

**Raping the Jezebel Hypocrisy, Stereotyping, and Sexual Identity  
in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

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**Abstract**

The following paper examines the origins of African-American female sexual scripts, particularly the image of the Jezebel, and their consequences as represented in Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Through an analysis of Jacobs's work, this paper explores the relationships between female slaves and their masters (and mistresses) in the Antebellum American South, locates the historical and cultural sources of negative sexual stereotypes about black women, and ultimately, concludes that these scripts and stereotypes, originating in American slavery, still play a large role in media representation and the formation of a positive sexual identity for African-American women in the United States. Jacobs's narrative, a monumental self-written memoir, sought to appeal to the white women in the American North whose participation in the abolitionist movement held the power to ameliorate circumstances for female slaves in the South. Her tale of sexually aggressive masters, harried choices, and the sacrifices of a loving mother illuminate the moral and spiritual degradation caused by the "peculiar institution of slavery." This paper places such considerations in both racial and sociopolitical contexts to examine the psychology of fear, abuse, and miscegenation suffered by American female slaves and perpetrated by southern plantation owners.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* chronicles the enslavement and ultimate journey towards freedom experienced by the author, through the fictional penname of Linda Brent. Through Brent, Jacobs illuminates the challenging landscape for slave women as they entered into sexual maturity and explores the consequences of sexual violence, control, and patriarchal dominance within the lives of female slaves. Jacobs's autobiography, while sculpting the portrayal of her suffering to appeal to the free white women of the North, directly addresses the various myths surrounding the character of slave women, their experiences with sexual desire, particularly in the context of their relationships with their masters, and the politics of oppression, dominance, and degradation that became daily fixtures within the lives of slave women. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, while attempting to convey the general indignities and cruelties of slavery, truly resonates with readers as an account of the sexual coercion, corruption, and violence enacted upon black female bodies as representative symbols of their masters' unchecked lust. Despite the propagandized narratives surrounding the "insatiable sexual lust" of African women, Jacobs's autobiography aims to faithfully represent the physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological consequences of relentless sexual persecution and highlights the limited options for slave women seeking to escape sexual violence at the hands of their masters. The long-lasting consequences of the propaganda in question speak to an inaccurate belief system about the sexuality of African-American women, which furthers a narrative in which these women are viewed as lacking in morality, and in which they exist primarily as lustful, seductive "Jezebels" who use their sexuality to manipulate the will of "honest" white men. Through a critical reading of Jacobs's work, this paper will examine the realities of sexual violence for female slaves, highlight the cultural narratives that endorsed and justified sexual violence and obscured consent, and ultimately, dissect the stereotyped images of black female sexuality to reveal the historical and ongoing consequences of propaganda which seeks to blame victims for their own victimization, and to devalue the lives and values of black women for the sake of satiating white male lust.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, sets the stage for a candid discussion of sexual violence from the outset through the author's straightforward appeal to the sensibilities of her northern white readership, whose ignorance of the true evils of southern slavery often prevented interference on behalf of enslaved southern women. In her opening preface, Jacobs clearly outlines her purpose for writing, appealing to the "abler pens" of the North in a plea of understanding, such that her story, representative of the

experiences of millions of enslaved black women in the South, might be heard and acted upon to begin the work of dismantling the unchecked power held by slaveholders to enact sexual violence. She proclaims,

...I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can anyone realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations. (Jacobs 2)

This address, humble and supplicant in nature, speaks to the untenable position in which many female slaves found themselves, where their only hopes of amelioration lay within the hands of a populous seduced by propaganda, which intentionally obscured the true suffering and evil perpetrated upon female bodies and enabled under the “peculiar institution of slavery.” Jacobs’s preface frames the magnitude of her endeavor and underscores the challenges that she faces in relaying her story as she prepares to fight against the dominant narratives of the South, which attempted to characterize slavery as benevolent, godly, and natural.

Throughout the course of her narrative, Linda Brent, the penname Jacobs assumed to narrate her own experiences, recounts various instances that emphasize the impossible situation in which many slave women found themselves. During her childhood, as was common for many slave children with kind mistresses, Brent lived a relatively unmolested life, not fully understanding the nature of her condition as a slave, nor foreseeing the insufferable trials which lay ahead for her. After the deaths of her mother, father, and mistress however, Brent’s circumstances change and she becomes the property of a cruel Master, Dr. Flint, around whom the bulk of the narrative’s action revolves. Dr. Flint, a very stereotypically lecherous, jealous, and passionate master, begins from the earliest moments of Brent’s possession to attempt to “seduce” her mind and prime her for sexual intimacy with himself. It was not enough, however, for Brent to surrender (something that she was as of yet, still unwilling to do). His desire for Brent’s “willing” consent and submission becomes the motivator for many of his actions, and more so, serves to reveal the true center of the ideologies which governed the imbalanced power dynamic between female slaves and male slaveholders. From the beginning of their acquaintance, Brent resisted the lecherous advances of her master, feigning ignorance of his import early in her youth. Once she became old

enough to feel sexual desire of her own, she became attracted to a black man who had hopes to marry her. It was not enough for Dr. Flint to deny this request however. In his relentless pursuit of Brent, he felt inclined to try and convince her about the propriety of his and her's relationship, and the impropriety of that between her and another black man. After her expression of love towards her suitor and her rejection of Dr. Flint, Brent recalls,

He thought to mortify me; to make me feel that I had disgraced myself by receiving the honorable addresses of a respectable colored man, in preference to the base proposals of a white man. But though his lips disdained to address me, his eyes were very loquacious. No animal ever watched its prey more narrowly than he watched me. (Jacobs 39)

These sorts of scenes, more than anything, reveal the backwardness of the thinking surrounding the sexuality of female slaves and the crooked psychology that justified such reprehensible behavior. Brent's observations about Dr. Flint's import – the ways in which he sought to make her feel disgraceful and ungrateful for seeking a “virtuous” union with another colored man instead of accepting the “base” union between herself and her married, much older master – speaks to the heart of the obstacles facing women like Brent. Biblically and socially, a marriage between members of the same race that aspired to the Christian values of chastity and honor would generally be considered virtuous, correct, and honorable. In the backward grasp of slavery however, white men tried to further the narrative that as a master's property, the union between master and slave was natural, virtuous, and honorable. Through this lens, if one can truly believe such a ludicrous thing, the female slave who would choose her own suitor instead of showing her “gratitude” for her master in his advances, has somehow disgraced herself. The attitudes that justified such twisted reasoning all boiled down to the sexual scripts and stereotypes surrounding black female nature – in other words, they all came down to the notion of “the Jezebel.”

The history of black sexual stereotyping extends back past the pre-colonial era in the United States, to the point at which Europeans first encountered African men and women. In their journal article, “Effects of Black Sexual Stereotypes on Sexual Decision Making Among African American Women,” scholars Sarita Davis and Aisha Tucker-Brown recount the history of black sexual scripts and tie their findings to a contemporary study regarding the psychological components of modern sexual behavior amongst black females. They cite the work of Evelyn Hammonds, noting

Hammonds (1995) argues that the world's preoccupation with African American women's sexuality began when Europeans' made initial contact with the African continent. Hammonds posits that the nineteenth-century image of the African woman was linked to that of a prostitute through the capture and public display of the Hottentot Venus'. The Hottentot female was Sarah Bartmann, an enslaved African. Bartmann was objectified and placed on public display for exhibition to the masses because scientific experts considered her genitalia and buttocks sensational and extraordinary. Commentators considered the genitalia of Bartmann and other African women as 'primitive' and a sign of their sexual appetites. These beliefs became the foundation of Western thinking and treatment of the Black female body.

According to Hammonds' scholarship, at the end of the nineteenth century European experts in fields ranging from anthropology to psychology 'scientifically' concluded that black female body embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality. Enslaved Africans were labeled 'savage' and 'primitive', which justified the idea that they could not control their own bodies, and therefore validated the need for white ownership and domination. (Davis and Tucker-Brown 112)

This deeply historical analysis regarding the foundations of black sexual stereotypes reveals the imperialist and patriarchal psychology on African physiology that pervaded the public sphere during the Antebellum South. In a truly imperialist fashion, Sarah Bartmann was kidnapped and placed on display in the same manner as a wild animal for her genitalia and buttocks to be objectified by the white gaze. The "abnormality" of her physical appearance (compared to white standards of physical normality) created some sense of scientific judgment regarding the relationship between the African female and sexual desire. The moniker of "primitive" laid upon an outward physical appearance that seemed foreign to European society was a common practice, and one that would have lasting consequences for generations to come. As astutely noted in the second paragraph of the quotation, this assessment was used to determine that the "primitive" sexuality and unchecked sexual lust of the African woman (inferred from the size and deportment of her primary and secondary sexual organs and the uninformed observation of native tribal sexual practices) required white regulation, ownership and domination to "save" these people from spiritual, physical, and moral degradation. In a world that believed that exposure to whiteness could correct natural

evils and that blackness and sin were synonymous with one another, it should come as no surprise that despite the depravity and violence exhibited towards black bodies by white actors, whiteness was still viewed as a civilizing and redemptive force.

From these historical, “scientific” findings surrounding the black female body, arose the sexual stereotypes that have remained prevalent for the last four hundred years: for the sake of this essay, namely that of the Jezebel. In addition to providing the stereotypical image that would go on to inform public opinion about the nature of black female sexuality, this characterization also took on the character of a sexual script, thus impacting both the internal and external expectations of black female sexual behavior. As described by Simon and Gagnon in Bryana H. French’s, “More than Jezebels and Freaks: Exploring How Black Girls Navigate Sexual Coercion and Sexual Scripts,” “... sexual scripts explore the cultural norms that serve as guidelines for acceptable and expected sexual behavior, how those expectations are negotiated between individuals, and ways that the individual forms their own sexual identity... (French 36). Sexual scripts, then, can be viewed as collections of societal sexual expectations that both describe and prescribe “acceptable” sexual paradigms for various portions of the population. In a sense, they describe how one is expected to behave by representing a certain set of practices and attitudes as the way that a certain type of person is *meant* to act and feel. Conflating beliefs about actual sexual practices with a prescription of the ways in which sexuality *should* be acted out is an ongoing problem that resigns untold numbers of adolescent girls to stereotypical behaviors, which may or may not represent their actual sexual inclinations and desires. Nonetheless, they give rise to various portrayals of sexual “types,” which have pervaded art, literature, and media from the era of slavery to the modern day. One of these “types,” the most relevant to Linda Brent’s portrayal in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is that of the Jezebel. In their article about the evolution of the harmful Jezebel stereotype as witnessed in the reality TV show, “I Love New York,” Shannon Campbell, Steven Giannino, Chrystal China, and Christopher Harris define the Jezebel as follows:

The Jezebel trope depicts black women as seductive temptresses with an insatiable and animalistic appetite for sex. Beguiling, voluptuous, lewd and lustful; the Jezebel’s greatest wish is to be fucked to death. During slavery the Jezebel image served several functions for oppressors. However, it was primarily used to justify the sexual exploitation of black women. Because the Jezebel maintains a ravenous desire for sex; forced sex between master and

slave was not viewed with disdain (by the oppressive class). The notion that Jezebels were immoral and desired sex, in general, and with white men specifically, served to justify the rape and subjugation of black women (Pilgram, 2002). (21)

This figure of the Jezebel – the sexually insatiable harlot who somehow managed to manipulate or seduce her white master with her lustful, sensual demeanor provided a convenient excuse for white slaveholders who struggled to explain their attraction to black women to their wives and to the rest of society. As their property, white men could legally use their slave women in whatever manner they deemed suitable, but southern society still dictated certain paradigms of Christian propriety, and therefore did not condone open miscegenation between slave and master. Thus, between masters and their wives, or especially, in instances when a master's dalliances were revealed in public society, imagery which cast black women as the initiators and perpetrators of sexual encounters served as an outlet for the jealousy of the mistress and provided an “understandable” justification to further hate and objectify the black seductress.

Such images were hurtful for a number of reasons, but none more so than the damage they caused to the relationship between black female slaves and their white mistresses. As Jacobs herself recalls in *Incidents...*, her master's preference for and attraction to her and the perpetuation of such stereotypes that reinforced the belief that Brent enjoyed or desired sex with her master served to alienate her from her only potential ally against sexual abuse within her home. Her mistress's jealousy became another source of unavoidable cruelty, and resigned her to suffer doubly in her mistress's belief that she deserved any punishment, violence, or misfortune that she endured because of her seductive and manipulative nature. Brent asserts,

I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress. The felon's home in a penitentiary is preferable. He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous. (Jacobs 30)

The “unprincipled master” who remorselessly pursued and raped his female slaves, all the while cursing her seductive nature and culpability in his lack of self-restraint was matched with a jealous, unforgiving mistress, whose propensity for blaming the slave and not the

husband redoubled the terror and suffering of a “virtuous female.” Almost more importantly than an understanding of this cruel combination, the aforementioned observation highlights the most spiritually challenging element of the slave girl’s existence. Brent, who was raised by her virtuous grandmother and who valued her chastity and reputation amongst her fellow slaves, was forced into a position that, regardless of the decision she made, would ultimately tarnish those intangible tokens of innocence bestowed upon her by a Christian upbringing. The “favorite slave” was not allowed any pride of character. The forces working against her did their utmost to wrench away her agency, and resigned her to relinquish her honor in one form or another. To liaise with her master meant certain death or sale of any future children, in addition to her general distaste for his physical and spiritual qualities. As evidenced by the events of *Incidents...*, Brent believed her only other option to be a liaison with another white man, who, while less reprehensible and repugnant to her sensibilities, still took advantage of her youth, circumstances, and innocence to fulfill his own sexual desires (Hopkins). This “choice,” as presented within the narrative, seems to tout Brent’s agency in resisting the advances of her master. Upon deeper examination however, it underscores the assertions of the aforementioned quotation. She “chose” the lesser of two evils. She was not allowed to just say no – to retain her pride and choose neither. She was not allowed to remain virtuous, and her desire to do so only enraged her master, disgusted her mistress (who sought to bring her low), and degraded her own sense of self-worth and value. Her virtuosity only served to make her degradation all the more tragic, and thus whether or not the “crime” of desiring virtue was a legal matter, the consequences were still just as severe and heartbreaking as if it were.

Linda Brent endures any number of hardships along the course of her journey towards freedom, but none so bad as the threat (and potential actualization) of sexual violence, domination, and terrorism on the part of her master. Her thoughts and actions, as is true of so many slave narratives, are entirely consumed with dreams of freedom for herself and her children, but more importantly, with the desire to thwart, circumvent, or otherwise escape the designs of her licentious master and the imminent threat of conquest incipient in his pursuit. The grossest irony to be observed from her staunch refusal to acquiesce to her master’s desires, and her resulting years of punishment, torment, and hiding, is the moral superiority assumed by all of those white actors who drove her so deeply into shame, manipulation, and self-degradation. The image of the Jezebel, who is not only sexually insatiable but also manipulative, cunning, and deceptive, stands at odds with the consequences of a life

governed by fear and avoidance and nurtured on a diet of deception, degradation, watchfulness, and evasion. Jacobs navigates this conflict within the fabric of her text, as she reflects, on multiple occasions, about the meanness and shame of the actions to which she has resorted, which readers are to infer would go against her nature if her life were unencumbered by the chains of slavery. Of her choice to bed Mr. Sands in the hopes of thwarting Dr. FLINT's pursuit of her, Brent contemplates, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (Jacobs 52). Where Brent would have preferred to stay chaste, or at best, to take up with her colored suitor in marriage, she made what she believed to be the most strategic choice for her and any future children. Where a life in sexual service to Dr. Flint guaranteed a future in which she and her children would be sold to different owners after the master tired and the mistress raged, sleeping with Mr. Sands would afford her an opportunity to be bought by a different man and to have her children freed by their father. Thus logistically, Mr. Sands was the most logical choice for the best possible future Brent could hope for. On a personal level, as noted above, Brent's internal rebellion against the ownership of her sexuality determined that a willful surrender to a man who did not legally have control over or *own* her would be preferable to the "grateful acquiescence" that Dr. FLINT expected her to make in "gratitude" to her benevolent master. Thus both logistically and emotionally, Brent made the choices that she believed would offer her the best chance at resistance and freedom (although the freedom of "choice" here is largely debatable), but was forced to compromise her principles to do so. Almost more so than the physical violations acted out upon her body, Brent seems to lament this fact most of all. Where she seems to have accepted the possession and use of her physical body in one manner or another, this moral maneuvering that forced her to compromise her principles and values seems the most egregious violation of Brent's personhood and appears to be the sin for which she begs the most forgiveness. Dr. Patricia D. Hopkins, in her essay, "Seduction or Rape: Deconstructing the Black Female Body in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," speculates that Brent's understanding of chastity comes from white standards of propriety, as outlined in the sentiments of "The Cult of True Womanhood," and lead her to feel more acutely the loss of her virtue than the violation of her physical body. Hopkins postulates,

Brent appears more concerned with how she will be perceived...by the women in the community...Could this be because even at this young age, Brent is

aware of the fact that although the black female body does not really matter in the great-chain-of-being, it is nevertheless held to the same standards of white female purity by the collective sisterhood within the Cult-of-True-Womanhood, which is why she focuses instead on her character being acted upon rather than her body being acted upon? (12)

Her awareness of the cultural insignificance of the black female body enables Brent, in some sense, to overlook the horror of the actual sexual acts (threatened or actualized) to which she is subjected, and instead inclines her to focus upon the loss of her morality. On one hand, the figure of the Jezebel is allowed no morality, with others believing that her greatest asset and joy is sexual communion with white men. On the other hand, Jacobs counts on the northern white understanding of “sisterhood” in her moral appeal, suggesting that whether or not a person felt sympathy for a black female body, the black female mind, still striving to achieve white standards of purity and chastity, should merit salvation and rouse northern whites to the southern black woman’s aid. Whether Jacobs actually attributed as much disdain to the physical act of sex with her master as she did to its moral implications is unclear, but from a narratological perspective, her strategic appeal to white women underscores the cultural emphasis on virtue and supplicates on behalf of slave women against the propaganda of the Jezebel motif.

Just as problematic for Jacobs as the contention that a slave cannot be chaste was the necessity of employing manipulation in securing oneself from danger. During a future incident in which Brent finds herself hiding in her grandmother’s friend’s attic, she considers, “Thus far I had outwitted him [Dr. Flint], and I triumphed over it. Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants” (Jacobs 94). On this occasion and several more like it, Brent underscores the challenge of maintaining morality in the face of such a corrupt institution, which by nature forces honest souls to lie and deceive or else to be ruled entirely. White accusations of immorality, while hypocritical and almost farcical in retrospect, were tremendously impactful in the treatment of slaves and the formation of their own identities, and thus slavery yielded one of its largest misfortunes – the moral and spiritual degradation of slaves combined with the ceaseless moral benedictions and reprobations from their oppressors. In her essay, “Figures of Orality: The Master, The Mistress, The Slave Mother in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*”, Holly Blackford challenges the notion of choice and the stereotype of sexual

manipulation within the work through an analysis of the language of orality and consumption. She asserts,

The symbolic link between eating and female sexuality is a familiar Christian story, an apt myth to illustrate how patriarch-powered space simultaneously tempts innocent girls with the fruit of sexual knowledge and forbids them to accept that knowledge, compelling the slave child to “drink” and then blaming her for her rampant appetite. (Blackford 316)

This “forbidden fruit” of sexual knowledge that was thrust upon Brent and untold women like her in their adolescent years made her “prematurely knowing in evil things” (Jacobs 8), and thus violated her innocence in an irreparable manner. Still, the blame (and subsequent shame that she feels) for ultimately yielding to this sexuality is laid upon her thicker by no one more than the very master who exposed her to corruption at the outset. This hypocrisy of “forcing the slave child to drink, then blaming her for her rampant appetite,” is the crux of the Jezebel stereotype and effectively summarizes the relationship between slave, master, mistress, and morality throughout American slavery. Black women were forced into a space of involuntary mental degradation, which in Jacobs’s case, leads to “voluntary” physical degradation. The understanding that one’s sexuality might be used as a weapon or tool to improve one’s prospects continues to contribute to many contemporary images of black women, including the “gold digger,” and “the baby mama” stereotypes, which characterize black women as manipulative, money-hungry seductresses who take advantage of good, decent men. While today, it is not used to justify the outright rape and subjugation of black women, it both establishes a script by which many disadvantaged black women learn to operate, and aids in the silencing and dismissal of black accounts of sexual violence by men of any race. Hundreds of years later, the Jezebel still prevails as a tool of oppression and dehumanization, both falsely characterizing black values and seducing the struggling with a resigned vision of sexual security.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides a vivid landscape of moral ambiguity, base and reprehensible characters, and deceptive and strategic sexual maneuvering upon which Brent, or more importantly Jacobs, explores the historical, cultural, and situational factors contributing to sexual violence, images of promiscuity, and the formation of individual sexual identity for slave women. Sexual scripts and stereotypes such as the figure of the Jezebel have, and still continue to, set the stage for the justification of sexual abuse, the gravitation towards promiscuous behavior in the hopes of bettering one’s circumstances, and

the jealous disgust, and lack of sympathy towards the plight of the black woman in bondage. The white male gaze has historically relegated untold populations of women to the status of prostitutes, simultaneously asserting their ownership of female bodies and devaluing the worth of their minds and spirits amongst even their own kind. In the case of the southern female slave however, white men exercised an unprecedented amount of control over black bodies and sought through propaganda to deepen their grasp by creating laws that supported their ignoble aims and by engendering a system of belief that rendered black women as both worthless and priceless, powerless and powerful. By representing the black female slave as a being with the ability to seduce, to manipulate, to toy with the affections of those men who already own her and may do with her what they like, those subscribing to the stereotype of the Jezebel blame black women for their position as slaves, their nature as victims of sexual assault, and a perceived moral degradation for receiving that which is forced upon them against their will. It creates a narrative in which a black woman supposedly *chooses* her manner of enslavement, and in doing so, takes on the same moral stain as an unencumbered, free woman who might choose her sexual activities without threat of force. Most terribly, it silences black female voices, casting into suspicion the veracity of their complaints, the solemnity of their utterances, and the natural purity of their souls in the light of white accusation, characterization, and minimization. Brent, whether or not she actually succeeded in avoiding the sexual advances of Dr. Flint, lived a life centered upon thwarting or otherwise refusing her master. Readings that cast these actions as signs of an empowered soul grievously fail to understand the complicated psychological and sociological factors that played into the politics of consent, refusal, oppression, and degradation. A complete understanding of the Jezebel, and her role in perpetuating violence toward black female bodies (as well as in lowering the self-esteem and potential of black girls from all eras of history) reveals the harm in such stereotypes and their usage as tools in the imperial agenda to brainwash, alienate, and control an oppressed body of people. Jacobs's work, as a slave narrative, succeeds in unveiling the truth behind the nature of master-slave sexual relationships, and as a cultural artifact, memorializes the impact of the origins of the Jezebel script, and provides a clear sign post from which scholars may begin to trace the evolution of such imagery and its continued impact on women of color in American society.

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