

Spectacles of Suffering

Transatlantic Spectacles of Race: The Tragic Mulatta and the Tragic Muse. Kimberly Snyder Manganelli. New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012. 224 pp.

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<1>*Transatlantic Spectacles of Race* examines a cluster of related ideas about race, femininity, and public display in the long nineteenth century by tracking the path from passivity to agency of the mixed-race, Jewish, or racially ambiguous heroine through a series of texts from Britain, France and America. Both the Mulatta and the Jewess – beleaguered, eroticized and racialized – are familiar subjects in recent scholarship, and Manganelli draws extensively on earlier research. (1) However, it is a new departure to bring the two figures together, and especially to foreground and compare the numerous scenes in which their bodies are exposed for public consumption, whether on the auction block or the theatre stage.

<2>The first three chapters of the book establish a robust methodology for examining representations of mixed-race women in travel writing and novels of the early nineteenth century. Here, fictional texts are read against a detailed account of the social and political worlds they reflected, challenged, or hoped to influence. As Manganelli shows, Creole societies in the West Indies and New Orleans created a tangled web of law, ideology, and desire. White colonists and free women of color were forbidden from marrying but nonetheless entered into unions often resulting in large inheritances or gifts passing to concubines and mixed-race children. Although concubines could only prosper in this way through the sale of their bodies, they had unusual financial autonomy. Unlike married women, they were able to keep their property in their own name, which, as Manganelli points out, “undermined the patriarchal social order and threatened the imperial project” (24). In this context, travel writers in the late eighteenth century represented the mixed-race West Indian woman as a “libidinous, avaricious mistress” (28). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, following the Saint-Domingue revolution, novelists began to call on Britain and France “to redefine their relationships with their West Indian colonies” (29) and their symbolic plots aimed to reimagine the West Indian woman as an imperiled heiress, a figure of ideal womanhood whose virtue and wealth made her suitable for marriage. Thus, literary accounts of the mixed-race woman rendered her passive (and often suicidal): “The figure of the Tragic Mulatta that grew out of travel narratives and abolitionist literature had neither voice nor agency. She was a spectacle whose sexual fall was ventriloquized by fascinated travelers and outraged abolitionists” (56). However, later nineteenth-century rewritings of the Tragic Mulatta story by Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Captain Mayne Reid, influenced by the phenomenal popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and featuring feisty protagonists who defy

the stereotype, were equally problematic, Manganelli suggests, as they “obscure the realities of slavery to offer their mixed-race heroines romantic endings” (89). Only in the era of the New Woman at the very end of the century did narratives emerge in which mixed-race women seek – and find – professional rather than romantic fulfillment.

<3>Stories of mysterious forebears, concealed identity, and contested inheritances from the Tragic Mulatta fiction of the first half of the nineteenth century provided a fertile source for the popular novel in later decades, and Manganelli demonstrates some unexpected lines of literary influence between American abolitionist fiction and the sensation novel. For example, in Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) the protagonist lives in fear that the “dreadful taint” (74) of madness she inherited from her mother will be discovered. Lady Audley’s words carry a specific racial valence, resonating with Braddon’s earlier novel *The Octoroon; or, the Lily of Louisiana* (1861), in which the heroine is so fair-skinned that even she herself does not suspect her racial ancestry (though others do). In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Braddon borrows from slavery novels the idea that the body holds a secret unreadable from its surface.

<4>Another important insight is evident in Manganelli’s analysis of the iconography of mixed-race women, especially Curren & Ives’ portrait *The Beautiful Quadroon* (ca. 1872-74). This image of a fair-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired woman adorned with a jeweled headdress and necklace, she argues, deliberately “exoticises the nameless subject by evoking associations with the Jewess and the Eastern woman” (9), in particular Walter Scott’s description and Albert Henry Payne’s illustration of Rebecca of York in *Ivanhoe* (1819). Manganelli is surely right to suggest that readers of the narrative texts under discussion here would also have been schooled in such visual markers of racial ambiguity, which blurred the categories of Oriental/Jewish/Mulatta. Also intriguing are the links she establishes between abolitionist fiction and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876): the Jewish heroine Mirah, who is trafficked by her father and forced into the public eye as a performer, Manganelli argues, “recalls the Tragic Mulattas Eliot read about in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (125). *Deronda*, too, expresses his Jewish nationalist aspirations at the end of the novel in phrases that echo almost word-for-word those of George Harris in Stowe’s novel: “The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African *nationality*. I want a people that shall have a tangible separate existence of its own” (128). These correspondences indicate that Stowe’s story of the suffering and redemption of African slaves had extremely wide reach, influence, and translatability.

<5>Manganelli’s reading of Tragic Mulatta texts is immersed in the historiography of slaveowning societies, on which she draws to demonstrate the ways that literary texts were engaging with, reflecting, or obscuring political realities, and how shifts in the representation of the Mulatta figure reflected changing political relations. This historicist approach to literary representation falters when *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race* briefly turns to the Jewess. There is no such attempt to ground her reading of the Jewish actress similarly in nineteenth-century British or French legal and political contexts. As a result there is little sense that, like the Tragic Mulatta, the figure of the Jewish tragedienne also functioned as a political symbol, produced in part by the public debates about the place of the Jews in the modern nation that raged throughout the century. Instead, the Jewess is understood in terms of a purely literary genealogy: a rapid gallop through everything from Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1590) to press reports about

Disraeli in the 1870s, confusingly drawing on stereotypes of Jewish men as well as women without considering the important distinctions between them. Here, incidentally, I was troubled by the claim that “the patriarchal emphases of Judaism encouraged a typology of the Jewish daughter who was more than usually at the mercy of [her] father” (95); this statement appears to repeat, rather than analyze, one of the most prevalent stereotypes leveled at Jews in this period, that of extreme patriarchalism (although in fact the emphasis of Judaism was and is on matrilineal transmission).

<6>What is crucially missing from Manganelli’s account of representations of Jewish women is religion, which was at least as important as race, if not more, in constructing Jewish difference in the nineteenth century. Thus Maria Edgeworth’s *Harrington* (1817) fits awkwardly into Manganelli’s schema, because it does not racialize the body of the Jewish heroine; Edgeworth’s concern in this novel, instead, is to use the Jews to make an argument for religious tolerance. Nor, in *Ivanhoe*, is it Rebecca’s “racial difference [that] makes a relationship with Ivanhoe impossible” (108), as Manganelli asserts, but her refusal to abandon her religious faith. The question of Jewish political equality underlies these and later texts, but so too does the attempt by legions of Protestant Evangelicals in the period to convert the Jews to Christianity. Representations of the Jewish tragic actress, then, cannot be understood without reference to the Protestant belief, widely circulating at this time, in the unique spiritual suffering of the Jews.⁽²⁾ The complex relationship between the racialized body and the idealized soul would also have been worth considering in relation to the Tragic Mulatta figure. After all, the religious rhetoric of colonial missionaries, abolitionists and slave converts was a key influence on Mulatta texts, formatively shaping the narratives of salvation and redemption and the models of virtuous womanhood that this book so deftly analyzes.

Endnotes

(1)On the “Mulatta” see, among others, Jennifer Devere Brody, *Impossible Purities: Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), Teresa C Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2004), Sara Salih, *Representing Mixed Race in Jamaica and England from the Abolition Era to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2010), Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). On the “Jewess,” see Michael Ragussis, *Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) and Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). The “Jewess” is also discussed in Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), Judith W Page, *Imperfect Sympathies: Jews and Judaism in British Romantic Literature and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Michael Scrivener, *Jewish Representation in British Literature 1780-1840: After Shylock* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011). (^)

(2)See Valman, *The Jewess*, Chapter Five.(^)