

Prof. David Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

Jana Chýlková

The African-American Slave Narrative in Context: Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs

M.A. thesis evaluation

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The aim of this MA thesis is to bring new perspectives on the genre of the African-American slave narrative. After the major characteristics of the genre are discussed and the definition of the African-American slave narrative is put forward, two analytical chapters follow, focusing on two well-known narratives: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself* and Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. The focus of the Douglass chapter is on issues of editorial control, marginalization of women, and the interrelated questions of freedom, literacy and masculinity. The Jacobs chapter argues that Jacobs questions the concept of true womanhood and reveals it to be a socially constructed perception that inherently excludes black women. A final chapter analyses Sherley Anne Williams's neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* (1986), which deconstructs, among other things, the conventions of the genre (as often deployed in the Douglass and Jacobs pieces) and illustrates how literacy was/is used by the dominant culture to control subordinated or enslaved human beings (accompanied by a consequent call for revised interpretations of written historical records, including slave narratives). Ms. Chýlková's conclusion summarizes various ways (illustrated throughout the thesis) in which black women and their voices were silenced by both the dominant culture and the patriarchal social structures in the nineteenth-century United States.

Ms. Chýlková's introduction and discussion of Anna Murray and Martin Delany, and their respective relationships to Douglass and his self-construction, provide good contextual comparisons/references, and her use of Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Hayden White's historical/cultural/literary perspectives also provide interesting and useful highlighting for significant contextual issues.

In sum, Ms. Chýlková has produced a very competent, knowledgeable, informed, informative, highly readable, and generally reliable scholarly work on the subjects she proposes for herself, effectively addressing issues relevant both to the current preoccupations and interests of literary and historical scholarship and to substantive matters within those issues. For the quality and overall success of this undertaking, both author and supervisor are to be congratulated.

That said, and not to denigrate but to clarify, I have several *caveats* and/or quibbles with the contents of the work.

1) American pro-slavery and racist/scientific racist literature/stereotypes of 1840s and 1850s drew, in general, on sources and authorities more contemporary than Jefferson and more insular (domestic) than Hegel. Jefferson was, in fact, regularly denounced in those sources for his "all men are created equal" statement in the Declaration of Independence. (p. 40 ff., *passim*.) These domestic and contemporary sources included, for example, John C. Calhoun, James Henry Hammond, William Harper, Thomas Roderick Dew, William Gilmore Simms,

George Fitzhugh, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright, Josian Clark Nott, George Robins Glidden, Robert Knox, and Samuel George Morton, arguments from whom were pervasive (often with attribution) in popular culture, including the numerous "Anti-Tom" fictional responses to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

2) Hegel's master-slave dialectic was not based on race or specifically on American slavery. Rather, it had ancient roots, in Plato, for example, and Greco-Roman slavery. (p. 40 ff., *passim*.)

3) William Lloyd Garrison's purported "editorial intervention" in Douglass's work seems to be taken for granted throughout the thesis, but is never specifically demonstrated. There is, in fact, little convincing evidence of concrete instances for such "editorial intervention" in Douglass's text, in the correspondence and journals of Douglass and Garrison, or in any other documents contemporary with Douglass's *Narrative*. (p. 53 ff, *passim*.)

4) Douglass moved, over time, steadily away from reliance on and deference to Garrison and much closer to Emerson and his emphasis on autonomy and "self-reliance," philosophically, psychologically, and politically. It might have been useful and clarifying to point that out in the thesis. The definitive scholarly evidence for that growing influence (Len Gougeon's, "Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave." in the *New England Quarterly* 85.4 [2012]: 622-657) was clearly known to Ms. Chýlková, and is, in fact, cited on page 46.

5) There are, in the text, multiple examples of significant, meaning-changing typos and grammar/syntax/vocabulary errors and/or proof-reading problems. For example:

- a) "comprise" is repeatedly misused (pp. 42, 43, *passim*.)
- b) "own" for "owe" (p. 51)
- c) "protest" for "protect" (p. 62)
- d) "disciple" for "discipline" (p. 73)
- e) "disapproves" for "disproves" (p. 73, *passim*.)

Overall, however, this M.A. thesis was, stylistically and in terms of content, a pleasure to read and represents well Ms. Chýlková's considerable critical and expository skills. It is worthy, I believe, of an evaluation of between "1, vyborne" and "1.5."

Thesis evaluation: Between "1, vyborne" and "1.5"

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [drobbins222@gmail.com](mailto:d Robbins222@gmail.com).