



African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus

By Rachel Holmes



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Saartjie Baartman was twenty-one years old when she was taken from her native South Africa and shipped to London. Within weeks, the striking African beauty was the talk of the social season of 1810—hailed as “the Hottentot Venus” for her exquisite physique and suggestive semi-nude dance. As her fame spread to Paris, Saartjie became a lightning rod for late Georgian and Napoleonic attitudes toward sex and race, exploitation and colonialism, prurience and science. In *African Queen*, Rachel Holmes recounts the luminous, heartbreaking story of one woman’s journey from slavery to stardom.

Born into a herding tribe known as the Eastern Cape Khoisan, Saartjie was barely out of her teens when she was orphaned and widowed by colonial war and forced aboard a ship bound for England. A pair of clever, unscrupulous showmen dressed her up in a body stocking with a suggestive fringe and put her on the London stage as a “specimen” of African beauty and sexuality. The Hottentot Venus was an overnight sensation.

But celebrity brought unexpected consequences. Abolitionists initiated a lawsuit to win Saartjie’s freedom, a case that electrified the English public. In Paris, a team of scientists subjected her to a humiliating public inspection as they probed the mystery of her sexual allure. Stared at, stripped, pinched, painted, worshipped, and ridiculed, Saartjie came to symbolize the erotic obsession at the heart of colonialism. But beneath the costumes and the glare of publicity, this young Khoisan woman was a person who had been torn from her own culture and sacrificed to the whims of fashionable Europe.

Nearly two centuries after her death, Saartjie made headlines once again when Nelson Mandela launched a campaign to have her remains returned to the land of her birth. In this brilliant, vividly written book, Rachel Holmes traces the full arc of Saartjie’s extraordinary story—a story of race, eros, oppression, and fame that resonates powerfully today.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A celebrated "human curiosity," exhibited in 1810 in London and Paris for her larger-than-average posterior, the so-called Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Baartman, is delivered once and for all by Holmes (*Scanty Particulars*) from the forces of sentimental primitivism, imperialism and scientific racism that so determined her life. Academics will recognize Holmes as one of their own (she is a former professor of English at the universities of London and Sussex); this book is liberally salted with the language of feminist, psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory (here is how Holmes explains Saartjie's susceptibility to exploitation at the hands of men: "[her] relationship with paternalistic figures was shadowed by her unresolved attachment to an idealized father, snatched from her at the point she most needed and respected him, and before she had cause to rebel against him"). But the book is propelled along by the inherent interest of Saartjie's story and Holmes's clear affection for her subject. Particularly close attention is given to Saartjie's declining years and her gruesome posthumous treatment at the hands of French scientist Cuvier, whose macabre fascination with Saartjie inspires some of the book's most engaging prose. (*Jan. 2*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Saartjie Baartman, a young South African woman, was brought to London in 1810 and displayed seminude as she danced suggestively to show off to best effect her ample bottom, earning her the name Hottentot Venus. Her public display and ultimate study by scientists long ago gained her iconic status as a symbol of European fascination with African sexuality. Holmes, author of *Scanty Particulars* (2003), explores the zeitgeist of Britain in the early 1800s, when Europeans were fascinated with the human behind and grappling with notions about race, sex, and colonialism. Holmes draws on press reports, ballads, and advertisements of the day that ridiculed Baartman as well as prominent politician Lord Grenville, who was similarly endowed. Baartman, abused by her manager and the public, attracted the attention of abolitionists, who saw in her a cause celebre to challenge provisions of the British constitution regarding slavery. Using fresh archival research, Holmes offers a definitive portrait of a woman whose remains--on museum display for generations--were only recently returned to South Africa for final burial. This is a probing look at historical racism and sexual exploitation presented through the life of an extraordinary woman. *Vanessa Bush*

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Review

Praise for Rachel Holmes and *Scanty Particulars*:

"From time to time a truly original piece of research comes to life. *Scanty Particulars* is not only a wonderful read; it captures the essence of one of the most enigmatic characters of the nineteenth century. The fabulous Dr. Barry is once again the center of speculation." - Amanda Foreman

"James Barry is the kind of character you think must have been dreamed up in an exotic collaboration between Joseph Conrad and Oscar Wilde. Rachel Holmes' *Scanty Particulars* is admirable and dramatic history, and suggests as well a subtle fable of colonialism and its discontents." - Ron Rosenbaum

"This clever and engaging book tells a fascinating story, and raises some vexing questions on gender as the disputed territory where physiology and ideology blur." - Jeanette Winterson -- *Reviews*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Henry Jensen:

Do you have favorite book? In case you have, what is your favorite's book? Book is very important thing for us to know everything in the world. Each guide has different aim or goal; it means that guide has different type. Some people experience enjoy to spend their time and energy to read a book. These are reading whatever they have because their hobby is actually reading a book. Consider the person who don't like reading a book? Sometime, individual feel need book if they found difficult problem or even exercise. Well, probably you will require this African Queen: The Real Life of the Hottentot Venus.

Jeffrey Paolucci:

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Owen Neri:

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Pat Thomas:

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