

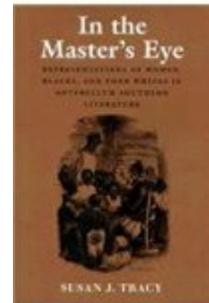
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan J. Tracy. *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. ix + 307 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87023-968-7.

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Published on H-CivWar (September, 1996)



In the Master's Eye is a study of the literature produced by proslavery southern men in the years preceding the Civil War. Six white, male, southern authors were selected and their novels analyzed to determine a consistent pattern in the fictional portrayal of females, African Americans, Native Americans, and poor (lower-class) white men. These six novelists—George Tucker, James Ewell Heath, William Alexander Caruthers, John Pendleton Kennedy, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker and William Gilmore Simms—were selected on the basis of race, gender, and social position. None of the men wrote for a living. Rather, they were intellectuals who dabbled in literature as a hobby because they enjoyed writing. All six were born or married into slaveholding families. Even William Gilmore Simms, the most prolific of the novelists discussed in this study, derived his primary income not from the sale of his books, but from his wife's 2500-acre plantation.

Southern female novelists of the period are not included in this study because, according to Tracy, they deserve a volume of their own. This arbitrary segregation makes the study somewhat problematical in that it weakens our understanding of the impact these male authors made on their intended audience. Nor does Tracy discuss the primary consumers of this literature, who they were, and how much they may have been influenced by these six particular writers, as opposed to other popular authors of the day. Nevertheless, Susan Tracy is to be commended for bringing attention to these sometime novelists for the insights they bring to the popular fiction of the period. Some of the books described in this study sound exciting enough to entice a modern reader.

The novels analyzed in this book are all romance nov-

els, either “contemporary” (that is, set during the same time period in which they were written) or “historical,” set in an earlier period, usually the Revolutionary War. Like romances of today, they follow a pattern: there are a primary hero and heroine, usually young, who become lovers and are united in marriage at the conclusion of the novel. In all the novels produced by these six authors, the hero and heroine are both white and belong to the same social class, usually the aristocratic upper class. Surrounding these primary characters are an assortment of supporting characters, who include African Americans, Native Americans, and other whites from a lower social level.

The villains in this literature come mainly from the “poor white” class. There are a few upper-class villains in the American Revolution historical romances, usually British officers or Loyalists, but these have “poor whites” as their supporters. None of the villains in any of the novels written by these six writers is black, Native American, or foreign. The foreign immigrant, in fact, is virtually ignored by these novelists. Tracy identifies only two minor characters who are recognizably foreign, both German immigrants, and she classifies them with the “poor whites.”

Tracy places the female characters in these novels in three categories—the “Belle” or the young romantic heroine, the “Mother,” and the “Fallen Woman,” usually a lower-class white or ethnic (Cajun or Native American, but no blacks). The “Belle” is usually passive and dependent. The “Scarlett O’Hara” type of character so fixed in the popular imagination as the typical southern “Belle” does not appear in this literature, Tracy argues. “Scarlett,” the creation of a twentieth-century feminist

writer, would have been classified as a “Fallen Woman” in the nineteenth century. However, in the descriptions of the heroines of the various novels, a number of assertive, strong, intellectual female characters do emerge. Assertive females who do not require male protection and companionship cannot, by definition, ever be primary heroines in a romance novel, even by today’s definitions of the genre. Even while claiming that such women were always singled out for vilification, Tracy nevertheless provides a counter-example in Mrs. Everleigh, the middle-aged, intellectual, aggressive heroine of William Gilmore Simms’s novel *Woodcraft*. Simms created the widest variety of personalities and temperaments among his characters.

The fictional portrayal of the seduced young woman, or “Fallen Woman,” is used to illustrate the feminist argument that a woman’s body, in Tracy’s words, “is not hers, but is owned by her father, who would deliver it up ‘undamaged’ to an appropriate male” (p. 99). In continuing the “female as slave” paradigm, the argument continues that “rape was an injury to the father’s interest in his daughter as ‘servant’ and as vehicle to wealth through marriage. Rape was not a crime against a woman as an individual” (p. 13). It is hard to imagine any Victorian woman, or man for that matter, actually accepting rape as anything other than an act of violence against women. This concept may have found its way into the wording of some legalistic definitions, but it can hardly be said to have taken hold in the popular imagination.

One such “Fallen Woman” heroine, Margaret Cooper of Simms’s *Beauchampe*, wants to learn to shoot in order to kill her seducer, the villainous Colonel Sharpe, but she is persuaded to allow the hero, Orville Beauchampe, to avenge her honor. It is considered “unfeminine” for a woman to want to avenge her own honor. Not even the minority heroines of these novels are exempt from paternalistic sexism. When Wingina, the Native American heroine of Caruthers’ *Knights of the Golden Horse-Shoe*, attempts to run away with John Spotswood, her white lover, they are caught by Chunoluskee, Wingina’s brother. He tomahawks Spotswood and takes Wingina back to her tribe. At Chunoluskee’s trial, one might expect him to receive the death penalty for killing a white man, but he is defending the honor of his tribe and the integrity of his family.

“Mothers” are a category of female character that includes all races and social classes. Motherhood, in these novels, is portrayed as “the purest and most spiritual of human emotions, surpassing even that of a wife for a hus-

band” (p. 113). “Poor white” mothers, even those married to brutal, cruel husbands, can redeem themselves and their children through good parenting, while neglectful and abusive mothers produce wicked offspring. The black mother is represented by these novelists as a revered, almost saintly figure, who loves not only her own children but the children of her white master. This idealized depiction of the beloved “Mammy” or “Mauma” was created by these pro-slavery novelists in rebuttal to the anti-slavery literature that showed children sold away from their mothers.

Surprisingly, the “mother” one would expect to find most exalted in this literature—the plantation mistress—is conspicuously absent. In only one novel, John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn*, does the plantation mistress play a major role; in the other novels, the unmarried heroine takes the place of her deceased mother as plantation hostess. Tracy suggests the reason for this omission was deliberate on the part of the writers: “Perhaps they realized the ‘romance’ of the historical romance would be compromised if the promised end for the heroine, as evidenced in the life of her mother, was years of pregnancy and fear of death in childbirth, unceasing toil, isolation, and loneliness, and possibly ruined marriages due to planter bankruptcy or vice” (p. 105). This is certainly not the “happy ever after” ending required by the romance genre, but one has to ask if the readers of this literature were not already perfectly well aware of a plantation mistress’s life. It makes sense to assume that most, if not all, of the readers of these romance novels were educated, upper and middle-class Southern women who managed plantations themselves.

Not surprisingly, the African-American characters created by these six novelists fit the usual stereotype one has come to expect in antebellum literature, both North and South. The black male is portrayed as the “faithful retainer” who puts his master’s needs above his own, is obedient, affectionate, childlike, submissive and dependent. The sexuality of the black man is either ignored or his supposed lust for white women is directed toward Native-American women. The love of a black man for a black woman is not acknowledged in this fiction, nor do young black women appear as characters. In only one novel, James Ewell Heath’s *Edge-Hill* (1828), does a slave earn his freedom through heroic action. The novels written later, in attempting to promote the benevolent paternalistic nature of chattel slavery, attempt to show how blacks would prefer to stay with kindly masters.

Besides race and gender, the third concept addressed

by Tracy is that of class. In the novels discussed, all of the villains belong to the “poor white” class. Although African Americans and Native Americans are presented as stereotypes in other ways, they are never portrayed as sinister or evil. Other lower-class whites can be heroic, but there is none of the class migration that is so unique to the American experience. In this fiction, the upper class is born to natural leadership, and the middle and lower classes can never hope to achieve that level. This rigid definition of class destiny is what distinguishes the literature of these six novelists from other American writers of the same period. However, it must be pointed out that Harriet Beecher Stowe also created a villain who was not only “poor white” but a Yankee as well!

Tracy describes her work as a “Marxist feminist project” (p. 2) which is intended to show how white males, in “every line and every scene in this literature ... assure the reader of the natural superiority of men to women, of whites to blacks and Native Americans, and of the planter class to all other classes” (p. 5). She concludes that these six authors prove Karl Marx’s thesis that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force...” (p. 2).

There are two things wrong with this conclusion. One is that people are more inclined to believe fictional

representations of lifestyles described in novels if they have no direct, personal experience of that lifestyle. Yet the readers of this fiction were themselves plantation women. The second is that people read novels primarily for entertainment. If an author attempts to impose a world view or opinion the reader does not basically agree with, the reader is not likely to enjoy the novel.

Romance fiction is a genre mainly produced by and for females. How do the portrayals of female characters in the work of these six men differ substantially from the female characters created by southern women writers of the same period, assuming similarities in the fictional representation of class and racial characters? Since women writers are not discussed in the study, it is impossible to draw a conclusion about the impact these six male authors had on their largely female audience.

I find it most ironic that *In the Master’s Eye* uses a Marxist paradigm to illustrate the fallacy of the theoretical paternalistic benevolence of chattel slavery, as compared to the horrors of the actual slave experience. Theoretical Marxist ideology and its practical application are the twentieth-century equivalent of paternalistic slavery as applied during the antebellum era. Nevertheless, Susan Tracy’s work helps to acquaint modern readers with some of the long neglected literature of the nineteenth century.

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Citation: Lynn Berkowitz. Review of Tracy, Susan J., *In the Master’s Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

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