

Matrimony, 'Passing,' and Anti-Patriarchal Representation in *Clotel: Enslaved Females'*

Elevation to Equality

Brown, through his choice to make enslaved African American females the fulcrum of *Clotel*, exhibited that these women's power existed and was, in fact, heightened by society's schemes to perpetuate unproportionate affliction and indisputably inhumane legalities and perceptions such as denial of marriage rights, critique of 'passing' as a submissive and inherently feminine solution, and the general gendered consensus of the male-female hierarchy. Concurring and contradicting literature from William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, M. Giulia Fabi's "The 'Unguarded Expressions of the Feelings of the Negroes': Gender, Slave Resistance, and William Wells Brown's Revisions of *Clotel*," and Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention* allows for more in-depth analysis of these ideas. By examining society's integral degradation and underestimation of the enslaved female population, one can partake in Brown's human perspective on an inhumane system as Brown ensures widely acknowledged representation for this portion of the population. A path-paving author in African American literature, Brown relays a tale of the enslaved female population's elevation in power despite conventions sought to further disintegrate their status, a literary anthem relevant and necessary to any audience looking to advance despite adversity.

MARRIAGE RIGHTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS

Brown depicts societal denial of marriage rights to the enslaved to comment on the disillusioned perception and lacking presence of human rights; the legality of these literary and literal situational marriages explore not only femininity but humanity. Legal marriage is only considered a convention in the free community as this portion of the population is the only part who can claim familiarity with this practice. However, the enslaved must take multiple steps to

ensure that marriage is a convention for them as well: marriages in enslaved communities are not recognized as legal and are thus demoted in status as a human right not yet secured. For instance, Mary and George's meeting in the graveyard embodies this duality of representation. The word "graveyard" (Brown 225) illustrates the refusal of marital rights—a metaphor affirming a 'civil death'—and the progression towards a lawful marriage. Thus, within the literal vicinity of death, the graveyard, the enslaved have found human rights; Mary's status is elevated as Brown allows her to secure human rights despite her previously inhuman status within the slavery system. Within this same scene, George's choice to wait and marry Mary lends her even more power. For, George insisted upon waiting for marriage to a person who was significant to him, thus highlighting females' significance. So, Brown illustrates enslaved females' power over males' decisions, actions, and emotions. By emphasizing the impact Mary has had on George's lifestyle, Brown acknowledges and argues that enslaved female power does exist and makes its presence undeniable.

George views marriage through a lens of both necessity and luxury; his viewpoint, now societally relevant due to his elevation to 'human' through marriage, emphasizes white men's perception of the importance of marriage as well. Brown has turned the typically feminized convention of marriage into a discussion of innate human rights. For instance, Brown maintains that marriage rights instead of "manhood rights [such] as suffrage, property ownership, and literacy" (duCille 19) are the ultimate signifier of human status and freedom. Now in a legal union, George has been simultaneously elevated to the status of a human and the metaphorical white man: he has secured the mark of freedom that defines masculinity and true power. However, George's devotion to Mary is the only viable option he considered to secure these inalienable rights.

By drawing attention to the institution of matrimony, a feminized convention inherently weak, submissive, and expected, Brown emphasizes the tragic realities of slavery where, in *Clotel*, enslaved African American women represent power and cunning through plotting escapes and ‘passing.’ Passing, a form of escape chosen by numerous enslaved women throughout *Clotel*, is a brave and calculative maneuver that requires much foresight despite some scholars’ argument that it is unheroic in nature. Fabi refers to multiple scholars’ conclusions that passing is a refined—even diminutive—action as it does not exhibit outward controversy or aggression (640). However, passing is also a risky, life-threatening decision that is commendable in its efforts to achieve even a temporary status of a rights-holding member of society. Free society’s general underestimation of enslaved women’s intelligence made ‘passing’ quite a cunning feat—every action must be calculated for fear of conviction and re-entering the slave system.

Specifically, when Mary poses passing to George as a form of escape, her support of his wish to escape has been considered submissive (Fabi 643). However, Mary has contemplated an escape method, whereas George sees none. Her intelligent initiative is courageous and insightful. Although her sacrificial proposal may be viewed as stereotypically feminine and passive, the love and compassion behind her actions heightens her perceived status. Mary, in formulating an escape, advances from a portion of society once considered merely mechanical to join human society. Furthermore, Mary’s ideas are acknowledged and validated by George, who represents masculinity. Her emotion does not hinder her status and cognitive power but heightens it.

Passing in *Clotel* critiques not only the societal view of typical femininity but the ideal of appearance over substance and power over appearance as well. Passing is only logical when an enslaved person can successfully masquerade as a white person. So, by painting passing as a

viable escape option, Brown indirectly comments on “Western notions of beauty” (Fabi 640) and illustrates the power outward appearance has over racial actuality or substance. For instance, this scene represents the fortune perceived in displaying these Western beauty ideals: “It was already dark, and the streetlamps were lighted, so that our hero in his new dress had no dread of detection” (Brown 213-14). The words ‘dark’ and ‘lighted’ subtly suggest the relationship between race or actuality, appearance, and power. Through George’s lightness of skin, he secures safety in the darkness, implying that asylum is possible for those even a bit darker than the typical white person. ‘Dread,’ however, exhibits the difficulty in passing and reiterates the bravery required of the act.

As *Clotel* progresses, Brown increasingly incorporates political commentary exhibiting the power possessed by the enslaved female population. Brown uses the insignificance of the life of an enslaved woman to illustrate their ability to make an attention-worthy political statement. As Brown includes the opening imagery to introduce Clotel’s suicide, he mentions her proximity to the Capitol (Fabi 644). A woman who “in any other land [...] would have been honored and loved” (Brown 208) thus maintains her power even in death. Despite whether she purposefully ended her life in this location, Clotel is elevated to a prominent political figure within Brown’s exposition. Thus, he has granted her a status denied by most women of the period regardless of color.

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY: BROWN’S DISMANTLED HIERARCHY

Supplementing the discussion of inarguable marriage rights and the intelligence behind passing, *Clotel* also includes analysis of the complex male-female hierarchy, the unwavering perception of heroism, and the fragile qualifiers of masculinity to further the association between the enslaved female and power. For instance, Brown opposed racial ideologies by choosing to

focus on the African American and took his commentary further by focusing on enslaved African American women. By portraying this group as the centralized characters in his novel, Brown undermines the negative perception—or disregard—of enslaved females' significance and power.

Clotel was the first novel authored by an African American, and Brown ceaselessly sought to disrupt the “sexual ideologies of [his time]” (duCille 18). Brown's female focus acts as a challenge to a patriarchal society that was only concerned with male rights. Furthermore, Brown's choice to follow quadroon females' stories juxtaposes society's strict adherence to the set racial and sexual hierarchy. Through illustrating the struggle and oppression of this group, Brown highlights their ability to assert their intelligence and power in a society that never expected them to possess or express that intelligence. This is evident within the scene in which George is passing in Mary's clothing. George is said to be “of small stature” (Brown 213), which acts as both a physical and symbolic description. When perceiving females as lower on the set male-female hierarchy of the time, one can infer that George's ‘small stature’ represents diminishing male status as he is equal in size to Mary. When focusing on the male-female hierarchy in effort to denounce it, one can conclude that this similarity in size comments, instead, upon the inherent equality of the two sexes. Within that same passage, the proximity of ‘hero’ and ‘dress’ develop this connection as well. With this word organization, Brown suggests that heroism, a trait connotatively masculine and even here attributed to George, is present within Mary, the owner of the dress and therefore the provider of heroic action, and, by extension, all enslaved females.

When elevating the perception of enslaved females, Brown also dismantles society's structured masculinity. Instead of casting males in *Clotel* as faultless saviors and providers, Brown chooses to write them within a very different role. For instance, throughout *Clotel*,

husbands to quadroon females are drawn as unable or reluctant to protect their wives (duCille 20)—these same females, though not automatically free within a marriage unfortunately find themselves within the slave system once again. Thus, Brown does not simply focus on enslaved females' mistakes despite their being the leading characters in the novel. By emphasizing that both females and males can and do mistakes throughout *Clotel*, Brown maintains the picture of masculinity painted in the scene where George passes in Mary's dress: masculinity is altered and transferred to express equality. Brown, as the ultimate sculptor of events in the novel, equalizes the perception of both sexes as he holds them to the same standards through his discussion of their actions.

A process maintained throughout *Clotel*, Brown's elevation of enslaved females' status begins with his placement of this group as central characters in the novel. The reader then follows these females through events meant to create societal boundaries between the enslaved individual and the human inhabitant. By examining authority's withholding of marital rights to the enslaved community, consistently emphasizing passing as a viable and validated method of escape, as well as analyzing and dismantling the restrictive male-female hierarchy as it pertains to masculinity and equality, Brown argues, in *Clotel*, that restrictions placed upon enslaved females only serve to accentuate and heighten their power. Instead, Brown writes these societal constraints to depict how the sacredness of marriage elevates enslaved females' status to human, discuss the relationship between appearance, substance, and power, and balance a gendered hierarchy by emphasizing equality. Thus, *Clotel* effectively reverses societal perception of arguably one of the most oppressed populations within American history. Providing fortitude to all audiences experiencing unjust or inhumane treatment, Brown has given the enslaved females

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one last display of power that purposefully remarks traits they displayed throughout the novel:

reassuring all readers that inequality is no match for intelligence, bravery, and tenacity.

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