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Piety as an Affect in the Interior State

*“While we all know that this condition of slavery is an evil, yet it is not an absolute, and unmitigated evil; and even if it were anything more than what it is – a comparative evil – there is one thing, that it is infinitely better than the condition in which this people would have been, had they not been seized to gratify the avarice and cupidity of the white man.” – John Hughes*

Slave narratives emerged in the decades leading up to the Civil War as a distinct genre that abolitionists recognized could effectively be used as propaganda. The value found in utilizing the narratives in this way was so that abolitionists could humanize the slaves in these stories, particularly the protagonists, in a way that establishes them as worthy of a reader’s compassion. With the introduction of slave narratives, therefore, came the strategy of try to touch the hearts of white readers. In turn, the most obvious tactic to abolitionists and authors of many slave narratives was to use religion, particularly Christianity, in a way that puts the African American slave on the same level as a white reader. By illustrating how both of these groups worship the same God, the more effective the argument can be made that skin color does not reflect inequality (Bailey, 50). By using strategies of romanticism, many black authors tried to parallel the deteriorating social order and civility with the logic of identification. In particular, Hannah Crafts, author of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, implicates this tactic by showing how social order is maintained by highlighting how governmental, authoritative uplift was about interiorizing a sort of “de-socialized” blackness (Castiglia, 14). In her novel, Crafts makes use of religious faith and superstitious beliefs as alternatives to this sort of identification, because in antebellum times identification served to be a disabling agent. By using religion and superstition, Crafts shows how two opposites can be used to demonstrate how separating public life and interior life can be denigrating to attempts to revolutionize democracy and national aims (Sharrow, 258). In a country that was founded on the principles of freedom and equality, the institution of slavery was an ironic turn of events that would only prevent the United States from achieving the calling it desired.

In the introduction of Christopher Castiglia’s work called “Interiority and The Problem of Misplaced Democracy,” readers are introduced to the concept of counter narratives. These narratives form to take on the shapes of desires wanted by people who are being suppressed by what is called the “interior state” (Castiglia, 2). Castiglia describes the interior as: “a realm of disruption and attempts to order that, mirroring the often tense struggles between popular demand and juridical control, may be called an interior state” (Castiglia, 3). In this state negotiations are made between the contradictions and conflicts of a state’s different ideologies in ways that benefit national and/or market comforts. Abolitionists used the idea of interiority to argue that African Americans embody the values necessary to be worthy of American citizenship. As a result, many authors in the thirty years leading up to the Civil War used their narratives, particularly slave narratives, to pinpoint how the concept of interiority had been de-socialized in a way that excluded African Americans from being able to correctly identify with their white suppressors (Castiglia, 14).

Hannah Crafts’ autobiographical narrative, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, remained hidden from the general public until 2001 when the work was found in a box in an attic. There were no hints as to what the purpose of the manuscript was, especially regarding whether it had been meant for publishing or not (Bailey, 61). Before long, Henry Louis Gates published the novel and it has remained a popular slave narrative. In regard to how this novel fits in with antebellum counter narratives, Crafts challenged the concept of self-regulated identities in the interior state by producing a protagonist who does not conform to the ideas of “white” Christianity. Instead, readers are exposed to a woman who equally presents herself to be thoroughly Christian, yet equally superstitious (Bailey, 62). Unlike most other slave narratives consistently aiding the abolitionist cause, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* does not portray the usual depiction of black slaves exhibiting Christianity in the same methods and practices as whites. This narrative did not follow the unwritten guidelines that made writers wary of presenting black religious practices alongside with superstitions, as it was firmly believed that doing so would make white readers more likely to look down upon the characters in these particular stories (Bailey, 62).

Throughout Crafts’ narrative, there is no distinct line drawn between Christian belief and superstitions. The two are interwoven so intricately that without one, the angle of the narrative would most certainly be skewed in a completely different direction. Instead, Crafts’ takes advantage of her protagonist’s superstitions as a way to help bolster Hannah’s religious faith. Furthermore, Crafts’ uses superstition as an alternative way for her protagonist to identify herself – a tactic that would go against the categorized identification of the white Christian interior state (Castiglia, 14). Instead of making her seem unreliable, Crafts’ ingrains her protagonist’s superstitions in her racial background. During her first meeting with Mrs. Vincent, Crafts’ first introduces readers to this concept by having Hannah outright admit the fact in her in an inner monologue to herself: “I am superstitious, I confess it; people of my race and color usually are…” (Bailey, 62).

Of course, in mainstream society today it does not seem all that strange for a person to be both inherently strong in orthodox Christian faith and also believe in the supernatural world. Hannah, therefore, never fully completes a full on Christian transition from paganism that most slave narrators previously took such pains to make evident. Hannah is in a precarious social state where she’s not really slave, but not necessarily a guest, either, in the homes of the women whom she resided with over the course of the novel, such as the household of Mrs. Henry (Bailey, 63). She is both ingratiated in the white world of these houses, while still stuck in the black world is suppression and derogatoriness that will always follow her because of her skin color. As a result, this meant led Crafts’ to want to create a protagonist that could identify with all readers in some way, no matter whether they were white or black. The strong faith she has in God makes her credible with white audiences, while her superstitions help connect her to the African American background she was born into (Bailey, 63).

If religion were to be characterized in three distinct points, they would be:

“…a definitive attitude of dependence upon a superhuman

Power for help and deliverance in some crisis in which human

values, actual or ideally possible, seem to be threatened; the

experience, in, certain cases, of the desired deliverance; and

the satisfied and grateful contemplation of the superhuman

Reality believed to have been the source of the deliverance.” (Macintosh, 195)

Religion, however, still must be subjected to rationalization. This is where Hannah Crafts’ brings in her protagonist’s superstitions. These beliefs, in turn, actually serve as a foreshadowing of events to come. A prime example of this is when Hannah stands before her master’s portrait in the opening of the novel, awaiting the arrival of her new mistress, who was to be his bride. Through her superstitions, Hannah is able to reach into her intuition to be able to perceive differences in the painting’s appearance. These alterations lead her to believe that a grave tragedy will come to pass.

“But it was prophecy, or presentiment, or why was it that

his idea was attended to my mind with something painful?

That it seemed the first scene in some fearful tragedy; the

foreboding of some great calamity; a curse of destiny that

no circumstances could avert or soften. And why was it

that as I mused the portrait of my master seemed to change

from its usually kind and placid expression to one of wrath

and gloom…” (Crafts, 17)

As events would have it, this passage foreshadows her master’s suicide following her flight from Lindendale with her Mistress, his bride.

What Hannah Crafts has managed to employ here is superstition as literary device, instead of portraying the beliefs as something to avoid or be wary of. In most antebellum African-American literature, a protagonist who embodies Christian beliefs and paganist beliefs is rare. *The Bondwoman’s Narrative,* however, accomplishes this by modifying something that is often used as an authentication tactic in most narratives in this genre. Crafts draws on the notions that superstitions believed by African Americans to be the cause of a romanticized, “childlike inclination to religion” (Bailey, 64). What makes Hannah Crafts’ narrative stand out is how she manages to make her protagonist’s story take on different meanings depending on the literary context. The purpose of this autobiographical novel is not to authenticate it with truthfulness, but literal truthfulness. These are not necessarily the turn of events exactly as they happened, but a factual retelling imbued with fictional features (Bailey, 66).

From here, Crafts’ uses religion to segway into a period of time where Hannah must assert her independence, which, especially as an African-American woman, was something that would have been impossible to achieve. If it is accurate that this novel was originally penned by Crafts in the 1850s, then it serves as evidence that African-American women were taking it upon themselves to fight for their rights, their freedom, and for their voices to be heard in general. By allegedly telling the world her life story in an autobiography that also exhibits fictional elements, Crafts is producing a work that is about “sharing a ground-level view of the life of slaves, from the most exalted and fortunate to the saddest and most degraded” (Jua, 3).

For the protagonist in this narrative, Hannah’s independence depends on her relationship to the house and the environment. She seems to move in a cycle of different spaces and houses. For example, thinking back to the example of Hannah standing before her master’s portrait in Lindendale, calling upon her superstitions to understand a certain doom that seemed to be pervading her environment, she realizes that she is free in the sense that she is capable of rational thought. This allows her to see her person as someone deserving of a life that is more than servitude and degradation (Jua, 3). In her words, she is “destined for something higher and better than this world can afford” (Crafts, 17).

Instead of complying with the norms of a typical American success story, Crafts fills her writing with characters of strong women. Unlike some of the women in other antebellum literature, these characters do not simply succumb to the physical and moral paralyses that are usually pushed on females, especially black female slaves (Jua, 4). In Crafts’ literature, however, the women make it their goal to erase their invisibility and lack of power thrust upon them by a domineering, patriarchal society. This belief, therefore, is what inspires Hannah’s mistress, the new bride of Lindendale, to choose to escape the confines of a suffocating household (Jua, 9).

What occurs next is a contrast of the woods and the house. The escape from Lindendale becomes a bit of a paradox. Crafts’ emphasizes the de-socialization of the black African-American in yet another way by using their flight to reference a descent toward a more animalistic nature (Jua, 9). An example highlighted in the text is the depiction of Hannah and her Mistress gradually shedding their clothing as their journey escalates. This is something that abolitionist’s, and perhaps Castiglia, too, would capitalize on this concept to illustrate how the institution of slavery dehumanizes not just the African-American male or female, but the slaveholder, as well (Jua, 10). Slavery pushed these people to extremes that otherwise would not have come to pass. For instance, in looking at how the enslaver is also harmed, Crafts’ shows us how Hannah’s mistress continues to become rather insane as their escape progresses. As most would safely assume for fugitive slaves running from their masters, who were constantly watching their surroundings for signs of pursuit, here readers are treated to an image of an aristocratic woman exhibiting the same fears and emotions. As she and Hannah press on she is persistent in her rationale that some invisible being is chasing them, waiting to “devour her flesh and crush her bones” (Jua, 10). “There; there it is, it is coming, keep him off, keep him off won’t you? Oh horrible. He tears my flesh, he drinks my blood. Oh; oh…” (Crafts, 67). In this situation the Mistress has been brought to the same level as the slave, sharing in superstitions that a white reader may previously have only thought to belong to African-Americans because of a more racially-based affinity toward both nature and the supernatural world. Hannah’s mistress would then remain in this state until they reach their first house of reprieve, which serves as a reminder of the freedom that they are trying to pursue.

Religion served as a basis of argument both for abolitionists and those who favored the institution of slavery. The point at which this argument divided, however, was in their interpretation. Both sides found ample support from the Bible, such as anti-abolitionist’s who cited a passage from Leviticus 25:44-46 as sanctioning the institution of slavery:

“Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt

have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of

them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you,

which they begat in your land: and they shall be your

possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for

your children after you, to inherit them for a possession;

they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren

the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with

rigour.”

Still, abolitionist’s rallied against these arguments, stating that if one were truly to follow under God’s sanction of universal love for all, then it would be impossible for one to want to oppress and enslave another. Religious observances are stated to place slaves and freeman on the same level, and that is decreed that none should return a fugitive slave back to his master under God’s law (Shanks, 142). Abolitionist’s claimed that the institution of slavery went against Mosaic law, which includes the Ten Commandments, as well as rules and laws depicted in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. As a result, this meant that slavery was equivalent to not only sinning, but some of the commandments outright, particularly the eighth and tenth, which forbid against stealing, desiring anything of a neighbor’s or friend’s. The evidence supporting this belief lies in the rationalization that usurping another person’s freedom and withholding it from them is in violation of the tenth commandment (Shanks, 144).

A valid argument in abolitionist ideology is the implication of religion as moral content to which there can be no logical objection. In terms of ascertaining within Castiglia’s ideology of identification in the interior state, this would fall in place with anti-slavery arguments which point out slavery’s violation of God’s commandments and overall principle of universal love. The value in Christianity as a moral code lies in the belief of a perfect God (MacIntosh, 199). This relates back to Hannah Crafts’ piety which represents that of a brazen Christian. Even during her times of imprisonment during her flight with her Mistress, and her trials with Mrs. Wheeler.

Hannah departs from her safe haven with the Henry family after being purchased by the Mistress’s friend, Mrs. Wheeler. A brash, conceited woman, Mrs. Wheeler has little respect for Hannah and treats her with none of the compassion and trust that Mrs. Henry previously bestowed upon the protagonist. Eventually Hannah is forced to flee from Mrs. Wheeler’s residence upon the prospect of being forced into a marriage with a man she loathes. Still, despite the hardships of the fugitive state, she bestows compassion and faith upon Jacob and his sister, whom she meets on her journey. Hannah’s belief in her God is so complete that upon learning that not everyone shares in her steadfast faith, her only response is sympathy. For Hannah, the only reason she has been able to make it through her time flitting from house to escape to bondage and back to escape, is through having comfort in God’s grace (Bailey, 64). In regards to Jacob upon the loss of his sister, her first thought is that she “could only regard him with compassion that in his trial, and difficulties he was unaware of the greatest source of abiding comfort (Crafts, 207).” In this way, Crafts’ success as a writer lies in her matter of fact approach to religion. Unlike abolitionist propaganda, which is filled with morally regulated religious representations, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* lays a clear line between what happens to those who commit evil acts and those who revel in the fulfillment of the Lord.

“For those of pious and discerning minds can scarcely fail

to recognize the hand of Providence in giving to the

righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the

fruit of their doings.” ()

To the great debaters of the abolitionist period it is unclear whether slavery is to be considered a part of a natural order decreed by God or if it was merely an institution that arose out of the human needs of a certain kind of historical revisionism (Bailey, 68). Blurring the lines even further, it is precedential in Scripture that Christ saw no biases or distinctions between master and slave. In His name, love and redemption are equal and available to all. Guilt over slavery as an institution can be found rooted in both religion and psychology. Nevertheless, despite the manifestations of such an evil most can concede to the fact that there is a sense of ethical failure or misconduct buried in the subconscious of America’s peoples (Foster, 666).

The moral in Hannah Crafts’ narrative lies in its genre of what Castiglia would deem “imaginative fiction” (Castiglia, 11). It was his belief that the ability of the human imagination to construe what has not already been conceived was not only possible, but imperative to the success of democracy in a nation that functions within a specific mainstream interior state. Therefore, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* is not simply a literary text denouncing the sins and moral corruption of slavery. Instead, the overall goals of this work as a piece of imaginative fiction is to serve as an account of what is socially possible for a group of people who have been so denigrated and de-humanized by the interior state (Castiglia, 14). Hannah Crafts’ account of her time as a woman in bondage serves to influence white readers and other abolitionists to consider the alternatives that America can take to better itself as a nation other than seizing the liberty of their fellow neighbors. This, therefore, embodies the epitome of what it means to study antebellum literature, overall. For these readers and writers, the goal is not to learn about historical wrongdoings, but to better understand how the nation, state, and/or community could have avoided the evils of slavery altogether (Castiglia, 16).

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