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In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature

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Susan J. Tracy, 1995. In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst. ix + 307 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. \$42.50 (cloth).

This is a study of the literature produced by six proslavery southern men in the years preceding the Civil War. The novels of these authors were analyzed to assess the fictional portrayal of females, African Americans, Native Americans, and poor (lower-class) white men. None of these six novelists, George Tucker, James Ewell Heath, William Alexander Caruthers, John Pendleton Kennedy, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, and William Gilmore Simms, wrote for a living. Rather, they were intellectuals who dabbled in literature because they enjoyed writing. All six were born or married into slaveholding families. Even Simms, the most prolific of the six, derived his primary income from his wife's 2500-acre plantation rather than the sale of his books. While female novelists of this period no doubt warrant a study of their own, as Tracy argues, their arbitrary segregation weakens our understanding of the comparative perspective of these male authors and their impact on their intended audience: white plantation women.

The leading characters of these novels are generally white elite men and women. The villains in this literature are from the "poor white" class. None of the villains in any of the novels written by these six writers is African American, Native American, or foreign. The foreign immigrant, in fact, is virtually ignored by these novelists. Tracy identifies only two minor characters who are recognizably foreign, both German immigrants, and she classifies both with the "poor whites."

The female characters in these novels in three categories--the "Belle" or the young romantic heroine, the "Mother," and the "Fallen Woman," usually a lower-class white or ethnic (Cajun or Native American). Much of the volume is given over to the discussion of these character types.

Of greater interest to the readers of this newsletter is the treatment of African Americans. Perhaps it is not surprising, but the African-American characters created by these six novelists fit the usual stereotypes seen in Antebellum literature, both North and South. Males are portrayed as "faithful retainers" who put the master's needs above their own, are obedient, affectionate, childlike, submissive, and dependent. In only one novel, James Ewell Heath's *Edge-Hill* (1828), does a slave earn his freedom through heroic action. The novels written later, in attempting to promote the benevolent paternalistic nature of chattel slavery, depict "happy" slaves that would prefer to stay with "kindly" masters.

In addition to race and gender, Tracy attempts to address class. In the novels discussed, all of the villains are "poor white" men. Although African Americans and

Native Americans are presented as stereotypes in other ways, they are never portrayed as sinister or evil. While some lower-class whites can be heroic, there no the class migration of the sort so often seen in the work of other 19th-century American writers. In this fiction, the elite is born to natural leadership, and the middle and lower classes are destined to play supporting roles.

Overall, this examination of antebellum literary images has the potential to inform aspects of archaeological analyses. It is recommended for that reason.