

INTRODUCTION

William E. Farrison

Brown's *Clotel* is generally considered the first novel written by an American Negro....In a sketch entitled "A True Story of Slave Life" published in *The Anti-Slavery Advocate*, London, for December 1852, Brown had related what was germinally the principal story he told in *Clotel*. This is the story of a Richmond, Virginia, slaveholder named Carter, his quadroon slave housekeeper and paramour, and their daughter Elizabeth. In October, 1844, so the story goes, to avoid embarrassment for himself and jealousy on the part of the bride he was about to bring home, Carter sold his paramour for transportation out of Virginia and tried in vain to dispose of Elizabeth in the same manner. At the time Carter was fifty years old, his paramour was twenty-eight, and Elizabeth was ten. Soon afterwards Carter sent Elizabeth to Philadelphia and forgot her for awhile. Eventually, however, he again acknowledged her as his daughter and provided for her.

A partial analogue to this story is found in the reminiscences of Captain Edmund Bacon of Trigg County, Kentucky, which were recorded by the Reverend Hamilton W. Pierson in 1861 and published the next year. Bacon said that he was born "within two or three miles of [Thomas Jefferson's] Monticello" in 1785, and that William Bacon, his oldest brother, "had charge of his [Jefferson's] estate during the four years he was Minister to France." Bacon also said somewhat inaccurately that he himself had been Jefferson's overseer at Monticello from 1804 to 1824. He was employed in various capacities at Monticello beginning at least as early as 1804, but he was overseer there only from 1806 to 1822. After the last-mentioned year, he moved to Kentucky.

As Bacon remembered,

He [Jefferson] freed one girl some years before he died, and there was a great deal of talk about it. She was nearly as white as anybody, and very beautiful. People said he freed her because she was his own daughter. She was not his daughter; she was ----'s daughter. I know that. I have seen him come out of her mother's room many a morning, when I went up to Monticello very early. When she was grown, by Mr. Jefferson's direction I paid her stage fare to Philadelphia, and gave her fifty dollars. I have never seen her since, and don't know what became of her. From the time she was large enough, she always worked in the cotton factory. She never did any hard work.

For obvious chronological reasons, if for no others, Elizabeth Carter could not have been the girl Bacon sent to Philadelphia. When Brown wrote his story, Bacon's had not yet been recorded, nor is it probable that Bacon ever heard of Brown's story. Whatever similarities there are between the two stories, therefore, are most probably coincidental.

Brown averred that his story of Carter was founded on fact, and that he had been introduced to Elizabeth Carter in Philadelphia in the summer of 1848. But even if the story was true, Carter was not known widely enough for it to arouse the anti-slavery sentiment Brown wanted to arouse. There was, however, the famous Thomas Jefferson, who had written magnificently about human freedom and had kept on buying, working, and selling slaves; who had been president of the United States; whom tradition had credited with begetting slave children and forgetting them; and one of whose alleged slave daughters was said to have been sold at auction in New Orleans. For Brown facts and tradition thus made Jefferson an example par excellence of the American democrat whose professions and practices were altogether inconsistent--an example which would be sure, Brown thought, to shock readers into attention. Accordingly Brown replaced the Carter of the "true story" with the Thomas Jefferson of a traditional one and combined details of these stories with many others, some factual and some fictitious, into *Clotel*, an episodic narrative abounding in tragedy and melodrama.

Brown never claimed personal acquaintance with any slave children of Jefferson, nor is it probable that he knew any more about such children than he had read principally in newspapers and periodicals and had heard in anti-slavery circles. Although he had no proof beyond question that the reports concerning Jefferson's fathering and neglecting such children were true, he knew that similar reports certainly were true of many other slaveholders, some of whom he had known personally. He did not trouble himself very much, then, about whether the reports concerning Jefferson were literally true; he merely used them for their sensational value to illustrate the ironical inconsistencies that existed between the theories and the practices of *soi-disant* democratic American slaveholders, of whom the famous author of the Declaration of Independence might be taken, he thought, as an archetype. Brown's *Clotel* grew out of his desire, not to attack the character of Thomas Jefferson, *per se*, but to win attention, by means of an entrancing story, to a comprehensive and persuasive argument against American slavery.

Brown's story does not fit chronologically into the history of Jefferson's life--a history concerning which Brown could hardly have been well informed, for no comprehensive biography of Jefferson had yet appeared. Nor was one published until Brown's *Clotel* was five years old. *Clotel* contains some remarkable anachronisms in addition to those pertaining to Jefferson, as may be readily observed....He had read Scott and Shakespeare, and from their works he could hardly have missed perceiving that if an historical story presented a true and vivid picture of a certain period, errors in calendar dates which did not becloud the picture were relatively unimportant....The anachronisms in Brown's *Clotel* detracted nothing from his portrayal of American slavery as he had come to know it.

William Edward Farrison
Introduction

Clotel; or, The President's Daughter by William Wells Brown
(University Books/Carol Publishing Group 1969) 7-10