

## Failed patriarchs, familial villains, and slaves to rum: White masculinity on trial in African American mulatta melodrama

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### Abstract

The article analyzes three African American mulatta melodramas from a masculinity studies perspective. Referring to the concepts of genteel patriarchy, the patrician paradigm, as well as the nineteenth-century reform discourse of temperance and self-restrained manliness, I demonstrate that the texts selected for analysis challenge the southern upper-class ideology of masculinity by contrasting it with northern mythology rooted in self-discipline. Yet despite their critique of southern men's cultural practices and myths, the novels also explicitly point out that white gentlemen in the South fail to meet their own standards and definitions of masculinity. Finally, the uncanny similarity between the representations of white upper-class men in the novels and minstrel images of blackness makes it possible to read the mulatta melodramas as implicitly challenging contemporary retrogressionist mythology.

Keywords: Melodrama, masculinity, reform movements, temperance

I became acquainted with death, the death of *true manliness* and self-respect [. . .].  
[T]here is many a poor clod-hopper, on whom are the dust and grime of unremitting  
toil, who feels more self-respect and true manliness than many of us with our family  
prestige, social position, and proud ancestral halls.

Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*

[Cuthbert Sumter from New England] looks very different from the most of the men  
one meets in Washington [. . .]. More *manly*.

Pauline Hopkins, *Hagar's Daughter*

“A fascination with mixture and near-white women of color,” as Suzanne Bost demonstrates in her study *Mulattas and Mestizas*, permeates both contemporary American culture and academic debates (Bost 2005: 185; 11). In this article, I will try to take a slightly different approach to this popular topic, when examining three now-canonical novels featuring mulatta protagonists: W. W. Brown's *Clotel, Or the President's Daughter* (1853), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), and Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1902). The first is a founding

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text of African American fiction, which interweaves abolitionist polemic and slave narrative with a complex and highly melodramatic plot revolving around three generations of heroic mixed-race women: Curren, Clotel, Althesa, and Mary. The two later novels represent the Black Woman's Era, a turn-of-the-twentieth-century outburst of African American women's literary creativity and both continue the African American mulatta tradition commenced by Brown, frequently making direct intertextual allusions to his novel. The structures of *Iola Leroy* and *Hagar's Daughter* are more disciplined than that of *Clotel*, and respectively focus on their biracial protagonists, Iola and Jewel. Like Brown, they also exploit the political significance of the mulatta. At the turn of the century, during the nadir of segregation, interracial characters and interracial relationships acquired additional capability to critique American race relations and to expose the absurdities of the color line. Despite their different historical contexts, the novels share a number of formal features. All contain structural elements characteristic for the melodramatic poetics of revelation and its "desire to express all," namely the excessive use of coincidence and *peripeteia* that drive the narratives towards the disclosure of the secret (Brooks 1976: 4; see also Gledhill 1987: 33; Gillman 2003: 16). As the revelation specifically concerns and is inherently linked to the mixed race of their female protagonists, the three novels represent what I will refer to in the article as mulatta melodrama.<sup>1</sup> Since scholarly investigations of melodrama complexly intersect with gender studies, numerous readings of the three novels have discussed their constructions of black femininity.<sup>2</sup> As the epigraphs suggest, in this article, I will complement their insights with a masculinity studies perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Susan Gillman, *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult* (2003).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987); Ann du Cille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition In Black Women's Fiction* (1993); Deborah McDowell, "The Changing Same": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995); Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1996); and more recent Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (2005); Gabrielle P. Foreman, *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women Writers* (2009); Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2010).

Using tools and theoretical concepts from narratology and masculinity studies, I will show how the mulatta narratives and their focus on interracial relations distinctively challenge the nineteenth-century ideology of southern masculinity.

As one of the key figures in masculinity studies, Michael S. Kimmel, argues, the dominant ideology of manhood in the South was defined by “property ownership and a benevolent patriarchal authority at home” and its central archetype, the Genteel Patriarch, “embodied love, kindness, duty, and compassion, exhibited through philanthropic work, church activities, and deep involvement with his family” (Kimmel 1996: 16). Alternatively, David Leverenz labels it as “the patrician paradigm” of masculinity, founded on “property, patriarchy, and citizenship” (Leverenz 1989: 78). Patriarchy, in this ideology, was closely related to ownership since male power was rationalized as necessary for the protection of all chattels and dependents. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, in their study of slaveholders’ self-representations, underline, “virtually all members of southern society shared a fundamental attachment to independent rural households anchored in absolute private property” (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 6). In contrast to the contemporaneous ideology of hegemonic masculinity in the North, the emerging marketplace manhood with its stress on productivity, individualism and self-reliance, or even “self-interest” (Dorsey 2006: 105), the patrician did not engage in productive endeavors but assumed a much wider responsibility and authority over his dependents. He pledged to support and defend not only the white nuclear family but the families of slaves as well—“Every southern slaveholder, according to the model, was supposed to treat his slaves as part of his ‘family, white and black’” (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 369). The southern patrician paradigm contained strong residues of the late-eighteenth-century definition of the gentleman as “a man not only independent of employer or landlord, but also a man who possessed dependents. The greater the number of dependents on him, of course, the greater the independence and hence manliness of the man [ . . . ]. White men proved that they were men by asserting that they were not boys, slaves, or women, all of whom they considered to be dependents” (Dorsey 2006: 35). Southern rhetoric frequently celebrated such a relationship in images of pastoral idyll: “Surrounded by his family, his dependents, his flocks and his herds, with all around him looking to him for food, for comfort, for protection or

instruction, [the planter] cannot but form a high estimate of his own importance in the scale of creation” (qtd. in Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 119).

These broader definitions of southern manhood need to be complemented with the significance of a man’s word of honor and oath-taking, which is especially relevant in the narratives analyzed in this article. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues, although its import was marginal in America in general, in the South “the sacerdotal nature of the oath was something impressive, particularly to [. . .] whites” (Wyatt-Brown 1982: 55; see also Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 631n38). The critical significance of the word of honor can be illustrated with the fact that “An oral pledge of a gentleman was thought to be the equivalent of the signed oath” (Wyatt-Brown 1982: 56). As an unidentified citizen of South Carolina declared, “A man’s word must be better than his bond, because unguaranteed. . . . [A] promise, however foolish, must be kept” (qtd. in Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 119). The values of honor and chivalry deeply informed the ideology of protection and dependents, and thus they add significance to the white men’s promises in the novels.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the visible Eurocentric feudal, anti-democratic residue and the postcolonial anxieties of the early republic, patrician ideology of masculinity was soon challenged by the celebrations of all-American self-reliance, autonomy, democracy, productivity, and competitiveness. Furthermore, as a result of the reorganization of the private and the public spheres after the Industrial Revolution, philanthropy and compassion, connotatively linked to “Genteel Patriarchy,” began to be correlated with hegemonic femininity. Accordingly, as John Mayfield claims, already by the outbreak of the Civil War, “the gentleman had become a quaint, cartoonish thing in literature” of the region (Mayfield 2011: 125-126; see also Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 114-16). In the light of this, Brown’s representations of white gentlemen in his 1853 novel are representative of this more general critical trend. Yet, although the patrician paradigm occupied a precarious position in antebellum America, it actually reinforced its currency as a reaction to and a compensation for the defeat of the Confederacy. Its continued appeal remained visible in the early twentieth century, for example, in Thomas Dixon’s novels and D. W.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more general historical account see Tindall and Shi (2013: 491-92) and Fox-Genovese (2005: 329-364).

Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. This revival explains the insistence with which Harper's and Hopkins's novels launch their attack on white southern gentlemen at the turn of the century.

The antebellum critiques of the patrician paradigm certainly added to the effectiveness of mulatta melodramas' assaults on southern white masculinity discussed in this article. African American authors were able to trigger the already existing "cartoonish" associations between the southern gentleman and feudalism, effeminacy, or foreignness. Their narratives dramatize these connotations and show that the glorious southern lifestyle results in violence and tragedy, simultaneously celebrating the northern norm of self-disciplined manliness. The novels also exploit the popular connotation between southern gentlemen and effeminacy that was used already in antebellum reform discourse. Since most reform movements defined masculinity through self-restraint and self-discipline and in opposition to indulgence and passion, the abolitionist movement used such assumptions to attack southern slaveholders as "emasculate by indulgence," "luxurious and effeminate" (qtd. in Dorsey 2006: 144; see also 190-191). As a result, in the predominantly southern milieu of Washington in *Hagar's Daughter*, a newcomer from the North is perceived as "different from the most of the men one meets in Washington" and simply "more manly" (Hopkins 1902: 86).

The African American mulatta novels' assaults on southern gentlemen assume primarily two forms. Their more implicit and less trenchant critique is targeted at the white father of the interracial family, and it fundamentally concerns his failure to protect his dependents. In the narrative structure, it is typically communicated through what Nina Baym calls the "termination of male control" (Baym 1978: 40), that is, the father's death, which exposes the weakness of the ideology of patriarchal protection. The second flank of the novels' attack is much more explicit and in most cases is directed against the melodramatic villain in the novel. Characteristically, in all cases, the villain is not a stranger but is closely related to the interracial family. Both the father's moral failure and the villain's scheming are represented as systemically related to the ideology of southern masculinity and the cultural practices of southern gentlemen, such as gambling and drinking, which, when judged by the standards of northern manliness, are unmanly and barbarous. The representations of white male uncivilized behavior indirectly enter a dialogue with

contemporary ideology of retrogressionism that represented newly emancipated black men as reverting to savagery (Tate 1996: 10).

*The failed patriarch*

Mulatta melodramas reconstruct one of the essential kernels—to use Seymour Chatman’s term—of woman’s fiction, in which “death of the father [. . . plunges] a comfortable and unprepared family into poverty” (Baym 1978: 39). Baym convincingly argues that in white woman’s fiction, the plot that “terminates male control” simultaneously exposes the money economy as unpredictable and “profoundly irrational” (Baym 1978: 40). The African American mulatta melodramas express analogous anxieties related to the instabilities of the market economy, yet the addition of race difference to the conventional plot device modifies its significance. They use this narrative kernel to challenge the ideology of patriarchal protection that in the southern imagination was supposed to defend women, children, and slaves. The way in which the novels recast the death of the father exposes the dramatic disparity between social conditions of white and black women, between poverty and chattel slavery, between the North and the South. Whereas white heroines in woman’s fiction are left without financial support and property rights, in Brown’s, Harper’s and Hopkins’s narratives, mulatta protagonists become private property; mistresses become chattels.

All three novels depict short-lived interracial unions, and in all cases the white father is held responsible for the tragic end of the romantic idyll. The narratives expose his moral weakness and broken guarantees of protection. As Ann du Cille argues, “The failure of southern ‘gentlemen’ to provide for and protect either their legal white wives or their ‘black’ slave families, along with the separation of those slave families by sale, play particularly dramatic roles in advancing the plot of *Clotel*” (du Cille 1993: 19). This is clearly visible in the case of the most developed white male character in the novel, Horatio Green. Having formed her acquaintance at a quadroon ball, Horatio buys the eponymous Clotel and enters what the narrative refers to “a marriage sanctioned by heaven, although unrecognised on earth” (Brown 1853: 65). Though he initially agrees to manumit Clotel and her family and move to France or England, none of these promises are fulfilled. The narrative assesses him as “an *ardent* young man *weakened* in moral principle, and unfettered by laws of

the land” (Brown 1853: 66; emphasis added). Since “ardor,” especially when accompanied with “weakness,” is frequently criticized in the sexual politics of passionlessness of both hegemonic woman’s fiction (Cott 1978: 219-236, Baym 1978: 26, Epstein 1986: 127-28) and mulatta narratives intertextually related to it, the reader trained in these contemporaneous conventions expects Horatio to fail as a protector of the family already at the beginning of the text. Passionlessness and ultimate self-control, celebrated in the nineteenth-century woman’s tradition, stand in a dramatic contrast to the narrative of Horatio’s actions. All his moves are determined by his desires, “unfettered by laws of the land”: first for Clotel’s beauty, then for a political career, and finally for “that insidious enemy of man, the intoxicating cup” (Brown 1853: 66, 120).<sup>4</sup> Having experienced “a change [of] the spirit of his dreams,” he leaves Clotel and their daughter Mary without any protection, later sells the mother and accepts the presence of the daughter as a slave in his new white family, where she is mistreated by his legal wife (Brown 1853: 66). Horatio represents the ways in which southern culture encourages self-indulgence and fickleness rather than self-discipline and steadiness among white men, and thus exposes the limitations of the patrician paradigm. On the other hand, he does not meet the standards of “Genteel Patriarchy” as he breaks the oaths and fails to protect his partner and daughter time and again. “Defeated in politics, forsaken in love by his wife, he seemed to have lost all principle of honour” (Brown 1853: 120). By making Horatio’s relations his slaves, Brown rewrites and challenges the apologetic image of the slave-owning system as modeled on a family structure. Whereas the popular southern rationalization compared slaves to dependent family members, *Clotel* conflates the two groups and demonstrates that chattel slavery is radically different from family protection even for slave children and life companions of the owner. Horatio’s failure triggers the dramatic *peripeteia* of women sheltered in the private sphere, who due to male fickleness become private property.<sup>5</sup>

Horatio is not the only man who is represented as a failed patriarch in the novel. Already in the title, the text alludes to the American president,

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<sup>4</sup> See also Robert S. Levine, “‘Whiskey, Blacking, and All’: Temperance and Race in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*” (1997).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of such ambiguous meaning of “privacy,” see Phillip Brian Harper, *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (1999).

and it opens with Thomas Jefferson's leaving of Clotel, her mother, and sister without any protection. The president is meaningfully alluded to again in the novel's climactic scene—Clotel's death. Ultimately, the protagonist escapes from "The prison stand[ing] midway between the capitol at Washington and the *President's house*" and jumps into the Potomac (Brown 1853: 183; emphasis added). The narrator concludes the episode with another reference to Jefferson: "Thus died Clotel, *the daughter of Thomas Jefferson*, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country" (Brown 1853: 185; emphasis added). As critics have pointed out, this symbolically charged setting serves to politicize Clotel's death (Berthold 1993: 19-29). On the other hand, however, the passage also serves to domesticate American public institutions, since Jefferson is presented as a father, and the President's house is exposed as a home. The allusions to American political institutions through the setting and the figures of Jefferson and Horatio quite radically politicize the failures of patriarchy in the novel. The failed patriarch ceases to be a marginal, individual character—he transcends the regional realm and gains national significance.

Whereas in *Clotel* men primarily fail through absence or withdrawal, in the remaining texts, fathers are dead or at least assumed dead for the main part of the plot, and thus their patriarchal authority is terminated as in the woman's fiction discussed by Baym. This narrative kernel of the patriarch's sudden death is also marginally present in *Clotel* in a chapter entitled "Truth Stranger than Fiction." Clotel's sister Althesa and her white husband Henry Morton unexpectedly die in an epidemic of yellow fever, leaving their daughters without protection. The two girls, brought up as white and free, suddenly learn that they are officially classified as slave and as black, which leads to their imminent deaths. This is one of the very few instances in which Brown closely embraces the tragic mulatta stereotype and heavily borrows from Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons."

Harper's novel, published forty years after *Clotel*, on the other hand, vehemently challenges the tragic mulatta figure and in the text the mulatta protagonists are heroic survivors although an uncannily similar sudden death of the patriarch results in the central *peripeteia* of the protagonists. Iola's father, Eugene Leroy, dies of yellow fever just like Henry Morton, and a formal mistake relegates his wife Marie and their children to slavery.



Before I move on to an analysis of Eugene's death and its consequences, however, a brief exploration of his character will shed additional light on the narrative's representation of southern manhood. Eugene shares Horatio's passionateness and lack of self-discipline, and thus he is positioned as unmanly when judged according to the standards of self-restrained manliness. "Young, vivacious, impulsive, undisciplined," Eugene is placed "in the dangerous position of a young man with vast possessions, abundant leisure, unsettled principles, and uncontrolled desires. He [had] no other object than to extract from life its most seductive draughts of ease and pleasure" (Harper 1892: 61). Even after he is saved by Marie from overindulgence, and his "every base and unholy passion die[s]" (Harper 1892: 70), the narrative still accentuates "the feebleness of [. . .] [his] moral resistance" and the detrimental influence of "his environment" (Harper 1892: 86). "Instead of being an *athlete*, armed for a glorious *strife*, he ha[s] learned to drift where he should have *steered*, to float with the current instead of nobly *breasting the tide*" (Harper 1892: 86; emphasis added). Again, the southern context is represented as encouraging indulgence instead of manly self-determination. His lack of independence is contrasted with the agency and muscularity of the athletic fighter, rower, and swimmer, which further emasculates Leroy and undermines his mastery.

Moreover, an almost exact same description—"drifting where he ought to steer" and "floating down the stream" rather than "holding the helm and rudder of his own life"—is used in Harper's earlier novel, the temperance narrative *Sowing and Reaping* (Harper 1876-77: 101-2), to describe a gentleman drunkard, who resembles Iola's father in many ways. Thus Eugene is intertextually marked with intemperance, which additionally highlights his similarity to the intemperate Horatio. Just as temperance narratives conventionally position former drunkards as powerful temperance advocates, the novel's most explicit critique of the indulgence of southern patricians is expressed in Eugene's description of his decadent juvenile adventures. Eugene acknowledges that "unwarned and unarmed against the seductions of vice," he grows "wayward, self-indulgent, proud, and imperious," "ignorant of the value of money," "never having been forced to earn it" (Harper 1892: 67-8). Harper, in his monologue, recasts the popular reform trope of a young man without proper ethical guidance (Parsons 2010: 110-11). Possibly alluding to the un-Americanness of the southern gentleman, she locates Eugene's

devotion to “debasement pleasures” in “the capitals of the old world” (Harper 1892: 68). As the character openly admits, his lifestyle results in “the death of true *manliness* and self-respect” (Harper 1892: 68; emphasis added). Furthermore, Eugene makes his case representative of southern patricians in general: “there is many a poor clod-hopper [. . .] who feels more self-respect and true manliness than many of us with our family prestige, social position, and proud ancestral halls” (Harper 1892: 68). He explains that institutions of slavery “sap [the] strength” and “undermine [the] character” of gentlemen (Harper 1892: 61). As “manliness” was the dominant contemporary term referring to the hegemonic ideology of masculinity in the North (Bederman 1996), its very use here can be read as a challenge to southern masculinity.

Despite his own critique of the corruptions of southern patriarchy, which is strongly endorsed by the narrative, Eugene’s own manhood ethic is also questioned in the novel. After their wedding, he promises Marie that “all that human foresight can do shall be done for you and our children” and that he “will make arrangements either to live North or go to France” (Harper 1892: 81-2). Just before Eugene’s death and the consequent *peripeteia*, Marie tells her husband again that she wishes they “could leave the country” and that she is afraid of his cousin Lorraine. In the conversation, he dismisses her as “growing nervous” (Harper 1892: 89). They go on vacation to the North to soothe her nerves, and on their way they encounter the yellow fever epidemic. Eugene “trie[s] to brace himself against the infection which [i]s creeping slowly but insidiously into his life, dulling his brain, fevering his blood, and prostrating his strength. But vain [a]re all his efforts” (Harper 1892: 92). There is “no armor strong enough to repel the invasion of death” (Harper 1892: 92). Even though he dies assured that he has left his family “well provided for” (Harper 1892: 93), his evil cousin Lorraine annuls the will and Marie’s manumission, eventually turning the Leroy’s *private sphere* into his *private property*. The incident exposes Eugene’s supposedly sober and sensible attitude as irresponsible, whereas Marie’s “fearful forebodings” and “intuitive feelings” turn out to be judicious and true (Harper 1892: 93, 89). Unexpectedly, it is not the “nervous” Marie but her protector, Eugene, that succumbs to the virus. Moreover, Eugene’s individual precautions and legal actions are not enough when confronted with the forces of the system of slavery or the unpredictability of fate. The children, far from being protected by the Genteel Patriarch and “well provided for,” are instead

hunted as slaves, and his daughter Iola goes through a “fiery ordeal of suffering” (Harper 1892: 114, 195), which refers generally to enslavement and more specifically to sexual violation. The ideology of patriarchal protection is an illusion in the context where children may be enslaved, sold, and raped after the death of the father. The system of slavery also undercuts “the sacerdotal nature of the oath” and the word of honor because Eugene’s repeated promises of protection are broken as a result of his cousin’s actions. Since Harper’s novel blends melodramatic and documentary sensationalism, this sudden reversal of fortune is represented as statistically representative. Referring to Iola’s story, a southern gentleman underlines his familiarity with many similar incidents, which suggests that they are not a marginal phenomenon (Harper 1892: 99).

Eugene’s character can also be read as a recasting of the mythical chivalric, humane slave owner. Through his actions, Harper demonstrates that a combination of “property ownership” and “benevolence” is impossible in the antebellum South (Kimmel 1996: 16). Eugene “conduct[s] his plantation with as much lenity as it [is] possible,” yet it results from his “feebleness” rather than good will (Harper 1892: 86). Evoking the forces of habit and environment, the narrative positions him as a naturalistic “character victimized by determinism” (Howard 1985: 104). Harper’s skepticism regarding benign slave-owners is reinforced with two episodic characters. The villain Lorraine’s father, “easy and indulgent,” is too humane to sell his slaves and thus ends up losing the “property” (Harper 1892: 64). His emasculated power is fatal in its consequences and effectively as cruel as overt oppression. Another “kind master” in Harper’s novel problematizes the notion of benevolent authority in a different way. “Mighty good” “Marse Robert”—tellingly introduced only with his first name throughout the text—is represented as reliant on the authority of his black slave, who has “great ‘sponsibilities on [his] shoulders” (Harper 1892: 25). Thus “Marse Robert’s” benevolence is inherently linked with the lack of mastery and role reversal: he is the one who assumes the position of the dependent. Such representations speak to the anxieties already present in southern rhetoric. As Fox-Genovese and Genovese explain, the southern slaveholder was faced with a number of contradictory expectations: “he was simultaneously to be gentle, forbearing, and kind – but stern, even severe, when duty, dignity, and preservation of authority required” (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005: 369). Harper’s kind-hearted gentlemen—

Marse Robert, Lorraine's father and Eugene—expose and highlight such necessary contradiction between mastery and benevolence, philanthropy and authority at the center of the patrician paradigm and suggest the impossibility of its resolution.

Ellis Enson, the father of Jewel in *Hagar's Daughter*, in many ways parallels Eugene. As Hopkins's novel is even more melodramatic than *Iola Leroy*, neither Ellis nor his wife Hagar are aware that their marriage is miscegenous, and both are introduced as representatives of white patrician families. Hopkins, drawing strongly on Brown's narrative, introduces a slave trader who claims Hagar as his property. Ellis, after some hesitation, pledges to remarry Hagar and to "sail from a Northern port for Europe" (Hopkins 1902: 61). Yet, his brother—closely akin to Eugene's evil cousin Lorraine—attempts to murder his sibling to take over the whole family property. Thus, Ellis's promise to Hagar that she will "be so loved and shielded that sorrow shall never touch" her is broken one chapter after it is given (Hopkins 1902: 38). Additionally, he is murdered before he manumits her, which as the family lawyer judges, is "a great oversight—a great mistake" (Hopkins 1902: 73). Hagar, twenty years after her husband's death, still feels that "he had failed her" (Hopkins 1902: 276). Thus, just as Horatio's and Eugene's stories, the termination of Ellis's control challenges the ideology of patriarchal protection and the safety of dependents guaranteed by it. Additionally, since the protagonists are introduced as white aristocracy of the South, the novel seems to suggest that no one can feel completely protected from the slave status in the context of the interracial history of the South. The presence of white mulattos threatens every member of southern society with the specter of racial indeterminacy and, in the antebellum context, with the condition of slavery.

Overall, the impulsive changes of heart, broken promises, and sudden deaths in the three novels reveal the irresponsibility and recklessness of white patriarchs. Even though the white fathers are not represented as villainous but rather sympathetic, their moral failures are strongly criticized and attributed to the southern environment. The novels unremittingly point to the tragic consequences of these men's weakness, feebleness, leniency, or even supposed benevolence. The texts advocate northern manliness based on self-restraint, which makes southern gentlemen seem unmanly. On the other hand, their recurrent broken oaths and the images of family members/slaves left unprotected expose the

white male protagonists as emasculated even when measured against their own patrician paradigm of patriarchal protection and honor. The plot device of the death of the patriarch gains more significance in African American mulatta melodrama than in the predominantly northern context of hegemonic woman's fiction. The depictions of terminated masculine control in the southern context challenge genteel patriarchy more astutely than hegemonic woman's fiction's assaults on the marketplace manhood since protection of dependents was the very basis of the southern ideology of masculinity.

*The familial villain*

In Harper's and Hopkins's novels, the ethically ambivalent father is contrasted with his close male relative, whose villainy and plotting against the interracial family are the driving force of both mulatta melodramas. The sheltered condition of mixed-race women in the private sphere does not protect them since the threat is not posed by strangers but by greedy white relations, who challenge the legitimacy of marriage licenses and manumission papers. The use of a family member as the villain who triggers the tragic *peripeteia* in the novels problematizes the ideology of separate spheres and challenges the popular dichotomy between safe domesticity and dangerous public sphere. Evil relatives in the texts, however, are not a simple example of melodramatic polarization of good and evil. Harper's and Hopkins's novels' reform logic links personal villainy to the system of slavery. Moreover, the fact that it is the post-Reconstruction novels—rather than the antebellum *Clotel*—that use the figure of the villain and thus resort to a more explicit attack on the southern gentleman can be explained as a reaction to the revival of patrician ideology at the end of the nineteenth century.

Lorraine, the villain in *Iola Leroy* and the cousin of Iola's father, Eugene, actually goes through a parallel *peripeteia* to the ones resulting from the termination of male protection experienced by the mulatta protagonists. Analogously to *Clotel*, Hagar, Marie, and their daughters, after his "easy and indulgent" father dies, Lorraine has to "face an uncertain future, with scarcely a dollar to call [his] own" (Harper 1892: 63-4). His family has lived beyond their means, and Lorraine, spoiled by the lavish lifestyle and surrounded by rich people who benefit from the work of slaves like the Leroy's, feels entitled to their wealth. Hence his

motivation does not simply stem from his inherent evil disposition but from poverty, resentment, and the ideologies of race he lives by. All these factors encourage him to exploit his cousin's death for his own ends. His position is implicitly contrasted with independent manliness: even though Lorraine has education and a trade, he chooses to rely on the fortune of the Leroy's and his wife's slave-trade money rather than follow the path of self-reliance and financial independence. His unmanly indolence is even more evident when compared with the heroism of the mulatta characters, in particular with Iola's incessant attempts to hold a job as a nurse, teacher, and shop assistant following her father's death in the novel.

Eugene, whose seemingly reasonable vision turns out to be "too blurred to read the signs of the times," does not see through Lorraine's plans. For him, Lorraine is "the only relative [. . .] who ever *darkens* [their] doors" (Harper 1892: 90; emphasis added). His "nervous" wife Marie reads this conventional metaphor in a more insightful way. For her, "with [Lorraine's] coming, a shadow fell upon her home, hushing its music and *darkening* its sunshine" (Harper 1892: 89; emphasis added). These two different readings expose the precarious character of the security guaranteed by family ties in the antebellum South. After Lorraine's successful take-over of Eugene's money, this problematization of family protection and private sphere is also visible in the description of distant family members of the Leroy family, who make themselves "offensively familiar" (Harper 1892: 95). The notion of "offensive familiarity" is interestingly ambivalent. The phrase is either used to refer to the assumption of equal status by inferiors or to euphemistically suggest sexual harassment. Both readings fit the story: Marie feels superior to Lorraine's wife, whose "social training [is] deficient" and "her education limited" (Harper 1892: 89), and at the same time the novel is peppered with implicit references to the rape of bondswomen under slavery. Hence, in the text the "familiar" and "familial" are revealed to be the source of cruelty and threat. Once the "reversal of fortune" takes place, the narrative only marginally mentions the "offensively familiar" Lorraine. The reader only learns that "He had at first attempted to refugee [. . .] in Texas, but, being foiled in the attempt, he was compelled to enlist in the Confederate Army, and met his fate by being killed just before the surrender of Vicksburg" (Harper 1892: 192). This attempt at desertion exposes his lack of courage and hence emasculates him. His unmanly conduct is even more conspicuous when juxtaposed with Iola's brother's actions. Harry Leroy

voluntarily enlists as a black Union soldier and declares that he “should like to meet Lorraine on the battle-field” (Harper 1892: 125).

In a sentence strikingly similar to the one from *Iola Leroy*, in *Hagar's Daughter*, the end of the happy idyll comes with “a shadow falling across the doorsill shutting out the light for a moment” and with the arrival of the evil St. Clair Enson, the brother of Jewel's father, Ellis (Hopkins 1902: 41). Just as Marie's forebodings turn out to be correct, in Hopkins's novel *Aunt Henny*, “born wif a veil,” accurately predicts that the coming of the pair is a bad omen (Hopkins 1902: 42-3). Ellis, analogously to Eugene, distances himself from this prediction, referring to it as a “mere ignorant superstition” (Hopkins 1902: 46), and his judgment is equally mistaken. *Hagar's Daughter* is divided into two parts—one set just before the war and the second one in 1882, and the *peripeteias* in both parts are driven by St. Clair's actions. In the antebellum days, similarly to Lorraine, he takes over the property of Ellis and remands his wife Hagar and daughter Jewel to slavery. Additionally, he is also directly responsible for Ellis's alleged death. In the postbellum part, he unknowingly plots against Jewel as he plans to take over her foster-father's fortune. In order to implement his plan, he murders a woman he has seduced and has a child with and frames Jewel's fiancé for the murder. This brief summary of his story accurately exemplifies the melodramatic excess of the novel, whose exaggerations partly serve to highlight the villainy of southern manhood.

Apart from the above parallels between St. Clair and Lorraine, both are similarly used to self-indulgence and are suddenly cut off from financial means by their fathers. Furthermore, in St. Clair there is a streak of unchecked passion that has characterized the white fathers of interracial families. Yet whereas the narratives have subtly criticized the fathers' lack of manly self-discipline, in the case of the villain, passion and sensuality are explicitly represented as sinister traits: “sensual, cruel to ferocity,” St. Clair has “a fiery temper that kn[ows] no bounds when once aroused” (Hopkins 1902: 20), and the novel often compares him to the devil (Hopkins 1902: 20, 21, 24, 42, 51, 64). Yet the explanation of his disposition, which the reader receives from the farsighted Aunt Henny, is intricately related to white violence against slaves. In the story, St. Clair's mother sees the devil on the night she gives birth. The appearance is conjured by Uncle Ned as a defense against the overseer's brutality (Hopkins 1902: 64-65). Thus, the text acknowledges a possibility that the evil plottings of St. Clair are deeply related to the systemic violence of

slavery. Accordingly, his villainy, just as Lorraine's, is not simply individual but closely linked to the systemic corruptions of the antebellum South.

No character in the selected novels epitomizes southern self-indulgence better than St. Clair. He believes that "a reckless career of gambling, wine and women [i]s the only true course of development for a typical Southern gentleman" (Hopkins 1902: 23), and his lifestyle is a metaphor for antebellum southern culture as a whole. If, as Mayfield claims, for the southern gentleman, "Life became a series of public displays in which the male literally performed through hunting, treating, conspicuous consumption, a little learning for good measure, and so forth—for the approval of his peers" (Mayfield 1995: 481), St. Clair perfectly exemplifies such a lifestyle, but also his extreme villainy positions it as univocally vain, idle, and corrupt. More importantly, however, in the context of the ideology of manliness championed by contemporary reform discourse and its politics of passionlessness, such lack of restraint emasculates his character. The novel's intricate assaults on his masculinity are visible in a long description of the office of St. Clair, who assumes the name of General Benson in the latter part of the novel:

The ceiling of the apartment was lofty, there were elegant paintings on the walls, and the furniture was luxurious. There were rich hangings at the windows, carpets and rugs on the floor, lounges were grouped about the spacious room giving it more the appearance of a *boudoir* than a public office [. . .]. General Benson, it was evident, though a servant of the people was using their resources freely to gratify an extravagant taste. His was the life of a popular official floating at the ease of his own *sweet* will [. . .]. General Benson sat before his splendidly covered table where cut-glass bottles of eau de cologne gleamed, vases of fragrant flowers charmed the eye, and ornamental easels of costly style held pictures of fashionable ladies. (Hopkins 1902: 148-9; emphasis added)

In contrast to masculine self-restraint, luxurious extravagance, which defines the room, was perceived as characteristically effeminate in contemporaneous public discourse (Dorsey 2002: 144). In such a context, even the epithet "sweet" that is supposed to highlight St. Clair's autonomy becomes charged with feminine connotations. He works at what seems to be a dressing table covered with perfumes and flowers instead of a desk. He looks at pictures of "fashionable ladies" that fill the place of a dressing mirror. His office is compared to a boudoir, a woman's private chamber, and the abundance of perfume and flowers reinforces this simile. The other



place where the term is used in the novel is a scene set in Hagar's room, where she rests "reclined in semi-invalid fashion on the couch" in a "dress of white cashmere, profusely touched with costly lace" (Hopkins 1902: 273). The juxtaposition of these two places—St. Clair's office and Hagar's repose—further challenges the villain's masculinity and work ethic, as it highlights that boudoirs were associated with nineteenth-century leisure-class femininity and the extravagance, indolence, and unproductiveness related to them.

The novel implicitly posits a connection between St. Clair's extravagant style and his seduction of stenographer Elise Bradford, who as a result gets pregnant and is murdered after she insists on a wedding. St. Clair's office is not dangerous for Elise because it is a public building, but to the contrary, the danger for female employees is related to the privacy and limited public surveillance of the place. Through the figure of St. Clair, this pathological privatization of the public seems to be an inheritance of the slave system, where intimacy and business were deeply interlinked; slave masters reproduced their property through sexual exploitation.<sup>6</sup> Even though the novel contests the separate spheres ideology, it does so in the revelatory drive of melodrama, which seeks to "express it all," to make all that is secret and private public. The sheltered domestic sphere in which Hagar and Jewel are remanded to slavery is revealed to be dangerous exactly because of its privacy and isolation. When, on the other hand, the public—like St. Clair's office—becomes privatized or secret, it results in a pathological transgression. In the climactic moment of the novel, all the private secrets of St. Clair are made public in a court scene. Prophetic Aunt Henny, who has the "skeleton key" to the building, reveals she has seen St. Clair kill Elise Bradford in his "private office" (Hopkins 1902: 254). The novel's melodramatic aesthetics of revelation makes the intimate secrets of the "private office" public, and its poetic justice punishes the villain St. Clair with an accidental death.

Furthermore, if Hopkins's representation of Washington's officials is read as yet another reference to *Clotel*, St. Clair's boudoir functions analogously to Jefferson's presidency and the white house in Brown's novel; all represent the glaring discrepancy between democratic

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<sup>6</sup> It is also parallel to the way in which all three novels expose the slippage between the private sphere and private property in the antebellum South when white gentlemen's children become slave chattel.

institutions and the legacy of slavery. Hopkins further highlights the similarities between St. Clair's individual plottings and the collective political endeavors of the South when she mentions "conspiracy [. . .] by fraud or violence" planned by the Confederate forces after the election of Lincoln (Hopkins 1902: 6). The setting in which "leading Southern politicians" gather—the magnificent hotel hall "used for dancing" with "the glittering mass of glass, plate and flowers" seems to have shaped St. Clair's taste (Hopkins 1902: 13). In these introductory chapters, politics in general is positioned on par with gambling as imprudent and unpredictable. When luck deserts St. Clair "at cards and dice," he hopes for "fame and fortune in the service of the new government" (Hopkins 1902: 22). Such narrative valorization of politics as irrational, precarious, and tragic in consequences is another element that resonates with *Clotel*, where Horatio's change of heart and the disintegration of the subsequent interracial family result directly from his newly discovered political ambitions.

#### *Slaves to rum and gambling*

St. Clair's self-indulgence and weakness for gambling and alcohol are reinforced through other images of male weaknesses both in *Hagar's Daughter* and in the other two African American mulatta melodramas. The narratives explicitly criticize the lifestyle of southern gentlemen as unmanly and contrast it with the northern hegemonic ideology of masculinity based on self-discipline, work ethic, and productivity. Images of white men drinking are especially frequently employed in this confrontation. As Elaine Frantz Parsons has demonstrated in *Manhood Lost*, the effectiveness of such representations in nineteenth-century reform discourse is inherently connected with the anxieties about masculinity they trigger: the influence of alcohol becomes inextricable from the loss of masculine mastery. "The drunkard [. . .] was not a true man because he was unable to exert his will over his body and interests" (Parsons 2003: 55). Since masculine identity was at the center of the apprehensions stirred by the temperance movement, the repeated representations of slave owners' alcoholic indulgence in the novels are yet another way in which they challenge the patrician paradigm of masculinity. What further adds to the force of these images is the residual presence of the central metaphor of temperance discourse—"slave to the

bottle” (Parsons 2003: 19; Dorsey 2002: 122-24). The novels, by representing drunken white men, implicitly invest them with the stigma of enslavement. Furthermore, the residual echoes of the apologetic rhetoric of “wage slavery,” which used to present “chattel slavery” as a more humane institution, problematically suggest that in the postbellum days all men can possibly become enslaved “wage laborers.” Undercut with such sentiments, in the late nineteenth century, male identity in the South was far from secure. Whereas in the antebellum era it was safely anchored in the opposition between slavery and freedom, after the Emancipation Proclamation this symbolic difference was abolished even if structural conditions of interracial relations sometimes did not change that dramatically. This anxiety was symbolically resolved in the revival of the patrician ideology, sharply challenged in the Black Woman’s Era texts.

Additionally, the subplots of white man’s decline due to gambling and alcohol in Harper’s and Hopkins’s novels exemplify structural similarities with contemporary naturalistic fiction published in the 1890s and thus express analogous insecurities regarding the social and economic instability of the era as discussed by June Howard (Howard 1985: 95-103), which in the South were exacerbated with the specter of “wage slavery” and black supremacy. The plots of decline in the two post-Reconstruction novels evoke dominant bourgeois anxieties of proletarianization and represent it as a direct result of failed white masculinity. This naturalistic undercurrent of white downfall serves as a foil for the self-determination and newly gained freedom of black characters, which is especially visible in *Iola Leroy*. The recurrent images of white male decline and failure also serve to counter retrogressionist mythology that postulated black indolence, intemperance, and shiftlessness. As Tate argues, racist delineations of “coons” and “sambos” that represented black men as “lazy, ugly, intemperate, slothful, lascivious, and violent, indeed bestial” were omnipresent in the late-nineteenth-century USA (Tate 1996: 9-10). Harper’s and Hopkins’s representations of white irresponsibility, laziness, and recklessness uncannily remind of the retrogressionist image of the “sambo,” whereas the way that they depict the unrestrained passions and self-indulgence of southern gentlemen uncannily mirrors the black “coon.” Thus, African American texts enter a dialogue with retrogressionist images of blackness and suggest that retrogressionist mythology projects white anxieties onto the black other. The novels’ representations of white southern masculine recklessness, indulgence, and

intemperance meaningfully complement their constructions of patriarchs and villains.

In *Clotel*, Brown devotes many long, digressive scenes, which seem scarcely related to the main narrative, to depict and critique the recklessness and irrationality of southern lifestyle and its most popular masculine entertainments. Through the words of a northern minister, introduced in such a tangential episode, the novel condemns intemperance and bloody animal fights, both correlated with the South. Furthermore, although the metaphor of “slave to the bottle” is not directly used in the dialogue, it is implicitly evoked. The minister expresses outrage at his servant’s unrestrained appetite for alcohol, which is manifested in the latter’s willingness to drink whiskey and shoe blacking. As Robert Levine argues, it suggests that “to drink intemperately is to transform oneself into a ‘black’ slave to the bottle” (Levine 1997: 94). In contrast, the opponent of the minister in the stagecoach, a model Southerner, vigorously speaks against temperance laws and states that he doesn’t “bet a red cent on these teetotlars” (Brown 1853: 163). Apart from inebriety, in the dialogue the South is associated with sensational animal fights taking place on Sundays in New Orleans. The minister cites a bloody eleven-paragraph-long newspaper account of the victory of an Attakapas bull over a grizzly bear, General Jackson from California. The animals represent southern entertainment in the dialogue and at the same time symbolically point to the frontier territories, which suggests an affinity between the South and the “Wild West.” This connotation is further reinforced by the striking similarity of the event in Brown’s novel to the one depicted by Washington Irving in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A., in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West* published sixteen years before *Clotel*. During the duel in Irving’s text, the bruin also loses to the bull and the fight is represented as local color element, “a barbarous sport” characteristic for the frontier California (Irving 1837: 399).

In an analogously irrelevant digression, in a chapter tellingly entitled “Going South,” Brown’s narrative almost completely ignores its main characters and devotes its attention to the technical details of slave trade transactions, to the steamboat race, and to gambling. The latter part seems to have no other function in the narrative apart from exposing the absurdity of southern entertainments. “The *wildest* excitement prevail[s] throughout amongst both passengers and crew,” when the race of two ships begins (Brown 1853: 54; emphasis added). This bravado results in a huge

explosion and fills the vessel with “shrieks, groans, and cries” (Brown 1853: 55). “The saloons and cabins soon had the appearance of a hospital,” and nineteen people get “killed and scalded” (Brown 1853: 55). Since the scene refers neither to the mulatta protagonists nor to the practices of slavery, its sole function is to demonstrate that slavery is the cruelest of the many irrational, fatal, and barbarous customs that constitute southern culture. The temerity of the race is matched with the recklessness of a gambling scene. As the narrative points out, “It was now twelve o’clock at night, and instead of the passengers being asleep the majority were gambling in the saloons” (Brown 1853: 55). Hence, instead of subscribing to the work ethic of daytime productivity and nighttime rest, the “majority” of passengers engage in nighttime leisure, which precludes any daytime labor. As a result, “many men, and even ladies, are completely ruined” (Brown 1853: 55). Brown swiftly moves from the ruination of white passengers to the resultant change in the ownership of slaves, who are lost in gambling debts. “He [the slave] goes to bed at night the property of the man with whom he has lived for years, and gets up in the morning the slave of some one whom he has never seen before!” (Brown 1853: 56). Concluding the fragment, the narrator again points to the representativeness of such scenes: “To behold five or six tables in a steamboat’s cabin, with half-a-dozen men playing at cards, and money, pistols, bowie-knives, all in confusion on the tables, is what may be seen at almost any time on the Mississippi river” (Brown 1853: 56). Thus, southern entertainments in the novel are similar to frontier rodeos and saloons rather than the European sophistication and refined traditions that the southern aristocracy aspired to.

The association between gambling and the South rather than the West is also interestingly inserted into *Hagar’s Daughter*. Senator Bowen, Hagar’s second husband and Jewel’s foster-father loses a considerable amount of his fortune in a gambling “palace” organized by St. Clair. Bowen’s predilection for gambling does not surprise the reader as he is introduced as a good-hearted but slightly uncouth miner from California. Yet, the narrative explicitly confounds this expectation and links his weakness with the South rather than with the saloon in the West. “Gaming was Senator’s Bowen only vice, a legacy from the old days when as mate he played every night for weeks as the cotton steamer made her trips up and down the river highways in the ante-bellum days” (Hopkins 1902: 132). This reference to gambling on the steamer is yet another way in

which Hopkins alludes to Brown. Moreover, she also recasts the scene of losing slaves from *Clotel* in gambling debts, and thus repeats his argument about general southern cruel recklessness. Following the conventions of temperance rhetoric, *Hagar's Daughter* represents the saloon as seductive, attractive, and glamorous (Parsons 2003: 115). "The glittering" bar, in which the reader gets acquainted with St. Clair, is filled with the "clink and gleam of gold" and decorated with "gilded mirrors" that reflect "the rays of a large chandelier depending from the center of the ceiling" (Hopkins 1902: 24-5). When St. Clair loses his loyal servant in a game of cards, the dazzling character of the place highlights his shock. "The lights from the chandelier shot out sparkles from piles of golden coin, the table heaved, the faces were indistinct" (Hopkins 1902: 27). St. Clair's office furnishings, discussed earlier, seem to be inspired by this glamour. Apart from his work for the government, he also opens his own gambling "palace" in the second part of the novel. In St. Clair's place, the allure of glamorous décor is reinforced by the presence of a mulatta temptress passing as white—"the Madison house was a gambling palace where men were fleeced of money for the sake of the smiles of the beautiful Aurelia" (Hopkins 1902: 253). Thus the gamblers are represented as seduced by the femininely decorative interiors as well as the presence of an actual seductress. Additionally, in both places alcohol is a significant factor that draws "inveterate gamblers" (Hopkins 1902: 25, 252).

Though the issue of temperance was less central in the activism and texts of Hopkins than in those of Harper and Brown, her literary career symbolically opened with the 1874 essay "The Evils of Intemperance and Their Remedies" for which she received an award in a contest organized by Brown. In *Hagar's Daughter*, alcoholic intemperance is predominantly used as a metaphor and is linked with other types of unchecked passion and lack of discipline. The South is "drunk with rage" (Hopkins 1902: 3) and "drunk with power and dazzled with prosperity" (Hopkins 1902: 4). As the Confederacy is founded, "mad passions" leave a mark on American history (Hopkins 1902: 6); "the most intemperate sentiments" are "voiced by the zealots in the great cause," "vociferous cheers" shake the assembly, "the crowd [goes] mad" and tears "the decorations from the walls" (Hopkins 1902: 15). "Pandemonium reign[s]," while "the vast crowd" goes "wild with enthusiasm" and is "wild" and "brute" (Hopkins 1902: 18). Intemperance of all kinds, passionateness, and wildness are positioned in the novel as key features of the southern gentleman's lifestyle. Thus the

text judges it as lacking manly self-restraint and independence and at the same time barbarous and savage.

As Harper was a key African American temperance activist and a member of the WCTU, *Iola Leroy's* representations of white slave owner's failures are even more deeply interlinked with inebriety than in the other two texts. Her novel is interpolated with images of white men's drinking themselves to bankruptcy and loss of health. Iola's last owner and oppressor, Frank Anderson gets "reckless and dr[inks] himself to death" (Harper 1892: 153). Analogously, for her uncle's former owner "drink [is] ruination" (Harper 1892: 188) and "he dr[inks] up ebery thing he c[an] lay his han's on" (Harper 1892: 158). Yet another former slave owner takes "to drink, an' all his frens is gone, an' he's in de pore-house" (Harper 1892: 174). The images of white poverty and ruin stemming from the fall of white men are explicitly contrasted with the rise of black people, visible in "evidences of thrift and industry" among the newly emancipated black households (Harper 1892: 153). The metaphor of "slave to drink," profusely used in the earlier mentioned *Sowing and Reaping* (Harper 1877: 100, 103, 110, 121, 134, 165, 172) reverberates through these repeated images of intemperance and consequently marks the white gentlemen with the stigma of slavery. In the novel, slavery and alcohol are also juxtaposed when white men selling alcohol to black people are compared to slave catchers: "mean white men [. . .] settin' up dere grog-shops [. . .]. Deys de bery kine ob men dat used ter keep dorgs to ketch de runaways" (Harper 1892: 159). Moreover, the text links the two problems in a speech by Iola's husband, who speaks against "slavery and the liquor traffic" and claims that "The liquor traffic still sends its floods of ruin and shame to the habitations of men" (Harper 1892: 250). Finally, Harper uses the same metaphor—a snake—to demonstrate the dangers of both: "wine at last will bite like a serpent and sting like an adder" and "Slavery is a serpent which we nourished in its weakness, and now it is stinging us in its strength" (Harper 1892: 185, 130). Thus, as the text intricately constructs the parallel between slavery and intemperance and at the same time repeatedly represents white gentlemen as addicted to alcohol, it marks them with the specter of enslavement, which symbolically emasculates the men according to the southern dichotomy of masters and slaves. Bankruptcies that accompany their drinking gain additional significance in the context of postbellum fears of "wage slavery" and late-nineteenth-century

proletarianization, which further undercut their masculine autonomy and mastery.

Overall, one of the most trenchant lines of the three mulatta melodramas' critique of slavery is addressed at southern manhood. Their repeated portrayals of southern gentlemen as failed patriarchs question their masculinity within the patrician paradigm of benevolent protection, the hegemonic model of manhood in the South. Male characters in the novels do not meet the central requirements of this ideology—the defense of their subordinates. In the three texts, no white man is represented as a reliable protector of his dependents. All the fathers break the promises given to their loved ones, and thus they violate the sacred word of honor of the southern gentleman. The mythical safety of the domestic realm is additionally contested in the novels as all the villains are close relatives, and thus the danger for the mulatta protagonists does not come from the outside but precisely from within the family circle. As a result, the patriarchs fail to provide a safe private sphere for their daughters and wives, who in turn become slave chattels and are repeatedly sold on auction blocks. Thus the men recurrently fall short of the standards of southern masculinity. At the same time, the texts question the very ideology of genteel patriarchy. They expose the contradiction inherent in the model of benevolent master. Even the actions of the most lenient white slaveholders in the novels show the cruelty of chattel slavery and thus demonstrate that it is impossible to resolve the conflict between benevolence and mastery over human property. Additionally, the African American melodramas continually show that the foundation of southern paternalism, the idea of absolute private property is far from solid and secure. Even in the cases in which the men believe they have provided for their families, the legal guarantees are rendered void and the wills are overturned; not only is private property taken from the rightful heirs, but the heirs themselves become private property. Thus, Brown, Harper, and Hopkins repeatedly discredit the basis of southern masculinity as outlined by Kimmel, that is “property ownership and a benevolent patriarchal authority at home” (Kimmel 1996: 16).

As an alternative to the patrician model, the texts champion the ideology of self-restrained and productive manliness promoted by contemporary reform discourse. Paradoxically, the juxtaposition of the two gender mythologies makes the southern gentleman simultaneously effeminate and barbaric. When measured against the norm of manly self-



discipline, southern slaveholders in the novels seem idle, irresponsible, indulgent, and intemperate. Their self-indulgence and fondness for luxury triggers associations with “parlor ornaments” and upper-class women (Harper 1892: 63), which feminizes southern gentlemen. In the novels’ challenge to southern masculinity and advocacy of disciplined manliness, the theme of temperance emerges as a central issue. The predominantly northern rhetoric of abstinence regularly represented drunkards as unmanly, but in the South the power of images of intemperance to question the characters’ manhood was additionally strengthened by the more immediate relevance of “the slave to the bottle” metaphor. The abundant images of white male inebriety in the African American mulatta melodramas represent the white men as enslaved by their appetite and thus emasculated in the southern dichotomy of masters and slaves. Additionally, their alcoholic decline triggers fears of proletarianization and wage slavery, which loomed large in the late nineteenth-century South. The excessive alcohol use is represented as a correlative of more general southern intemperance and inclination for recklessness and gambling. These in turn, in part through associations with the “Wild West,” are represented as uncivilized, uncouth, and even barbarous and thus Brown, Harper, and Hopkins scornfully mock aristocratic pretensions of southern patricians and cavaliers. As white male characters assume these savage characteristics stereotypically associated with black men at the time, the novels both challenge southern manhood ethic and question the retrogressionist images of blackness.

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