

## Harriet Jacobs (1813-97)

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861)

OLLI (Spring, 2016)  
Professor Rutledge

## Sojourner Truth, 1864 *carte de visite*



## Harriet Jacobs: Chronology

- 1813 Harriet Ann Jacobs born.
- 1819 Mother dies; 1826 Father dies.
- 1829 Begins liaison with "Mr. Sands"; her son born.
- 1833 Daughter born.
- 1835 Begins concealed life in her grandmother's garret.
- 1842 Escapes to the North.
- 1849 Meets Amy Post.
- 1853 Begins her narrative, rejecting Harriet Beecher Stowe's offer.
- 1860 First book contract signed for Jacobs by L. M. Child; publisher goes bankrupt
- 1861 Jacobs purchases printer's plates and *Incidents* is published.

## Approximate Dollar Values for Jacobs' *Incidents...*

- **\$1 in 1840 = \$28.30 in 2014** (commodity value) or **\$264.00** (unskilled labor value).
- Jacobs' grandmother lent **\$300**, the equivalent of **\$8,490.00** (commodity value) or \$79,200 (unskilled labor value).
- "Sands" paid **\$1900** for children's freedom, the equivalent of **\$53,770.00** (commodity value) or **\$501,600.00** (unskilled labor value).

(Calculations from <http://www.measuringworth.com>)

### Earlier Models of Female Heroism

Ancient:

Inanna.

Classical:

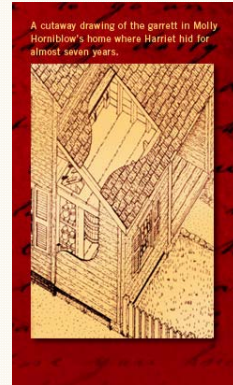
Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Medea, Penelope; Camilla; Amazons (Penthesilea). Note that of these, only two are positive maternal figures, and only two are active (and one is a goddess). Both Camilla and Penthesilea fall to superior male prowess in the *Aeneid*.

Medieval:

(Europe)saints, a few Icelandic women, and Valkyries.

(Persia) a few in *Shanameh* (Mihrdukht.), and Shirin of *Shirin and Koshrow*.

### Harriet Jacobs' Hiding Place (9' long X 7' wide; maximum height 3')



### Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847; lyrics, 1853): 1337-48

Not learned, save in gracious household ways,  
 Not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants,  
 No Angel, but a dearer being, all dipt  
 In Angel instincts, breathing Paradise,  
 Interpreter between the Gods and men,  
 Who look'd all native to her place, and yet  
 On tiptoe seem'd to touch upon a sphere  
 Too gross to tread, and all male minds perforce  
 Sway'd to her from their orbits as they moved,  
 And girdled her with music. Happy he  
 With such a mother! faith in womankind  
 Beats with his blood...

### Harriet Jacobs' heroic "moves"

- Passive resistance to Dr. Flint and his wife;
- Active resistance through the risky strategy of accepting Mr. Sands' advances;
- Escape from the plantation to forestall Flint's plan to keep her and her children there;
- Garret concealment for seven years;
- Escape to the "Free States" with subsequent evasions of Flint's daughter and her husband.

## Defining the Trickster

Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*:

The Trickster always changes the context; even if domesticated, the Trickster's place is not the same as it was.

The trickster is a change agent, always liminal, almost always escaping consequences, even if there is a risk of outsmarting himself.

"When he lies and steals, it isn't so much to get away with something or get rich as to disturb the established categories of truth and property and, by so doing, open the road to possible new worlds"

Tricksters opportunistically seek gaps; further, they feel no anxiety about lying. Happenstance=opportunity, and Tricksters revel in contingencies.

## Harriet Jacobs' Trickster "moves"

- Using verbal cunning to evade Dr. Flint;
- Using Mr. Sands to escape Dr. Flint;
- Midnight escape from the plantation;
- Various escapes and concealments culminating in the garret episode;
- Escape in disguise to the "Free States."

## Birch's Slave Pen (Alexandria, VA), converted to house refugees from the South

Source: Scott Korb, "Harriet Jacobs' First Assignment," *The New York Times* 9/6/2012



- Jacobs and her daughter later founded the Jacobs Free School in Alexandria.

## Harriet Jacobs' Relief Work

Source: Scott Korb, "Harriet Jacobs' War," *The New York Times* 9/6/2012

- [Jacobs had] sought homes for orphans and appealed for Northern teachers to travel South to help; women especially were needed. Jacobs made a special plea to the young Charlotte Forten, an abolitionist poet, who would move to the freedman settlement at Port Royal, S.C., as one of its first black teachers.
- Jacobs, who was nearly 50, returned to Alexandria as a relief worker [she would work there with Julia Wilbur, a member of a New York Quaker organization]. It was for her a religious calling: "I have often read the sentence – they are God's poor."