writings. By referring to the work of post-colonial and eighteenth-century scholars, I argue that Edgeworth uses the black figure to affirm her reliance on enlightened tenets and her political position towards Great Britain as a Union; but, at the same time, there is a great deal of instability and criticism in her play suggesting that Edgeworth was not blind to the marginalization of the blacks in England. Also, the incorporation of other forms of slavery affecting the high classes and woman reveals that Edgeworth's critique was extended to intellectualism and gender.

Keywords: Abolitionism, Anglo-Irish Literature, Maria Edgeworth, Postcolonial Studies, *Whim for Whim*

1. Introduction

Though *Whim for Whim* is sufficiently attractive, this play by Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) was hidden from the main public until 1999, when it was included in the complete edition of the Anglo-Irish author's *oeuvre*. Nevertheless, this comedy reveals much about Edgeworth's political thought by dealing with the topics of the woman of fashion or colonialism that are later

developed in her narrative, namely in *Belinda* (1801), “The Grateful Negro” (*Popular Tales* 1804), and the comedy *The Two Guardians* (1817), where it is easy to establish many parallelisms with *Whim for Whim*. The three productions appeared at a time of social turmoil and revolution in Europe. It was the age of the vindication of the rights of woman, the uprising of nationalism, the years after the French and the American Revolutions. It is no wonder that so many topics converged in literary works and that Edgeworth has been called “an uncomfortable authority” for the way she attempted to preserve her own privileged position as a Protestant landowner and her acknowledgement of the tenuousness of that position (Kaufmann and Fauske 2004, 11). Here we are interested in the importance of a black character in *Whim for Whim* and its relation with Edgeworth’s stance towards abolitionism, a movement which challenged existing stereotypes about the moral and intellectual capacity of black people.

The 1770s and 1780s witnessed the flourishing of abolitionist poems, like Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s “The Dying Negro” (1775), William Cowper’s “The Negro Complaint” (1788) or Hannah More’s “Slavery: A Poem” (1788). By introducing black characters in her works, Edgeworth was participating in a social debate: Marshal and Stock suggest that the popularity of black subjects helped set the stage for the emancipation of slaves in Britain and its colonies (Carlson 2007, 176), and scholars like Debora C. De Rosa consider that Edgeworth inspired American domestic abolitionists along with Eliza Weaver Bradburn and Amelia Opie since “The Grateful Negro” appeared repeatedly in the United States under various publishers until 1859 (De Rosa 2003, 14). In George Boulukos’ perceptive article on “The Grateful Negro”, Edgeworth’s concern about the black slaves is related to the concern about the Irish and woman following Rachel Ann Jennings (1995). This tale is about two Jamaican planters, Mr. Jefferies, who considers blacks as inferior and indolent, and Mr. Edwards, a kind master and supporter of emancipation. Mr. Edwards prevents Caesar, a Koromantyn black belonging to Jefferies, and his partner Clara from being sold and even gives them provision ground and a cottage. Meanwhile, Jefferies’ blacks plot against their master and Hector, one of Caesar’s friends, heads the conspiracy in spite of Caesar’s efforts to persuade Hector not to go ahead with their plans. Caesar runs away to Edwards’ plantation and warns his master about what is going to happen, thus frustrating the conspiracy. Though initially regarding Edgeworth as moderate towards abolitionism, Boulukos later redefines his stance:

... to her, slavery was undesirable and unpleasant, but it was also necessary to contain the irrationality, and the tendency to vengeance, of African descended people. While she, with her character of Mr. Edwards, would prefer a better world were such things weren’t necessary, in the real world she was, in fact, a lukewarm, ameliorationist *supporter* of slavery. (1999, 22)

Boulukos focuses on the economic dimension of slavery and considers that Edgeworth refuses to acknowledge the violence inherent in slavery and its effects as indispensable for the master-slave relationship. For Boulukos, "The Grateful Negro" becomes a relevant work in the antislavery debate for two reasons: first, Edgeworth illustrates the fallacy that sentimental humanitarianism leads to antislavery because slavery apologists used sentimental discourse to make slaves accept their condition voluntarily and to accept slavery in the same way that a free laborer accepts a contract (*ibidem*, 13); and second, she also shows the interdependence of slavery and free labor as extremely beneficial to members of the capitalist employer class "whether they were planter, landlords or industrialists" (*ibidem*, 24). Finally, Boulukos maintains that Edgeworth falls short of exemplifying the difference between new emerging bourgeois values and the receding aristocratic ones (*ibidem*, 29). Here I want to emphasize the condemnation of the diverse forms of slavery portrayed in *Whim for Whim*. By using the ideas of Homi K. Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars, I will argue that in *Whim for Whim* the black character is placed in an ambivalent position in British culture and that Edgeworth illustrates her pedagogical aims by exposing the abuses suffered by the blacks in Britain.

An additional point of interest is the fact that the theatre meant a new genre for Edgeworth, who used to collaborate with his father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, and was just enjoying the success of the educational essay *The Parent's Assistant* (1796). The nature of drama provided more freedom of expression than the essay or the novel which would make Edgeworth a name. The stage offered the advantage that women could "mock the powerful, debate cultural assumptions, and challenge gender roles in ways that were pleasurable and unthreatening to the audience" (Anderson 2007, 147). However, cultivating this genre meant risking a lady's reputation: as eighteenth-century scholars have pointed out, "long-standing concerns about sexual impropriety in the theatre and the likelihood of the critical censure in the rough-and-tumble world of reviewing made life in the theatre a suspect choice for a 'proper' lady" (*ibidem*, 145). Defined in the introduction to Edgeworth's complete work as "A play that begins in an impressionistic view of West Ends London [and] ends as a panorama of the military battles and Masonic networking of the Europe-wide Revolutionary wars" (Eger, ÓGallchoir, Butler 2003, 295), *Whim for Whim* was written in November 1798 for performance by the family. Edgeworth based her piece on real episodes and real people, as it is extensively documented in the introduction. In a letter to Sophy Ruxton dated 19 November 1798, Edgeworth describes the theatre and its location in the house: "a charming theatre in the room over [the father's] study: It will be twice as large as old Poz's little theatre in the dining room" (Hare 1894, 62-63). The Anglo-Irish author also provides the cast of the play in which we find her father and his wife Honora, "[who] painted the scenery and arranged the dresses" (*ibidem*, 63). More interestingly, Edgeworth gives us the

play-bill with only one servant (Jemina), so the subplot of the diamonds was added later. The idea was to include *Whim for Whim* in one of her series for adolescents, so Edgeworth sent the work to the dramatist Richard B. Sheridan, an abolitionist whig and a member of Parliament who was committed to the parliamentary campaign to end the slave trade from the 1780s onwards (Gibbs 2008, 86). The Anglo-Irish author faced Sheridan's first "no" to one of her comedies since "the subject was not considered of sufficient interest or comic enough for the stage" (Eger, ÓGallchoir, Butler 2003, 379; Fernández 2012, 34). By all means, *Whim for Whim* is an early work and Edgeworth refused to polish it. Nevertheless, the Anglo-Irish author kept in mind many of the characters and issues depicted in that play for her first successful feminocentric fiction, *Belinda*, and it is even possible to identify some traces of *Whim for Whim* in *Castle Rackrent* (1800), Edgeworth's most memorable production.

2. The "ugly white diamonds" and the helpless urchin.

Whim for Whim focuses on wealthy Sir Mordent's relationship with Mrs. Fangle, a widow with two children, Heliodorus and Christina. Mrs. Fangle's desire to enter the mysterious circle of Illuminati promoted by Count Babelhausen runs parallel to her refusal of Sir Mordent for his old-fashioned ideas. The widow is much more attracted to the Count, who intercepts Sir Mordent's letters to Mrs. Fangle thanks to his malevolent servant, Felix. Another subplot is about Caroline and Opal, Sir Mordent's ward and nephew respectively. In spite of Caroline's love for Opal, Sir Mordent cannot approve of the young gentleman since Opal has not fixed upon a profession. Mrs. Fangle goes bankrupt and Felix plans to steal her diamonds and run away with them with the help of Count Babelhausen's mistress, Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche, who is passing for a French governess and will take part in Mrs. Fangle's initiatory ceremony into Illuminatism. Fortunately, Felix's plan is frustrated and both Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche and Felix are arrested.

Together with the footman Felix and Jemina, Quaco is a secondary character and one of the three servants that appear in *Whim for Whim* with a special feature: his black skin, "the visibility of darkness, and a prime signifier of the body and its social and cultural correlates" (Bhabha 1994, 82). Quaco represents the black people who were ferried to London and other ports on the same ships that brought imperial products to enrich national economy. As literary critics and art historians have argued, in England black people worked as butlers or household attendants with a decorative function equivalent to the porcelain, textiles and expensive pieces that the English nobility was increasingly buying from the east (Markley 2009, 88-89). Life in Great Britain was preferable to the punishing work they had in the West Indies, though black people were not treated as fully human and they

were often placed next to dogs and other domestic animals with which they shared the same status (Tobin 2003, 176-178), as pictures by William Hogarth repeatedly show (see *A Harlot's Progress: plate 2* [1732], *The Rake's Progress* [1733] and *Marriage à la Mode: 4, The Toilet* [c. 1745]). More importantly, it was said that black slaves lacked reason. Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that in the eighteenth century writing was taken to be the visible sign of reason and Enlightenment used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been "discovering", so black people were relegated to a lower place in the great chain of being (1986, 8). However, some aristocrats educated black slaves and there were some famous blacks, like Oludah Equiano (c. 1745-1797), Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), or Francis Barber (c. 1735-1801).

Edgeworth scholar Siobhán Kilfeather points out that Quaco bears a strong resemblance to a historical figure, Tony Small, who was Lord Edward Fitzgerald's servant and companion (2003, xxxii). In her excellent biography about Fitzgerald, the fifth son of the first Duke of Leinster, Stella Tillyard explains that Small was a runaway slave that Fitzgerald encountered in the United States and he later employed Small as a personal assistant. Often referred to as "faithful Tony" by Fitzgerald, African American Small was an uncommon sight among the predominantly Irish and British people in Dublin, and the two formed a close friendship. On one occasion, when Fitzgerald was returning home, Small warned him about British soldiers inside and saved Fitzgerald from arrest. The partnership between Fitzgerald and Small is best summarized in Tillyard's words: "Tony embodied and brought to life his master's commitment to freedom and equality for all men" (1997, x).

In *Whim for Whim*, Quaco's difference is immediately obvious through his speech. Though the play is a patchwork of idiolects ranging from Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche's French to Opal's tilted rhetoric, Quaco's discourse departs from the prevailing standard English of the main characters and tells much about his sincere attachment to Opal. In Bhabha's theory, what Edgeworth represents through Quaco corresponds with "mimicry", or the desire to produce a reformed, recognizable Other, Europeanized in tastes and opinion, yet native in appearance and language. Mimicry is the authority of colonial discourse and emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal: "Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers" (Bhabha 1994, 86). Within the framework of colonialism, cultural hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, a close cousin of mimicry, and

... the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and dis-

placement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turned the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of the power. (Bhabha 1994, 112)

As a matter of fact, Quaco is a hybrid, rather than an “Other”; he has been absorbed and incorporated into the metropolis where he does not feel annihilated but defies the expectations of others who see their authority as challenged. Quaco’s attitude sets him apart from a resentful black; and, conscious of his privileged position, Quaco cannot but celebrate his happiness in England.

Quaco endorsement to his master’s democratic views coincides with the Edgeworths’ ideas of the Union as a political territory encompassing the integration of different identities (Bhabha 1994, 86). Alison Harvey makes a point which cannot be skipped here since she argues that the redefinition of nationalism offered by Edgeworth in *Belinda, Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), “The Grateful Negro” and *The Two Guardians* (1817) blurs conventional views of gender and race and proves to be a critique of the hegemonic power assumed by English patriarchal society: “The analogies Edgeworth draws between the situation of the Irish in Ireland and the slaves in the West Indies suggest a more liberal view of both groups than critics tend to grant her” (2006, 16). *The Two Guardians* must be regarded as directly inspired on *Whim for Whim* and equally critical of social injustice. Carmen María Fernández has already examined the former as a play in which black characters are imbued with humanity despite being rejected by whites to the point that a young lady insults them “Negroes are all naturally inferior” (Edgeworth 1817, 234). According to Fernández, in *The Two Guardians* Quaco’s generosity towards Mrs. Beauchamps – to whom he has anonymously lent money – is more valuable than the ridiculous efforts of Miss Juliana, Lady Courtington’s daughter, to conquer the hero’s heart (2012, 39), and this will similarly be registered in *Whim for Whim*, where wealth means more than material possessions.

The first time that Quaco appears on stage he sings a song about his release and the kindness he feels to his master. The audience has to reconstruct the uncomfortable story of his Self from what the black man says. In his conversation with Felix, Quaco states that he is free in Great Britain, where slavery was abolished in 1772 thanks to Lord Chief Justice Mansfield after the James Somerset case. Far from keeping his condition as a free man to himself, Opal’s servant represents the universalization of freedom:

Happy little Quaco has now a massa kind
 “QUACO!” said he —
 “From dis day be free” —
 May every little Quaco such a massa find

Happy little Quaco has now a massa kind
 To QUACO he cry —
 “No slaves by and by”
 May every little Quaco such a massa find. (Edgeworth 1999, 319)

Leaving apart Quaco's optimism, a more complex view of abolitionism cannot be ignored. For Felicity Nussbaum, British imperialism certainly aimed at 'civilize' and 'anglicize' Others; however, many used the abolitionist cause to heighten the British opportunities for expansion, to encourage trade in Africa or simply to control territory (2009, 138-139). In that sense, Quaco defends the supremacy of England, which is taken as a metonymy of the Empire. When his land and his parents are mentioned, Quaco's attitude shifts from melancholy to resentment against those who exploit black slaves since his insertion in English culture has turned him into a human being. Quaco feels grateful to England, which is embodied by Opal and associated with kindness:

QUACO (*with indignation*). Me no slave!—Dere be no slave in Englan—
 Massa Opal said dere be no slave in Englan—I be slave great while in de diamond
 mine—dey did sell Quaco for tobacco pipe—but Massa Opal took me from the
 cruel mens, and carry me to Englis men's land where be no slaves—Fine country
 Englan! (Edgeworth 1999, 320)

As the play progresses, more information about Quaco's past comes to light and the black slave's voice is recorded in his autobiographical narrative. After having run away from a “cruel man” (*ibidem*, 352) who mistreated him, Quaco has known freedom, the most treasured asset, even surpassing the comfort provided by money or wealth. Applying Gates's terms, “[w]ithout writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist” (1986, 11) and the black man remembers his past in his autobiographical song, a mechanism of retrospection and denunciation and also the opportunity to incorporate other abolitionism-related issues. No matter what the economic value of the diamonds is, in Quaco's song they turn into ‘ugly’ products because human suffering was necessary to satisfy the fine ladies' ambition to stand up in society, and this eventually becomes the source of social injustice and economic exploitation, which is passionately condemned by enlightened minds like Opal's and echoed in Quaco's speeches:

Down below—down below—hot hothot! Down below
 Over de Sea
 In far countree
 De ugly, ugly, ugly, white diamuns grow
 Poor little negro work in the mine

Lash from the whip
 Black skin all strip
 White and rich lady for to make fines
 Down below—down below—hot hothot! Down below
 Over de Sea
 In far countree
 De ugly, ugly, ugly, white diamuns grow. (Edgeworth 1999, 352)

Edgeworth's comedy does not ignore the fact that Quaco has enemies and competitors who perpetuate and increase his alienation as a black man and deny his social insertion, producing what Frantz Fanon calls "Manichaeic delirium" (Bhabha 1994, 43). These perverting forces clearly expose instability and opposition to what Quaco voices. According to Kilfeather, the play presents "a group of characters whose willingness to experiment with ideas of inheritance, property, gender roles and class relations draws them into a world of secret societies and new forms of affiliation" (2003, xiii), and, in *Whim for Whim*, the theme of encryption and secret knowledge is equally important (*ibidem*, xvii). Quaco's first enemy is Sir Mordent – the representative of order and conservative patriarchy – whose inability to understand Quaco is contrasted with the black man's proficiency of the colonial language. While Quaco is branded a "helpless urchin" (Edgeworth 1999, 325), the black servant explicitly rejects his objectification. In this regard, the play purposefully presents a denial of the traditional image of the black servant in British theatre: Carlson refers to the frequently intoxicated Mungo in Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Padlock* (1768), Hassan in *The Spectre Castle* (1797) and Cymbalo in John Cross's *The Surrender of Trinidad* (1797), who assist their masters' intrigues; or the sentimental slave Caesar in Mariana Starke's *The Sword of Peace* (2007 [1788], 180). In all these plays the role was invariably low in terms of social status (slave, servant) and it was 'white-washed' in its eroticism. Also, Quaco has undergone a process of self-consciousness facilitated by Opal ("massa Opal tell me he never like I wear lace band like puppy", Edgeworth 1999, 325), reversing the image of black servants as solitary mutes, or infantilized and servile figures which were even dressed in fancy garb. Edgeworth is careful to bridge the racial gap and makes Quaco a sentimental figure almost at the same level as his master. According to Lynn Festa, in eighteenth-century texts sentimentality defined who was acknowledged as human and the interest in the interior life of sentimental characters and readers not only responded to colonial expansion: it helped distinguish the particularity of the human from the interchangeability of the commodity and sparked a struggle to claim feelings for one's one (2006, 3-6). The same idea is used by Boulukos, who maintains that Edgeworth envisions slaves as easy to manipulate, but capable of internalizing a sentimental contract with their masters and ready to see their interests as intertwined with their masters (1999, 14). Quaco behaves as

a child in need of guidance and improvement. His loyalty reaches the point that, when ill-willed Felix suggests running away from Opal, Quaco says he would rather prefer any unpleasant chore than let Opal down and challenge his authority. The key for this bond is affection verging homoeroticism, the voluntary identification with the representative of the Self and civilization.

Quaco's second enemy is his counterpart as a servant, Felix, who is knowledgeable of low life above stairs and derides Quaco. Through Felix and other servants, Edgeworth enriches the aristocratic milieu that Bouloukos misses in "The Grateful Negro". Felix will be expelled from England, in accordance with the Edgeworths' recurrent association of nationalism and morality which is recurrent in *Tales of Fashionable Life* (1809-1812) and *Patronage* (1814). Envious of Quaco's joy, Count Babelhausen's servant keeps for himself the "magnificent" diamonds (Edgeworth 1999, 359) and gives Quaco the false ones while he insults him by using racial epithets and by pointing to his economic status:

FELIX. Always singing!—Where the devil can that little foolish fellow find those spirits of his—He's a blackamoor—he has not a guinea in the world—he has no portmanteau—and yet there he's singing away—There's something in a light heart that I never could understand! (*Ibidem*, 360)

The unprincipled servant does not only alienate Quaco through language, but he also cheats his master and Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche when he changes the diamonds and calculates they are worth ten thousand pounds. Another reason accounting for Felix's hate of Quaco is the fact that Quaco is occupying a white man's post and has his master's reliance. As Nussbaum explains, the competition between black slaves and white servants created some cultural anxieties in the metropolis:

... when slaves first came to England their paltry wages have merely amounted to shelter and clothing in exchange for their services, their devotion, and the display of themselves as part of their owner's wealth. Native-born English servants, however, were more likely to demand monetary remuneration, and even earlier in the century blacks had been legally prevented from gaining upward mobility and from competing with whites by serving as apprentices. (2003, 222)

In the same way that Thady Quirk participates in the action of *Castle Rackrent* and reveals the family story to British readers, the black servant is involved in Count Babelhausen's plot by chance and proves decisive in its conclusion. While Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche convinces Mrs. Fangle that her diamonds are too dirty to be worn at the masquerade *raisonnée* organized by Count Babelhausen, Quaco enters the stage and disturbs Jemina. The former prostitute now redeemed by Mrs. Fangle hates blackamoors where-

as Mrs. Fangle is not surprised at all and gives Quaco a tip for the feathers, a gesture which is appreciated but gently refused: “Massa Opal tell me no take money” (Edgeworth 1999, 351). Quaco’s honesty surprises the ladies, who decide to trust him with the diamonds. Like the Jewess’s diamonds in *Castle Rackent*, Mrs. Fangle’s jewels become a fetish, a source of authority in Quaco’s hands. They signify both European refinement and civilization and a metonymy of Africa, like Quaco himself, who turns into an authorized version of otherness and a doubling because he is the part-object of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates dominant discourses in which he emerges (Bhabha 1994, 88):

QUACO. But me sorry to have no massa Opal—Me love to hear massa Opal say—Do dis—Do dat—cause wen Quaco has done dis,—done dat— Massa Opal smile and say—Tank ye Quaco—Good Quaco! And Quaco very glad den. (Edgeworth 1999, 321)

3. *Testing the slave and the masters*

For *Kilfeather*, in *Whim for Whim* major characters struggle to reconcile their principles with their instincts or passions (2003, xiii). However, the relationship between Quaco and Opal can hardly be assimilated to the one between Felix and Count Babelhausen or the one between Opal and the Count: Opal pursues to educate Quaco while the Count has an economic motivation. In Edgeworth’s comedy people are obsessed with secret knowledge which is never revealed, explained or overcome, as it happens with prejudice, and Edgeworth’s play is not exclusively reduced to denounce racial exploitation but also deals with other forms of enslavement – to prejudice, to customs and fashion. Quaco, Mrs. Fangle and Opal constitute three Others estranged from the rest of characters embodying the establishment and conventional values.

Mrs. Fangle’s ruin symbolizes her intellectual defeat in the hands of Count Babelhausen. Seduced by false discourse and the aesthetic of Illuminatism, she has neglected her children, like Lady Delacour in *Belinda*, and her independence is at risk at one point. Several remarkable ladies inspired the character of Mrs. Fangle: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, Emma Hart, Catherine Macaulay and Catherine II, Empress of Russia, and especially, Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu. It seems that Sheridan “launched a theatrical fashion for portraying leaders of ‘the ton’, so that these glamorous figures could watch their counterparts on stage from their boxes, and themselves could provide the pit and the gods with a second spectacle” (Eger, ÓGallchoir, Butler 2003, 286). Mrs. Montagu was the center of the Bluestocking circle, the mid-eighteenth-century group of men and women which, according to Gary Kelly “enabled increasing numbers of women to avoid being

'sentenced to everyday life,' to escape 'confinement' in the domestic sphere, and to pursue work and knowledge within a wider and supposedly superior sphere of intellectual work and sociability, an idealized version of academia" (2015, 175-176). The term "bluestocking" became derogatory; it often indicated traits of independent-mindedness, intellectual display, disdain for domesticity, and disregard of social and sexual propriety (*ibidem*, 182) and was similarly ridiculed in Frances Burney's *The Wiltings* (1779), which was also rejected by Sheridan.

In *Whim for Whim*, Mrs. Fangle's behaviour and way of thinking are incongruent and whimsical. Caroline praises Mrs. Fangle's capacity to label something already existing: "When one can't have a new thing, give an old thing a new name and it will go down the public throat directly... Mrs. Fangle is to have a masquerade raisonnée" (Edgeworth 1999, 316). Her attempt to recreate life in Ancient Rome affects both her hair style imitating Empress Poppea and her custom to have a bath with milk of seven hundred asses like Empress Faustina (*ibidem*, 340). However, anxiety brings her to incoherence, for example, when she tells Sir Mordent: "This Count's charming Herculaneum ornaments have come so apropos for my Roman matron's toilette—especially this box of antient [*sic*] rouge" (*ibidem*, 341). In search of novelties, she aims to reform language. Consequently, expressions like "How do you do?" are disgraceful to philosophic tongues (*ibidem*, 314) and are to be replaced by "even a new pain is better than an old pleasure" (*ibidem*, 318), or "How are the affections today?" (*ibidem*, 379). Edgeworth parodies exaggerated feminism through Mrs. Fangle. Rather than a sponsor of the rights of woman – which were in vogue after the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) –, Mrs. Fangle sets her mind to become an Amazon, to build up a new social system, and her rhetoric features the concerns of that time: "Curtsies are symbols of slavery—Odious homage to man—Remains of the feudal system which subjugated and imbruted our unfortunate sex" (Edgeworth 1999, 314). According to Mrs. Fangle, maternal weakness spoils everything (*ibidem*, 314) and maternity simply provides the opportunity to test her theories. Her concept of a woman of fashion is very clear; she is allowed to say what no other woman dares to say and do, and her main virtue is courage (*ibidem*, 341).

Sexual appeal and secrecy are manipulated by the villain of the play, Count Babelhausen, to achieve his goal and remove all the obstacles to obtain Mrs. Fangle's jointure. The Count's irresistible appeal to Mrs. Fangle stems from the novelty of his "manner—new language—and new system" (*ibidem*, 318) and from the conditions he imposes on her to be accepted among Illuminati: keeping silence, joining an international secret society in which origin and race do not matter and having a confidant. In Mrs. Fangle's case this role is performed by a German princess called Aspasia (who is actually Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche in disguise). Therefore, in the sophisti-

cated initiation ceremony orchestrated by Count Babelhausen, Mrs. Fangle will be Pulcheria – in allusion to the powerful Empress of the Eastern Roman Empire who took a vow of virginity–, and she will be metaphorically sacrificed on the Altar of Pure Reason before the Count has collected purses and revealed in an aside it has been “No bad day’s work” (*ibidem*, 359). No character escapes from Count Babelhausen’s tricks, and, at the masquerade, Caroline is even courted as “dear, dearest, dear lady” (*ibidem*, 373) by the Count, who does his utmost to raise her doubts about Opal: “What suspense, what agony I feel amidst this scene of festivity, and noise, and folly” (*ibidem*, 376). A daughter of Enlightenment, Edgeworth introduces the Count to represent the dark side of secret lodges and opportunism, which is parodied in *Whim for Whim*. One of the sources she used to write the comedy was John Robinson’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religions and the Governments of Europe Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies* (1798). This controversial book argued that Illuminati had spread “under the specious pretext of enlightening the world by the torch of philosophy, and of dispelling the clouds of civil and religious superstition which keep the nations of Europe in darkness and slavery” (1798, 11), a metaphor which can be very suitably applied to the Count’s proceedings in *Whim for Whim*. Aware that Opal will inherit Sir Mordent’s wealth and that it will be easy to manipulate his friend, Count Babelhausen tells his mistress, Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche, to seduce Opal. The discovery that Sir Mordent assigns great importance to symbols and ranks leads the Count to cheat the old gentleman into the belief that he is in possession of the Order of the Red Eagle and that Mrs. Fangle will undoubtedly attract the Count: “Charming bewitching whimsical creature!—with the learning of a bachelor [*sic*] of arts, the enthusiasm of a girl of fifteen, and the airs of a woman of fashion, she has wit and beauty enough to drive a man mad” (Edgeworth 1999, 329). Unluckily, Sir Mordent’s stiffness prevents Mrs. Fangle from loving him, and Caroline, who is “wedded to the world and bound in chains of gold” (*ibidem*) warns Opal that the Count is playing a double game.

Both Opal and his servant are tested in opposite ways. The first is in love with Caroline, who thinks Opal’s pure reason is pure folly (*ibidem*, 328). Opal is committed to truth and despises wealth, as he explains to Caroline: “not all my love dear Caroline for you, the center to which every radius of my happiness tends, can induce me to adopt opinions not my own, to follow plans my mind approves not, or to find myself in the fetters of antiquated prejudice” (*ibidem*, 328). Rather than “dutiful” or “obedient”, he transforms language like Mrs. Fangle and defines himself as “affectionate”: “I acknowledge no such principle as duty to relatives” (*ibidem*, 336). Opal’s enthusiasm is not sanctioned by Sir Mordent: while the young man lives in this world of fancy expecting to be guided by his Illuminatus dirigens, Sir Mordent is worried because Opal is so ridiculous that he will easily be made a dupe and he will

never fix upon a profession. The old gentleman hardly bears Opal's remarks: "Men of contracted views, men of 'tideless passions' can make themselves understood in a few words—but men of Genius speak a language of their own, not always easily understood" (*ibidem*, 333). Two very different ideologies are contrasted in a previous conversation with Sir Mordent. At this point in the play, Opal's speech on the education of negroes and on a crusade about the Barbary corsairs is quite short, but these views are presented as opposed to Sir Mordent's and closely related to Quaco's regard of the ugly diamonds as not indispensable for most human beings:

OPAL. An individual cannot do all—but he can do something Sir Mordent—What because one bee cannot fill the whole hive, shall he refuse to make a single cell in the cosmopolitical honeycomb? (*Ibidem*, 309)

Unable to approve of Opal's "cursed jargon" (*ibidem*, 310) and Kantian manner, Sir Mordent despises his nephew's ideas because an individual cannot reform the world ("The fly upon the chariot wheel!", *ibidem*, 309) while Opal explains that mercantilism cannot stand much longer in Europe and that the rise of stocks that is celebrated by Sir Mordent has no meaning. Facing Sir Mordent's patriotic views, Opal proclaims his universalism: "I am a citizen of the world—Patriotism is a narrow principle—Cosmopolitanism" (*ibidem*, 310). Similarly, in his conversations with Caroline, Opal is featured as a reformer who denounces the oppression of custom ("Vain forms! Senseless ceremonies — shall man with an inquisitorial ubiquity of tyranny torture the unuttered thoughts from his fellow man" *ibidem*, 333) and the obedience to the family ("What privileges of consanguinity, What prerogatives of seniority can justify this unqualified breach of imprescriptible unalienable rights of man", *ibidem*).

Opal's submission to Count Babelhausen represents a more sophisticated subjection than Mrs. Fangle's, as Caroline points out to Sir Mordent. For the old gentleman, Mrs. Fangle is "a woman of sense under all her follies" (*ibidem*, 372) and "a woman of real feeling under the appearance of thoughtlessness" (*ibidem*) who will eventually give up her whim to a man while for Caroline, "even people of the best sense...and the best hearts are sometimes strangely run away by their whims" (*ibidem*) in reference to Opal. The symbiotic relationship between the Count and Opal is reflected in the way they refer to each other as Socrates and Alcibiades. In Plato's *The Symposium*, the latter is an extravagant Athenian statesman and general who becomes a pupil of Socrates and hopes to seduce him with his good looks in order to glean some wisdom from his tutor. Though a promising youth, Alcibiades is too independent and resolute and Socrates does not succeed in winning him to the philosophical life. Edgeworth refashions this erotic relationship: Count Babelhausen takes advantage of Opal's fascination for

Illuminatism to challenge him and tells Opal to sacrifice his passion for non-Illuminée Caroline (“a slave to the customs of the world”, *ibidem*, 358) and to love another woman, Aspasia. Yielding to blackmail seems a condition to complete Opal’s training as an Illuminatus, but Caroline does justice to her name and represents the voice of reason, like Edgeworth’s homonymous heroines. When Opal proposes Caroline to live with him in poverty and to give her money to “the great work” (*ibidem*, 329), the young lady’s answer cannot be more adamant: “he [Count Babelhausen] has saved me from becoming a victim to your whims misguided Opal—I forgive you—Farewell!” (*ibidem*, 365).

As we can see, Quaco is rejected because of his skin and Opal because of his extravagant ideas leading to unhappiness and frustration, and there is one carnivalesque scenario for racial and social reversal. Terry Castle envisions masquerade as the site where the categories of domination fold endlessly into the categories of powerlessness and vice versa: “The venerated topoi of eighteenth-century culture (humanity, masculinity, adulthood, nobility, rationality) merge with the despised opposites (the bestial, effeminacy, childishness, servility, madness)” (1986, 79). Here Quaco’s blackness is extended to whites and identities are confused: “Me tinkmens and womens all mad dis night—me see all de white peoples wid de negro face—black! Black! Me know nobody—nobody know Quaco” (Edgeworth 1999, 378). Quaco is the only character not wearing a fancy dress while Opal dresses as a slave to attend Mrs. Fangle’s masquerade *raisonnée* because he feels as such.

It is worth noting that, in her correspondence with an American friend, the Jewess Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, Edgeworth agreed with Miss Martineau on the slave question and the inconsistency of American liberty and slavery system (11 July 1837; MacDonald 1977, 298), and some months before she had just raised a significant objection: “[t]he slaves must be prepared by education to be free and to provide for themselves before they can be set free without danger to others and destruction and misery to themselves and society” (15 April 1836; *ibidem*, 279). Despite similarities between Quaco and Opal, the former’s views are not misguided by empty discourse. Quaco is never discouraged by prejudice, and he is the only character who never hesitates and always refuses to lie. The play features a man with moral strength, integrity and dignity (“Me no like to tall [*sic*] tales”, Edgeworth 1999, 325). Besides, in Edgeworth, the black servant throws more light upon what is happening than Count Babelhausen’s Illuminist theories. He does not only know that the diamonds are false but also discovers the fake one by showing both cases to Opal. Quaco’s test of authenticity places him at the level of Mrs. Fangle’s children when they explain that the mysterious foreign princess is really Mademoiselle Fanfarlouche:

Wat me see dese diamons—me tink—Ah Quaco know good way to try de good diamons—dey cold to de tongue— me try

(puts the false diamonds to his tongue)

No cold! —no diamons!—Felix make a great mistake—me run and tell him—

(In running across the stage QUACO catches his foot in the straps of FELIX portmanteau drags it after him and opens—He disentangles his foot and is going to shut the portmanteau when he sees the case of real diamonds which have fallen out)

Watme see! Watme see! Dese are de diamons de lady give Quaco

(puts them to his tongue)

Yes dese cold—dese good!—Ah!—Ah!—Ah!—me great fear Felix be bad white man! (*Ibidem*, 361)

As a colonial subject, Quaco has some limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself, which is represented by his dependance and gratitude to Opal. Bhabha highlights that the success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure (1994, 86). On the one hand, his life as a slave in the diamond mine taught him to tell authentic diamonds from false ones. On the other hand, he feels cheated and misses Opal: "... what to do?—De lady will tink me bad man when she sees dese—but Quaco honest!—Quacohonest!—Oh massa Opal!—me wish you here" (Edgeworth 1999, 366). Caroline's promise that he will have justice and she will be his friend reassures him to the point of revealing: "Next to massa Opal I love her the best in de world" (*ibidem*). Poetic justice works when Quaco reveals the truth and Sir Mordent sends him for a Bow Street officer who takes Felix up (*ibidem*, 383), but Count Babelhausen escapes punishment and leaves the stage "bowing with an air of assurance" (*ibidem*, 382). The dramatic climax coincides with the comic plot of social mobility and takes place when Mrs. Fangle, Quaco and Opal are together on stage in act 5. The news of Mrs. Fangle's "fatal loss of fortune" (*ibidem*) brings Sir Mordent closer; he feels bound to her in honour and resolves to propose to her at the masquerade. Both relinquish to their whims in a sprightly dialogue, which provides the cure for Mrs. Fangle's eccentricities and her rescue from ruin: "Let these diamonds be sold—this is the last night of Mrs. Fangle's extravagance—I will shew the world I can bear adversity—better than prosperity" (*ibidem*, 384). Opal likewise sees he has also been duped by the farce of Illuminatism:

OPAL (clasping his hands). Heavens! What do I hear! What a scene of villainy! What a dupe I have been! (stamps then turns to Caroline)—And I have been exposing myself to Caroline all this time! But the Count! My Illuminatus dirigens! Villain of villain! And is this the great work! Is this the end of Illumination—And was it for this I was on the point of sacrificing all my hopes of happiness—Oh Caroline—can you ever forgive my folly? (*Ibidem*, 383)

4. Conclusion

Set against the background of the changes affecting British society at the end of the eighteenth century, *Whim for Whim* must be regarded as an ideologically complex piece of work taking into account its portrait of many forms of social and sexual dependence. Behind the comic façade, the manipulation of people's beliefs and attitudes is not limited to a particular group. Therefore, both Mrs. Fangle and Opal are self-alienated: the former represents the contradictions of feminist intellectualism at the time colliding with maternal duties and Opal's absurd submission to secret knowledge compromises his happiness. Rather than an attack against a particular philosophy, the Anglo-Irish author expresses her concern about the consequences of sectarianism and intolerance opposing the values of liberty and freedom. In *Whim for Whim*, the Count's rhetoric is only a means of imposing his will and Illuminatism proves the most suitable medium to lure his initiatives and menace the microcosmos of the play representing the Empire.

Despite Opal's defense of Illuminatism as "the most stupendous enterprise [*sic*] ever conceived by human intellect" (Edgeworth 1999, 329); this theory eventually becomes an obscure abusive system for Caroline, who perceptively defines it as "darkness to my weak eyes" (*ibidem*, 329). Such darkness is ironically lit up by a black character. With Quaco, Edgeworth made a notable contribution to the representation of black characters on the British stage. His integrity and perspicacity suggest that Edgeworth was aware of the potential that the performance of slavery in the theatrical and print culture had to sway public opinion. According to Bhabha's theory, Quaco's mimicry exposes the artificiality of all symbolic expressions of power and they stand unresolved because, though Quaco feels part of society, the black character remains in the unstable position of the hybrid described by Bhabha and is marginalized and outraged. From her enlightened post, Edgeworth argues against human inferiority based on race. The play positions the individual, his history and his commitment to others at the level of national sympathies or social class, and it is through Quaco that Edgeworth voices her liberal views and exposes injustice. The agency of the black man in *Whim for Whim* is comparable to the Irish peasant, (un)loyal Thady Quirk, in *Castle Rackrent*. Far from neutral, Edgeworth proves to be an egalitarian writer because the black man is no longer a luxury object or commodity and becomes instrumental to reveal deception and restore social order.

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