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Hagar and the Symbols of Slavery: Reading Fredrika Bremer’s the Neighbours through Carhlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre

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ABSTRACT
Using Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) as a backdrop, this article examines the symbol of slavery in Fredrika Bremer’s novel The Neighbours (1837). In particular, the character Hagar (mirrored in Jane Eyre by Bertha Mason) is analysed. The Neighbours depict slavery both on a literal and a symbolic level; firstly, in the representation of colonial plantations and transatlantic slave trade and secondly as a symbol of white women’s submission. The slave trade is described as fundamentally un-Swedish, and Swedes complicit in slave trade as corrupted by foreigners. The wrongs of oppression are doubled with the wrongs of being oppressed, and both owning and being slave are constructed as non-Swedish positions marked by race. Building on the slave as a symbol, submission appears as a counter image of white femininity. Being a proper woman equals not allowing oneself to be treated as a slave.

A Byronic hero who has returned home from the West Indies, bringing with him a mad woman of colour who attempts to murder the white woman he now wishes to marry. The triangle of colonial desires and nightmares that haunts Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre is classic, but not original. Ten years earlier, a plot with a similar triangle appeared in Bremer’s bestseller The Neighbours. What among the racial dynamics in Jane Eyre can be traced back to The Neighbours? Bremer’s novel depicts slavery both on a literal and a symbolic level. As a symbol of white women’s submission, the theme of slavery haunts the novel.

The connections between the British and American movements for women’s rights and the abolition of slavery are well documented (e.g. Sklar & Stewart, 2007; Yellin & Van Horne, , 2018). We know that early feminists used arguments from the abolitionist movement, employing slavery and the transatlantic slave trade as a symbol of white women’s submission. How were those symbols understood and used in a country that considered itself outside the discourses on slavery? Despite the flourishing slave trade in the Swedish colony of Saint Barthélemy, the transatlantic slave trade was never really considered a Swedish issue. By the 1830s, the Swedish consensus was that slavery was immoral, but Swedes in general do not appear to have considered themselves complicit. Paradoxically, the question of slavery appears to have been both uncontroversial and untouchable. As it was not considered a Swedish question, Swedes did not have to speak of it, so making it possible to ignore the Swedish involvement. What then happened when someone did speak of it?

Fredrika Bremer was a key nineteenth-century advocate of women’s rights in her time, both in Sweden and internationally (on Bremer as a front figure of the Western women’s right’s movement, see Anderson, 2000; Gleadle, 1995, p. esp. 54–62; McFadden, 1999, pp. 154–61; Bremer’s role in the Swedish women’s rights movement, see Manns, 2005, pp. 130–55). Her novel Granmarne (1837, The Neighbours...
1842) was one of her most appreciated works and led to her international breakthrough (Arping, 2018, p. 19–20). It explicitly discusses questions of race, and it is one of few Swedish novels to portray a slave trader. Still, readings of The Neighbours have failed to investigate this theme. Scholars have noted that the main cast includes a former slave trader and a woman of colour from the West Indies, but these characters haven’t been the focus of analysis (Burman, 2001, pp. 138–48; Burman & Burman, 2000, p. xii; Burström, 1930, p. 453–5; Kleman, 1925, p. 124–8; Stendahl, 1994, p. 53–6; Burman and Burman offers an extensive overview of the literature on The Neighbours until 2000; subsequent publications are; Arping, 2018; Asklund, 2016; Burman, 2004). As yet, only one study has traced the thread of slavery and colonialism in The Neighbours, and none have discussed the implications of this theme for the novel’s portrayal of femininity (Holmqvist, 2021). Instead, the literature on Bremer’s views on race has for the most part concentrated on her travels in the Americas some years later, and especially her published letters (Bohlin, 2013; Körber, 2004; Lofsvold, 1999; Qvist, 1969, pp. 227–42; Wendelius, 1985, pp. 71–98). For example, Körber has demonstrated the significance of whiteness in these writings, where Bremer constructs slavery as a sort of education in whiteness—a civilizing project for the black population (Körber, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to examine how slavery functions as a symbol in Bremer’s fiction, looking at The Neighbours with a particular emphasis on Hagar, one of the characters. Hagar is a common nineteenth-century female stereotype: an Oriental femme fatale. More specifically, she is also a forerunner of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847). My article presumes similarities between Jane Eyre and The Neighbours and uses earlier literary analyses of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre to inform my reading of Hagar in The Neighbours. I would not argue that Brontë copied her story from Bremer, but rather that both authors were influenced by a shared European cultural heritage. Without dwelling on the details of who-read-what-when, I will demonstrate the similarities between the two novels in order to operationalize the readings of Jane Eyre in my reading of The Neighbours.

The extensive research on Jane Eyre has underlined the importance of such works in the building of the British Empire. Since Spivak’s (1985) groundbreaking article on the imperialist ideology of Jane Eyre, several scholars have carried out postcolonial and decolonial readings of Brontë’s novel (e.g. David, 1995; Meyer, 1996; Perera, 1991; Sharpe, 1993). As Sharpe (1993, p. 29) puts it, Jane Eyre has been transformed into “a contested site for establishing the relationship between feminism and imperialism.” Yet what of its predecessor, written using the same themes, similar characters, and a strikingly similar pattern of desire—but a decade earlier and outside the Empire? The racial dynamics of Jane Eyre is vital also to understand The Neighbours. From that also follows that Jane Eyre could be further examined through a reading of its predecessor The Neighbours. What did similar hierarchies of femininity look like before they were transformed into Jane Eyre?

Sweden’s role in nineteenth-century colonialism was of course very different from Britain’s, and has long been viewed as insignificant, even non-existent. It is only recently that it has attracted significant scholarly attention, most of it from historians (Pålsson, 2016; Thomasson, 2016, 2018; Weiss, 2016; Wilson, 2015); in cultural history, the multitude of images of the Orient has been noted (Björk, 2011; Landmark, 2003), as has the latent colonialism that permeated Swedish visual culture (Bharathi Larsson, 2016). The significance of such findings for Swedish fiction remains largely unexplored, however.

My analysis will begin with a short introduction of The Neighbours, charting its similarities with Jane Eyre, before considering the use of the slavery motif and in particular the significance of this theme for the portrait of Hagar. The last section turns to the wrongs not only of subjecting others to slavery but subjecting oneself to being a slave—and how Swedish femininity was constructed in opposition to both positions.

The novels

The Neighbours, unlike Jane Eyre, needs some introduction. Not that that was the case when the novels were published—Bremer was a bestselling author in both Europe and the US (Arping, 2018). The Neighbours was her fourth novel, first published as Grannarne in 1837 (on the novel’s
A Danish translation was published the same year, and editions in English, French, Dutch, Polish, Russian, German, etcetera soon followed. The English translation by the poet Mary Howitt was published in London 1842 (Bremer, 1842a, 1842b; a complete list of translations and editions of The Neighbours is given in Vitterhetsamfundet’s scholarly edition, edited by Carina and Lars Burman, 2000/2000, p. 396). One year later it was serialized in the US magazine The New World and is said to have caused enough of a stir for the newsboys to announce the magazine as “Miss Bremer’s latest!” (Rooth, 1955, p. 13) The Neighbours became one of Bremer’s most successful novels and established her as an international bestseller.

In Bremer and Brontë’s time, the similarities of Jane Eyre and The Neighbours were known, and Brontë was well aware of them. Unlike today, Bremer was a celebrity both in and outside Sweden. According to Elizabeth Gaskell’s (2000, p. 245) biography, Brontë upon reading The Neighbours dreaded being accused of plagiarism, convinced that “every one would fancy that she must have taken her conception of Jane Eyre’s character from that of ‘Francesca,’ the narrator of Miss Bremer’s story.” Gaskell disputed the similarities but writes that Brontë persisted “in saying that Francesca was Jane Eyre married to a good-natured ‘Bear’ of a Swedish surgeon.” Among Bremer scholars, this section of Gaskell’s biography is often quoted to call attention to Bremer’s international fame. Yet the only scholar to have discussed in detail the similarities between Brontë and Bremer, Carol Hanbery MacKay, swiftly joins Gaskell in dismissing the resemblances between Jane Eyre and The Neighbours. MacKay (1994, p. 120) mentions the likeness of both Hagar/Bertha Mason and Bruno/Rochester but claims that the only substantial similarity between the two novels is “a strong-minded female narrator.” As I will argue, I believe this to be a misconception. The similarities are striking, in particular when it comes to the colonial theme of both novels.

Like Jane Eyre, The Neighbours is a first-person narrative, although not a fictional autobiography but a fictional epistolary novel. Most of the letters are written by Franziska, described much like Brontë’s Jane as short, plain, middle-class, and poor, but clever, self-confident, and artistic. She finds employment as a music teacher but marries money in the shape of the kind Lars Anders, whom she calls “Bear”. Although Bear is a very different man than Jane Eyre’s Rochester, the dynamics of the relationships Franziska–Bear and Jane–Rochester are much the same. Not only because the books see poor women marry older, wealthy men—a standard ingredient in nineteenth century fiction—but because both women gain influence over their partners in their good-humoured quarrels, or what Freedgood (Freedgood, 2006, p. 48) has described as a “high-speed Hegelian master/slave dialectic” in Jane Eyre. 2 In both cases, the inequalities are eventually balanced out through a financial blow: in the case of The Neighbours, Bear loses his fortune in bad investments, whereafter Franziska takes charge of their shared fate (a similar development—and its similarity to Jane Eyre—has been pointed out in Bremer’s novel Syskonlif by Heggestad, 1991, p. 46–8).

Unlike Jane Eyre, the plot of The Neighbours is built around not one love story, but two. Although both novels centre on triangular relations of race and desire, they are also different in this respect. Jane of Jane Eyre is a mixture of two characters in The Neighbours: the narrator Franziska, but also the angelic ideal, Serena. Consequently, Rochester is also a mirror of two male characters: Franziska’s sensible and solid husband Bear and his mysterious, passionate half-brother Bruno. While the marriage dynamics of Franziska and Bear match Jane and Rochester’s, the triangle Jane–Rochester–Bertha instead mirrors Serena, Bruno, and Bruno’s former mistress Hagar.

It is in Bruno’s relationships with his true love Serena and ex-lover Hagar that the similarities between Jane Eyre and The Neighbours become truly striking. Like Rochester, Bruno is a Byronic hero, dark, secretive, and owing his fortune to European colonies. Also like Rochester, this connection takes physical form in a woman—both Rochester and Bruno are haunted by a colonial past embodied by a woman of colour. The colonial relations and anxieties of both Jane Eyre and The Neighbours are joined in the scorned lovers of the Byronic heroes, functioning as the mirrors, shadows, and antagonists of the main characters. Although Franziska as the narrator of The Neighbours is not herself invested in the love triangle that involves Hagar and
Bruno, she constantly worries about their questionable characters and obscure pasts. Meyer (1996, p. 66) describes Bertha Mason’s function “as the central locus of Brontë’s anxieties”; I would argue that her Swedish counterpart, Hagar, is the locus of Bremer’s anxieties, and, in particular, anxieties of race.

**Owning slaves, or non-white Hagar**

The transatlantic slave trade is depicted in *The Neighbours* in a way that assumes it is an affront to the Christian values Bremer held high. Nevertheless, Bremer was not particularly interested in the emancipation of persons from slavery. Like most of her fellow Swedes, Bremer does not appear to have given slavery much thought before she visited the Americas—twelve years after the publication of *The Neighbours*. When she arrived, she seems to have been mostly interested in the white inhabitants (Körber, 2004; see also Wendelius, 1985, p. 72). In her first letters home Bremer (1853, p. 124) said that, “like every other thinking Christian” she “must condemn slavery as a system and institution,” but postponed her judgement on US slavery until she had witnessed it for herself.\(^3\) When she did so, she refused to join the abolitionist cause without reservation, and instead adopted a compromise position—much to the surprise of her American friends (Qvist, 1969, p. 239). Although Bremer was shocked by the brutality of some slavers, she became friends with others, and took a stance both against slavery and what she referred to as the “ultra-abolitionists and their violence” (Bremer, 1853, p. 383). Paradoxically, Bremer had been more wholeheartedly anti-slavery before her travels.

In *The Neighbours* the slave trade is used to signal immorality. This appears to reflect the general opinion in Sweden. Weiss’s (2016, p. 201) research has indicated that arguments against slavery had appeared in the Swedish press since the 1770s. Anti-slavery arguments seem to have been distributed in Sweden broadly through cheap prints such as chapbooks. One of Legh Richmond’s anti-slavery tracts, for example, was translated into Swedish and published in several editions from 1812 onwards (Richmond, 1812; new editions appeared 1814, 1816, 1820, 1823, 1835, 1837, 1842, 1847, 1849, 1852, and 1875). Around the time Bremer started work on *The Neighbours* in 1835, the term “abolitionist” appeared in Swedish press for the first time. The Swedish press, in reporting on the US debates, appears to have taken for granted the immorality of slavery Utrikes, 1835a; Utrikes, 1835b; Nyheter, 1835a; Nyheter, 1835b; Nytt, 1835; on the production of *The Neighbours* see C. Burman & Burman, 2000, pp. xv–xxiv; Toijer-Nilsson, 1965).

However, the Swedish examples of fictional representations of the transatlantic slave trade are few in comparison with, for example, British literature. The most significant is probably Emilie Flygare-Carlén’s *Jungfrutornet* (Flygare-Carlén, 1848, “The Maiden Tower”)—a little known novel by a much-appreciated writer. *Jungfrutornet* is partly set on a slave ship, and like *The Neighbours* takes a firm stance against the slave trade using slavery as a symbol of immorality. This area of study is still largely unexplored in Swedish comparative literature and has only recently begun to gain some attention, and it is therefore difficult to make any general claim on the depiction of the transatlantic slave trade in Swedish fiction during the nineteenth century (see foremost Pålsson, 2020). What makes *The Neighbours* particularly interesting is that it makes an explicit case against slavery and the transatlantic slave trade that reveals some knowledge of the arguments for and against slavery (Holmqvist, 2021).\(^4\) Carl Plasa’s (1994) conclusion that *Jane Eyre* excludes “colonial slavery at the level of the literal” while presenting it as discourse is hence not true of *The Neighbours* (noting Plasa’s point that scholars are just as silent on the subject in their readings, while the opposite is true of readings of *The Neighbours*).

Namely, Bruno does not only owe his fortune to colonies in the West Indies, but he is a repentant slave trader. He hides this from his family but tells the secret to Serena when she agrees to marry him, saying that it is “that which I will for ever repent.” He recounts his crimes frankly, revealing to her that he not only bought and sold humans but also personally kidnapped them, describing how he “tore with violence husband from wife, mothers from their children, and carried them as slaves.
to the Portuguese colonies” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 318). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Holmqvist, 2021), the famous abolitionist catchphrase “Am I not a man and a brother?” is alluded to in order to accentuate the immorality of transatlantic slave trade. The dyad appears in Bruno’s confession when he exclaims “men—my brethren—I sold for gain!” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 318) Before that, and before the reader knows anything of Bruno’s past, a heated debate about the immorality of slavery is concluded with the narrator Franziska’s husband Bear saying that any person of African descent “is a man, and as a man he is my brother” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 226) The phrase was one among a repertoire of standard abolitionist arguments, and signifies Bremer’s familiarity with the international movement’s reasons for the emancipation of people from slavery.

Bremer’s commitment to arguing against slavery can likely be attributed to her feminist beliefs and connections. After all, she was a prominent advocate of women’s rights both in Sweden and internationally. In the women’s movement, metaphorical language was borrowed from the abolitionist movement in order to draw attention to women’s submission (Anderson, 2000, pp. 114–28; Gledade, 1995, p. 62–5). Although these connections have yet to be thoroughly investigated when it comes to Sweden, they have been noted in this context too (Manns, 2005, p. 26).

Much like her international colleagues, Bremer used these arguments to make the case for a better nation. Feminism for Bremer was a nationalist concept. Anna Bohlin (2013; also 2016, 2018) has demonstrated Bremer’s investment in the nation-building project and how her nationalist enterprise corresponded with her feminist thought, for example pointing out that Bremer’s interest in the Americas was a chance to create a better Sweden. Bremer’s deep commitment to the question of women’s emancipation was part of her commitment to Sweden: women’s emancipation would lead to a better nation, just as a better nation would lead to emancipation of women. For Bremer, these questions were intertwined (as were several other emancipatory projects, not least a religious one). The emancipation of women was, as Midgley (2007, p. 129) has put it, “the culmination of the progress of western civilization,” and early British women’s rights activists “presented the oppression of women, like the enslavement of Africans, as out of place and out of time in developed Western society.” Consequently, for Bremer: as slavery is immoral, it is also fundamentally un-Swedish.

While Bremer places the question of slavery in a Swedish context, she also describes it as a consequence of foreign influence. More precisely, the reason that Bruno has become a slave trader is that he has been corrupted by foreigners. His slave-trading past is described as a direct consequence of his life abroad, and something he embarked on despite his Swedish upbringing. He says that it was by falling into bad company far from Sweden that he “confounded the remaining ideas of right and goodness which I had brought with me from the maternal home” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 317). It was Bruno’s foreign friends with their “powerful influence” who convinced him that Africans were “destitute of all moral worth”, and thus persuaded him to become “a dealer in men, a trader in human souls!” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 318) It is, thus, only by the influence of foreign others that Bruno has become a participant in the slave trade. Despite this, a contemporary reviewer of The Neighbours objected to the character of Bruno for precisely the reason that slavery was un-Swedish (Burman & Burman, 2000, pp. xiv). It was apparently not enough for the reviewer that Bruno is described as corrupted by foreigners. The notion that a Swedish man would ever become a slave trader was so unlikely that it was considered a flaw in the plot.

The pronounced reluctance to accept Swedish complicity in the transatlantic slave trade goes in line with previous findings about the self-image of what has been called Nordic exceptionalism (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). When The Neighbours was published, Sweden still had its colony of Saint Barthélemy—a free port, and hence a popular port of call for slave ships (Pålsson, 2016; Thomasson, 2016, 2018; Wilson, 2015). As a result of negotiations with Britain, Sweden made half-hearted attempts to end the slave trade on Saint Barthélemy in 1813, and again in 1823 and 1830, but it was not until 1845 that the government made the final decision of ending slavery in the Island. Despite this direct involvement, the Swedish self-image was (and still is) that it had nothing to do with the transatlantic slave trade. It was not until 1840 that the question of Swedish slavery was at all
debated within Sweden, after an organization for the emancipation of slavery was initiated by British quakers visiting Stockholm (Sällskapet för neger-slafvars emancipation, 1840; Weiss, 2016, p. 242). When in the early nineteenth century the Swedish press wrote about the horrors of the slave trade, they took for granted it had little or nothing to do with Sweden, not even hinting at the possibility of Swedish participation (Weiss, 2016, p. 203).

This is where Hagar comes in—as a foreign influence corrupting Bruno. Hagar is the only non-Swedish character in The Neighbours, a dark and troubling beauty. Hagar’s hair is black, and her face is of “dark hue” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 121) She is described as of an “oriental beauty,” and is called “a very dark woman” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 128, 111, also 115). She is constantly used as a counter image of the other—white—women in the novel. And significantly, Hagar is not only a foreigner but also the daughter of a slave owner. Hagar’s precise family relations are unclear, but her father is a business partner of Bruno’s, presumably the plantation owner in the West Indies that Bruno traded with. Hagar and Bruno met in his house, where Hagar says she could “command a thousand slaves” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 298). This brief mention of the slavery in Hagar’s father’s house clarifies that she is not just a foreigner, but more specifically originates from a nation where slavery is visibly present. It is never clear which nation this is. Bruno is said to have been in Portuguese military service and has sold people into the slavery of “Portuguese colonies” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 318). On several occasions, he is also said to have made his fortune in the West Indies, and Franziska is told that he made his fortune “by trade”, “in partnership with a planter” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 294).

However, Portugal did not have any colonies in the West Indies, which could either mean that Bruno has traded with two countries (selling people to a Portuguese colony, then trading with a planter in the West Indies), or simply that Bremer uses the term “West Indies” not so much as a reference of any particular nation but rather as an indication of somewhere in the Americas.

The obscurity of Hagar’s origin is not a coincidence—it is an effect of Bremer’s interest in whiteness. Also, it further marks Hagar as the counter image of Swedishness. Exactly where Hagar is from seems less important than the detail that she grew up surrounded by slavery, and this is also a key similarity with Bertha Mason. In Sharpe’s reading, Bertha is a female version of the stereotypical, immoral West Indian plantation owner. The specifics of Bertha’s race have been contested by scholars, and she has been described as both colonized (for example Spivak, 1985; Meyer, 1996) and colonizer (for example Sharpe, 1993). I follow Sharpe’s reading in understanding Bertha as foremost the daughter of a plantation owner and thus a member of the slave owning class. This is not to exaggerate her agency—as married to Rochester she has no access to whatever fortune her family possesses—but only to point out that her background places her among owning slaves rather than being subjected to slavery. Although Hagar’s background is slightly more obscure than Bertha’s, this is an important likeness between the two. Like Bertha, Hagar has experienced the slave economy first-hand by growing up on a plantation, legitimate daughter of its owner. Both women bring with them to their new countries a familiarity with, and a closeness to, slavery.

The very obscurity of their origins is another significant similarity between Hagar and Bertha. Unlike Bertha, Hagar is not described explicitly as creole but instead as Jewish (on “creole” in Jane Eyre see Thomas, 1999, p. 2–3). The female creole stereotype was less common in Sweden than in Britain, but there were stereotypical Jewish characters in abundance. Jews were a visible minority group in Sweden, and anti-Semitic portraits were a standard element in nineteenth-century Swedish fiction. Hagar’s Jewish origins are implied by her name and “Hebrew form of countenance” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 121), but to the author’s mind also in private letters (Burman & Burman, 2000, pp. xxii–xxiii). Despite this difference, there is a vagueness about both Hagar’s and Bertha’s origins that comes to show in the multiple, shifting scholarly attempts at clarification. In the literature, Hagar has been called “a black woman” (Stendahl, 1994, p. 55) as well as “oriental” (Burström, 1930, p. 422, “orientalisk”, my transl.) and “eastern” (Adlersparre & Leijonhufvud, 1896, p. 277, “österländsk”, my transl.) What Meyer (1996, p. 67) calls the “odd ambiguity” of Bertha Mason’s race is just as true of Hagar.
Despite the mentions that Hagar is Jewish and Bertha creole, and both characters’ origins in the West Indies, they are not so much characterized by what they are, as what they are not. Hagar is racialized as un-Swedish in the same manner that Bertha is un-English. Meyer (1996, p. 66) points out that the question of Bertha’s race marks “the impurity Victorians assigned to colonial whiteness.” In a similar manner, Mckee (2009, p. 70) has described the threat of contamination that Bertha represents, according to “conflicting European assumptions about the fixity of racial identity.” Sharpe suggests that Bertha, as a member of the white plantation-owner class, is arguably a more threatening character than she would be as a free black woman—Bertha’s creole background suggests that “whiteness” is not a sign of racial purity. As Sharpe (1993, p. 46) points out, one of the functions of the creole stereotype is to “disassociate a pure English race from its corrupt West Indian line.” In Hagar’s case, it is not so much that the Swedish race needs to be disassociated from a corrupt line—Swedish citizens had far less direct contact with the colonies—but the obsession with racial purity was just as massive in Sweden as it was in Britain.

Hagar is thus racialized in two ways: as non-white, and as tainted with the moral bankruptcy of slavery. These aspects are deeply connected in The Neighbours. Hagar’s connection to slavery is an aspect of her non-whiteness, as her non-whiteness is key in her connection with the slave trade.

Hagar’s diffuse non-whiteness is a mark of her otherness, and it secures her role as a threatening foreign influence in the novel as well as an indicator of the other women’s whiteness. The Neighbours may be described as an early account of what Svensson (2020) has called whitifying narratives, vitifera(n)de narrativ, within 20th century Swedish literature. Hagar’s non-whiteness, her racialization as other than Swedish, is emblematic for the construction of whiteness in the novel.

Hagar represents a corruption of Swedishness that is most evidently demonstrated in Bruno’s former wrongdoings. These wrongdoings, in turn, are synonymous with slavery. As Bruno’s former love object, Hagar is representative of the importance Bremer places on women within the family, and the transatlantic slave trade functions in The Neighbours as a reminder of all that can go wrong with a man’s morals. The “powerful influence” that foreign friends exerted over Bruno’s mind when he lived abroad is represented in Sweden by Hagar, the foreigner who follows Bruno to his native country (Bremer, 1842b, p. 318). It appears only natural, then, that she should also come from a family of slavers.

Being a slave—Hagar’s slavery and Serena’s moderate submission

What are the implications of that other aspect of Hagar’s foreign femininity—that she is not only a slave owner’s daughter, but also a slave? Again, the scholarship on Jane Eyre can shed light on The Neighbours, as Brontë also contrasted proper femininity with both subjecting and being subjected to slavery. Both novels argue for women’s rights using Orientalist symbols of women’s submission—what for Jane Eyre Suvendrini Perera (1991, p. 79) calls a “vocabulary of oriental misogyny” and Joyce Zonana (1993, p. 593) a “feminist orientalist discourse”. The same set of Orientalist symbols used by Brontë is already in place in The Neighbours. Again, Bremer’s novel is more explicit, employing Islam as a talking point between two of the main characters. As demonstrated elsewhere (Holmqvist, 2021), that conversation—or, rather, quarrel—presents a feminist, nationalist argument against slavery by using a misogynistic Orient as a backdrop. Scholars such as Perera and Zonana have underscored the implications of Orientalism for nineteenth-century women’s rights activists in general and for Jane Eyre in particular. By comparing Rochester’s oppressive patriarchal tendencies with the Orient, a Western readership is invited to dislike the patriarchy in Jane Eyre without having to question either the West or Christianity (Perera, 1991, pp. 79–102; Zonana, 1993; see also David, 1995, pp. 90–96; Michie, 1992). The argument for women’s rights is thus phrased not as an overturning of society as we know it, but as quite the opposite.
In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s English femininity is contrasted with the wildly self-indulgent Creole and the overly submissive Oriental woman. Sharpe (1993, p. 47) argues that the novel constructs its story of female individuality around a racialized split in femininity, where “a domestic form of agency” is enabled by means of two opposed (equally un-English) femininities: Creole self-indulgence and Oriental self-immolation. Bertha Mason, in Shape’s reading, is representative of the West Indian female plantation owner: ambitious, passionate, and sexually depraved. At the other end of the spectrum of wrongful femininity there is the self-renunciation of Hindu sati. In *The Neighbours*, meanwhile, proper femininity is also contrasted with indulgence as well as submissiveness. Self-indulgence and self-immolation are described here too, but they are conjoined in Hagar. This is most evident in the novel’s melodramatic finale, when Hagar tries to kill first Bruno’s new love and then herself in order to make him happy: “‘Thy will shall be done!’ Cried Hagar wildly. ‘See here, Bruno, thy victim;—it would only die at thy feet!’” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 288). Hagar’s passion drives her to both excess and submission. She is both proud and humble, indulgent and yielding.

When Hagar describes her father’s house and the “thousands” of persons subjected to slavery at her command, her wealthy background serves as a contrast to her current position as Bruno’s ex-mistress. Describing her father’s wealth, Hagar continues that “I forsook all, and became his [Bruno’s] slave” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 298). She refers to her biblical namesake, comparing her own situation with that of Hagar in Genesis, “a handmaid” who “forsook all” and was cast out “into the wilderness” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 122). Bremer’s choice of names was seldom coincidental, and the Bible is an important intertext in all of her works. In Hagar’s case, this is most evidently so. All of the history and complexities of the biblical character Hagar—the handmaid of Sara that was given to/raped by Abraham in order to give birth to his son—are alluded to in the character of Hagar in *The Neighbours*. Hagar is repeatedly described as a slave in relation to Bruno, enduring his harshness “with slavish servility,” and allowing him to disrespect her (Bremer, 1842b, p. 141).

That Hagar voluntarily takes on the position of slave seems to Franziska worthy of contempt, even disgust. That Hagar accepts Bruno’s harshness is taken as proof of her wrongs: “How deep must a woman have sunk before she can suffer herself to be so treated, and like a hound creep fawning to the foot which kicks it away!” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 141). That Bruno treats Hagar with so little respect is thus taken as a sign of Hagar’s own lack of morals. To allow oneself to be treated as a slave is to be an inferior woman. As Zonana (1993, p. 601) points out, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s writings on slavery it is not only the English male oppressor who is against nature, but also the oppressed Englishwoman: no Western woman can accept the bondage that for Eastern women is natural. In other words, Hagar’s self-inflicted slave position is as foreign as she is herself.

However, female submission is also a crucial element in Bremer’s vision of ideal femininity. When Franziska reflects on Hagar’s “spirit of a slave,” she also compares it with “the free but unassuming mind with which an honoured and beloved wife devotes herself to the object of her pure devotion” (Bremer, 1842b, p. 141). What she has in mind seems to be Serena, who is similarly self-sacrificing, but not in the submissive way that Hagar is. Throughout the novel, Serena is painted as the ideal of womanhood—everything that Hagar is not, her complete opposite. Again, the name implies the character: Serena is pure and angelic. The name’s resemblance with Sara—Hagar’s mistress in the story of the Genesis mentioned above—also underscores the juxtaposition of Serena and Hagar. In contrast to Hagar’s diffuse non-whiteness, Serena is ultra-white: “white maiden!” as Hagar greets her (Bremer, 1842b, p. 296). She has “soft white hands,” a skin that is “white and transparent,” a “white and gracefully moulded forehead,” and “beautiful blue eyes” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 210, 112). In the words of Virginia Woolf’s seminal critique of Victorian ideals, famously elaborated by Gilbert and Gubar (2000/2000), Serena is an angel in the house—and incessantly referred to as such.

An important part of Serena’s angelic femininity is how she sacrifices herself for others. Deidre David (1995, p. 116) has pointed out how the physical misery and resilience “formed by the Victorian gender codes of female sacrifice” qualifies Jane Eyre “as a fit woman for the empire,”
and how precisely those characteristics are what makes her able to clean Rochester of his colonial past. This background—physical misery, sacrifice, resilience—belongs to Serena in The Neighbours, and just as in Jane Eyre these characteristics qualify her to be the one to erase Bruno’s wrongdoings as a slave trader. It is their marriage that renders Bruno fit for life in Sweden—to do that he needs to clear himself of his foreign experiences.

But Serena must make sure not to become too submissive. Being an angel is not uncomplicated in Bremer’s feminist vision. Although Franziska and Bear relish “how altogether she sacrifices herself for her old grand-parents; how self-forgetting she is,” they (and most of all Franziska) make efforts to hinder those same sacrifices (Bremer, 1842a, p. 222). Serena is sickly throughout the novel, but for the most part unable to take part of the healthy country air she so desperately needs, since she refuses to leave her grandparents on their own. Franziska, while moved by Serena’s affection, opposes her lack of self-preservation. She does not question Serena’s devotion to her grandparents per se but is worried by the extremes of: the “unreasonable” business of reading aloud to her grandfather all night; her “needless, irrational self-torture” when failing to object to her grandparents’ refusal to let her marry Bruno (Bremer, 1842b, p. 213). Apparently Serena runs the risk of becoming too much of an angel.

This fear of excess, of the ideal woman becoming too ideal, is also inscribed in Serena’s looks. Although Serena looks exactly like Franziska’s “idea of a seraph”, she is also “not beautiful” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 111). More precisely, she has a particular flaw, explicitly singled out as breaking literary protocol. When first describing the angelic Serena, Franziska concludes her account of perfection with the following ironic remark:

But the prose in this picture, the earthly feature in this angel-image! Ah, this must also be told! Serena is lame in her hip. (Bremer, 1842a, p. 214)

Bremer, as always, is playfully balancing irony and earnestness, melodrama and realism. Serena’s limp is a sarcastic reminder of the literary ideals of the day. It is presented as making her not an idealized “angel in the house,” but rather an actual angel in an actual house, in a sort of realistic take on the literary ideal. The realism may very well be contested—Serena is certainly an idealization, a representative of what Holm (1981) calls Bremer’s romantic code, and not the realist one—but that objection seems to be exactly what Bremer is alluding to in the quote above. By giving Serena a limp, by making her “not beautiful” (Bremer, 1842a, p. 111) Serena can be perfect while still representing Bremer’s unwillingness to adhere to the literary conventions of perfect women. Gleadle (1995, p. 60) has argued that one reason Bremer’s heroines were so popular among women’s rights activists is that, unlike most literary heroines at the time, they are not perfect but rather normal, realistic women. Because of her limp, this is also true of Serena. It is precisely Serena’s qualities as not perfect that makes her a feminist heroine—and thus fit for Bremer’s nationalist project. Serena is devoted, but not subservient; beautiful, but not pretty; a seraph without confirming the literary convention of seraph; an angel, but not an “angel in the house.” That is why she is also a feminist heroine, the one to save Bruno and cleanse him of his colonial past—i.e., the taint of the slave trade and his relationship with Hagar.

Conclusions

Using readings of The Neighbours’ successor Jane Eyre, I have demonstrated the significance of colonialism and race in The Neighbours. I have discussed the meanings and significance that slavery holds for the portrait of Hagar, a Jewish plantation daughter from the West Indies. The relationship pattern Jane–Rochester–Bertha that upholds the racial hierarchy of Jane Eyre is already in place in The Neighbours, in which a similar triangle Hagar–Bruno–Serena constructs Swedishness in opposition to an imagery of slavery. Hagar is the only foreigner in Bremer’s novel,
and a counter image of the Swedish female characters. That she grew up on a plantation and in
a house full of persons subjected to slavery is mentioned only in passing but is nevertheless
significant as it taints her with the same system of slavery in which her ex-lover Bruno has been
actively complicit. She is thus a Swedish example of the stereotypical, immoral slave owner’s
daughter that Bertha Mason is. Hagar is described as proud, ill-tempered, and passionate, but
towards her beloved Bruno she is also submissive. Paradoxically, her servility seems to be just as
evident of her being a foreigner as is her pride. Through Hagar, wrongful femininity is repre-
sented as both self-indulgence and self-immolation—the racial splitting of femininity that Sharpe
(1993)identifies as the counter image of Jane’s domestic agency in Jane Eyre. Hagar is not only
a corrupted slave owner’s daughter but also a slave, distanced from proper femininity by
imposing and acting out submission, constructing both as opposites of Swedish behaviour.
Being a slave is associated in The Neighbours with being an inferior woman. Proper femininity
equals self-confidence.

The precise limits of submission and femininity are tested by Hagar’s counterpart, Bruno’s new
love interest (and later wife) Serena. The ultra-white Serena pinpoints the limits of submission by
almost—but not quite—breaking them. Explicitly described as an angel, Serena runs the risk of
being too perfect, too submissive. While presented as an ideal woman, Serena’s idealized woman-
hood constitutes a risk because of its proximity to a too self-sacrificing womanhood. The narrator of
The Neighbours sarcastically plays up the ideal female “angel in the house,” and saves Serena from
perfection by giving her a limp.

In both The Neighbours and Jane Eyre, discussions of the limits of proper femininity bear the
stamp of the discourses about slavery. Britishness and Swedishness alike are constructed as
opposites of anything that has to do with slavery. Although these discussions are remarkably
explicit in The Neighbours (far more than in Jane Eyre), the same framework is used for both.
These novels are thus separate yet connected parts of a mutual European colonial discourse,
permeating British and Swedish society alike during this period.

Bremer argued for women’s rights in all her works, so the fact that the emancipation of women is
a key question in The Neighbours comes as no surprise. Like others in the international movement
for women’s rights, Bremer used slavery as a symbol of women’s submission. By bringing actual
slavery in European colonies into the novel, however, slavery becomes not just a symbol or a turn of
speech, but a reality. Slavery in The Neighbours is described as fundamentally un-Swedish, and
Swedes complicit in the slave trade as corrupted by foreigners. The wrongs of oppression are
redoubled with the wrongs of being oppressed, and both subjecting and being subjected to slavery
are constructed as non-Swedish positions marked by race.

Notes

1. Bear—Björn in Swedish—is a common Swedish name and Franziska’s nickname for her husband.
2. By nineteenth century standards Franziska marries late, but she is still twenty years younger than Bear.
3. The English translation was published the same year as the Swedish original. The differences in the translation
   versus original pointed out by Lofsvold (1999) have no bearing on the passages I quote here.
4. MacKay (1994, p. 128 n.9) points out that Bremer, unlike Brontë, had witnessed slavery. However, this has no
   bearing on The Neighbours, which she wrote before she visited America, knowing about slavery from second-
   hand information.
5. Burman and Burman also note that as early as the turn of the twentieth century Lydia Wahlström pointed out
   that a Swedish slave trader, Gustaf Lewin, lived close to Bremer and died while she was working on The
   Neighbours.
6. The lack of Swedish research in the field makes this statement somewhat speculative. A (very) cursory search
   of the Litteraturbanken database (Litteraturbanken, n.d.) in 2021 finds 280 instances of “kreol*” and “creol*”
in literature published before 1860, while 668 for “jude*” and “judimna*” (Jew and Jewess). The database
   includes both translated and original works, as well as several editions and non-fiction.
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