

## THE SLAVE WOMAN: CONDUCT AND ASPIRATIONS AS PORTRAYED IN THREE ANTI-SLAVERY NOVELS

Francine M. King  
DeKalb College

The enslavement of black people in the American South has been labeled the "Peculiar Institution." The institution did not suddenly establish itself on fertile ground in 1619 with the arrival of the first Africans in North America. Kenneth Stampp says it was a conscious, step-by-step process by men who found other kinds of labor more expensive. The use of slaves in southern agriculture was a willful choice. From the official genesis in the 1660s, the institution provoked opposition and insurrection. Slavery did not fail as an economic endeavor. However, it did contain the seeds of its own destruction; few slaves really adapted and few whites could defend it without emotional strain.<sup>1</sup> Slavery became the foundation of Southern culture, and an ever-present disquieting reality. The conduct and aspirations of slave women as portrayed in anti-slavery novels provides insight into the "Peculiar Institution" as it related to the slave woman. Historical research into the black woman's role in slavery has just begun to surface, although her character was adroitly delineated in numerous anti-slavery novels. Despite the fact that anti-slavery fiction is not a historical narrative, it does reflect in many instances the conduct and aspirations of slave women. Surprisingly enough, it may be concluded that the only means by which anti-slavery novelists could evoke sympathy for the slave woman was to portray her as a stereotypical "southern belle." The purpose of this analysis is to separate this myth from reality.

Historical anti-slavery literature may be divided into four eras. The first period occurred prior to 1808, when the slave trade officially ended. Abolitionist thought was expressed through poetry and essays. The second phase was from 1808-1831. The anti-slavery literature during this time favored colonization and gradual emancipation. All forms of literary expression carried the message. The third period, 1831-1850, began with William Lloyd Garrison's bitter attacks on the institution of slavery, which proposed immediate emancipation. Such sentiments appeared in all popular forms of literary expression. The fourth and final phase began in 1850 and lasted until 1861. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and attempts to enforce it stimulated the publication of anti-slavery literature. The novel emerged as the literary form best suited to

express these sentiments.<sup>2</sup> These anti-slavery novels effectively appealed to the sentimentalism of the public in the United States. People had to be moved to action and the sentimental appeal accomplished this end.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth phase of anti-slavery literary development forms the core of this analysis concerning the slave woman's conduct and aspirations as delineated in anti-slavery novels. Three novels selected from this period are: (1) Richard Hildreth's *The White Slave: Another Picture of Slave Life in America*, the first anti-slavery novel published anonymously in 1836; (2) Emily Catherine Pierson's *Jamie Parker, The Fugitive* (1851), the first anti-slavery novel written by a woman; and (3) Mrs. Metta Victor's *Maum Guinea's Children*, published in the Beadle Dime Novel Series, 1861, and known for its popularity among Union soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Hildreth's *The White Slave* was the first anti-slavery novel which appealed to sentimentalism. It is centered around Archy Moore, the son of Colonel Moore by a mulatto maid. To avoid torments from a vicious older brother, Archy becomes a field hand and falls in love with Cassy, an octoroon maid. Before they can be married, Colonel Moore chooses Cassy as his concubine.<sup>5</sup> Hildreth presupposed that his reader's sentiments could be aroused only if his characters were as white as possible. In order for his abolitionist audience to identify with the conduct and aspirations of Cassy, the female slave, Hildreth assigned her behavior equivalent to that of a fragile "Southern belle." Cassy is loyal to her man and her only aspiration is to marry Archy. After Colonel Moore propositions Cassy, she says to Archy, "I am your wife; I will never be anybody but yours."<sup>6</sup> Not only is Cassy loyal, she is weak and dependent. Her near-rape experience produces the following reaction:

... she. . . was dizzy, a cloud swam before her eyes, and she had hardly been sensible of anything but a painful feeling of language and expression . . . with impatience for the hour that would permit her to throw herself into the arms of her husband, her natural protector.<sup>7</sup>

Like her white Southern counterpart, Cassy has a genetic predisposition to faint. Upon accidentally meeting her after a long separation, Archy says: "I sprang forward and caught her in my arms. She recognized me at the same moment, uttering a cry of



surprise and pleasure; she would have fallen had I not supported her.<sup>8</sup> Since Cassy is an imitation of a stereotypical white southern woman, she can give her "all" for true love. She "besought and begged that she might be sent off and sold with him [Archy]."<sup>9</sup> She would sacrifice her comforts to stand by her mate.

Hildreth distorted the conduct and aspirations of slave women in *The White Slave* to make an anti-slavery statement. He sacrificed realism for sentimentalism. It is true that slave women loved their husbands and cared deeply for them. However, in most instances, they submitted to their master's advances, knowing in advance the brutal repercussions of defiance. They did not depend on their mate to rescue them from lustful masters. This was not possible under slavery.<sup>10</sup> Historically slave women were rebellious, strong, and realistic. They aspired to be free while their conduct was basically shaped by a natural instinct to survive.<sup>11</sup>

In depicting the conduct of the "Black Mammy," Hildreth became a realist. He captured and recorded accurately the historical conduct of the "Mammy." He said of the slave owner of Mr. Thomas's slave mammy: "she was a black woman commonly called Aunt Emma, of formidable size and strength . . . a favorable upper servant and had succeeded . . . to the general control of the household after Mrs. Thomas's death."<sup>12</sup> Aunt Emma conducts herself in a manner not befitting a slave. Angry with Mr. Thomas for marrying a Yankee woman, she declares to Dianah, the cook:

' . . . fine times these, Aunt Dianah . . . that you and I, raised in one of the first families of Virginia, should have one of those good-for-nothing, no account, poor folk put over our heads--and a Yankee, too! Oh, Aunt Dianah, who would a thought it, that two quality niggers like you and I . . . should have to take up with a Yankee mistress?'<sup>13</sup>

The author then related: "Mrs. Thomas herself could hardly fail to overhear since the discontented housekeeper made very little privacy of her griefs."<sup>14</sup> Historically, the "Black Mammy" was the key figure in the master's household. She socialized the children, performed the mistress' tasks, and did the master's bidding.<sup>15</sup> She was also exempted from corporal punishment. Her behavior when found in other slaves was considered impertinent, but for the "Black

Mammy," it was her privilege.<sup>16</sup> Hildreth accurately captured the conduct of the "Mammy." Since she appeared the least threatening slave type, the author could depict her conduct realistically without sacrificing his readers' approval. The "Black Mammy" and the slave woman represented to Hildreth the *sina qua non* of female slaves' conduct and aspirations.

Emily Catherine Pierson's portrayal of the slave woman's conduct and aspirations were convincingly realistic. In *Jamie Parker, the Fugitive*, Pierson did not assign her characters any particular color. She failed to mention mulatto, octoroon, or quadroon. The novel's purpose was to present characters as human beings who were victims of a destructive institution. Most people could identify with the conduct and aspirations of Pierson's main female character, Jinny. The novel revolved around Jinny's son, Jamie, an escaped slave. Although her book was pious and sentimental, Pierson's account of slave life on the plantation was accurate.<sup>17</sup> She depicted Jinny as a loving and caring mother and wife. After her son, Jamie, is beaten by the patrol, Jinny "dressed his wounds and held him in her arms through the first weary night of his suffering."<sup>18</sup> Jinny is so concerned about her other child's illness that she decides to elicit the help of her mistress: "Jinny became so alarmed about him that one rainy day she dispatched Jamie to his mistress to ask if she might have a doctor."<sup>19</sup> The author noted that "Jinny's careful nursing was the means, under Providence, of his recovery."<sup>20</sup> When Jinny's husband escapes, she maintains her loyalty: "Jinny had nothing to communicate respecting him; she could not tell where he was . . ."<sup>21</sup>

Jinny also behaves in a predictable manner when her children are placed on the auction block and sold into slavery. "Jinny had borne her grief thus far in silent agony, but now her bleeding heart found relief in a loud, tumultuous cry. . . long and shrill was the scream which rose to heaven from that poor, bereaved mother."<sup>22</sup> Jinny is known around Monmouth plantation afterwards as "crazy Jinny."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Jinny acts in a rebellious manner:

She regularly left her little children to 'keep house' at the cabin and performed her work in the field, hot or cold, rain or shine, sick or well. Yet there was a sullen frown on her swarthy brow and she groaned more often than she spoke . . . she could not submit with meekness



to her situation. It galled her that she must work in the field.<sup>24</sup>

The overseer does not approve of Jinny's conduct. He says: "She made more trouble by her sour looks and bitter speeches than any other woman on the plantation."<sup>25</sup> He regards her "with an evil eye, and would gladly have taken occasion to bring her to punishment for delinquency, but no such occasion could be found."<sup>26</sup>

Jinny nourishes aspirations for freedom and the freedom of her family. "Had she been free, she could have felt that her toil was making her husband and children more comfortable and happy, then, indeed, it would have been accomplished early, with an elastic step and buoyant heart. It was not so now."<sup>27</sup> Jinny's daughters, Rose and Judy, are maids on the Monmouth Plantation. Sometimes, in Jinny's heart,

there was little hope remaining . . . that she could be able to effect her project of getting all her children to the 'free country.' Still, a glimmering would at times lighten the darkness of her fears, that some of them would yet be free, and it was this that strengthened her to toil on.<sup>28</sup>

*Jamie Parker, the Fugitive* depicted a female slave with realistic behavior patterns and clearly defined aspirations. Since Emily Pierson did not combine sentimentalism with color consciousness, she succeeded in portraying the female slave condition, conduct, and aspirations in a historically accurate manner. Although Jinny is a character exaggerated and larger than life, she conducts herself in a believable manner. She works hard on the plantation and resents it.<sup>29</sup> She does her best to comfort and take care of the children. Above all, she holds them in great esteem.<sup>30</sup> Slave women overwhelmingly yearned for freedom and frequently attempted to escape.<sup>31</sup>

*Maum Guinea's Children* by Metta V. Victor (1861) showed the planter and his family in a sympathetic manner. However, Victor managed to recount the horrors of slavery. Maum Guinea is the heroine of the book. She plots to help two slave lovers, Hyperion and Rose, escape.<sup>32</sup> Although Metta Victor only found merit in her

mulatto characters, she did delineate well some aspects of the female slave's conduct and aspirations. Her mulatto women displayed diverse characteristics; however, the more white blood they possessed the weaker they were psychologically and physically.

Maum Guinea, the Black Mammy of the novel, behaves in a manner as to gain respect from her master and the other slaves. In the eyes of the slaves, "Maum Guinea, although colored and a cook was as superior a being as any of the white race they had ever seen . . . they believed that something of a supernatural character was attached to her."<sup>33</sup> Since Maum Guinea has a son by her previous master's son, and is forced to marry a male slave on the same plantation, she becomes class and color conscious. She says of her octoroon daughter, Judy: "Little Judy was six years old when I married Jackson. Well, we had children, four in all. I took good care of all demm, but dey, never seem to me my own, like Judy. Dey was nice pickaninnies, some mos' as black as der fadder." Maum also has great aspirations for her light skinned daughter. She says:

If I'd had my choice I'd rudder see her married to a man as black as Jackson than be any white massa's missus, but I'd hopes of better things dan either for her. If I could take her up North and put her in some school or get some white family to 'dopt her, I was bound to do it.<sup>35</sup>

Sophy, another mulatto housekeeper, aspires to be a good wife and mother. She even aids one of Nat Turner's men in escaping. Sophy says of her mate, after their child is taken away: "I knew he had only one, now Daniel was gone, for we had no children, I nebber scolded him for staying out, but tried to get him as good breakfast, as I could."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, she adds, "he didn't like knocks and whippings and raising chil'ren for market, lite has they was chickens and pigs."<sup>37</sup> After Sophy discovers one of Nat Turner's men in the woods hiding, she becomes aggressive and decides to come to his aid. "It come into my mind to carry him food, and I made a pocket in my dress. and put in bread and taters . . . . In dis way, I brought him food two, three weeks, once I went and he was gone."<sup>38</sup>

Although Sophy is an aggressive character, Rose--the octoroon maid--aspires only to marry Hyperion, the love of her life. "Almost



for the first time in her life, she wished she were not a slave, which was very unreasonable in her, for there are many free white people who cannot marry whom they please . . . ."<sup>39</sup> With Maum Guinea's aid, Hyperion and Rose attempt their escape. Victor recounted: "Maum pressed in her arms the timid creature, whose heart fluttered wildly against her own."<sup>40</sup> She further asserted, "the wind grew more chilly toward morning, and despite her shawl, she shivered with the cold; for she was but a tropical plant, house-reared at that, tender and easily blighted."<sup>41</sup> Rose aspires for love only and behaves as if she is a "southern belle" in dire distress.

Metta Victor undeniably fell into the color conscious sentimental trap of anti-slavery novelists when she portrayed the conduct and aspirations of Rose. However, she did attribute aggressive and caring behavior to her other female characters, Sophy and Maum Guinea. Historically, slave women were aggressive and did plot escape.<sup>42</sup> Victor also adroitly depicted the color consciousness and class behavior of the mulatto house servant. Many slave mothers were against their daughters' marriage to a certain class of slaves because they were dark skinned and of "lowly status."<sup>43</sup>

The representation of the conduct and aspirations of black women in the selected anti-slavery novels, in many instances, reflected the historical realities recorded during the ante-bellum period. Nevertheless, in order to arouse their audiences' sentiments against slavery, some anti-slavery novelists preyed on the sentimentality of their readers. When anti-slavery literary figures such as Richard Hildreth and Metta Victor employed this technique, they tended not to portray the conduct and aspirations of the slave women accurately. They thought the only means by which their audience could sympathize with a woman slave was to make her the mirror image of a fragile white female, thereby equating sympathy for a human being with a certain color. The whiter the nature of the individual, the more sympathy the writers thought they could evoke. However, there were some anti-slavery novelists like Emily Catherine Pierson who appealed to the humanistic qualities innate in all human beings, regardless of color. Therefore, their portrayals of the conduct and aspirations of the slave women reflected more historical reality.

In anti-slavery novels, slave women aspired to gain their freedom. Many attempted to escape and others endeavored to assist

in escapes. They loved and cared for their families and friends as best they could. The "Black Mammy" did exist and was class conscious. However, the black woman did not have a fallacious sense of security. She understood that she was property and could not depend on her husband or mate to protect her. She was strong and sometimes aggressive. Regardless of her status as a slave, the black woman was not allowed the privilege of fragility. The fragile and mythical slave octoroon was a figment of the anti-slavery novelists' imagination. Her conduct and aspirations were purely mythical.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vantage Books, 1956), pp. 5-6.

<sup>2</sup>Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Anti-Slavery Sentiment in American Literature Prior to 1865* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1920), pp. 120-121.

<sup>3</sup>Jesse Macy, *The Anti-Slavery Crusade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), pp. 154-155.

<sup>4</sup>Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1937), pp. 32-43.

<sup>5</sup>Donald E. Emerson, *Richard Hildreth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), pp. 73-77.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Hildreth, *The White Slave: Another Picture of Slave Life in America* (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1852), p. 34.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup>John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 164.

<sup>11</sup>Dorothy Burham, "The Life of the Afro-American Woman in Slavery," *International Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (July-August 1978): pp. 374-375.

<sup>12</sup>Hildreth, *The White Slave*, p. 326.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*



- <sup>15</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, pp. 266-267.
- <sup>16</sup>Jesse W. Parkhurst, "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household," *Journal of Negro History* 23 (July 1938): p. 355.
- <sup>17</sup>Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, p. 33.
- <sup>18</sup>Emily Catherine Pierson, *Jamie Parker, The Fugitive* (Connecticut: Brockett Fuller and Co., 1851), 23.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>29</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, p. 248.
- <sup>30</sup>Deola Dean, "The Ante-Bellum Slave Woman, 1830-1865: A General Survey" (M.A. Thesis, Atlanta University, 1975), p. 41.
- <sup>31</sup>Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, pp. 192-193.
- <sup>32</sup>Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction*, p. 42.
- <sup>33</sup>Metta V. Victor, *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation Children: A Slave Romance* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1861), p. 19.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.
- <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157.
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 120.
- <sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 132.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.
- <sup>42</sup>Burham, "The Life of the Afro-American Woman in Slavery," pp. 374-375; Dean, "The Ante-Bellum Slave Woman," pp. 31-32.
- <sup>43</sup>Justin Labinjoh, "The Sexual Life of the Oppressed: An Examination of the Family Life of Ante-Bellum Slaves," *Phylon* 35 (December 1974): p. 386.