

THE FOREMOTHER FIGURE IN EARLY BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

Clothed in my Right Mind

Jacqueline K. Bryant

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Preface

Readers assume that the stereotypical mammy figure exists indiscriminately in nineteenth-century American literature; however, the older black woman portrayed in early black women's works differs substantially from the older black woman portrayed in early white women's works. The foremother figure, then, emerging in early black women's fiction revises the stereotypical mammy in early white women's fiction. In the context of the mulatta heroine the foremother produces minimal language that, through an Afrocentric rhetoric, distinguishes her from the stereotypical mammy and thus links her peripheral role and unusual behavior to cultural continuity and racial uplift.

Chapter 1 of this study provides background information on the mammy stereotype in southern white culture. Using close reading with a Womanist perspective, the following chapters examine speech situations in a series of works by white and black female authors. Chapter 2 shows how the mammy helps to define the ideal white female in response to a patriarchal ideology in six works by early white women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Carolyn Hentz, and Kate Chopin. Chapters 3 through 5 examine how the foremother figure helps to define the mulatta heroine in response to a racial uplift ideology. Chapter 3 differentiates the foremother from a strong mother figure in Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, while Chapter 4 reveals the complexity and range of the foremother-mulatta relationship in three of Frances Harper's novels. In Chapter 5 two minor works by Pauline Hopkins illuminate the foremother-mulatta relationship in the motifs of passing and disguise. Similarly in Chapter 6 Jessie Redmon Fauset's four novels reveal the foremother-mulatta relationship in the context of

passing. Chapter 7 concludes this study with an examination of three novels by later black women writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Gloria Naylor, and confirms the consistency of the positioning of the foremother and mulatta whether the relationship is liminal as in the early works of Hopkins or foregrounded as in the recent work of Naylor.

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**The Foremother Figure
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Literature**



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Stereotypical images of the black female exist in writings of white and black writers who published from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. Black female images emerge as Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Jezebel or wench, and mammy. Aunt Jemima is the cook who is dark in complexion, obese in size, and jovial in nature. Sapphire is headstrong and always emerges with the presence of the black male. She emasculates the black male with verbal put-downs. Her color is generally brown to dark brown. Jezebel is the bad, black girl who is generally the mulatta. She possesses white features and is portrayed with hypersexual behavioral characteristics. White men use her as the excuse for their sexual interactions (Jewell 1993, 46). The Jezebel/wench/mulatta is victimized when the white male blames her for promiscuous behavior consistent with the role which he himself has conceived, and when the white mistress perceives the casting of hypersexuality as a mockery of her own socially imposed purity (Gwin 1985b, 45). These images, which are believed to have evolved during slavery, portray African American women as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood (Jewell 1993, 36). Of these stereotypical images, the mammy, which emanated from the plantation, is considered to be the most persistent and enduring historically.

Because the plantation embodied the hierarchical structures of southern paternalism (Faust 1996, 32), it served as the primary site of social and political organization. Powerful white males occupied positions that controlled societal institutions and thus influenced societal ideas. White males, then, held the power to construct images. Many consider image construction humorous and a thing of the past,