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While the Harlem Renaissance marked a point of freedom from literary oppression for African American writers, black women still struggled to make their voices heard on the stage of newfound black expression. Many black women playwrights during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s responded to the one-act play contests created by W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles S. Johnson in their respective journals, *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, outnumbering black men in competing in them, and winning. Additionally, such developments as the Little Negro Theatre Movement, the Krigwa Players, and the Howard Players brought black women playwrights into public or at least semi-public fora. But, as Kathy A. Perkins asserts in her introduction to *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*, "black women were not in any leadership position as compared to black men" (7). And while these venues helped promote African American women's work, black female writers of the Harlem Renaissance were and have remained largely ignored until their recent re-introduction in such works as Perkins's anthology.

Two important figures whose drama has been disturbingly overlooked are Zora Neale Hurston and May Miller.[1] Close friends, Hurston and Miller shared ideas regarding blackness and black womanhood as well as similar approaches to the craft of composing drama. As a result, certain similarities and connections can be found between their dramatic subject matter, themes, and techniques, and two plays in particular illustrate this similarity: Hurston's *The First One* and Miller's *Riding the Goat*. The important common element in these plays is their depiction of markers or signifiers of blackness as defined by white American conventions, myths, and stereotypes of African Americanness, such as prescribed black dialect, idiom, physicality, and disposition as arbitrary rather than accurate markers of race. A particularly useful tool for exposing the arbitrariness of racial signifiers is the trope of the goat—a creature of complex signification associated with blackness in western tradition. Hurston and Miller dramatize these traditionally negative markers as in fact arbitrary and even false. They subvert white- and male-defined signifiers of blackness by exposing the tenuous status of the goat as signifier and wresting it from patriarchal definitions. In doing so, they recover past and assert new positive definitions of the goat as long-rooted in traditionally western values and as culturally legitimate.[2]

With its rich history of various significations, the goat provided Hurston and Miller with a figure useful for dealing with the arbitrariness of blackness signifiers. The goat has been a significant animal throughout the history of western civilization, serv-

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ing as both a positive and negative symbol. As a pagan figuration, it carried positive associations. The Greek god of forests and animals, Pan, had goat's hooves, a tail, goatee, horn, and large phallus. And Bacchic rites, with their wine-filled laurel alters of wild and flowing corporeality, were predicated on the sexual freedom that the goat symbolized because in this ancient culture, the goat carried the favorable connotations of youth, merriment, boundlessness, freedom, earthiness, energy, love, involvement, and intercourse. These Dionysian festivals included dramas—the very word tragedy (*tragôidia*) meant "goat-song."[3] In a Judaic context, the goat represented possibilities of atonement and thus served as a sacrificial animal. Hebrews depended on the scapegoat as the creature to bear the sins of a generation and onto which sins were cast. As a sacrificial figure, the goat was a vessel of salvation. Christian ideology, however, endowed the pagan and Jewish goat with negative associations. Christianity stressed the goat's sexual licentiousness and the threat and Satanic impulses it registers. Iconographically, Pan evolved into Satan, with goat's tail, feet, and horns. Jeffrey Burton Russell asserts that in the Middle Ages, "Animals and monstrous demons tended to follow the forms suggested by scripture, theology, and folklore, such as snakes, dragons, lions, goats, and bats. . . . The symbolism was intended to show the Devil as deprived of beauty, harmony, reality, and structure. . . . Among the common bestial characteristics given them were tails, animal ear, goatees, claws, and paws. . ." (131). Ultimately, the goat became a signifier of blackness. As Russell further notes, "Demons [among other things] were blacks, who were popularly associated with shadow and the privation of light" (49). These medieval figurations of devil-black-goat transferred to the New World and ultimately informed racist figurations of blackness in America. Where the goat had originally been a positive signifier in pagan ideology and to some extent Jewish thinking, in Christianity, it became a signifier of blackness and all of the things it represented—sexual freedom, merriment, and earthiness—and thus registered sexual and cultural threats to white control. Although by the twentieth century no longer a distinctly visible element in the construction of stereotyped blackness, the goat/Satan/blackness figuration in part composed the groundwork for the image of the "Black Beast," which registered the threat of a black man's raping a white woman, and in its sexual licentiousness the goat remained in alignment with racist notions of essential blackness.[4]

The goat thus stands as a figuration rife with traditional significance, and Hurston and Miller utilize the multiple symbolic aspects of this animal to fashion a trope by which to portray problems of African American female identity. In Hurston's *The First One* and Miller's *Riding the Goat*, goats take center-stage in dramatizing the difficulties and arbitrariness of blackness signifiers. Realizing that goats (can) signify blackness and carry negative connotations, Hurston and Miller strive to expose them as arbitrary material signs of oppression rather than natural representations of some imagined essence of blackness. For these women writers, the goat represents a set of values considered either positive or negative according to prevailing belief systems rather than something positive or negative in itself: it represents a colonized and oppressed entity.

The goat in fact serves as a malleable enough emblem to permit Hurston and Miller to equate it with black womanhood. As an animal victimized by western civilization's whims, the goat mirrors the mule, which Hurston posits as suffering at the hands of both white and male patriarchy and thus representative of black womanhood. The goat also carries possibilities of female empowerment—perhaps most significantly in

the Biblical incident of Rebekah and Jacob's deception of Isaac to steal Esau's blessing. In the Genesis 27 story, the patriarch Isaac promises to bless his older and favorite son Esau if Esau will kill a deer, prepare the meat, and bring it to him. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, hears this promise and, as Esau goes off to hunt the desired game, plots a scheme that will help the younger son, Jacob (whom she favors) gain that blessing. Her plan is to have Jacob pretend to be Esau and visit his father. To fool the nearly blind Isaac, she has Jacob dress in Esau's clothes as she prepares venison. To complete the effect, she makes Jacob wear goatskin to approximate Esau's hairiness, a maneuver that successfully deceives Isaac and results in Isaac's mistakenly blessing him instead of Esau. Hurston and Miller read this story as an example of a woman's subversion of (western) patriarchy, using the goat—which the two authors would have recognized as a signifier of blackness—as a vehicle of deception. By constructing plots of Rebekah-like deception, these writers could usurp patriarchal definitions of blackness by reclaiming goats as positive signifiers.

Utilizing this trope of deception-by-goat/goat-as-arbitrary-signifier, Zora Neale Hurston's *The First One* presents a densely-packed re-presentation of what the West has posited as the beginning of the black race: Noah's cursing his son Ham with blackness. In this carefully constructed play, "goat" changes from a positive to negative signifier that becomes arbitrarily connected with blackness. That change is brought about by means of a woman's deception. And whatever possibility of salvation remains at the play's end also lies in the hands of a woman, thus positing matriarchy as a problematized but central aspect of the shift in blackness signifiers.

Hurston's stage set plays a crucial role in prescribing the play's meaning. The time is morning—emblematic of creation, which informs the story as one of creation of blackness. The place is the Valley of Ararat, three years after the Flood. The scenery should be arranged as follows:

> The Mountain is in the near distance. Its lower slopes grassy with grazing herds. The very blue sky beyond that. These together form the background. On the left downstage is a brown tent. A few shrubs are scattered here and there over the stage indicating the temporary camp. A rude altar is built center stage. A Shepherd's crook, a *goat* skin water bottle, a staff and other evidences of nomadic life lie about the entrance to the tent. To the right stretches a plain clad with bright flowers. Several sheep or *goat* skins are spread about on the ground upon which the people kneel or sit whenever necessary. (80, emphases added)

Significantly, the left (traditionally sinister) side of the scenery is associated with darkness and coldness, with its dingy tent and mountainous landscape, while the right side is low and warm and full of brightness and life and fertility. From the outset, "goat" represents positive order—the goat skin bottle orders the material, water, that when unordered constituted the recent force of destruction, the Flood: goat skin thus designates a space of domesticity and containment, which differs from the pagan figuration of goats representing wild and unrestrained pleasure and bestiality. Accordingly, the altar on the stage suggests the sacrificial goat, a positive trope of reconciliation. The altar's central position on the stage marks the in-between point of change at which the sacrifice-goat / scapegoat cultural contribution is enacted and where later the goat transforms from positive to negative figuration.

Noah and his family enter the scene for the purpose of commemorating their "delivery from the flood" (81), and a striking visual difference between Ham and the rest of the family appears. Noah emerges from the dingy tent, wearing a "loose fitting dingy robe tied about the waist with a strip of goat hide" (80). Then Noah's wife and Shem and Japheth enter with their families, also "clad in dingy gar-

ments" (81). Absent from the scene is Ham and his wife and son, a fact that Shem quickly notes, rebuking Ham for his irresponsibility in a way that immediately betrays his dislike of Ham and Ham's ways. Noah, however, "lifts his hand in a gesture of reproval" to Shem and says, "We shall wait. The sweet singer, the child of my loins after old age had come upon me is warm to my heart" (81). At this point, "There is offstage, right, the twanging of a rude stringed instrument and laughter" and "Ham, his wife and son come dancing on down stage right [from the area of lightness]. . . . He is dressed in a very white *goat*-skin. . . . They caper and prance to the altar. Ham's wife and son bear flowers. A bird is perched on Ham's shoulder" (81, emphasis added). Ham gives the bird to his father and then plays on his harp, which is "made of the thews of rams" (81).

The goat provided Hurston and Miller with a figure useful for dealing with the arbitrariness of blackness signifiers

Hurston thus presents a contrast between Ham and his family—Ham sings, dances, loves life, is free (as symbolized by the bird on his shoulder), and, most importantly, he is the whitest member of the family, wearing a white goat skin instead of the dingy attire of his relatives. His darker brothers and sisters-in-law upbraid him for not working with them in the fields and vineyards; instead he is content to "tend the flock and sing!" (81) Ham emerges as a much more positive and interesting character than his prudish siblings and their wives. His love of life stands in sharp positive contrast to their hard-edged hatefulness and humorless, rigid work ethic. The significance of this contrast lies in the fact that these characteristics of singing, dancing, playing, laughing, laziness, and goatness that later signify blackness here signify the utmost whiteness and earn Noah's approval. As Anthea Kraut notes, Hurston "vexes racist assumptions by proposing that blacks' [reputed] love of dance antedated their color" (35).

Ham's wife also possesses these and other characteristics that will eventually be associated with blackness. With her "short blue garment with a girdle of shells" and "wreath of scarlet flowers about her head," Mrs. Ham completely differs from all the other characters on stage (81). Whereas Ham is a type of his father and brothers and sisters-in-law, Mrs. Ham represents something totally incongruous, something more free-spirited. The greatest difference is that this actor features the only blackness on the entire stage—her black hair. From the outset, Hurston positions Mrs. Ham as a prefiguration of blackness and the potential black matriarch. Hurston later codifies this figuration when she reveals that Mrs. Ham's name is Eve.

Although Ham represents supreme whiteness and enjoys his father's dotage, both he and his wife suffer from the jealousy of his siblings and their families, particularly his brothers' wives. Mrs. Shem and Mrs. Japheth scorn Ham for not working in the fields, and Mrs. Japheth complains, "Still, thou art beloved of thy father . . . he gives thee all his vineyards for thy singing, but Japheth must work hard for his fields" (81-82).[5] Thus, Ham, who possesses a plethora of what in the twentieth century are black signifiers, here "just after the Flood" occupies the position of the white-clad plantation youth, who frolics in his father's beaming favor as his darker-clad brothers work the fields. Mrs. Ham also suffers when she ventures the following comment on the Flood: "there, close beside the Ark, close with her face upturned as if begging for shelter—my *mother!*" to which Mrs. Shem replies, "She would not repent. Thou art as thy mother was—a seeker

after beauty of raiment and laughter. God is just. She would not repent" (83). Mrs. Ham's response—"But the unrepentant are no less loved. And why must Jehovah hate beauty?" (83)—highlights her aesthetic, even though she has repented and thus been spared.

Hurston orchestrates the action of the play to move quickly toward its inevitable and tragic end. Noah, "whom the Lord found worthy; Noah whom He made lord of the Earth," makes a sacrifice to Jehovah and blesses his family and its seed forever (82). The family then begins reveling in their salvation, drinking wine from goatskins. At length, a drunken Noah arises, enters his tent and collapses there. In the meantime, Ham continually behaves as one privileged, including a scene in which this husband of Eve grabs apples before his brothers, prompting Mrs. Shem to comment, "Thus he seizes all else that he desires. Noah would make him lord of the earth because he sings and capers." Ham laughs and throws fruit skins at her (84).

All this time, Ham sings a song that performs the positive figuration of "goat":

> I am as a young ram in the Spring
> Or a young male goat
> The hills are beneath my feet
> And the young grass.
> Love rises in me like the flood
> And ewes gather round me for food. (83)

In his drunkenness, Ham mixes up the lines so that they repeatedly include the word "goat." He sings, "I am as a young goat in the sp-sp" (84), then goes to "pull [Noah] out of the water, or to drown with him in it." Assured of his father's well being, he announces that "Our Father has stripped himself, showing all his wrinkles. Ha! Ha! He's as no young goat in the spring" (84). Ham then "reels over to the altar and sinks down behind it still laughing [then] subsides into slumber" (84).

Goat first shifts from negative trope to positive when, at this point in the play, Mrs. Shem seizes on Ham's impropriety to tell her husband:

> Ha! The young goat has fallen into a pit! Shem! Shem! Rise up and become owner of Noah's vineyards as well as his flocks. . . . Shem! Fool! Arise! Thou art thy father's first born. . . . Do stand up and regain thy birthright from . . . that dancer who plays on his harp of ram thews, and decks his brow with bay leaves. Come!
>
> [When Shem stupidly asks how he can resume control, Mrs. Shem scolds,] Did he not go into the tent and come away laughing at thy father's nakedness? Oh. . . that I should live to see a father so mocked and shamed by his son to whom he has given all his vineyards! (*She seizes a large skin from the ground.*) Take this and cover him and tell him of the wickedness of thy brother. (84)

Mrs. Shem thus sets into motion whiteness's laying claim to what will become a black trope, the trickster figure. She reverses the Jacob and Esau scenario in which a woman effects the return of birthright from the younger son to the older by using (in this case) goatskin to cover their father's nakedness and to realize Noah's deception. To be sure, Ham stands guilty as charged, but his words were uttered in drunkenness, not disrespect. Mrs. Shem deliberately misrepresents his infraction.

Hurston again shifts the signification of blackness when her Noah later learns that he has been mocked but not who has mocked him.[6] For the patriarch unknowingly curses his beloved: "His skin shall be black! Black as the nights, when the waters brooded over the Earth! . . . Black! He and his seed forever. He shall serve his brothers and they shall rule over him . . ." (85).

With blackness now introduced into the world, those things that signify Ham now signify blackness. Having delivered his curse, Noah falls back into drunken slumber, while Ham emits "a loud burst of drunken laughter from behind the altar" and says, "I am as a young ram—Ha! Ha!" (85). Mrs. Noah then asks whom Noah has cursed, and Mrs. Shem replies, "Ham—Ham mocked his age. Ham uncovered his nakedness and Noah grew wrathful and cursed him" (85).

Mrs. Shem abnegates her part in the cursing and places the blame on the patriarch.[7]

Hurston then constructs a highly problematic scene that complicates and questions the justice of white patriarchal authority. Ironically, as Shem and Japheth reveal to Noah the object of his curse, they doubly sober him with water poured from a goatskin-covered bottle. Everyone, including Noah, hopes that the curse may be removed. Eve argues that Jehovah should not fulfill a curse uttered in a drunken stupor. Shem blames his wife for having brought this trouble, and she reverses the reproach by insisting that her actions resulted from his desire for the vineyards. When Mrs. Noah admonishes the rashness of Noah's blind curse, Noah enigmatically asks: "Did not Jehovah repent after he had destroyed the world? Did he not make all flesh? . . . No, He destroyed them because vile as they were it was His handiwork, and it shamed and reproached Him night and day. He could not bear to look upon the thing He had done, so He destroyed them" (87).

Noah's riddle accentuates the problematics of the accepted patriarchal approach to such crises. Eve had earlier questioned Jehovah's seemingly arbitrary justice. And now, Jehovah has apparently granted an uninformed request. Noah's unwittingly cursing Ham mirrors Ham's unknowing mocking of Noah. In both cases, they must pay dearly for their deeds. Hurston's men characters have created this trouble. Ultimately even Noah, lord of the Earth, waxes sexist with, "Shem's wife is but a woman" (86). Thus Hurston illustrates ways that men wrest all womanly involvement, positive and negative, from the annals of history.

When Ham emerges next, from behind the altar, he has been transformed into a black man.[8] Because Noah equates blackness with the Flood's death and punishment, blackness already carries a negative connotation. So Mrs. Shem exclaims, "Black! He could not mean *black*. It is enough that he should lose his vineyards" (85). But Hurston has showed the signifier's arbitrariness: presumably, Noah could have cursed Ham to be as gray as the clouded days of the Flood rather than black like its nights. And when Ham appears newly "colored," the family "shrink[s] back terrified" (87). Everything that Noah has cherished about Ham now becomes tarnished, as Noah says, "Arise, Ham. Thou art black. Arise and go out from among us that we may see thy face no more, lest by lingering the curse of thy blackness come upon all my seed forever" (88). Hurston directs the actor to utter this statement "sternly," to show a distinct change in tone from the conciliatory, regretful, and desperate tone that had characterized the father's speech when he thought the curse might be reversed. Ham functions now as the scapegoat upon which the family devolves its faults.

At this point, Eve, still not black herself, emerges as the mother of a new race as she finds her son as black as his father. She quickly sees the problematic machinery of the white patriarchy that will exclude and oppress Ham and tells him:

> Ham, my husband, Noah is right. Let us go before you awake and learn to despise your father and your God. Come away Ham, beloved, come with me, where thou canst never see these faces again, where never thy soft eyes can harden by looking too oft upon the fruit of their error, where never thy happy voice can learn to weep. Come with me to where the sun shines forever, to the end of the Earth, beloved the sunlight of all my years. (88)

So Ham then takes his leave of his family and fulfills his role of scapegoat as he takes on the signifiers of blackness. He tells his family, "Oh, remain with your flocks and fields and vineyards, to covet, to sweat, to die and know no peace. I go to the sun" (88). With these parting shots, Ham, Eve, and their son leave "right across the plain," Ham's "voice happily singing: 'I am as a young ram in the Spring' "

(88). Thus Ham becomes the scapegoat sent out of the presence of the sinful, carrying their sins upon his back. At the same time, the audience understands that Ham's goat characteristics now are characteristics of blackness and therefore "negative" signifiers where they had first been "positive" signifiers of his whiteness. The devastating and startling point that Hurston makes is that these signifiers—laughter, dance, laziness—that a 1920's and 1930's audience would recognize as embodying some essence of blackness are in fact merely arbitrary personality traits that originate in whiteness, or, more precisely, before whiteness or blackness as a racial construct even exists. By presenting Ham's curse as an arbitrary rather than a predetermined "essence," Hurston deconstructs the very framework of black signifiers. At the same time, she derides the neat concepts of justice allegedly inherent in that white patriarchal framework and exposes its supremacist flaws.

Whereas Hurston sets the action of *The First One* in a time before constructions of race, May Miller's *Riding the Goat* discusses an American and southern setting laden with racial and racist constructions. In the monoracial setting of *The First One* the reader/audience witnesses the prefiguration of blackness signifiers; in the time and setting of *Riding the Goat* those signifiers are firmly in place. Even though every character in her play is black, Miller packs its signifiers of blackness with meaning. She also shows them to be just as arbitrary now as at the moment they became associated with blackness—the moment dramatized in Hurston's play. In both plays, a literal goat, the figure of a goat, and acts of deception turn the plot's action. And this deception plays out on the goat trope, as well as on the back of a literal goat. Finally, for Miller, a woman facilitates the salvation of the goat as a blackness signifier, the dominance of patriarchal hegemony notwithstanding.

As in Hurston's play, the stage set bears great significance and in fact resembles the stage in *The First One*. Miller sets the action in the "stuffy sitting-room of Ant Hetty's home" in South Baltimore (153). The right side of the stage offers an egress to freedom and brightness, with a door leading to "a white stoop and a few white steps" (153). The door on the left side of the stage leads to the kitchen, a site of labor. Altar-like, an ironing board dominates the middle of the stage, and Ant Hetty herself stands there ironing. Thus, like Hurston's play, the *mise-en-scène* establishes a triad that posits two points, darkness and brightness, and the transition point in between where, in this case, black males and females interact and transformations occur. Unlike Hurston's play, however, in *Riding the Goat* the site of labor signifies black womanhood instead of black manhood, and the door leading to brightness and sunlight signifies the freedom of whiteness rather than what Ham declares the freedom of blackness. Miller thus represents the tragic end of Ham's hopefulness and the degradation brought to blackness signifiers by means of racialized oppression in the American, specifically southern, setting.

The play's opening action differentiates the matriarchal Ant Hetty, "a stout dark woman of about sixty," from William Carter, "a slender brown fellow of medium height, neatly dressed in a dark suit," physician who has accrued signifiers of whiteness rather than blackness (153-54). Mammy-like, Ant Hetty wears a "gingham house dress . . . open at the throat and a pair of well worn bedroom slippers . . . more off her feet than on" and enacts a mode of labor that suggests servitude, as she irons a "stiffly starched white dress" (to be worn on this evening by an African American) (153). Steeped in local African American folk traditions, Ant Hetty can forecast weather by the pain in her

feet, and she eagerly anticipates celebrating the local United Order of Moabites parade, to take place during the daylong time of the play's action (154-55). Carter stands in sharp contrast to Ant Hetty: representing science and enlightenment and speaking so-called standard American English rather than a black vernacular dialect, he embodies the new-fangled black man, who appropriates whiteness and rejects blackness. He hates the United Order of Moabites and its traditional parade, having participated in such an organization only for the pragmatic reason of getting black patients, complaining all the while (154).

Ironically, as grand master of the lodge of the United Order of Moabites, Carter must ride a goat in the parade. As he and Ant Hetty discuss his unwillingness to participate, Miller constructs a biblical parallel and system of signification in the day's activities, that reinforce the centrality of the goat. Carter complains that it is too hot to wear the grandmaster's "heavy regalia" while reviewing candidates for the lodge (155). Ant Hetty is herself excited over the candidates, especially "that reformed scape-goat of a husban' of Rachel Lee's," who now faces reunion with the community from which evidently he had been alienated (155). Given the Christian-informed context that equates goats with blackness and diabolism, Miller subverts the white-defined goat with the United Order of Moabites's and Ant Hetty's resurrection of the Judaic tradition that champions the scapegoat.

Regarding Carter's flaw of appropriated whiteness and the potentiality for black matriarchal intervention in patriarchal failure, Miller offers the following exchange:

> **ANT HETTY.** Now ain't that jest lak a man atalkin' bout duty an' there's fifty others wantin' your place. A woman ought to have it; she'd know a good thing.
>
> **CARTER.** Any woman who'd want it is welcome to the trouble.
>
> **ANT HETTY.** Oh, there's plenty. I ustah hear my poor dead Sam talk 'bout a woman who hid in a closet at her husban's lodge meeting an' heard an' saw all the 'nitiation. Nobody knew that she was there; but jes' as they was 'bout to leave, she sneezed an' they opens the closet an' there she was.
>
> **CARTER.** (*Laughing.*) What did they do to her?
>
> **ANT HETTY.** They give her her choice—she could jine the lodge or die.
>
> **CARTER.** Which did she take?
>
> **ANT HETTY.** She went aridin' the goat, of course. (155-56)

Talk of a woman's clandestine participation in the lodge and its parade ushers in the play's heroine, Ruth. Carter has been waiting for Ruth, whom he is courting, but finally must call on a patient. As soon as he leaves, Ruth appears, "a tall, well developed brown girl of about eighteen. Her smoothly brushed hair and the pretty checked gingham she wears bespeak personal care" (156). Like Carter, Ruth performs signifiers of whiteness: she wears light colored clothing and eschews black vernacular English. The foremost marker of Ruth's whiteness is her dislike of the parade: parroting Carter, she thinks it too hot for parading and agrees that being a member of the lodge and the community should not have any bearing on one's business.

Ruth parallels the biblical Ruth, the Moabitess who performs complete and universal loyalty—a woman who pays ultimate obeisance to patriarchal authority even as she manipulates it. The wife of one of the sons of Naomi, Ruth finds herself widowed at an early age. When her mother-in-law returns to Israel, Ruth accompanies her, declaring, "Whither thou goest I will go." In Israel, Ruth works on a farm gathering sheaves. The farm's owner, Boaz, sees her, grows attracted to her, and makes special provision for her. Noting his kindness, Ruth consults her mother-in-law about what, if anything, she should do in regard to him. Her mother-in-law instructs her to go sleep at his feet and see what promise he makes to her. Boaz awakes in the night to find her there and then proclaims his desire

for her. He cannot, however, marry her for the law says her near kinsman has first rights to her and must release her from the possibility of marriage. Boaz goes to her near-kinsman and arranges to marry Ruth. Her story, then, is one of great loss followed by great gain resulting from her own initiative from the prescribed passive role of a woman within the patriarchal system.

In Miller's play, Ruth finds herself torn between multiple loyalties. As William Carter's sweetheart and an educated woman, Ruth aligns herself with signifiers of whiteness. At the same time, she is a black woman and, as Ant Hetty's niece, she owes homage to black matriarchy.

A third character adds another pull to these extremes: Christopher Columbus Jones contributes to this mix of black patriarchal signifiers. Jones "is a very dark, stockily built fellow of about twenty-three" (158). Confirming his intractable blackness, Jones himself recalls to Ruth their youthful days of "race scrubbin' the front stoop": she "always made [hers] whiter'n mine an' got through sooner" (159). Where Ham's laziness has not yet become a black signifier in *The First One*, Jones's blackness is confirmed by the fact that he "never did like to work" (159). Steeped in blackness signifiers and black communal traditions, Jones criticizes Carter's uppity ways and blames Ruth for imitating Carter and becoming educated. In the Jacob and Esau-type paradigm that Miller revises, the newcomer Carter has usurped the established Jones's birthright. Jones complains: "[Do] you think I'm gonna let any fella step in an' take the job that oughta be mine an' my gal to boot an' not raise my hand to stop it?" (160). Although Ruth herself is part of the "birthright," she does not possess mere object position because she has the right to choose the set of signifiers to which she will be loyal.

Faced with the demands of these multiple and conflicting sets of signifiers, Ruth must forge some course of action that will appease them all. When Jones leaves the house to take his place in the parade, Carter returns—at which time Ruth tries to convince him of the wisdom of riding the goat in the parade. But this time Carter resolutely declares that he will not ride. As she pleads with him, he storms out of the house, leaving his grand master uniform and regalia behind. Then, hearing the bugle call that hearkens the parade's beginning, she puts on his uniform, including its black mask, and takes his place in the parade.[9] By doing so, she fulfills the demands of all three sets of signifiers: first, she remains loyal to the pseudo-white patriarchal markers that Carter controls by hiding his failure; second, she conforms to black patriarchal hegemony by hiding her face in a black mask and riding the goat; third, she maintains her black femininity by hiding her own gender. Significantly, the middle ground area of the sitting-room forms the site of her transformation and her act of deception takes place on the back of a goat, thus reclaiming the goat as a positive site of salvation. With this act of deception and its connection to a goat, Ruth resembles not only her biblical counterpart but also Rebekah, the sly blessing/birthright thief.

As the parade gets underway, Carter rushes back into the house looking for his uniform, having changed his mind about riding in the parade. Unable to find it and aware of the trouble his failure will cause, he throws himself upon the mercy and enlists the aid of Ant Hetty. She offers deception as a means of solving his problem, and he concedes the wisdom of her advice: "You'll have to tell them you was called on a mattah of life an' death" (163). At this point, however, they realize that an imposter is riding in his place. Ant Hetty observes, "If I didn't see you asettin' right there, I'd vow it was you. Even got that sway of yourn" (163). When the parade ends, Carter and Ant Hetty retreat to the site of womanly labor and control, the kitchen, planning to surprise the

usurper who they see is headed toward the house.

With black matriarchal forces now completely in control, the deception reaches completion. Ruth enters the mid-stage transition site, locks the door behind her, and quickly removes her uniform. At that moment, Christopher Columbus Jones—who has not been fooled by her ploy—begins beating on the door. Ruth tosses the uniform into the kitchen and then lets Jones in. Jones rages at her for "[t]ryin' to save" Carter, who meanwhile puts on the regalia in the kitchen (notably not in a transition space, signifying that while he may have changed in this process, his doing so takes place under the thumb of feminine control and does not represent a fundamental transformation). Carter emerges fully dressed to "disprove" Jones's assertions about Ruth. The play ends with Carter's subjecting himself to Ruth, "(*Stooping and placing his helmet on her head.*) Very well, grand master, just as you command. (*As the curtain falls he kneels before Ruth in mock salute.*)" (165). While Carter's "mock salute" illustrates his minimizing of her empowerment, the scene neither confirms his empowerment nor condones or supports his condescension. Instead, he and the patriarchy that he represents emerge as impotent pawns in the greater wisdom and control and deceptive means of matriarchal power, control that exists despite the patriarchy's view of itself.

That Ruth can manipulate signifiers, including signifiers of blackness, exemplifies the arbitrariness of those signifiers. These differing codes of signification within an at least visibly monoracial framework (at one point Ant Hetty equates Carter's rejection of the community with "white doctorship") show that racial signification is arbitrary. Just as Eve establishes a new black matriarchy by accompanying into exile the scapegoat who bears the sins of his community, Ruth takes on the role of scapegoat to atone for Carter's sins even as she rides a literal goat. Thus black female authority facilitates the salvation of white patriarchal failure.

Hurston's and Miller's dramatizations of the constructedness of blackness signifiers—and, by association, racialized signifiers, generally—and their dramatizations of black matriarchal power over and manipulation of those signifiers represent significant claims within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. At a time when white essentializing of blackness dominated theatrical presentations of African American life, black theater (Zora Neale Hurston particularly argued) strove to present black people as complex humans rather than simple pawns acting according to racist prescriptions.[10] By presenting blackness signifiers as being arbitrarily imposed upon black people, these African American women expose the problematics of their racialized attachment and reclaim them as positive rather than negative aspects of African American life and identity.

Notes

1. Very little scholarly work exists on Hurston's drama; Susan Gubar offers an excellent discussion of *The First One* in *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*, and Anthea Kraut deals with *The First One* in her article, "Reclaiming the Body: Representations of Black Dance in Three Plays by Zora Neale Hurston." Also, Will Harris, David Krasner, Carme Manuel, and Barbara Speisman deal with Hurston's plays, primarily *Mule Bone*, with the exception of Krasner's in-depth treatment of *Color Struck*. Scholarly works on May Miller's drama are extremely limited, consisting of biographical/critical essays by Elizabeth Guillory, Nellie McKay, Andrea Nouryeh, Jeanne-Marie A. Miller, Winifred Stoelting, and Ethel A. Young-Minor.

2. Signifiers are by nature complex, fluid, and at times arbitrary, as demonstrated by Ferdinand de Saussure, and signification encodes complicated elements of African American identity and communication, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., shows in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American*

Literary Criticism. This essay is attempting to fix neither systems of African American identity nor Hurston's or Miller's treatment of or attitude toward signification within these systems. As these authors negotiated lines between "essence" and performance throughout their careers, the potential for contradictions in their rhetoric and methodology was necessarily present. See, for example, Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in which she presents a set of culturally, geographically, and physically determined black characteristics, some of which she actually portrays as arbitrarily imposed by white society in *The First One*.

3. For discussion of the role of the goat in Greek drama, see Abrados, Else, Pickard, and Ridgeway.

4. These devilish figurations also devolved upon Native Americans. Further discussion of these figurations of Satan, goats, and blackness may be found in Carus; Cervantes; Messadié; and Woods. For further discussion of racist assignment of signifiers of blackness, see Fredrickson, Hood, and Rigby. And for treatment of the development of concepts of blackness in America from the goat/Satan/blackness figuration to the "Black Beast" and 20th-century depictions, see Dain, Lively, Stokes, Gross and Hardy, and Hutchinson.

5. Hurston's appropriation of speech style from the King James version of the Bible accentuates the constructedness of the play and the arbitrariness of its signifiers.

6. Shem and his wife rouse the still-drunken Noah and inform him of Ham's deed, which leads to Noah's cursing Ham. Noah asks who has mocked him, and Mrs. Shem skillfully replies, "We fear to tell thee, lord, lest thy love for the doer of this iniquity should be so much greater than the shame, that thou should slay us for telling thee" (85). Having thus amplified the significance of Ham's deed and withholding Ham's name, Noah, thus incited to greater anger and "swaying drunkenly" storms, "Say it, woman, shall the lord of the Earth be mocked?" (85). No one answers.

7. Gubar writes regarding this situation that: "As a statement about the psychology of bondage, Hurston's play suggests that paternal anxiety about potency as well as genealogical claims to legitimacy and property motivate racial subjugation. Laughing at the phallus is the outrage; disrespect for the father (even when the father has earned it) will be punished in the patrilineal, part-centered ancient world. Slavery or white supremacy is the result of the law of the (insecure, out-of-control) father outraged and determined to assert authority and control over his family, his property, and his future" (129).

8. The logistics of production here raise an interesting question: how did Hurston envision the staging of this scene—*if* she did at all. Nouryeh notes that black women playwrights often had little or no training in the practicalities of theatricality. Assuming the stage directions are more than tongue in cheek, how did she imagine the play would be cast? Should *The First One* feature primarily white actors, the actor playing Ham blacking up or putting on a mask to mark the transformation? Or is the ideal cast one of African Americans wearing white masks or make-up? One might "act black," but do whites "become black" simply by adding color but not, say, changing the shapes of their lips, which Hurston posited in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" as a physical trait that affects speech pronunciation? Here, again, delineating between essence and performance threatens to undercut Hurston's attempt to resist white impositions of essentialized blackness.

9. The mask evokes the mask worn in Greek tragedy, suggesting the pagan connotation of the goat.

10. Kraut and Speisman discuss the black musical *Shuffle Along* as having promoted essentialized blackness, and note that Hurston's idea of "Real Negro Theatre" sought to explode such racist definitions. Jeanne-Marie A. Miller asserts that: "In the United States of the 1920s and the early 30s, almost every facet of the lives of blacks was circumscribed by both tradition and laws that bound them in an inferior position. . . [The Harlem Renaissance, however, intended to present] an expanded angle of vision of blacks, one more closely akin to their real lives, and a cessation of their past monotonous depiction in literature" (349-51).

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