Rebels and Martyrs: The Debate Over Slavery in American Popular Culture, 1822-1865

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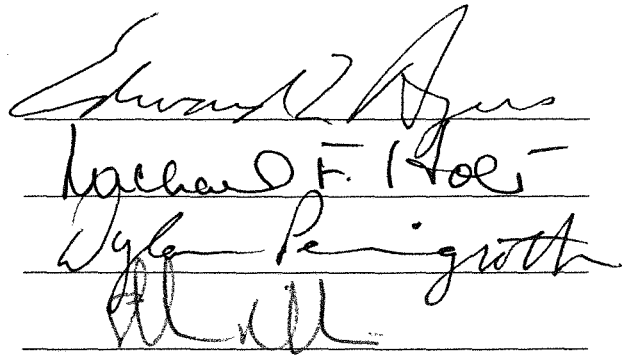

Abstract

This dissertation examines the attempts by proslavery and antislavery advocates during the antebellum period to win over the American public to their respective positions on the slavery issue through the use of various popular culture media. In their efforts to convert ordinary white Americans to their particular cause, activists on all sides of this critical question sought to put forth images of black slaves that would resonate with the general public. In this way, popular notions of African Americans often directly influenced the way that these authors and artists crafted their texts. Yet fiction, music, and visual prints created by abolitionists and their opponents could also alter or intensify commonly accepted views of black men and women. By analyzing these cultural sources, along with public response to these individual texts, this project seeks to shed light on the role that popular culture played in shaping the attitudes of ordinary Americans on slavery and race as the Civil War approached.

Because representations of violence either by or against African Americans occupied a prominent place in many antebellum and Civil War texts dealing with slavery, this dissertation centers largely on the role that violence played in abolitionist and proslavery propaganda during this period. My findings suggest that the way a source portrayed violence involving African Americans often played a critical role in determining the degree of popularity it would enjoy with the American public. The evolution of the figures of the black rebel and the black martyr within antebellum popular culture, therefore, provides a particularly useful framework through which to explore the changing strategies of proslavery and antislavery advocates between 1831 and 1865.

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Introduction

In the late summer of 1831, an event took place in the tiny backwater of Southampton County, Virginia, that suddenly forced the American public to confront the figure of the black rebel in an unexpected and sobering way. As the slave Nat Turner came to be identified as the leader of an insurrection that had left 60 white Virginians dead, this formerly unknown black man began to gain a prominent place in the collective imagination of white Americans. Nat Turner quickly rose up to become a symbol for Northern and Southern whites of death and destruction, not only of the slave system, but, more broadly, of white Americans and their hold on power in the United States.

Just over three decades after Nat Turner's rebellion, the most popular Northern publications featured images of black men violently striking down white Southerners in armed combat. Authors writing in 1863 and 1864 did not portray these encounters as frightful expressions of black savagery against blameless whites, but as an honorable vindication of the wrongs white slaveholders had committed against black slaves. The image of the black rebel in American popular culture had been transformed over the course of the antebellum period from a sinister figure that threatened white American society to a righteous freedom fighter celebrated by the Northern public.

This study explores the changes in popular conceptions of African Americans that occurred between 1831 and 1865 and the roles that proslavery and antislavery proponents played in shaping those racial images through their use of various cultural media. In their attempts to convert ordinary white Americans to a particular cause, activists on all sides

of the slavery issue sought to put forth images of black slaves that would resonate with the general public. In this way, popular notions of African Americans often directly influenced the way that these authors and artists crafted their texts. Yet fiction, music, and visual prints created by abolitionists and their opponents could also alter or intensify commonly accepted views of black men and women. By analyzing the cultural sources that both opponents and defenders of slavery published during the antebellum period, along with the reactions of the American public to those sources, this dissertation seeks to further our understanding of antebellum attitudes about race. Just as importantly, this investigation also sheds light on the ways in which advocates on opposing sides of the slavery debate shifted the images they presented over time in an attempt to appeal to the widest audience and to advance the strongest arguments they possibly could.

Not all texts created to promote a proslavery or antislavery agenda succeeded equally with the American public. Many of these sources, in fact, either met with hostility or were simply ignored when they appeared in print. To trace the response of American readers to individual texts, the present study takes into consideration both the sales figures available for published narratives, evaluated based on contemporary standards of popularity, and the reviews of these sources that appeared in popular publications. The content of texts that were received with enthusiasm is then compared to the content of those that proved unattractive to American readers. By this process, it is

possible to surmise what sort of plots and characters resonated with general readers at any given point during the antebellum period.[1]

The findings of this study lend important insights to the debates surrounding the topics of slavery and race in the antebellum period in which historians have long been engaged. The current project offers, for instance, an added dimension to the controversy among scholars over the nature of Northern hostility toward the South as sectional conflict intensified during the 1850s. This dissertation complements studies by political historians such as Michael Holt and Eric Foner that examined documents written by politicians to demonstrate Northerners' growing resentment of the Slave Power for persistently disregarding their republican liberties, from Holt's standpoint, or the fervent belief in free labor ideology that white Northerners developed in the period, in Foner's view. The creators of popular culture in antebellum America, like the creators of political rhetoric, could only succeed in their chosen profession if they presented their arguments so that they appealed to ordinary Americans. As a result, both sets of sources shed some light on the position that the Northern masses took up with regard to the South on the eve of the Civil War. While voters registered their approval or disapproval of a politician and all the policies he supported at the polls at some perhaps distant date, though, consumers voiced their opinion on a published text or a publicly performed play through the dollars they spent directly on that text. As a result, popular culture provides, in some respects, a

[1] In its analysis of fictional sources, this study employs a methodology similar to that of William Taylor in his seminal work *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1961).

more direct link to the beliefs of the Northern populace, which also consisted of non-voting women, African Americans, and children, as well as white men.[2]

Like *The Private Civil War* by Randall Jimerson, *Rebels and Martyrs* also explores the attitudes that white Northerners held about the participation of African-Americans as soldiers for the Union army during the Civil War. In particular, both studies focus on the extent to which white Northerners supported the arming of black soldiers in the Union cause and the reasons behind their support or opposition to this wartime policy. Whereas Jimerson relies on anecdotal evidence from individual letters and diaries, however, this study seeks a broader understanding of the issue by analyzing documents that touched the lives of thousands of ordinary Americans during the Civil War. Though each reader or viewer doubtless came away from a text or performance with their own personal interpretation of the material, common threads that appeared repeatedly in popular media suggest that Americans living in the same region at the same time identified particularly well with certain plots or characters in the early 1860s. As a result, it becomes possible to draw conclusions about how Northerners as a society, rather than a group of individuals, felt about the role that African Americans should play in the war effort.[3]

Much of the popular culture materials concerning slavery that were released during the antebellum and Civil War periods served not only as entertainment, but also as

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[2] Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970).
[3] Randall C. Jimerson, *The Private Civil War: Popular Thought During the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University State Press, 1988).

a form of propaganda for various proslavery and antislavery causes. This project, therefore, also contributes to the large body of scholarship on the abolitionist movement as well as to the smaller body of work on anti-abolitionist activity in the North and the proslavery argument in the North and the South. Historians have long debated the motives and true racial attitudes of the men and women who headed, or merely joined, the abolitionist movement in the antebellum period. Employing a set of sources that few historians of abolitionism have taken into consideration, this dissertation enhances our current understanding of the abolitionist movement and the attitudes that some of its most important members possessed on the subject of race. Yet it goes beyond the personalities who have dominated previous scholarship on the subject to take into account not merely rank-and-file abolitionists, but ordinary men and women who had an impact on the movement through the literature they produced. The project also emphasizes the degree to which even the most committed abolitionists differed from one another in their conceptions of African Americans. This study, finally, highlights the struggle that abolitionist authors experienced in trying to decide how far afield from the egalitarian principles of Garrisonian immediatism they were willing to go in their attempts to bring the Northern masses into the antislavery fold.[4]

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[4] For some of the best on the abolitionist movement from the past two decades, see, among others, Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Donald Jacobs, ed. *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery*) New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1996).

The current project, moreover, provides new insights into the methods used by proslavery advocates to plead their case to the American public. In his monograph *Proslavery*, Larry Tise has already demonstrated that Northerners put forward more than their share of written defenses of the Southern slave system in the antebellum period. The sole book-length volume on the anti-abolitionist riots of the 1830s, published by Leonard Richards in 1970, graphically extends this point to include violent demonstrations against the abolitionist cause in the North. My study adds to the discussion by demonstrating how a common mentality shared by proslavery advocates in the North and the South prevented most proslavery literature from successfully winning over converts to the cause.[5]

Finally, the present study further illuminates the attitudes of ordinary Americans on the nature of African Americans and the place they should occupy in society. Over forty years ago, Leon Litwack in *North of Slavery* highlighted the presence of racial discrimination against blacks Americans throughout the Northern states in the antebellum period. William Staunton's *The Leopard's Spots*, also published in 1960, outlined the evolution of scientific racism, mainly by Northern intellectuals, during the same years. Later, George Fredrickson explored the racial thought of various groups in nineteenth-century American society in an effort to explain commonly held beliefs about African Americans in that era and to point out the diversity of those beliefs. In more recent years, Eric Lott and David Roediger delved into the non-traditional historical source of

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[5] Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens, Ga., 1987); Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian*

antebellum minstrel shows to illustrate the functions that anti-black racism served in the formation of a white working-class identity in the North. *Rebels and Martyrs* develops a new angle in relation to the earlier studies on race and also expands the scope of Lott's and Roediger's studies by its examination of a wide variety of popular culture media.[6]

Because representations of violence either by or against African Americans occupied a prominent place in many antebellum and Civil War texts dealing with slavery, this dissertation centers largely on the role that violence played in American racial thought, as demonstrated in the nation's popular culture. My findings suggest that the way a source portrayed violence involving African Americans often played a critical role in determining the degree of popularity it would enjoy with the American public. The evolution of the figures of the black rebel and the black martyr within antebellum popular culture, therefore, provides a particularly useful framework through which to explore the changing strategies of proslavery and antislavery advocates between 1831 and 1865.

This investigation into the slavery debate in antebellum popular culture has led me to conclude that over the course of this period, antislavery propagandists were, on the whole, much more successful than proslavery advocates in promoting their cause with the public. Antislavery authors and artists came to understand during the 1840s and 1850s

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America (New York, 1970).

[6] Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row), 1971; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991).

that Northern readers, in particular, allied themselves much more comfortably with texts that highlighted the figure of the black martyr rather than that of the black rebel. By the mid-1840s, men and women in the antislavery camp realized that when they had tried to prey on white Americans' fears about black violence to convert them to the antislavery cause, the literature they produced failed to attract a popular audience. Once these purveyors of popular culture began to focus on the suffering of African Americans at the hands of their slaveholding oppressors, their texts had much more success with the general public. Even during the escalation of sectional hostilities in the late 1850s, skittish white readers did not permit antislavery authors to resurrect the slave rebel in their fictional or visual texts. Not until midway through the Civil War could African-American characters finally employ violence against white Southerners without invoking the antagonism of a fearful white readership.

For their part, proslavery artists and authors remained woefully out of touch with their desired audience. Once they finally initiated a concerted effort to promote their cause after 1852, supporters of the slave system appropriated the theme of martyrdom in the texts they created. But their inability to understand the general sentiments held by most Northern readers led these proslavery advocates to apply this theme in an entirely ineffective manner. Even though most Northerners at the beginning of the antebellum period had harbored an affinity for the anti-abolitionist cause to at least some degree, the incomplete and generally inept campaign waged by proslavery forces in the arena of

popular culture contributed to the shift in Northern loyalties against the slave system by the 1850s.

Since the distinction between an antislavery and an abolitionist mentality proves critical to this study, it is important to clarify the specific use of this terminology at the outset. The designation of "abolitionist" in this work refers to sources or people who promoted Garrisonian ideals of racial equality as well as an immediate end to the slave system. The broader term "antislavery" indicates a person, text, or idea that opposed the Southern slave system for any of a variety of reasons, but that did not necessarily advocate either immediate emancipation or rights for African Americans.

The current study goes beyond narrow conceptions of social or cultural history in its attempt to relate the thoughts and actions of ordinary people directly to central, transformative events in American history. An exploration of the slavery debate in antebellum popular culture links the experiences of slaves and governors with those of housewives and U.S. Senators, as well as countless others who either created or consumed texts that took sides on the slavery question. The actions that both prominent and more ordinary individuals took in the struggle to win the hearts and minds of the public on the slavery issue allow a increased understanding not only of how regular people reacted to the great events of their day, but also of how they shaped those events in significant ways.

Chapter 1 In the Public Eye: Slavery and the Rise of Print Culture, 1822-31

In 1822, a free black carpenter named Denmark Vesey set his sights on destroying the major U. S. port city of Charleston, South Carolina. To this end, Vesey and his comrades organized their men into companies and prepared to slaughter the city's 11,000 white residents and burn the town before departing via ship to their diplomatic allies in Haiti. When two dissenting slaves betrayed the plot, white authorities put on trial over a hundred black conspirators, seventy-two of whom received sentences of death or deportation.

Nine years later, an enslaved field hand living in a rural Virginia backwater launched an insurrection that clearly lacked the elaborate strategy and ambitious goals of Vesey's plan. Nat Turner set out in August of 1831 to slay all the white citizens of Southampton County, and to lay siege to the town of Jerusalem--population, 175. Before slaveholders put a halt to their spree, Turner's men managed to kill about sixty whites, the majority of them women and children. Local courts found thirty-one black men guilty of involvement in the episode, and, in all, twenty-one of those convicted went to the gallows.

Though Vesey's plot, if carried out, would have posed a far more profound threat to white Americans than Nat Turner's did, the figure of Nat Turner haunted white Americans throughout the antebellum period, while that of Vesey seemed to disappear altogether from national consciousness. In fictional and visual depictions of slavery crafted in the decades before the Civil War, white authors rarely evoked Vesey's name or

alluded to his sinister plot. In 1861, the white abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson remarked that, "to the readers of American history, Denmark Vesey and Peter Poyas [a chief co-conspirator] have commonly been but the shadows of names." In contrast, the figure of Nat Turner lived on long after his death as "a memory of terror."[1]

Part of the explanation for these disparate legacies lies in the stark reality that Nat Turner succeeded--at least in comparison to Vesey--in his plan to murder slaveholding whites. This simple fact compelled Virginia authorities to acknowledge to the outside world that an insurrectionary plot had posed a real threat to the safety of whites in Southampton County. Charleston officials in 1822, on the other hand, could publicly downplay the seriousness of the Vesey conspiracy, since no whites had actually lost their lives as a result of it.

But once South Carolinians began executing alleged rebels in the summer of 1822, the American public faced the choice either of believing that the rebels had, in fact, presented a grave danger to Charleston whites, or of suspecting authorities of the overzealous and unjust prosecution of harmless black men. By the end of the summer, thirty-five prisoners had been hanged and thirty-seven had been transported outside the state. After thirty-four of the executions had been carried out, the New York *Daily Advertiser* commented that, "As yet nothing has appeared that has met our view to justify the great sacrifice of human lives that has taken place." Most newspapers, on the other hand, voiced the beliefs that the death penalty represented "a rigid but necessary

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[1] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws: Episodes in American History* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1889), 275, 326. Both stories were first printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*, June and

punishment" in the case of the Vesey conspirators. "Misguided persons, thus plotting the work of murder and conflagration," the New York *National Advocate* shuddered, "may give a fatal blow to a portion of our country." Such evidence suggests that the grave nature of the Vesey conspiracy was rarely lost on Americans who gave the episode even the slightest degree of their attention.[2]

The difficulty for Americans in 1822, both in and out of Charleston, was that for many months they were unable to gain access to more than a very limited amount of information about the Vesey episode. They could fix little of their concern on the horrors of the incident, since the general public had not yet become privileged to any of the details of those horrors. Only nine years later, by contrast, during the fall of 1831, literate Americans could hardly avoid following the entire saga of the Southampton rebellion, from the slaying of the first victims to the capture and execution of Nat Turner over two months later. But almost no confirmed facts, and few rumors, about the Vesey uprising reached the public at large until well after the last execution had been accomplished and the court adjourned. Once information finally began to reach ordinary people not directly involved in the prosecution of the rebels, that information assumed the form of carefully scripted official sources designed to paint Denmark Vesey and his cohorts in a particular light. By the time these accounts emerged, the entire chapter had come to a close, and

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August 1861.

[2] New York *Daily Advertiser*, August 6, 1822, reprinted in Robert S. Starobin, ed., *Denmark Vesey: The Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 88; New York *National Advocate*, quoted in the Washington, D.C., *National Intelligencer*, July 20, 1822, in Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 86-7.

authorities could assure white Americans that the court had succeeded in "bringing to punishment the whole of the ringleaders."[3]

The discrepancy between the amount of news available to the public in the Vesey and Turner incidents derives largely from the dramatic growth of a national print culture during the 1820s. By 1822, the movement toward mass consumption of newspapers had begun in the United States, but after 1825 the process rapidly picked up momentum. In 1823, there had been 578 newspapers operating in the United States. Only five years later, there were nearly 900. The average daily circulation of individual newspapers rose from about 800 in 1820 to 1,200 in 1830. The technological developments that made the penny press possible beginning in 1833 had not yet thoroughly taken hold in the newspaper industry by 1831, but mechanical advances in printing had nevertheless begun to make their impact. The cylinder press and the paper-making machine, implemented in American publishing houses by the mid-1820s, increased the speed of printing from about 200 sheets per hour to 2,000 four-page papers in the same period of time. In addition, the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and other improvements in transportation meant that newspapers began to extend their reach into the expanding West. Between 1820 and 1830, the number of post offices, the critical distribution sites of early nineteenth-century newspaper, nearly doubled, growing from 4,500 to 8,450.[4]

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[3] [James Hamilton, Jr.], *An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of This City* (Charleston: A. E. Miller, 1822), 28.

[4] For the development of the press during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, see Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992), 73-94, and Carol Sue Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 71-160.

By 1831, newspapers and pamphlets had become, on the whole, a much more significant part of American culture than when Vesey plotted his rebellion in 1822. "No matter how remote from civilization or poor the settler may be," Tocqueville observed during his tour of the United States in 1831-2, "he reads the newspaper." Frances Trollope, journeying through the country between 1827 and 1831, remarked on "the universal reading of newspapers" among Americans. Faced with increased competition for this numerically and geographically expanding readership, editors acquired a financial incentive to emphasize the sensational stories that would attract more customers. Thus, in the fall of 1831, papers throughout the country seized on the dramatic and bloody story of the Southampton rebellion, giving it a prominent place in their pages for days on end.[5]

Before the expansion of the press, Southern slaveholders carefully limited the information about slave revolts to which the general public had access. They did so, in part, to keep wayward texts out of the hands of slaves, who might be inspired by such documents to launch a mutiny of their own. Masters also worried that news of a revolt would suggest to non-slaveholding white Americans the terrible risks involved in maintaining the slave system and prompt them to speak out against it. In either case, any publicity on the subject that was not closely monitored by slaveholders threatened to undermine the social and economic order that formed the basis for slaveholders' wealth and power.

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[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, quoted in Emery and Emery, 87; Trollope quoted in Humphrey, *Press of the Young Republic*, 136.

The successful efforts of Charleston officials to prevent reports of the Denmark Vesey plot from circulating freely reveal the situation in effect during the early 1820s. In the summer of 1822, city authorities held the trials of Denmark Vesey and his fellow conspirators behind closed doors and kept all news of the court proceedings out of local papers, excepting a few brief notices of executions. Finally, when the trials had drawn to a close, the Charleston *Mercury* and the *Courier* noted simply that the business of the court had concluded. Governor Thomas Bennett explained later that the "secrecy and seclusion observed in the incipient stages of the inquiry" had proven necessary because, he claimed, "Every individual in the state is interested, whether in relation to his own property, or the reputation of the state, in giving no more importance to the transaction than it justly merits." In letters to family and friends, Charleston whites who mentioned the episode indicated their accord with this policy, admonishing their correspondents that the information they had disclosed to them must remain "all private and confidential."[6]

Only after the last of the rebels had been executed did officials in the case publish their own versions of the conspiracy and trials. In August of 1822, Governor Bennett released a brief synopsis of the episode that was picked up by both the Washington *National Intelligencer* and the Baltimore *Niles' Register*. In his letter, the governor explained that he had "entered with much reluctance on this detail" about the revolt, but that he had felt a published account of the event had become necessary, "to counteract the

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[6] *Niles' Register*, September 7, 1822, reprinted in Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 344, 347; letter from John Potter to Langdon Cheves, July 20, 1822, reprinted in Pearson, *Designs*, 333.

number of gross and idle reports, actively and extensively circulated, and producing a general anxiety and alarm" among white South Carolinians. Also in August, the mayor of Charleston, James Hamilton, submitted to the public his own *Account of the Late Intended Insurrection*, in pamphlet form. Finally, the two justices who presided over the trials, Lionel Kennedy and Thomas Parker, came out in October with *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes*, based on court transcripts. Shortly after the publication of *An Official Report*, South Carolinians abruptly resumed their former policy of public silence on the matter.[7]

Despite avowals by these various authors that their accounts were aimed merely at fulfilling the citizenry's "very general desire . . . to be informed of the details of the plot," political motives figured largely in the publication of these documents.[8] As governor of the state, Bennett faced the embarrassment of having owned three of the principle ringleaders of the rebellion, men he had considered his most trustworthy domestic slaves. Through his public statement about the revolt, the governor hoped to redeem his political reputation by shifting negative attention away from himself and onto the officials

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[7] *National Intelligencer*, August 24, 1822, and *Niles' Register*, September 7, 1822, reprinted in Pearson, *Designs*, 344-7; quotation from the governor's letter, Pearson, *Designs*, 347; Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, *An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negores Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1822).

[8] William W. Freehling has previously discussed the controversy that occurred between Bennett and his opponents over the fairness of the trials, in his essay, "Denmark Vesey's Antipaternalistic Reality" in *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Freehling, however, downplays the political motives of these key players in contemporary South Carolina politics and instead emphasizes the differences in worldview that Bennett and Justices Kennedy and Parker held. While the governor does seem to have followed a more thoroughly paternalistic ethos than the judges, political considerations cannot have been far from the minds of any of these public officials.

responsible for depriving Charleston masters of over seventy of their slaves.[9] For their part, Intendant Hamilton and the justices he had appointed released their own perspectives on the conspiracy in order to defend their actions and discredit the governor as naive or, worse, reckless in his insistence that the plot had posed no real danger to Charleston whites. Along with their reputations, the highest offices in the state remained at stake for Bennett and Hamilton.[10]

In hopes of salvaging his political career after the damage caused by the plot's discovery, Bennett carefully crafted his August missive to reassure fellow slaveholders that they could anticipate no lingering danger from slaves who had been involved in the conspiracy. "It cannot be doubted," he declared confidently, "that all who were actually concerned, have been brought to justice." In fact, "the scheme," the governor assured his readers, "has not been general or alarmingly extensive." According to Bennett, the attempted revolt had "not only been greatly magnified, but as soon as discovered, it ceased to be dangerous." Bennett promised that, in handling the rebellion, "No means which experience or ingenuity could devise were left unessayed to eviscerate the plot." The governor went on to declare that, "an extensive conspiracy cannot be matured in this state," due to the loyalty and the cowardice of the slaves therein. Therefore, he

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[9] Three of the seventy-two men executed or transported outside the state were free blacks. Two other slaves, however, died in jail while awaiting trial.

[10] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 1. All quotations from Kennedy and Parker taken from John Oliver Killens, ed., *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970).

concluded, "I fear not that we shall continue in the enjoyment of much tranquillity and safety as any state in the union."[11]

Most of the United States received information on the Vesey revolt from a source less confident of the faithfulness of the city's slaves than Bennett, but even more forceful in assuring the public that Charleston authorities had acted decisively to put down the rebellion. As the mayor, who had also established the make-up of the court, James Hamilton had to justify the vigorous action of the magistrates, while also putting citizens' minds at ease concerning the current security of the city. Hamilton therefore recalled in his *Account of the Late Intended Insurrection* that at the first sign of the plot, "measures were . . . promptly taken, to place the City Guard in a state of the utmost efficiency." He went on to inform his readers that, "In the progress of the subsequent investigation, it was distinctly in proof, that but for these military demonstrations, the effort [at rebellion] would unquestionably have been made." In the end, Hamilton concluded, "all who were active agents . . . in the conspiracy have expiated their crimes." Of all the accounts produced in the wake of the Vesey incident, Intendant Hamilton's tract seems to have been the most widely read outside of South Carolina. In early September, the Richmond *Enquirer* recommended that its readers buy copies of the treatise in order to help disseminate its "truth and nothing but the truth throughout the United States." Before the

[11] *Niles Register*, September 7, 1822, in Pearson, *Designs*, 346, 344, 345, 347.

end of the year, a Boston printing house had issued two editions of the pamphlet, in addition to the two editions published in Charleston, also during the fall.[12]

Because Hamilton's version of the plot and trials reached more Americans than any other, the impression that Denmark Vesey would leave on the national consciousness would prove relatively unremarkable. Hamilton made a brief attempt to explore Vesey's motives for leading the revolt, pointing to a supposed "malignant hatred of the whites, and inordinate lust of power and booty." According to Hamilton, Vesey showed himself "ambitious" to impose his own "despotic rule" on fellow blacks, including his own "numerous wives and children." His temper appeared "impetuous and domineering in the extreme," Hamilton remarked, and "all his passions were ungovernable and, savage."[13] These scattered observations created a somewhat hazy outline of the rebel leader. But they also suggested a black ringleader whom white readers might easily recognize as the typical American stereotype of the African. A polygamist, a despot, and an uncontrollable savage, Vesey, as Hamilton presented him, emerged as the very antithesis of the republican ideal. As such, the Vesey Hamilton depicted would undoubtedly have aroused the disdain of white Americans. At the same time, though, Hamilton's characterization of Vesey would not have surprised or unnerved them in the same way that the most widely read portrayal of Nat Turner would in the 1830s. White readers

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[12] Hamilton, *Account*, 7, 10; Richmond *Enquirer*, September 3, 1822, noted in Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 206; Higginson in *Travellers and Outlaws*, 268, stated that Hamilton's report "passed through four editions in a few months,--the first and fourth being published in Charleston, and the second and third in Boston."

[13] Hamilton, *Account*, 29, 17.

could absorb this image of Vesey without wrestling with its meaning or even becoming unduly alarmed.

For South Carolinians, a far more disturbing source provided the last official word on the Vesey affair in 1822. In October, Justices Kennedy and Parker published a tract that included an edited version of the official trial transcript, preceded by a lengthy introduction in which the justices offered their interpretation of the summer's events. By emphasizing the harrowing danger that the Vesey plot had posed for white Charlestonians, this *Official Report* further vindicated the methods of the court that Hamilton had established and supported, and over which Kennedy and Parker had presided. The pamphlet also warned Low Country residents that continued vigilance with regard to their slaves would be vital to the preservation of their society and even, perhaps, of their lives. In doing so, the *Official Report* helped cinch the campaign of Hamilton for U.S. Congressman and push the legislature to adopt more stringent measures aimed at preventing slave revolt in the future.

The publication of this chilling pamphlet about the grave threat that the Vesey revolt had presented, and the disturbing lack of safety that white South Carolinians still faced among their own slaves, however, did not become a source of national, or even region-wide anxiety for white Americans. Instead, the *Official Report*, precisely because it was so frightening, never saw the light of day among the American public at large. In time, South Carolina planters burned their individual copies of the *Official Report*, in the process destroying practically all printed evidence about the rebellion. The unsettling

information that Kennedy and Parker had revealed about the plot and the continued danger would not reach most Americans outside South Carolina until after the Civil War, when a Union soldier discovered a copy of the document in the garret of an abandoned Low Country plantation house.[14]

Kennedy and Parker's *Official Report* directly contradicted Governor Bennett's representation of a slave population that posed no threat to the tranquillity of the white populace. Far from "all . . . concerned" having "been brought to justice," the justices warned starkly that, "the companies of Vesey, Peter, Ned, Rolla, and Gullah Jack have escaped detection and punishment." The *Official Report* pointed out that at least two of the leaders had kept lists of their recruits. Monday Gell had recorded forty-two names on the roll he kept, while Peter Bennett, "who was bold and active in his exertions, had six hundred names on his list." In addition, it would prove impossible for a slaveholder to discern which of his slaves might have been concerned in the affair, since "the character and condition of most of the insurgents were such, as rendered them objects the least liable to suspicion." They reprinted a letter from a planter in St. John's district, testifying that "the orderly conduct of the Negroes in any district of country within 40 miles of Charleston, is no evidence that they were ignorant of the intended attempt." According to Kennedy and Parker, "not only were the leaders of good character and much indulged by their owners, but this was very generally the case with all who were convicted, many of

[14] "Bibliographic Note" in Killens, *Trial Record*, xxiii.

them possessing the highest confidence of their owners, *and not one of bad character*," they emphasized.[15]

Once again at complete variance with Bennett's assessment, the judges suggested that the plot might well have succeeded, had it not been discovered by whites only two nights prior to "the intended exhibition of the dreadful tragedy." Besides ample numbers of men, the rebels seemed to have outfitted themselves sufficiently with weaponry. Bennett had insisted that, "no weapons . . . have been discovered, nor any testimony received but of six pikes, that such preparations were actually made." Kennedy and Parker, on the other hand, claimed that one hundred "pike heads" and bayonets had reportedly been manufactured, and that by the time of the uprising "as many as two or three hundred, and between three and four hundred daggers" were to be produced. The justices then catalogued an extensive list of arms that the individual leaders had procured for their own personal use. "Had the plot not been discovered, and the insurrection commenced at the appointed time," the judges concluded soberly, the insurgents "would not have been found unarmed."[16]

Similarly, the portrait of Vesey that the justices presented hinted ominously that another free black man like Vesey might at any moment be busily recruiting slave troops to rise against their masters, right in the midst of whites, but without whites' having the least knowledge of what was happening. Whereas the governor mentioned Denmark Vesey only in passing as "unquestionably the instigator and chief of this plot," Kennedy

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[15] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 17, 16, 28-9, 21, 29.

and Parker sketched the leader in greater detail. The justices emphasized the trust that Vesey had earned from whites, as well as the influence he had gained over fellow blacks. Vesey "was in good business as a carpenter," the authors related, "and enjoyed so much the confidence of the whites, that when he was accused, . . . he was not even arrested for several days after, and not until proof of this guilt had become too strong to be doubted."[17]

While he convinced whites that he was harmless, Vesey meanwhile drew on "every principle which could operate upon the mind of man" to convince African Americans to back his cause. "He rendered himself perfectly familiar with all those parts of the Scriptures which he thought he could pervert to his purpose," the justices related, "and would readily quote them to prove that slavery was contrary to the laws of God, that slaves were bound to attempt their emancipation, however shocking and bloody might be the consequences." Kennedy and Parker further speculated that Vesey typically spoke to his followers in a "dictatorial, despotic manner," in an attempt to command obedience from them. This emphasis on the power that Vesey had evidently amassed within the black community, contrasted with his reputation for trustworthiness among white citizens, offered a worrying picture that would unmistakably have frightened white readers of the *Official Report*.[18]

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[16] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 32, 22, 24; *Niles' Register*, September 7, 1822, in Pearson, *Designs*, 346.
[17] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 29.
[18] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 13, 11, 30.

The *Official Report* further threatened white South Carolinians by depicting several of the plot's ringleaders in an unmistakably manly light. In terms commonly used in the antebellum period to indicate manliness, Kennedy and Parker referenced the courage, resolve, and wise forethought of Vesey's lieutenants.[19] The justices described these black slaves with scarcely concealed admiration. They suggested that Rolla Bennett, for instance, "possessed uncommon self-possession" and a resolve that was "bold and ardent." Rolla was, the judges contended, "not to be deterred from his purpose by danger." Likewise, Ned Bennett emerged as "a man of firm nerves, and desperate courage." Monday Gell impressed the judges as being "firm, resolute, discrete, and intelligent." Peter Poyas received the most praise, for showing himself "intrepid and resolute, true to his engagements, and cautious in observing secrecy where it was necessary." Kennedy and Parker went on to remark that Poyas "was not to be daunted nor impeded by difficulties, and though confident of success, was careful in providing against any obstacles or casualties which might arise, and intent upon discovering every means which might be in their power if thought of before hand." Even while facing death, these rebel slaves passed the test of true men by meeting their fate with undaunted courage. The insurgent leaders, after being jailed, "mutually supported each other," the

[19] For a concise discussion of white American ideals of manliness gleaned from the work of Charles Rosenberg and of E. Anthony Rotundo, see James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America" in Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, v. 1* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 382-3.

judges reported, "and died obedient to the stern and emphatic injunction of their comrade, Peter Poyas: 'Do not open your lips! Die silent, as you shall see me do.'"[20]

The unsettling implication of these noble portrayals was that if slaves could indeed exhibit the kind of measured boldness and brave conviction that were supposed to remain strictly the purview of white men, white Southerners could not count themselves immune from a daring and carefully calculated insurrection. Such a suggestion rendered implausible Governor Bennett's assurance that, "Servility long continued debases the mind and abstracts it from that energy of character, which is fitted to great exploits." It also cast dispersion on the widely accepted notion that black men were peculiarly suited for slavery, and the accompanying belief that white men were born to rule.[21]

Had this harrowing picture of Vesey and his comrades, and of the danger that remained for white South Carolinians, ever reached the general American public, a greater opportunity would have existed for Americans to remember and be continually haunted by the figure of Denmark Vesey. Instead, the distribution of the more moderate Hamilton treatise outside South Carolina and the careful containment of the *Official Report* help to explain why Denmark Vesey remained a haunting presence in the memories of South Carolinians, but faded into obscurity for most other Americans. Once slaveholders within the vicinity of Charleston had read the pamphlet and satisfied their own curiosity about the revolt, they became uneasy about allowing such alarming information to become widely known. As a result, they secured their copies of the

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[20] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 15, 16, 30-1.
[21] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 346.

incendiary document under lock and key within their households. They later claimed to Northern visitors that they had chosen to lock away the pamphlet "lest it should reach the dangerous eyes of the slaves."[22] Certainly, masters did not want their slaves reading about slave rebels portrayed as heroic figures or thinking about how much power slaves might possess if they were able to organize their large numbers in the Low Country. But it is also likely that planters did not want to alarm non-slaveholding whites, either inside or outside of South Carolina, about the dangers that slavery continued to pose to white Americans.

The most impressive triumph white South Carolinians achieved was to keep the information that sparked these changes circulating only among themselves. Part of the reason for this silence likely stemmed from the concern that South Carolina slaves would bring little price at sale if slaveholders outside the immediate Charleston area realized that many of the rebels had gone unidentified. The governor himself feared "a rapid deterioration of property" if "a variety of rumors, calculated to produce great excitement and alarm" were allowed to go unchecked. Likewise, financial agent John Potter admitted to Langdon Cheves his fear that the Vesey incident would "have a sad effect, on this kind of property."[23] Historians have noted this concern among South Carolina masters before. But they have hitherto ignored the shrewd selectivity of these

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[22] Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws*, 274. Higginson related that, "in 1841, a friend of the writer, then visiting South Carolina, heard from her hostess, for the first time, the events which are recounted here. On asking to see the reports of the trials, she was cautiously told that the only copy in the house, after being carefully kept for years under lock and key, had been burnt at last, lest it should reach the dangerous eyes of the slaves. The same thing had happened, it was added, in my other families."

slaveholders in allowing Hamilton's pamphlet to circulate widely, while keeping a tight rein on the more dangerous *Official Report*. As a result, Americans outside the state could do little other than accept Hamilton's contention that Charleston slaveholders were left "with little to fear, and nothing to reproach ourselves."[24]

By 1831, the vigorous growth of the press in every part of the country had made the suppression, or even the control, of information about Nat Turner's rebellion impossible for Virginia authorities. Even before court proceedings had begun, newspapers in the state and across the nation trumpeted the news of, "Insurrection in Virginia!" Rather than the intense silence that confronted Americans during the Vesey incident, a dizzying array of information--much of it inaccurate and all of it horrifying--greeted newspaper readers in the days and weeks following the Southampton insurrection.[25]

These unchecked reports in newspapers fueled the panic that had broken out when Virginians had first begun to hear rumors of the rebellion. In their zeal to sell papers, editors capitalized on the hysteria surrounding the revolt by publicizing even the most outlandish rumors that reached their notice. John Hampden Pleasants of the Richmond *Constitutional Whig* complained less than two weeks after the revolt had been quelled that "editors seem to have applied themselves to the task of alarming the public mind as much as possible." Although the Petersburg *Intelligencer* reassured its readers on August

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[23] *Niles Register*, September 7, 1822, in Pearson, *Designs*, 344; letter from John Potter to Langdon Cheves, July 5, 1822, in Pearson, *Designs*, 322.
[24] Hamilton, *Account*, 30.
[25] See, for example, the New York *Journal of Commerce*, cited in *The Liberator*, September 10, 1831.

26 that "by this time, tranquillity has been restored," its editor reprinted a letter rife with horrific exaggerations about the revolt. "Between eighty and a hundred of the whites have already been butchered--their heads severed from their bodies," the correspondent wrote. The Richmond *Enquirer* likewise misinformed its clientele that "about 250 negroes from a Camp Meeting about the Dismal Swamp set out on a marauding excursion, and have, for the sake of plunder, murdered about 60 persons." At most, sixty black men from Southampton County had participated in the killing of sixty whites. In the days following the insurrection, an undetermined number of African Americans throughout the region suffered torture and death in retaliation for the killings of whites committed by Turner and his men. Such inaccurate reporting only helped to justify white Virginians in the extralegal murders they committed against blacks who had played no part in the rebellion.[26]

In North Carolina, local papers began in mid-September to publish rumors that slave revolt had broken out in several areas around that state. One newspaper printed a letter from the North Carolina town of Washington, in which the author recorded that "there was a report in Fayetteville, that the Negroes had risen in force, taken and burnt Wilmington, and massacred many whites." The same source related that a revolt had broken out in Duplin County, and that "seventeen or twenty families had been butchered by them." The correspondent emphasized that, "Of the truth of this there can be no

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[26] Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, September 3, 1831, reprinted in Eric Foner, ed., *Nat Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), 17; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, August 26, 1831, reprinted in Henry Irving Tragle, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst:

doubt." Whether or not these rumors contained any truth to them, they undoubtedly exacerbated the panic already felt by North Carolinians.[27]

Even editors who tried to keep silent on the Turner affair eventually gave in when they saw their local competitors freely disseminating information about the events in Southampton. The New Orleans *Bee* had initially "deemed it more prudent to abstain from noticing the disturbances in Southampton County, Virginia." When it recognized that, "some of the contemporary papers have laid the subject before the public," however, the paper yielded and printed a synopsis of the insurrection. In Kentucky, a correspondent to the Portland *Courier* complained that "the papers, from motives of policy, do not notice the disturbance." The appearance of his letter alone in the *Courier*, though, provides evidence of the abandonment of such a policy, at least by one local editor.[28]

By mid-September, South Carolina authorities stood virtually alone in trying to stem the tide of the rampant new journalistic tendency to publicize dangerous stories like that of Turner's rebellion. Many of the most important state officials at the time had also helped to enforce the policy of silence South Carolinians had followed in 1822. Governor James Hamilton had served as the mayor of Charleston during the Vesey episode, and former state Attorney General Robert Hayne now served as U.S. Senator for South Carolina. As they had done in 1822, the government and the press joined together

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University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 39; Richmond *Enquirer*, August 26, 1831, in Tragle, *Southampton Slaves Revolt*, 46.

[27] Quoted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 290.

to bar all news of the revolt from local print media. A week after the incident began, the Charleston *Mercury* alluded in its columns to a "very painful and revolting subject" that was "highly important and interesting not only to the people of this city, but of the whole Southern country." The editor of the *Mercury* thanked the correspondent from North Carolina who had provided the paper with information on the revolt, but informed his readers that, "We cannot publish his letters, nor anything indeed relating to their subject matter, for very obvious reasons."[29]

Despite the block on information about the rebellion that South Carolina officials imposed, white residents learned enough through private channels and out-of-state papers to set off a more intense and widespread panic than had occurred in 1822. In one county, authorities imprisoned "a great many negroes" and gathered white women and children together for extra protection. As rumors of local insurrections spread like wildfire, districts increased patrols, and the legislature empowered a hundred-man cavalry force to guard Charleston. The Richmond *Enquirer* quoted one South Carolina resident as warning that "we may shut our eyes and avert our faces, if we please, but there it is, the dark and growing evil at our doors." The panic of this anonymous source echoed that of whites throughout the region when he declared, "What is to be done? Oh! my God, I do not know, but something must be done."[30]

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[28] New Orleans *Bee*, September 15, 1831, reprinted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 79; Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 342.
[29] Charleston *Mercury*, August 29, 30, 1831, reprinted in Foner, *Nat Turner*, 65.
[30] Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War*, 63; Richmond *Enquirer*, January 7, 1832, quoted in Joseph Clarke Robert, *The Road from Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1832* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1941), 17-8.

By the time Virginia officials realized that unchecked journalistic exaggeration deserved partial responsibility for the hysteria gripping the South, the government and the press no longer had the option of simply suppressing all news related to the rebellion. Print media both inside and outside the state had become too extensive and too independent for the governor of Virginia to control. In eastern Virginia alone, at least ten local newspapers went to press on a daily or weekly basis. In addition, for the preceding two weeks, newspapers had been printing reports that hundreds of slaves were roaming the Southern countryside, massacring white families indiscriminately. After the dissemination of such alarming news, a sudden and unexplained silence would have only further agitated white Southerners, perhaps causing them to turn on the government as well as on African Americans.

To restore order, Virginia authorities would have to publish their own reports of the happenings in Southampton, assuring Virginians and the country that the situation had been effectively brought under control. General Eppes, the commander of the militia at Jerusalem, issued a report on August 28 stating that "there is no longer any danger" in or near the site of the rebellion and, furthermore, that "there is not the least danger of the renewal of the disturbances." Eppes went on to explain that "the insurgents [are] all taken or killed, except Mr. Turner the leader, after whom there is a pursuit," even though his next communication two days later related that, "a few more prisoners had been taken." General Broadnax, who had commanded two other regiments brought into Southampton, assured the public a day later that "there has existed no great concert

among the slaves," and that "a force of 20 resolute men," he believed, "could easily have put [the rebels] down."[31]

The editor of the Richmond *Whig* aided Governor Floyd in calming the frantic fears of white Americans that the Southampton rebellion spelled race war for the entire South. In his eyewitness reports of the revolt, James Pleasants expressed the opinion that "the conspiracy was confined to Southampton, and that the idea of its extensiveness originated in the panic which seized upon the South East of Virginia." The editor went on to "assert confidently" to his readers that "20 armed whites would put to rout the whole negro population of Southampton" and that "another insurrection will be followed by putting the whole race to the sword." Since newspapers in 1831 still had to depend on messengers or the postal service to receive news from distant locations, most editors in other areas of the country simply reprinted articles from Richmond papers to inform their readers of the latest news from Southampton. Therefore, Pleasants's placating assurances to white readers reached an audience far beyond the local readership that the *Whig* usually attracted.[32]

But the white Virginia establishment faced a more incendiary and less tractable source of information about the revolt in the Northern abolitionist press that had begun to emerge over the previous decade. In an effort to combat mainstream apathy on the subject of slavery, abolitionist papers and tracts had initiated efforts during the late 1820s

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[31] Official reports printed in the Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, August 29, 1831, reprinted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 54.

[32] Richmond *Whig*, August 29, 1831, reprinted in Foner, *Nat Turner*, 14; Richmond *Whig*, September 3, 1831, in Foner, 21.

and early 1830s to force the issue into the national spotlight. Thus, when the burgeoning newspaper industry brought Nat Turner's actions to the attention of the American public, abolitionist presses managed to use the incident to publicize their cause. Frightened by this agitation of the public against slavery, proslavery forces countered by releasing their own interpretations of the Turner incident. Their response, however, only served to move the issue further into the open. This public contest to win over ordinary Americans to one side or the other of the slavery controversy ensured that Nat Turner would not be forgotten.

During the Vesey incident in 1822, whites complicit in the slave system had wielded effective control over the print media in operation at the time. No organized movement of whites had formally opposed slavery, nor did an antislavery press yet exist to push for the rights of enslaved Americans. As the trials in Charleston drew to a close, a New York newspaper editor ventured, in passing, a brief criticism of slavery as the direct and inevitable cause of insurrectionary movements in the South. "It ought to excite no astonishment with those who boast of freedom themselves," the New York *Daily Advertiser* commented, "if they should occasionally hear of plots and desertion among those who are held in perpetual bondage." The editor further remarked that "white men, too, would engender plots and escape from their imprisonment were they situated as are these miserable children of Africa." The Boston *Evening Gazette* declared a month later that "nobody can blame the servile part of the population (the blacks) for attempting to escape from bondage, however their delusions may be regretted." South Carolinians

reacted to such suggestions with public indignation, effectively suggesting in print that Northerners mind their own business. "We cannot hope but that our Southern fellow citizens," the Charleston *City Gazette* chided, "will hereafter be permitted to manage their own concerns in their own way."[33]

The inflammatory opinions of the *Daily Advertiser* would pale in comparison to those of newspapers and pamphlets founded during the late 1820s and early 1830s expressly for the purpose of opposing slavery and racial discrimination. Beginning in 1827, black abolitionists released newspapers and pamphlets that attacked slavery and colonization head-on. In that year, Samuel E. Cornish and John Russwarm founded the *Freedom's Journal* in New York, which Cornish abandoned two years later to start a paper on his own, *The Rights of All.* Later in 1829, David Walker, a free black Bostonian who sold used clothing, published a pamphlet that he entitled *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World.* Finally, with the commencement of *The Liberator* in 1831, William Lloyd Garrison became the first white editor in the United States to devote his newspaper exclusively to the cause of immediate emancipation and racial justice.

Of the antislavery publications released in the years between Vesey's and Turner's rebellions, David Walker's *Appeal* produced the most intense reaction from white Southerners. In the *Appeal*, Walker insisted that black men must no longer submit to the cruelty and debasement that whites inflicted on them, arguing that God would support and even lead them in a fight to cast off their enslavement. "The man who would

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[33] New York *Daily Advertiser*, July 31, 1822, reprinted in Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 87; Boston *Evening Gazette*, quoted in the Charleston *Mercury*, August 26, 1822, in Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 89; Charleston

not fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ," Walker warned, "in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom and of God--to be delivered from the most wretched, abject and servile slavery, that ever a people was afflicted with since the foundation of the world" deserved, in Walker's view, to remain enslaved. Slaveholders, he believed, constituted "the Lord's enemies," and, as such, "ought . . . to be destroyed." According to Walker, any man "of good sense" would, rather than submit to the injustices of slavery imposed by another man, "cut his [master's] devilish throat from ear to ear." In Southern eyes, such statements made Walker guilty, as one white North Carolinian put it, of "exaggerating [slaves'] sufferings, magnifying their physical strength and underating the power of the whites." More seriously, Walker threatened with his terrible words to encourage slaves that successful rebellion against was not only feasible, but was thoroughly sanctioned by God.[34]

The *Appeal* proved even more unnerving for white Southerners when they discovered that Walker had begun to disseminate his pamphlet among slaves living all along the region's coastline. Using white and black sailors as his chief agents, Walker shipped copies of the tract to black ministers and others in at least five slave states. Authorities in Richmond, Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, as well as in smaller towns near those cities, confiscated scores of pamphlets between January

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City Gazette, September 20, 1822, in Starobin, *Denmark Vesey*, 90.

[34] David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, 3rd edition (Boston, 1830), 12, 25, 32; all quotations taken from Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965). Spelling as in the original text. Letter from James F. McKee, magistrate of the Wilmington police, to Governor John Owen,

and December of 1830. In the midst of the crisis, legislatures passed a variety of repressive measures designed to stop documents like the *Appeal* from reaching more slaves and free blacks in their states. North Carolina and Louisiana forbade their citizens from teaching slaves to read and write, while Georgia, North Carolina, and Mississippi prescribed death for any black person convicted of distributing abolitionist materials. Georgia and North Carolina imposed a quarantine on ships carrying black sailors that entered their ports. In addition, the mayor of Savannah and the governor of Georgia each expressed in correspondence with Mayor Harrison Gray Otis of Boston their urgent desire that Otis bring Walker to justice, or at least halt any further distribution of his pamphlet to the Southern states.

These attempts at suppressing the *Appeal* occurred too late to prevent several incidents of slave unrest that undoubtedly had some connection with the pamphlet. Governor John Floyd of Virginia had complained in early December of 1829 that "a spirit of dissatisfaction and insubordination was manifested by the slaves in different parts of the country from this place [Richmond] to the seaboard." Only a few weeks later, on January 7 of the following year, whites came upon thirty copies of the *Appeal* in the home of a free black man in Richmond. In April of 1830, two black men in New Orleans were executed for plotting an insurrection. A local newspaper reported that one of the alleged rebels was found in possession of the tract penned "by the colored dealer in old clothes." In North Carolina, authorities discovered the pamphlet circulating in

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August 7, 1830, reprinted in Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker's* Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 104.

Wilmington, New Bern, Fayette, and Elizabeth City during August and September. Near the end of the year, slaveholders in the nearby towns of Tarborough and Hillsborough discovered that their slaves had been planning a revolt that was to begin on Christmas morning. On January 7, 1831, the town of Washington, just north of New Bern, reported "much shooting of negroes in this neighborhood recently, in consequence of *symptoms of liberty* having been discovered among them."[35]

When the Turner insurrection broke out in August of the same year, it did not take long for white Southerners to suspect a connection between radical abolitionist documents like Walker's and such a dramatic eruption of slave violence against their masters. Although David Walker had died a year earlier, outraged slaveholders found other Northern publishers of incendiary materials at whom they could direct their ire. William Lloyd Garrison and his partner in *The Liberator*, Isaac Knapp, bore the brunt of Southerners' indignation.

In its first few months of publication, the *Liberator* had printed enough incendiary material, by the standards of Southern slaveholders, to provide clear evidence that Garrison approved of, and even encouraged, slave rebellion. Although he insisted explicitly and repeatedly that his commitment to non-violence was firm, it took only a casual attempt at reading between the lines to suspect that Garrison's abolitionism harbored more militant tendencies. In the first installment of the paper, for example,

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[35] Hinks, *David Walker's* Appeal, 105; reprinted from the New York *Sentinel* in *The Liberator*, March 19, 1831 (emphasis by William Lloyd Garrison); quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: Together with the Full Text of the So-Called 'Confessions' of Nat Turner Made in Prison in 1831* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 21.

Garrison noticed David Walker's pamphlet in a mostly favorable light, "it being one of the most remarkable productions of the age," Garrison intoned. Although the editor remarked of the pamphlet that, "We have already publicly deprecated its spirit," he also declared that, "a better promoter of insurrection was never sent forth to an oppressed people" than Walker. In the next issue, Garrison declared "that the possibility of a bloody insurrection at the South fills us with dismay." But, he continued, "We avow, too, as plainly, that if any people were ever justified in throwing off the yoke of their tyrants, the slaves are that people."[36]

Garrison's response to the Turner revolt proved to white Southerners' satisfaction that the editor aimed to "urge our negroes and mulattoes, slaves and free to the indiscriminate massacre of all white people," as the governor of Virginia put it. The killings in Southampton, Garrison wrote, represented merely "the first drops of blood, which are but the prelude to a deluge from the gathering clouds." Imploring the South to repent, Garrison proclaimed that, "IMMEDIATE EMANCIPATION can alone save her from the vengeance of Heaven." Later the same month, *The Liberator* reported another outbreak of slave rebellion in North Carolina that turned out to have been merely a rumor. "The Avenger is abroad," the young firebrand announced triumphantly, "scattering desolation and death in his path!" Slaveholders had no cause for surprise at this news,

[36] *The Liberator*, January 1, 8, 1831.

according to Garrison, since "MEN MUST BE FREE!" A slave, he argued, was like any other man: "If you wrong him," Garrison suggested, "shall he not revenge?"[37]

While the white Southern establishment had countered the sensationalism of their region's newspapers by publishing reassuring versions of Southampton events themselves, the same men responded to abolitionist tracts like Garrison's with loud cries for suppression. Public officials, newspapers, and even private citizens directly implored Mayor Otis to put a stop to Garrison's dangerous activities, just as they had with Walker. Governor Floyd, who had begun to collect antislavery propaganda in a folder that he labeled "Conspiracy," led the charge, followed by Senator Hayne of South Carolina. The Washington, D.C., *National Intelligencer* pleaded with Mayor Otis in its columns to "prevent the publication, within the City over which he presides, of such diabolical papers as we have seen a sample of here in the hands of slaves." Martha Washington's granddaughter, Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, urged Otis to "make an example of the Author of evil," referring to Garrison. Lewis elaborated briefly on what this example should be: "I think he merits *Death*," she declared, for "inculcat[ing] insurrection, murder, cruelty, & baseness, in every shape." The state of Georgia offered $5,000 to anyone who would deliver Garrison to their state to stand trial, while North Carolina placed an equivalent price on Garrison's head. Grand juries in Raleigh and New Bern issued indictments against the editor under a state statute that prohibited distribution of "incendiary" materials among slaves. Finally, in Columbia, South Carolina, the local "Vigilance

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[37] Letter from Governor John Floyd to J. C. Harris, September 27, 1831, reprinted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 274; *The Liberator*, September 3, 24, 1831.

Association" offered $1,500 to anyone who caught a white person "distributing or circulating within the State the newspaper, called 'the Liberator,' printed in Boston, or the pamphlet called 'Walker's Pamphlet,' or any other publication of a seditious tendency."[38]

Floyd and his white Southern counterparts, however, were witnessing a new era in the history of American publishing in 1831. Proslavery sentiment and general apathy on the question no longer enjoyed exclusive reign within the world of print. Using their basement presses and their scarce hours of spare time at the end of a regular work day, activists like Garrison had begun to push against the dominant cultural trend of complicity with the slave power. The Constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press made slaveholders and their allies unable to suppress this renegade branch of the media and remain within the law. Mayor Otis replied to Floyd that, as much as he might regret it, there was nothing he could do to put Garrison out of business.

White Southerners' attempts to suppress the abolitionist press following Nat Turner's rebellion served to help more than hinder the cause of the newly conceived antislavery movement. Mayor Otis, for one, had never heard of Garrison or *The Liberator* before Floyd called his attention to its existence in Otis's own city. Although Garrison had issued more than eight months of weekly editions up to that point, the mayor reported that "it appeared on enquiry that no member of the city government, nor

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[38] Washington, D.C., *National Ingelligencer*, September 15, 1831, reprinted in Foner, *Nat Turner*, 88; letter from E. P. Lewis to Harrison Gray Otis, October 7, 1831, reprinted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis, 1765-1848: The Urbane Federalist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 466-7; Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 134; Charleston *Mercury*, cited in the Washington, D.C., *Globe*, October 11, 1831, reprinted in Foner, *Nat Turner*, 93.

any person of my acquaintance, had ever heard of the publication." But the evidence suggests that hysterical slaveholders like Floyd had provided Garrison's paper with publicity that it sorely needed. While Garrison's paper floundered prior to the Turner incident, by the spring of 1832 it claimed forty-seven agents and several thousand subscribers.[39]

By voicing fears that Turner's revolt represented only a small part of a nationwide conspiracy to topple the slave power, white Virginians lent an inflated sense of importance to the relatively humble efforts of Nat and his men. Southern whites already suspected that the plan to revolt had involved slaves beyond the confines of Southampton County. Now, newspapers and governors were connecting the Turner incident to places as far afield as Boston and suggesting the collaboration of traveling salesmen, white missionaries, and black ministers in bringing on slave rebellion. As a result, a small band of field hands attempting to seize freedom for themselves grew, in the minds of white Virginians, into a looming conspiracy bent on destroying the entire framework of Southern society. Under the power of such a frightful illusion, white Americans began to view Nat Turner as a much more significant figure than his actions alone had warranted.

Faced with the possibility of an extensive and violent conspiracy against slaveholding Southerners, some white Virginians began to reason in the fall of 1831 that emancipation might provide the only sure way to avoid future revolts. On October 14, the Richmond *Whig* printed a petition to the General Assembly of Virginia that urged an

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[39] Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: Willliam Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 123, 134; Mayer, the most recent and thorough biographer of Garrison, downplays

end to slavery in the state by "kind, gentle, gradual, and sure means." The petitioners, who announced themselves slaveholders, emphasized "the alarming truth" that Virginians could no longer ignore--"that if we wish peace and happiness, quiet and prosperity, the fatal paralizing, destroying mischief" of slavery "must be removed." They demanded of the legislature, "Will you wait until the land shall be deluged in blood, and look alone to the fatal catastrophe, of the extinction of the black race by force as the only remedy"? In November, "A Native of Eastern Virginia," writing in the Richmond *Enquirer*, declared to "the Citizens of Virginia" that, "a more auspicious moment for action than the present can never arrive." The "Native" recommended that his fellow Virginians urge their representatives in the legislature to implement a plan to remove free blacks and gradually eliminate slavery from the state.[40]

Near the end of October, in the midst of this antislavery fervor, an unknown author named Samuel Warner published a pamphlet in New York City that purported to offer an *Authentic and Impartial Narrative* of the Southampton Insurrection. Many historians, uncritically accepting Warner's own description of his tract as unbiased, have generally dismissed the *Narrative* as simply a haphazard compilation of contemporary news reports on Turner's revolt. Stephen Oates has characterized it as merely "a long-winded tract culled largely from newspapers." Henry Irving Tragle did raise the question of Warner's motives, but then declared it "impossible to deduce Warner's true purpose in publication." Tragle, too, seems to have accepted Warner's word that he had striven to

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the importance of the Turner incident in making or breaking the *Liberator*.

publish a balanced account of the episode. In discussing the strongly abolitionist conclusion to the pamphlet, Tragle classified it as the author's attempt to present "the other side of the picture."[41]

The personal comments Warner made throughout the pamphlet, however, indicate that the author harbored a decidedly antislavery--even abolitionist--bent with regard to the slavery question. In beginning his discussion of the rebellion, Warner declared that Nat Turner had preached to "the poor deluded wretches"--his fellow slaves--"the Blessings of Liberty, and the inhumanity and injustice of their being forced like brutes from the land of their nativity, and doomed without fault or crime to perpetual bondage, and by those who were not more entitled to their liberty than themselves!" Warner went on to express his own admiration for slaves who had subsisted in the Dismal Swamp for years rather than submit to enslavement. These men and women, he proclaimed, "would prefer becoming the victims of starvation to returning again to bondage!" Warner suggested that this preference should not surprise Americans, since "such indeed is the love of liberty--the gift of God!" In contemplating the Turner massacre, Warner asserted, "we cannot hold those entirely blameless, who first brought them [African slaves] from their native plains." This mild language by itself does not fully convey Warner's opinion about slavery. He went on to accuse slave traders and slaveholders of serious crimes against the men and women kidnapped in Africa, charging that these Americans and Europeans "robbed them of their domestic joys," "tore them from their weeping children

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[40] Richmond *Whig*, October 14, 1831, reprinted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 120, 122; Richmond *Enquirer*, November 15, 1831, reprinted in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 140-1.

and dearest connections, and doomed them in this 'Land of Liberty' to a state of cruel bondage!"[42]

Warner concluded his discussion of the issue in a manner that closely echoed the style and sentiment so often advanced by Garrison in *The Liberator*. Slavery, to Warner, constituted a "stain on the American people." Like Walker, Garrison, and other abolitionists, Warner pointed out the contradictions between American rhetoric that trumpeted liberty and the practice of slavery on American soil. "We have already said that all men are born equal," Warner noted. "But do we mean by the term ALL MEN, to be understood those of a white complexion only, and that nature has denied, or the Creator withheld, from those of other shades, the rights which have been contended for?" This notion, according to Warner, is "preposterous." Americans, he wrote, could not "be exonerated from the charge of tyranny until by our solemn act we place them [African Americans] in the full possession of those rights which are claimed for ourselves, and which are consistent with the principles of our excellent government." Warner concluded his pamphlet by reprinting an abolitionist poem commonly quoted in antislavery publications of the antebellum era. "I would not have a Slave to till my ground," the first line began. "I had much rather be myself a slave," concluded the last verse, "And wear the bonds, than fasten them on him."[43]

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[41] Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 280, 281.
[42] Samuel Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene Which Was Witnessed in Southampton County (Virginia)* . . . (New York: Warner and West, 1831). All quotations taken from the reprinted version in Tragle, *Southampton Slave Revolt*, 281-300; Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 282, 298, 299.
[43] Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 299, 300.

With its unmistakably abolitionist tone, the *Narrative* warrants the distinction of being the first abolitionist document in the antebellum period to use a narrative strategy in its quest to condemn the institution of slavery. Like the stories and novels that would follow it, Warner's tract employed the subtle, even deceptive, form of storytelling to suggest to ordinary Americans why they should oppose slavery on American soil. Yet the American public seems to have almost entirely overlooked Warner's tract when it came out in late October. Newspapers in the North or the South failed to mention its release. Thomas Higginson claimed to possess a copy of it in 1861, even though he could find no original copies of the more widely distributed *Confessions of Nat Turner*, suggesting that the Warner pamphlet may have circulated among a small group of early abolitionists in the North. If so, Governor Floyd never received a copy to include in his "Conspiracy" folder with the other important antislavery documents he had collected there.[44]

The reason Americans largely ignored Warner's pamphlet likely stemmed from the alarmist tone he adopted toward the Turner rebellion and the emphasis he placed on the chilling brutality of the episode. Warner insisted that the insurrectionist plot had involved a far more extensive network of slaves than the ones who had been apprehended in Southampton County. The reports he published were also designed to suggest to his readers that surviving conspirators still threatened residents of numerous Southern states.

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[44] Lydia Maria Child and other authors had published fictional narratives dealing with slavery prior to the release of Warner's *Narrative*, but they uniformly condemned the African slave trade rather than the American slave system itself. See Child, "Jumbo and Zairee" in *Juvenile Miscellany* 5 (January 1831), 285-99. Higginson, *Travellers and Outlaws*, 319.

The *Narrative* claimed, for instance, that at the height of the massacre, rebel forces had "numbered from 150 to 200." Those men who had not been apprehended had successfully fled to the Dismal Swamp where "it was reported," Warner informed his readers, that "there were from 1000 to 2000 runaway Negroes secreted!" Warner also maintained that Turner "had had communication with and was promised the support of some of the disaffected Slaves in North Carolina, and possibly Maryland." A letter from a Southern source warned that "in addition to what has been stated relative to the alarming insurrection of Blacks in Virginia and North Carolina, strong symptoms were manifested by the Slaves in Maryland and Delaware to revolt." The writer drew the conclusion that "there can be no doubt but that there was a general understanding among them, and that they intended to have acted in concert in the indiscriminate slaughter of the white inhabitants of the four States!" As proof of a widespread conspiracy, Warner included a communication from North Carolina that had relayed "the appalling information of an insurrection of the blacks" in Duplin County, claiming that "seventeen or twenty families had been butchered." In a letter from a resident of the county in question, the correspondent added, "Of the truth of this there can be no doubt."[45]

The tale of the Southampton rebellion that Warner related in the *Narrative* abounded with sensationalistic descriptions of the killings of white Virginians that seem designed to turn white readers more resolutely against the slave system. At one point in his story, Warner reported that the insurgents "proceeded to the dwelling of Mr. Travers,

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[45] Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 284, 286, 289, 293, 290.

whom they murdered together with his wife and three children, cutting and mangling their bodies in a manner too shocking to describe!" In another house, a witness discovered "the lady slaughtered--her son's head severed from his body." At the home of John Barrow, Warner noted, "the merciless wretches appeared, and in such numbers that bolts and bars proved but feeble barriers--the doors were instantly forced and they entered, with their hands and arms bathed to their elbows with the blood of the unfortunate victims already slain!" In the end, the "mangled remains" of the men, women, and children killed by the rebels, Warner commented, "presented a spectacle of horror the like of which we hope our countrymen will never again be called upon to witness!"[46]

To demonstrate the most frightening possible outcome of a slave insurrection in the South, Warner devoted several pages of his treatise to the successful St. Domingue uprising and the official attempt in 1804 to purge the island of all remaining whites. The Haitian massacre served as a graphic example, the author warned, of the extent to which "the Slaves of the South would in all probability carry the work of human butchery, did they but once obtain the power." Planters on the island, Warner intoned, "heard the pick-axe thundering at the door of some neighbour, and soon forcing it--piercing shrieks almost immediately ensued, and these were followed by an expressive silence!" When the revolt had ended, "after a long, severe and bloody struggle, in which it is probable that the lives of not less than 60,000 human beings were sacrificed," Warner informed his

[46] Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 283, 286.

readers, "the Blacks succeeded in their views in the almost total extermination of the whites . . . and in placing one of their own color, and one who in the horrid massacres had mostly distinguished himself (Dassalines) at its head." Warner concluded this section of his pamphlet by cautioning that "similar scenes of bloodshed and murder might our brethren at the South expect to witness, were the disaffected Slaves of that section of the country but once to gain the ascendancy."[47]

Beyond the mere carnage that his treatise recorded, Warner also attempted to horrify his readers by alluding to the actual or proposed sexual abuse of white women in both the St. Domingo and Southampton revolts. Although public outrage in antebellum America rarely equaled the hysteria on the issue that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, few crimes could stir up the kind of emotion in whites that the rape of a white woman by a black man could. "On a few estates" in St. Domingo, Warner wrote, the women were not killed, but instead "were spared for a severer fate." In Virginia, one of Turner's chief lieutenants "was in favour of sparing the lives of the females," Warner contended, "that if success attended them, they might become their wives!"[48]

Less than a month after Warner released his *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, a Southampton slaveholder published a document with much more comforting conclusions for white Virginians about the Turner episode. Historians have attributed a variety of motives to Thomas Gray's decision to publish Nat Turner's version of the revolt that he had engineered. Most seem largely satisfied with Gray's contention that he had merely

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[47] Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 295, 296.
[48] Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative*, 294, 289.

"determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit [Turner's] statements to writing, and publish them."[49] In addition, the most recent scholars on the subject, including Eric Sundquist and Kenneth Greenberg, have pointed to Gray's financial difficulties at the time to suggest that Gray wrote the *Confessions* for pecuniary reasons. Certainly, the fact that Gray had lost much of his property during the year before the rebellion, and had found himself excluded from his wealthy father's will, lends credence to the idea that the tract served as a necessary source of income for the young lawyer. The desire to sell pamphlets likely led Gray to capitalize on the drama of the Turner situation. But the recognition of a financial motive does not in itself explain the particular slant on the revolt that Gray adopted in the *Confessions*.

Over the past thirty years, historians have offered radically divergent views to explain the tone of Gray's document. In 1975, Stephen Oates suggested that Gray wanted to prevent further vigilante killings of African Americans that had resulted from a belief that the insurrection had involved many more slaves and free blacks than had been apprehended. Yet by November, when Gray composed his pamphlet, the worst of this slaughter had been effectively brought under control. In 1978, Thomas Parramore suggested that Gray had, in fact, joined with Turner to "create the most compelling document in the history of black resistance to slavery." Rebuked by the establishment himself, in the form of his father, Gray shared Turner's desire to resist the slave system,

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[49] Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.* (Baltimore, 1831). All citations taken from the reprint of the *Confessions* in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966), 129. For examples of such scholarly

Parramore argued. "Unwilling to acknowledge his affinity with the rebel, yet unable to escape it," Parramore ventured, "the young attorney seems to have found in the recesses of his own heart a chord that responded vibrantly and in unison with the savage confessions of the slave." Fifteen years later, Kenneth Greenberg contended more simply that Gray had meant for the *Confessions* to "bolster a position already articulated by other white Southerners--the belief that Nat Turner was insane." In doing so, Greenberg believed, Gray had hopes of making his pamphlet more "palatable to many white Southern readers."[50]

The tone of the *Confessions* strongly suggests, however, that Gray produced this document with an eye to helping reestablish order in the chaotic aftermath of the revolt. The laws of society did not seem to matter in the fall of 1831, amidst the anarchy of slave insurrection and the indiscriminate retaliation of whites against blacks. Slaves rose up and massacred their masters, and white men blatantly disregarded due process, whipping and beheading African Americans in a furor of vigilante injustice. Added to this general lawlessness, Gray also had to contend with the personal turmoil he had endured during the past year. During the majority of the 1820s, Gray appears to have lived as a successful young planter, owning 800 acres and 21 slaves in 1829. But within two short years, this life of prosperity had been snatched from him, as had his wife, who died

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opinion, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 9; Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 121.

[50] Oates, *Fires of Jubilee*, 121; Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 113, quoted in Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 38; Greenberg, *Confessions*, 10.

sometime in the late 1820s. The exclusion of the thirty-one-year-old Gray from his wealthy father's will in the midst of the trials ended any immediate hopes that Gray might return quickly to the ranks of the landed elite. And now, white Virginians were seriously contemplating the abolition of slavery, thereby threatening to cut off the only established avenue to upward mobility in the South that Gray had known. In the midst of these discomfiting circumstances, the planter-turned-lawyer may well have craved a return to order and to the security of the status quo.[51]

Unlike most Southerners, Gray found himself in a unique position to encourage Virginians' abandonment of the abolition scheme, as well as to discourage further random violence against black people in southeastern Virginia and elsewhere. As a defense attorney for certain of the rebels, Gray enjoyed a rare opportunity to speak to the infamous Nat Turner one-on-one. The intense public interest surrounding the case would ensure that a published transcript of any conversation with the rebel leader would be read throughout the state, as well as further afield. By publishing a reassuring version of Nat Turner's "confessions," Gray could prove with authority that the Southampton insurrection had been an isolated incident that no longer posed a threat to white Virginians. As November wore on, Gray rushed to get his pamphlet out before the state legislature convened at the beginning of December, when the question of emancipation would occupy a critical place on the assembly docket. On November 3, Gray completed his interview with Turner; a week later he secured a copyright for the *Confessions* in

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[51] For biographical information on Gray, see Parramore, *Southampton County*; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*; Peter H. Wood, "Nat Turner: The Unknown Slave as Visionary Leader" in Leon Litwack and

Washington, D.C.; and fifteen days after obtaining the copyright, on November 25, the *Confessions* was issued in pamphlet form.

To calm the fears of white Virginians, Gray first sought to refute the rumors of a far-reaching insurrectionist plot that had extended beyond the borders of Southampton County, even into other Southern states. Gray reported that, after Nat had recounted his story of the revolt to Gray, he directly asked Turner whether "he knew of any extensive or concerted plan" for a mass uprising. Gray pointed out that at this point he had taken care to remind the condemned man, "of the certain death that awaited him, and that concealment would only bring destruction on the innocent as well as guilty, of his own color." Gray recorded Nat's answer as, simply, "I do not." Pressed further about concurrent uprisings in North Carolina, Turner suggested to Gray that, perhaps, "strange appearances about this time in the heaven's might prompt others, as well as myself to this undertaking." Apparently satisfied that Nat's response accorded with his "gloomy fanaticism" and his "bewildered, and overwrought mind," Gray pronounced the crisis a modest one. "If Nat's statements can be relied on," he assured his readers, "the insurrection in the county was entirely local, and his designs confided but to a few, and these in his immediate vicinity."[52]

Although he emphasized the savage nature of the slave army rank and file, Gray also suggested that slaves involved in the rebellion had not actually posed a fundamental threat to white Virginians. Turner's men, he noted, "had fled precipitately at the first

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August Meier, *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 37-9.
[52] Gray, *Confessions*, 146, 131. Spelling taken directly from the original text.

fire." Gray intimated that this band had shown themselves cowards and had merely followed Nat's lead rather than making a thoughtful decision to join the revolt. Once the revolt had ended, Gray pointed out, "each individual sought his own safety either in concealment, or by returning home, with the hope that his participation might escape detection." Gray's description of Nat himself when he was discovered in hiding paints the rebel leader as defenseless and impotent. When Turner was brought into custody by "a single individual" wielding "a shot gun well charged," Gray emphasized that, "Nat's only weapon was a small light sword which he immediately surrendered." Turner, according to Gray, had not attempted "to make the slightest resistance," but merely had "begged that his life might be spared." Long before Nat's capture, Gray reminded his readers, the other participants in the insurrection, "had all been destroyed, or apprehended, tried and executed." He ended his pamphlet by stressing again that, "the hand of retributive justice has overtaken them; and not one that was known to be concerned has escaped."[53]

By portraying Nat as both the sole author of the rebellion and a highly atypical slave, Gray attempted to present the Southampton revolt as a unique event, making the odds of a similar episode recurring in Virginia seem minuscule. Nat spoke in the *Confessions* using language that an Old Testament prophet might have used, indeed claiming that "the Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days" had given him commands. Gray contended that Turner had believed himself "ordained for some great

[53] Gray, *Confessions*, 130, 129, 149.

purpose in the hands of the Almighty." Nat had clearly served as the ringleader of the rebellion, according to Gray's text. He repeatedly referred to the band of slaves as "my company" or "my men" and portrayed them as acting specifically on his orders. In Gray's version of the interview, this lowly field slave also pointed out his exceptional nature among those of his class, which Nat argued had been evident since he was a boy. Even his master remarked, Turner supposedly related, on "the singularity of my manners" and "my uncommon intelligence for a child." Since white Americas hardly thought it possible for a slave to possess either manners or intelligence, Turner constituted for them a clear exception to the general rule. When Nat likened himself to Christ, Gray seemed to confirm for his readers that this convicted killer constituted "a gloomy fanatic" who possessed a "dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind," not a typical slave interested in striking for his freedom.[54]

The *Confessions* ultimately established the form that the memory of Nat Turner and his revolt would assume in the minds of white Americans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson estimated in 1861 that between 40,000 and 50,000 copies of the tract, which originally sold for twenty-five cents, had been printed in the November 1831 edition

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[54] Gray, *Confessions*, 135, 140, 143, 134, 130; Scot French has suggested that Gray himself helped create the notion that Turner was the ringleader of the Southampton revolt, despite other evidence that the rebellion had been conceived jointly by a number of slaves. Likening this commonly held view of the revolt to a "lone gunman" theory, French suggests that Nat constituted "the one person who could take the fall" for launching the rebellion. French may be somewhat overstating the case, since decidedly more contemporary sources, even before the *Confessions*, pointed to Turner than to any other black man as the instigator of the uprising. If there is indeed some truth to this theory, however, it merely lends credence to the idea that Gray very deliberately fashioned the *Confessions* into a version of the Southampton incident that would prove supremely comforting to white Virginians. See Scot A. French, "Remembering Nat Turner: The Rebellious Slave in American Thought, 1831 to the Present," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2000.

alone. In addition, Scot French has located advertisements of the *Confessions* in newspapers throughout the South. Intended as a proslavery document, Gray's pamphlet also inspired antislavery advocates like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Martin Delany in their literary opposition to slavery more than twenty-five years after its original publication.[55]

The willingness of Nat Turner to tell his story, in contrast to the silence with which Denmark Vesey confronted his accusers, allowed for the dramatic impact that the *Confessions* would have on the imaginations of both proslavery and antislavery advocates during the antebellum period. Probably because Vesey was tried and executed before most of his co-conspirators were, he refused to tell his side of the story publicly. Unlike Turner, Vesey "died without confessing anything," as Kennedy and Parker noted in their *Official Report*. Moments before Vesey and Peter Poyas met their fate as two of the first insurgents to hang, Poyas enjoined his fellow rebels "not to open your lips!" and to "die silent, as you shall see me do." As French has pointed out, Turner, on the other hand, had little incentive to keep quiet and may even have saved some of his black cohorts from death by telling his story. Because Turner had named no living slaves or free blacks as accomplices in the rebellion, he became the last of the Southampton rebels to be executed.[56]

The immediate personal presence that Turner exuded in the *Confessions* overwhelmingly accounts for the lasting impression he left with white and black readers

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[55] Higginson states in his article that appeared in the August 1861 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* that 50,000 copies of the *Confessions* had been printed.

[56] Kennedy and Parker, *Official Report*, 17, 31; see Tony Horowitz, "Untrue Confessions" *The New Yorker*, December 13, 1999, 31.

of the pamphlet. Gray decided to provide the public with Turner's "own account of the conspiracy" in hopes of bolstering the credibility of the document. Because Gray put the rebel at the center of his story, the spirit of Nat Turner pervades the *Confessions* in a way that Denmark Vesey's presence never could have done in James Hamilton's *Account of the Late Intended Insurrection.* The first-person narration of these anecdotes makes Turner appear a more human and even, perhaps, a more sympathetic character to Gray's readers. "Having arrived to man's estate," Turner explained at one point to his examiner, "I reverted in my mind to the remarks made of me in my childhood, . . . and as it had been said of me by those by whom I had been taught to pray, both white and black, and in whom I had the greatest confidence, that I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any use to any one as a slave." Near the end of the *Confessions*, Gray claimed that Turner brought his story to a close by observing, "I am here loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me."[57]

Finally, the three days that Gray had spent interviewing Turner moved him to present a decidedly more ambivalent and, therefore for whites, disturbing impression of Turner than Hamilton had of Vesey in the *Account.* Like Hamilton, Gray accepted the notion that black men rebelled, in part, because they yearned to gain an "influence . . . over the minds of [their] fellow servants." But whereas Hamilton had accused Vesey of acting from an "inordinate lust of . . . booty," Gray dismissed the contention that Turner's aim "was to murder and rob for the purpose of obtaining money to make his escape." In

[57] Gray, *Confessions*, 130, 135, 146.

addition, far from suggesting that Nat's "passions were ungovernable and, savage," Gray remarked on the "calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions." Throughout the narrative, Gray used unflattering, stereotypical language to refer to Turner's "fiend-like face" and "dark, bewildered and overwrought mind." But at the same time, he praised Turner for "the decision of his character" and noted that, "for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension" Turner was "surpassed by few men I have ever seen. Largely as a result of this puzzling, but seemingly compassionate portrayal of a black man responsible for the murder of sixty whites, the Turner that Gray portrayed would haunt white Americans for the next three decades.[58]

The profound impact of Nat Turner on white antebellum memory, contrasted with the relative obscurity of Denmark Vesey, illustrates dramatically the critical role of print culture in establishing mainstream American images of slaves and slavery in the decades before the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856) demonstrates the difficulties involved in trying to reintroduce a figure into print that had been virtually expunged from the written record. Although she presented Dred as a son of Denmark Vesey, Stowe was forced to turn to Gray's portrayal of Nat Turner in the *Confessions* for a physical description of Dred and for most of the speeches she fashioned for her rebel hero. Only with the rise of a national print culture that local authorities could not control so easily would figures like Nat Turner be able secure a vital place within the popular imagination.

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[58] Gray, *Confessions*, 135-6, 147, 130; Hamilton, *Account*, 29, 17.

The stark disparity between the legacies of Turner and Vesey also helps to pinpoint the precise moment at which black and white abolitionists began to succeed in forcing ordinary Americans to consider the legitimacy of the Southern slave system. In 1822, the threat to the South Carolina slave system lay wholly within the local community and could be suppressed with relative ease once the white establishment had discovered it. By 1831, however, Nat Turner and his followers did not stand alone in expressing their opposition to Southern bondage. The disturbing antislavery messages heralded by David Walker's *Appeal* and William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* combined with the bloody actions of the Southampton rebels to compel white Virginians to reexamine their attitudes toward slavery in their state. The most open discussion of the subject in all of Southern history ensued, and the Virginia legislature came within only a few votes of approving a plan for gradual emancipation similar to that adopted by Northern states during the late eighteenth century. Although the Assembly ultimately opted to strengthen the slave codes rather than abolish slavery, the Virginia debates mark the first time in the antebellum period that proslavery forces were forced to react publicly and dramatically to abolitionist clamor for an end to the institution. In decades to come, the antislavery element would provoke increasingly vehement action from slaveholders and their allies, who would also soon learn to present a united front to their enemies in the debate.

Chapter 2 Losing Ground: The Anti-Abolitionist Struggle with Mass Culture, 1835-40

With the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Thomas Dew's *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature*, advocates of slavery seemed in the early 1830s to be embracing the medium of print as a tool for promoting the proslavery cause to the general public. Together, these two widely distributed pamphlets established a justification for slavery that helped persuade Virginians to commit themselves more fiercely to slavery in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion. These two tracts demonstrated that written publications could help rally public opinion behind the proslavery cause and accomplish real political victories over proslavery opponents. At the same time, the campaign to suppress the *Liberator* had resulted only in increased publicity for William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionist cause. Given the emergence of a mass print industry and the early successes the proslavery faction had achieved within it, in 1832 it seemed likely that slaveholders and their allies would cast aside the old method of suppressing subversive publications and instead boldly answer those documents in kind.

By contrast, abolitionists in the spring of 1832 appeared to be struggling ineffectually with the new world of print. Garrison's paper remained the lone serial publication in the nation committed to the antislavery cause. Although recent publicity had increased its list of subscribers, the *Liberator* was still kept in business principally by "a very few insignificant persons of all colors," as Mayor Otis had noted the previous October. Scarcely a handful of antislavery pamphlets or books supporting the antislavery position were being produced, and those attracted few readers, particularly whites. The

popular climate even in New England was so thoroughly opposed to antislavery efforts that the small abolitionist leadership in Boston required five meetings over the course of two months before finally agreeing in January of 1832 to found the first formal society dedicated to the abolition of Southern slavery. In short, abolitionist John Collins was not far off when he looked back on slavery in 1832 as "the Goddess of the land," whose "influence was omnipotent and omnipresent." Against this formidable force, it seemed antislavery publications could offer little significant challenge to the Southern system of bondage.[1]

By the close of the decade, however, abolitionists had begun to overtake their opponents by a substantial margin in the production of literature to promote their position. In January of 1841, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society alone offered for sale 76 pamphlets and 68 bound volumes designed to promote abolition. In contrast, proponents of slavery had printed fewer than fifty tracts during the entire decade of the 1830s.[2] Garrison's *Liberator* had been joined by thirteen other weekly or monthly antislavery periodicals, while the proslavery faction relied on only a few conservative newspapers and journals to advance their cause. Abolitionists also churned out almanacs and prints that pled their cause with visual images as well as written appeals. Songbooks, handkerchiefs, stationery, plaster statuettes, quilts, drawstring bags, watchcases, and other such objects rounded out the list of promotional media circulated by the antislavery

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[1] Samuel Eliot Morrison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis* (2 vols., Boston, 1913), v. 2, 259-62, quoted in Leonard Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 21; *The Liberator*, January 21, 1842.

crusaders in a concerted attempt "to keep the subject [of slavery] before the public eye, and by every innocent expedient to promote perpetual discussion."[3]

The vigorous abolitionist publicity campaign of the 1830s enjoyed remarkable success, attracting converts from throughout the non-slaveholding states. Beginning in July of 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society began distributing 20,000 to 50,000 copies of abolitionist publications per week throughout the entire country. In doing so, the Society's leaders hoped to draw nationwide attention to the plight of the slave and the evils of the Southern slave system. By the end of 1837, over a million tracts had reached the public from abolitionist mailings. "This daring endeavor," as the prominent scholar of abolitionism James Brewer Stewart has put it, "began to persuade hitherto-uncommitted people to adopt an antislavery stance." Before 1835, abolitionists had founded only 60 auxiliary societies in the North and counted only a handful of adherents to the cause. By 1840, they could boast nearly 2,000 local antislavery groups and a national slate of over 200,000 members.[4]

Anti-abolitionist shortcomings in the production of polemical literature in this same period could not be attributed to an inability to recognize abolitionism as a serious

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[2] This tally derives from a count made by Larry E. Tise in *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 262.

[3] Carlos Martyn, *Wendell Phillips* (1890, original; 1969 reprint by Negro University Press,) 125, quoted in William E. Cain, ed., *William Lloyd Garrison and the Fight against Slavery* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), 14. For the mention of such items, see, for example, *The Emancipator*, August 1835, May 12, 1836, and January 16, 1838. Also, Bernard F. Reilly, Jr., discusses these materials in "The Art of the Antislavery Movement" in Donald M. Jacobs, ed., *Courage and Conscience: Black and White Abolitionists in Boston* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 48-9. Quotation from *The Liberator*, January 17, 1831, found in Reilly, "The Art of the Antislavery Movement," 49.

threat to the cause. Anti-abolitionist activists had learned all too well from the recent collapse of the American Colonization Society the destructive power that William Lloyd Garrison and his allies could bring against the nation's passive acceptance of the Southern slave system. When Garrison and the New England Anti-Slavery Society leveled an attack against the colonizationist movement in the early 1830s, the ACS attempted for nearly six months to ignore the abolitionist onslaught. The organization's leadership, at this stage, adhered to the advice of colonizationist Thomas Gallaudet, who had suggested "a perfect silence" in the face of Garrisonian attacks. The unwillingness of the Colonization Society to answer abolitionist charges, or even to increase their printing budget by more than $700 from one critical year to the next, contributed significantly to the downfall of the once-powerful organization within only a few short years. By 1834, colonizationist agents reported the somber news from the field: "Colonization is dead."[5]

After the painful defeat of the colonization movement, anti-abolitionists understood that to retain public support for their position they would have to fight back against antislavery propaganda measures. Thus, when abolitionists first began to inundate the American postal system with antislavery tracts in the summer of 1835, leading opponents of the movement publicly sounded the warning cry. If the national abolitionist movement was not "speedily checked in its mad career," the future President John Tyler cautioned in August of 1835, it was "destined to attain much greater power."

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[4] James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997 revised edition), 70; Philip S. Foner, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), 38.

Anti-abolitionists expressed alarm at the "systematic, and, as far as practicable, simultaneous effort" of abolitionists to ignite public indignation through the use of "regular publications, and the incessant circulation of cheap tracts, pamphlets, handbills, &c." The American Anti-Slavery Society, Harrison Gray Otis warned in August of 1835, had emerged as "a *revolutionary society*," with "auxiliary and *ancillary* societies, in every state and community, large or small, in the eastern and western states." Otis was convinced, he told fellow Bostonians, "that these associations will act together for political purposes," and that when they did, it would be impossible to "calculate the amount of trouble and calamity which will ensue."[6]

Given the intensely alarmist tones of these reactions against the antislavery movement, the failure of anti-abolitionists to launch their own publicity campaign in the 1830s to counter abolitionist propaganda efforts appears perplexing. If anti-abolitionists feared that their opponents would not only disrupt peace and order in the young nation, but violently rend asunder the republic itself, the mass production and distribution of leaflets and books to promote their own cause might have seemed the next logical step in anti-abolitionists' attempt to preserve the status quo. Instead, printed denunciations of the antislavery message emerged only sporadically in the late 1830s, indicating that no concerted strategy lay behind the issuance of these publications. Despite the strong

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[5] P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 194, 234.

[6] Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 56; from *Letters Against the Immediate Abolition of Slavery* (Boston, 1835), quoted in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 49; *The South Vindicated From the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* (H. Manly, 1836), 196; speech by Harrison Gray Otis in Fanueil Hall, Boston, on August 21, 1835, quoted in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 58-9.

feelings they harbored against their enemies and all they represented, anti-abolitionists appeared unable or unwilling to fight them with their own weapons.

The few scholars who have touched on the issue offer only incomplete explanations for why anti-abolitionists did not undertake a counteroffensive against antislavery propaganda efforts in the latter half of the 1830s. Leonard Richards, writing over thirty years ago, highlighted the nagging fears of anti-abolitionists in the mid-1830s that they would not be able to compete with the "cheap presses, 250 auxiliaries, and other means of widespread manipulation" wielded by the abolitionists. But his own research shows that abolitionists were able to flood the mails with polemics precisely because recent innovations in printing had made mass production a relatively inexpensive enterprise. Although anti-abolitionists may have failed to understand this fact initially, the editors and publishers among them could not have remained ignorant for long of such revolutionary technological advances in the industry. Larry Tise, an authority on the development of the proslavery argument in the United States, cites a rise in the number of proslavery publications written by Southerners after 1835. The vast majority of these tracts, however, consisted of printed sermons or letters that saw little circulation, particularly in the North. Even taking into account the most obscure proslavery polemics, anti-abolitionists failed utterly in the 1830s, and throughout the antebellum period, to approach the level of print production that energetic abolitionist organizers had reached by 1840.

Without fully understanding why anti-abolitionist literature in this period failed to compete effectively with that of their opponents, historians risk overlooking a key element behind the growing hostility that white Northerners harbored against Southern slaveholders as the antebellum period wore on. Almost without exception, historians have attributed the increasingly belligerent relationship between Northerners and Southerners in the decades leading up to April 1861 to a combination of political and economic causes. Underlying and shaping these public events, however, lay a deliberate strategy on the part of abolitionists to use popular culture media to mold Northerners' opinions against the Southern system of slavery. Had proslavery advocates managed to attract and retain white Northern allies by publishing compelling propaganda, Northerners might not have turned against the South with as much concerted aggression as they did by the 1850s and 1860s.

The emergence of a new cultural climate in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century largely accounts for anti-abolitionist difficulties in attracting a substantial number of converts in the 1830s. Political, literary, and cultural historians have variously defined the shift that occurred in these years as a movement from aristocratic to democratic values, as the overshadowing of Enlightenment thinking by Romanticism, or as the replacement of a culture of honor in the North by one of personal responsibility. Regardless of the precise label, however, this change in fundamental values involved a growing devotion among ordinary Americans to the tenets of egalitarianism and a corresponding distaste for hierarchy in most aspects of life.

As those values took hold, every individual, not merely the educated elite, rose to an unprecedented level of importance in American society. Men of the upper crust could no longer proclaim the arrogant notion that their natural superiority over others entitled them to rule their communities and the nation as a whole. Instead, traditional elites had to appeal to all white men as their equals to retain their power in society. Moral suasion, rather than coercion or even logical persuasion, became the most acceptable means through which individuals might gain ascendancy for themselves or their ideas in the new world of early nineteenth-century America.

Both abolitionists and their adversaries had to cope within the more democratic framework of American society when the struggle over the slavery issue began in earnest. But in 1835, the traditional ways in which anti-abolitionists looked at the world continued to hold an appeal for many Americans. Few Northerners or Southerners felt entirely comfortable with the radical nature of the egalitarian ideas espoused by the antislavery leadership. The thought of putting black men on an equal footing with white men in society, or of allowing white women to play key roles in the discussion of political issues, enraged more citizens than it attracted. As a result, anti-abolitionists seemed likely in the early 1830s to retain widespread popular support for their cause.

The emphasis on moral suasion rather than physical intimidation, however, ultimately proved an important reason for the abolitionist movement's success in the 1830s. Antislavery activists understood the vital importance of persuading ordinary Americans that their cause had legitimacy. Without a transformation in public sentiment,

they believed, economic interests would allow slavery to continue untouched for decades, or even centuries, to come. Therefore, the American Anti-Slavery Society, headed by Elizur Wright, committed itself in 1835 to propagating the antislavery message in print throughout the United States. To that end, the Society devised a strategy for producing and distributing 20,000 to 50,000 copies of abolitionist publications per week to citizens in both the Northern and the Southern states of the union. In distributing these publications, abolitionists hoped to communicate their intentions and their arguments "plainly and honestly, to the great body of the American people." The moral and emotional appeals of this literature were designed to put "all the people of the free states on the true abolition ground." In the South, abolitionists hoped "the pleadings, the arguments, the appeals of anti-slavery writers" would affect the slaveholder by finding "their way to his conscience, and open[ing] his heart to their claims of brotherhood" between white and black men. Although the antislavery pamphlet campaign initially had little positive effect either on slaveholders or on Northern readers, it was not long until abolitionist writers hit upon an emotional angle that would resonate with ordinary Americans and attract their sympathy for the antislavery cause. By highlighting the martyrdom of the white men who had begun to suffer violent attacks at the hands of anti-abolitionists, antislavery writers appealed to white Northerners' growing belief in the natural rights of all men and in the cruelties of those who subverted those natural rights through violence.[7]

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[7] *Human Rights* I:1 (July 1835); "The Generous Planter," *The Anti-Slavery Record* I:8 (August 1835).

Anti-abolitionists, on the other hand, clung to traditional principles throughout the 1830s that kept them from producing a coherent national strategy that might turn the masses against abolitionism. The commitment of anti-abolitionists to localist and hierarchical values, in particular, kept them from reaching out in print to the American public at large. When they did, their reluctant appeals often proved so subtle that readers might easily overlook the proslavery message encoded in the text. Instead of endorsing democratic methods of persuasion, enemies of abolitionism sanctioned the exercise of raw, extralegal power over those whom they believed to be threatening the very fabric of society. They reasoned that Americans who refused to respect the traditional patriarchal family or the national union possessed no legitimate claim to individual rights.

The American Anti-Slavery Society intended the postal campaign to prepare the way in the North for traveling agents to establish auxiliary societies across the region. In the South, tracts would take the place of agents, since AAS leaders had judged the situation there too dangerous to send organizers into Southern localities. Beginning in July, the AAS mailed out hundreds of thousands of copies each of *The Anti-Slavery Record*, *Human Rights*, and *The Emancipator* to influential citizens throughout the nation. In the South, these papers were discovered by authorities in port towns as far-flung as Richmond, Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Nashville, and Enfield, North Carolina. Although abolitionists never realized their vision of converting Southerners to antislavery beliefs, one slaveholder at a time, AAS publications distributed

in the North assisted in the formation of the 2,000 local antislavery societies that had arisen by 1840.

By contrast, anti-abolitionists' belief in local control caused them to shy away from long-term organizational schemes that encompassed the entire nation in their scope. Part of the reason they so loathed immediatists involved the conviction that the abolitionist movement had grown into "a powerful combination" of national and even international proportions. As Leonard Richards pointed out in *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing,"* the New York-based AAS seemed to many Americans to be effectively imposing its will on thousands of localities through its growing numbers of auxiliary societies, thereby extending its sinister control throughout the nation. These ancillary societies, Boston mayor Harrison Gray Otis shuddered in 1835, had reached "every state and community, large or small, in the eastern and western states." The local elites who represented the most adamant enemies of immediatism lashed out against abolitionist organization, Richards contended, in an effort to preserve their own power from such a takeover of the town or city in which they lived.[8]

The Utica riot of October 1835 exemplifies the localist objectives of typical anti-abolitionist activity in the 1830s. Most active opponents of abolitionism in this decade cited the shame and degradation that an anti-slavery organization would bring to their city or town as a central reason for protesting abolitionism. Samuel Beardsley, a chief instigator and leader of the Utica mob, charged abolitionists with trying "to degrade the

[8] Quoted in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 57, 63, 58, 56.

character of the city in the esteem of the world." New York City immediatists, in conjunction with the Utica Anti-Slavery Society, had set their sights on Beardsley's town as the site for the headquarters of their state organization. "Rather than have this," Beardsley vowed, "I would almost as soon see it (the city) swept from the face of the earth, or sunk as low as Sodom and Gomorrah!" "The question," Beardsley summed up, was "whether we are to be thus disturbed and disgraced."[9]

It was this kind of localist focus that doomed the anti-abolitionist novel of Utica resident Jerome Holgate to national obscurity when it was published early in 1835. Instead of working to find an editor with anti-abolitionist leanings to print and distribute his book on a wide scale, Holgate seems to have failed even to consider this possible course of action. As Elise Lemire has discovered, Holgate left Utica for New York City on January 1, 1835, and by February 3, his *Sojourn in the City of Amalgamation* had been entered into state copyright records. Holgate had chosen to publish the book himself, and, given the short time he spent in New York City, it is unlikely that he made much of an effort to find a publishing house that would have printed it for him. In contrast, Richard Hildreth spent the better part of six months the following year presenting his novel *The Slave* to various New York and Boston publishers before deciding to have the novel printed at his own expense. According to Lemire, Holgate also seems to have published his subsequent works independently. These circumstances suggest that

[9] [William Thomas], *The Enemies of the Constitution Discovered* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1835), 60, 61, 62.

Holgate's objective in writing *Sojourn* had more to do with more narrowly local interests than with promoting his anti-abolitionist message to a wide national audience. [10]

Given his history prior to 1835, Holgate's sights seemed focused on fighting abolitionism in his hometown. Along with his brother William, Holgate was an active participant in the Utica Literary Club during the 1830s. In September of 1833, when the abolitionist assault against colonization remained in full effect, Jerome had engaged in a debate on the question, "Ought the Colonization Society to be encouraged" at the Literary Society, arguing the pro-colonizationist position. The fact that the organization's president pronounced Jerome the winner of the debate suggests strongly that members of the Literary Club harbored colonizationist sympathies and probably opposed the abolitionists, as conservative organizations generally did in the 1830s. Judging from his harsh condemnation of abolitionists in *Sojourn*, Jerome felt passionately that the abolitionists posed a grave threat to the social order. But Holgate seemed to have few ambitions about spreading that message much beyond the Literary Club audience he had addressed during the debate only a year before he began writing his novel.

Anti-abolitionist organizational structures, like anti-abolitionist concerns, remained local in scope during the 1830s and beyond. Close-knit societies like the Utica Literary Club formed the basis for organized opposition to antislavery measures throughout the antebellum period. Suspicious themselves of centralized power, opponents of abolition in almost every case refrained from forming associations with

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[10] Elise Virginia Lemire deserves credit for uncovering the authorship of Holgate's novel; see Lemire, *Making Miscegenation: Discourses of Interracial Sex and Marriage in the United States, 1790-1865*

other towns or cities when they came together in reaction to immediatist activities in their localities. Although they followed traditional rules of order and decorum in the meetings they called, anti-abolitionists rarely intended groups formed for the express purpose of protesting abolitionism to last long enough even to warrant voting themselves a name. Nor did such groups generally organize tracts to be published, beyond broadsides designed to announce a meeting to the public.

Only in Cincinnati, a perpetual hotbed of anti-abolitionist activity, did leaders make an attempt to form a more lasting organization. In September of 1841, the Cincinnati Anti-Abolition Society came into being, declaring "war against Abolitionists--*white men*" and determining to toughen legal controls against the city's black population. The following year the same men founded the *Cincinnati Post, and Anti-Abolitionist*, but the venture, which consisted largely of threats against local abolitionists, lasted only a few months. The Society and the *Post* proved singular examples within a movement whose organizations were generally, by design, short-lived.[11]

Most anti-abolitionists combined their beliefs in local control with a reverence for a traditional social hierarchy that likewise served to limit the impact that their cause would have on the American public. Anti-abolitionists believed that their opponents undermined the social order by reaching out to white women, white children, and African Americans. Conservative leaders insisted that white men, regardless of class, had a stake in that order and a republican duty to put down abolitionist activity. Yet the antislavery

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(Ph.D. Thesis, Rutgers, 1996), 69.

[11] See Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 129.

movement grew strong in the 1830s by attracting precisely these formally disenfranchised sectors of American society to their cause. By developing a solid base of support among these groups, abolitionists were able to create the foundation of a movement that would ultimately influence public policy through both official and unofficial channels.

Abolitionists recognized early in their battle for public opinion the important role that women, black and white, had begun to play in establishing the nation's cultural climate on critical social issues. As the work of Mary Ryan and others has revealed, the market revolution of the 1820s and 1830s led middle-class women to take on the formerly paternal duty of rearing children and to assume responsibility for the morality of the choices made by their husbands and offspring. These changes gave women a powerful role in any public or private affairs that involved moral questions, thereby making women especially crucial figures in the battle over slavery. In March of 1832, William Lloyd Garrison wrote to the African-American activist Sarah M. Douglass that the abolitionists' "hopes for the elevation of your race are centered upon you and others of your sex." Garrison pointed to "the victorious influence which you possess over the minds of men" and the "direct connexion" between any of their actions and "the results of masculine actions and pursuits." Angelina Grimke addressed most of her pamphlets and speeches to women. In her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, Grimke argued that although women did not themselves create laws, they were "the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do." Each of her female readers, therefore, should "try to persuade your husband, father, brothers and sons that slavery is a crime *against*

God and man." Women, in the eyes of these abolitionists, should be regarded as active agents, not only able to determine their own opinions on a political subject like slavery, but also to use their position in the household to influence the views that men held on public issues.[12]

Abolitionists viewed children, too, as a vital group that would strengthen their movement in the present as well as in years to come. "It has been well said, 'children are all abolitionists,'" editor R. G. Williams noted in the July 1835 issue of *Human Rights*. "Be it so--we can reach parents then through their children." Evidence indicates that targeting children often paid off for abolitionist authors when these children became adults. Even though Lydia Maria Child's *Juvenile Miscellany* had to fold after Child published a book-length polemic on slavery, a number of abolitionists later pointed to the impact that reading antislavery and anti-racism stories in the *Juvenile Miscellany* as children had had on their opinions about slavery. "I don't know whether I ever told you with what delight I fed on your little Juvenile Miscellany long ago," the theologian Samuel Johnson wrote to Child in February of 1860. "You little know how many young spirits you were quickening by that wonderful gift to children (as I still regard it)." Antislavery proponents continued Child's legacy by publishing the illustrated monthly

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[12] Letter from William Lloyd Garrison to Sarah M. Douglass, March 5, 1832, reprinted in Walter M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, v. 1: I Will Be Heard, 1822-1835* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 144; Angelina Grimke, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), quoted in Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (New York: Schoken Books, 1967), 139.

periodical *The Slave's Friend*, as well as numerous abolitionist books and pamphlets designed for young readers.[13]

For opponents of immediatism, abolitionist appeals that designated women and children as integral players in national decision-making marked a dangerous departure from the traditional patriarchal values that most of them so reverently venerated. Anti-abolitionists consequently railed against these methods, which they deemed underhanded and subversive. Thomas Sullivan expressed outrage that abolitionists sought to "*inflame the passions of the multitude*, including the women and children, the boarding-school misses and factory girls." In John Tyler's complaints against abolitionists, he decried the fact that "Woman is to be made one of the instruments to accomplish their mischievous purposes." His tone intensifying, Tyler warned his audience that in the abolitionists' plan, woman "is to be made the presiding genius over the councils of insurrection and discord," that "she is to be converted into a fiend" and "is already lending herself to these fanatical schemes." Furthermore, Tyler preached, abolitionists were "also addressing themselves to the growing generation through horn-books and primers," so that "the youthful imagination is filled with horror against us and our children by images and pictures exhibited in the nursery." Mayor Otis informed his fellow Bostonians that abolitionists had asked women to "turn their sewing parties into abolition clubs" and had begun to teach "little children when they meet to eat sugar plumbs or at the Sunday

[13] *Human Rights*, July 1835.

schools . . . that A B stands for abolition." "Men, women and children," he warned, "are stimulated, flattered and frightened in order to swell their numbers."[14]

When a Southern white man's position in society was threatened in such an underhanded, dishonorable way, his society prescribed violent retaliation against the offender. As historians like Kenneth Greenberg, Edward Ayers, Bertram Wyatt Brown, have shown, the system of Southern honor required a violent reprisal when any person denied the power a man of honor wielded in society, menaced his property, or tampered with the integrity of his hierarchical household. Because abolitionists committed all three outrages against slaveholding Southern men, the code of honor proclaimed that such contemptible wretches did not deserve the courtesy of a verbal response. The only acceptable answer to such affronts, slaveholders believed, involved suppressing the offense in a violent manner.[15]

A successful attack on an inferior adversary put that opponent in his place and demonstrated that the man of honor was, in fact, the superior man. Thus, President Andrew Jackson applauded the repeatedly violent treatment that English abolitionist George Thompson met in the Northern states during his 1834-35 lecture tour as "strong and impressive." More than twenty years later, South Carolinian Preston Brooks felt justified in caning the unarmed U. S. Senator Charles Sumner in the Senate chamber

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[14] Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 59, from *Letters Against the Immediate Abolition of Slavery*; Richards, 57-8; Richards, 58.

[15] Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

because Sumner had publicly insulted Brooks's cousin and Southern slaveholders in general. Other Southerners saw no shame in this act, and many offered their congratulations and support to Brooks in the wake of the caning. The dearth of visible abolitionists in the South during the 1830s led proslavery men there to uphold their honor by directing their wrath against a few symbolic representatives of the abolitionist cause. Throughout the South, any person found with abolitionist materials, or any stranger found conversing with black slaves, suffered the physical pain and public humiliation of being flogged or tarred and feathered. First in Charleston and then in towns and villages across the region, groups of citizens vindicated their community honor against antislavery detractors by setting fire to abolitionist documents that had been mailed to their localities and by burning effigies of Lewis Tappan and William Lloyd Garrison. These acts of violence sent the message to abolitionists that the slaveholding South had the power and the intention of vindicating its honor, even if it meant blatantly violating the personal rights of their attackers.

In the North, the violence that anti-abolitionists inflicted on their adversaries in the 1830s demonstrated the persistence of principles of honor outside the South well into the antebellum period. Like their slaveholding counterparts, the leaders of Northern anti-abolition mobs considered the abolitionist crusade a personal assault on their way of life. For Samuel Beardsley, the decision to locate a state antislavery organization in his hometown of Utica, New York, represented a personal affront to him and his fellow townsmen. Beardsley complained that "it is intended to insult us" and "to degrade the

character of the city in the esteem of the world." Abolitionists had determined, Beardsley avowed, "to treat us with the utmost contempt--insult us to our faces, where they cannot raise a corporal's guard." Connections between the American antislavery movement and English reformers, in particular, demonstrated the affronts that abolitionists committed against the nation as a whole. "It would seem sufficiently evident that a great concentrated effort is making against the good name . . . of the United States," J. K. Paulding suggested in 1836, judging by the "slanderous" material being printed in Great Britain, and by the abolitionist press at home. "The people of the United States are of a nature to forgive injuries," Paulding warned, "but they never forgive insults."[16]

Because they adhered to an older system of honor, the most ardent anti-abolitionists opted for violence rather than the written word to put their enemies in their place. Southern whites urged their Northern supporters not to allow abolitionists to get away with publishing "their missiles of mischief" with impunity and instead to "adopt the necessary measures to PUNISH and silence the vile incendiaries." Northern anti-abolitionists, for their part, were only too glad to comply. Upper-class and working-class white men whose place in the home, the economic order, and society in general had been called into question by the market revolution took out their frustrations and fears on a group that seemed to be contributing to the further dissolution of traditional conservative values. In some 169 different incidents between 1834 and 1840, Northern anti-abolitionists formed local mobs of white men that disrupted antislavery meetings,

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[16] Thomas, *Enemies*, 58-63, quoted in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 88; J. K. Paulding, *Slavery in the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 136, 137.

attacked individual abolitionist speakers, and destroyed printing presses. Before the 1835 riot in Utica, Congressman Samuel Beardsley vowed that he would "do my duty manfully to prevent the meeting" of a state convention of abolitionists, "*peacefully if I can, forcibly if I must.*"[17]

In nearly all these vigilante actions, anti-abolitionist used force to suppress the verbal and written assaults on slavery that antislavery activists were attempting to broadcast to the general public. Abolitionists chided those who incited riots against them, claiming that they resorted to violence simply because they could not summon a reasonable answer to antislavery charges. "What a pity that the Charlestonians should shake the Union with threats of violence," *Human Rights* editor R. G. Williams sneered, "when they are able, on moral and scriptural grounds, triumphantly to vindicate slavery and set the question at rest!" Less caustically, the *Anti-Slavery Record* observed that "the anti-abolition side would not have resorted to physical force if they had had a superabundance, or even a moderate supply of argument." Foes of abolition seemed to confirm that they had no persuasive words to offer their opponents, only violence, when they produced for sale in New York City a version of the bowie knife sporting the simple rejoinder, "Death to Abolition" on the blade.[18]

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[17] *Human Rights*, I:3 (September 1835). For a discussion of the shifting situation of the gentry, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991). For the increasing economic dependence of workers, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) and Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Milennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York* (New York, 1978); Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 90, original emphasis.

[18] *Human Rights* I:3 (September 1835); *The Anti-Slavery Record* II:7 (July 1836); *The Emancipator*, July 6, 1837.

Abolitionists relished for their propaganda value the flagrant violations of personal freedoms that their adversaries committed repeatedly during the second half of the 1830s. Never missing an opportunity to highlight these acts conspicuously in their publications, antislavery newspapers, almanacs, and other printed documents chronicled incident after incident of anti-abolitionist violence in those years. Especially after 1835, articles with titles like, "How Mobs Are Got Up," "Triumph of Mobocracy in Boston," and "Why do the Aristocracy Encourage Mobs?" filled abolitionist periodicals. Antislavery strategists also made use of the visual arts, commissioning the print "Southern Ideas of Liberty: Attack on the Post Office, Charleston, S.C." and reproducing similar images of violence carried out by Northern mobs.[19]

Abolitionist leaders rightly understood that Americans who cherished the antebellum values of individual rights for all and of the importance of each soul would be appalled by the unabashed assault their enemies were waging against the fundamental liberties of white American citizens. Even if they disagreed "on minor and subordinate points" with the antislavery cause, organizers argued, the "awful moment" had come when Americans must come "to the rescue and deliverance of the rights of the press, freedom of speech and conscience." As mobs repeatedly infringed on these sacred constitutional rights, Congress enacted a federal Gag Rule in 1836 that barred the discussion of antislavery petitions in Congress. These events gave abolitionists ample evidence that their opponents had dedicated themselves to crushing democracy in their

[19] *Human Rights* I:6 (December 1835); *The Liberator*, November 7, 1835; *The Emancipator*, July 21, 1836; the sketch of the Bowie knife appears in the July 6, 1837, issue of the *Emancipator*.

home country. In two incidents rendered infamous by the antislavery press in the late 1830s, an informal Nashville court ordered white Northerner Amos Dresser flogged for carrying antislavery pamphlets, and a mob in Alton, Illinois, gunned down abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy. In their treatment of these events, antislavery writers stressed the appalling infringement of the basic rights of respectable white men by lawless anti-abolitionists. "What sort of an institution," the *Anti-Slavery Record* demanded after receiving word of the Dresser beating, "drives the most respectable members of a community into a disgraceful and unlawful outrage upon the rights of an American citizen?"[20]

The flogging of Dresser and the murder of Lovejoy marked the first instances in which antislavery propagandists seized on the figure of the martyr to promote their cause, a strategy abolitionists would use to great benefit for decades to come. By the late 1830s, abolitionists had found that portraying their own kind as martyrs in the cause of freedom drew in ordinary Americans to their cause. The extralegal violence in which the anti-abolitionists engaged, on the other hand, merely alienated most Northern whites, especially when the perpetrators of that violence offered little explanation for their actions in print. Finally, the emotional appeal of the wronged white Northerner added an emotional element that Northerners could hardly resist.

Amos Dresser, a Bible salesman trying to raise money to put himself through seminary, provided an ideal subject for abolitionists to hold up as a holy martyr who had

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[20] Amos Phelps to Gerrit Smith, October 2, 1835, and Alvan Stewart to Smith, October 2, 1835, quoted in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 87; *Anti-Slavery Record* I:11 (November 1835).

been viciously persecuted by callous and brutal anti-abolitionists. The account of Dresser's ordeal published in the *Anti-Slavery Record* had a Biblical ring to it, echoing the persecution endured by Christ on his way to the cross. "Mr. Dresser was seized and brought before a committee of vigilance, consisting of sixty members" the editor related, "among whom were many professors of religion, and men of the highest respectability, in the city." Like other martyrs, Dresser suffered numerous violations of his dignity and privacy before being unjustly convicted by a bloodthirsty crowd. The *Record* noted that in the investigation of Dresser's activities the vigilance committee "proceeded to examine his trunks and read his private letters." After the trial, "the Editor of one of the newspapers seized upon his journal and private letters, and appropriated them to his own use." Dresser was judged, the abolitionist periodical emphasized, by a "self-constituted tribunal," and the charges for which he received his sentence "were totally unknown to the laws." Finally, the *Record* used the dramatic testimony conveyed by Dresser himself to relate the violent climax of this atrocity. "Whilst some of the company were engaged in stripping me of my garments," Dresser recalled, "I knelt to receive the punishment, which was inflicted by Mr. Braughton the city officer, with a heavy cowskin." The crowd, Dresser added, "was appeased only by the sound of the instrument of torture and disgrace upon my naked body." These savage slaveholders, the article intimated, could only be satisfied with a violent reprisal against the pious man.[21]

[21] *Anti-Slavery Record* I:11 (November 1835).

The antislavery press heralded Illinois editor Elijah Lovejoy as a martyr to the abolitionist cause even more enthusiastically than they had Dresser. Abolitionist propagandists, in fact, attempted to elevate public mourning of Lovejoy into a cult activity. Within two months, a collection of Lovejoy's writings edited by his brothers appeared, whose title, *Memoir of the Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy*, reminded readers of the editor's ties to the church. The subtitle, moreover, stressed the theme of martyrdom for the sake of democratic principles: "Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press." A few months later, the *Emancipator* claimed that "when Mrs. Lovejoy heard of the death of her son, she replied, 'Tis well! I would rather my son had fallen a martyr to his cause, than that he had proved recreant to his principles." A plaque commemorating Lovejoy's contribution to abolitionism noted that the editor "was murdered defending the freedom of the press." Poems and songs like "The Martyr at Rest," "Our Lost Rights," and "Freedom's Alarm; or Lovejoy's Voice from the Grave" were composed and widely sold by the American Anti-Slavery office in New York City. Even "a bronze profile likeness of Mr. Lovejoy, with a fac simile of his hand writing, and a short inscription" was produced for sale at a reasonable price of 12 1/2 cents per copy."[22]

The Northern response to Lovejoy's murder suggests the progress abolitionists had made by the end of 1837. Only two years earlier, in August of 1835, Bostonians had crowded into Fanueil Hall to protest antislavery organization and lecturing in their city. On December 8, 1837, over five thousand people jammed the same hall to protest the

[22] *Emancipator*, February 1, 1838; see advertisement in the *Emancipator*, January 16, 1838.

killing of an abolitionist editor far away in Illinois. Abolitionist propaganda expressing indignation at the violation of fundamental constitutional rights, combined with the pathos of Lovejoy's willingness to sacrifice his own life in the cause of freedom, had clearly struck a nerve with the Northern public.

In their divergent treatments of Elijah Lovejoy, abolitionists and their opponents demonstrated a fundamental difference in the goals, the strategies, and the effectiveness that would continue to characterize the two camps throughout the antebellum period. In the Lovejoy incident, as in 168 similar instances during the late 1830s, anti-abolitionists engaged in violent suppression of their enemies to silence their appeals to other Americans and to intimidate antislavery activists into leaving their local community. Abolitionists, on the other hand, focused their energies on getting their message out to the general public and on crafting that message to appeal to rising values in American culture. At the hands of the anti-abolitionists, therefore, Lovejoy was killed; at the hands of the antislavery element, on the other hand, he was elevated to the position of holy martyr to a holy cause. Through the veneration of Lovejoy, abolitionists enhanced their following, while anti-abolitionists merely enhanced their own reputation as tyrannical ruffians who had little regard for the rights, or even the lives, of white Northerners.

Despite the emphasis that anti-abolitionists placed on suppression of antislavery activity during this period, a handful of proslavery advocates also saw the need of pleading their case to the public to answer abolitionist verbal attacks. The elitist tendencies of anti-abolitionists, however, gave them a marked reluctance to appeal

directly to the masses in the way that the abolitionists did. As stalwart believers in hierarchy, many who abhorred the antislavery movement considered pleading their cause to a public who could "read but not reason" beneath their dignity.[23]

During the 1830s, some anti-abolitionist activists fixed on what they considered an ideal solution to this dilemma. To advance their position with the public at large without appearing to pander to the masses, these proslavery advocates turned to the production of fiction. Between 1832 and 1836, opponents of abolitionism published no fewer than ten novels that at least obliquely attacked the antislavery movement. The use of fictional narratives gave authors the opportunity to introduce characters who might argue their position, or to create situations that demonstrated to readers the evils involved in abolition. At the same time, these defenders of slavery would not be overtly engaged in the distasteful task of disseminating propagandistic materials in support of their cause.

Disagreements over the approach these novels should take, and a persistent distaste for marketing publications to the general public, however, often hindered the impact that such items had on ordinary Americans. The fiction of Virginia law professor Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, for instance, owed its lack of popularity in large part to a conflict over strategy between Tucker and his literary agent, Duff Green. Both Tucker and Green agreed that champions of the South should respond in kind to abolitionist criticism expressed in the AAS postal campaign. Both men also hoped for an eventual Southern separation from the national union. Tucker, however, believed that fiction

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[23] *South Vindicated*, 196.

could further these aims most effectively by promoting Southerners' pride in their region. In "the Southern fight against abolitionist mailings," Tucker biographer Robert Brugger has contended, "Tucker sensed the makings of a political din that might not only awaken the South to public events but also change their course."[24]

Green, on the other hand, believed that Southern fiction should counter the antislavery tracts that "poison the minds of the people of the north" by specifically presenting a positive picture of Southern slavery. Green chafed at the thought that "the writers of those articles set their imaginations to work to frame lies, representing the slaves of the south as treated in the most horrible manner." Authors like Tucker, Green believed, should directly counter such slander against their native region by highlighting in their fiction the paternalistic treatment of slaves by their masters and the genuine affection that he believed existed between the two groups.[25]

Tucker, though, barely mentioned slavery in his 1836 novel *The Partisan Leader*, a fictional account of Southern secession and civil war. In only one scene did Tucker comply with Green's philosophy, when one of his main characters explained the confidence he held in the willingness of slaves to fight loyally on behalf of their masters. In this brief episode, the character referred to as "B--" reminded Douglas Trevor, a Southerner who had been educated in the North, that his early years on a plantation had given him "the benefit of the parental feeling of the old woman who nursed your infancy, and watched your growth," as well as "the equal friendship of those with whom you ran

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[24] Robert J. Brugger, *Beverley Tucker: Heart Over Head in the Old South* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 118.

races, and played at bandy, and wrestled in your boyhood." Douglas's mammy and the black playmates of his childhood, B-- noted, constituted merely "one integral part of the great black family, which, in all its branches, is united by similar ligaments to the great white family." B-- went on to assure Douglas that in the contest with Northern troops, "there are twenty true hearts which will shed their last drop, before one hair of your uncle's head shall fall." When the slaves' fidelity was later tested, they remained true to their masters, taking Northern soldiers as prisoners for their masters rather than being tempted by their offers of freedom.[26]

Had Tucker made such episodes more central to the plot of his novel, Duff Green would likely have done a more thorough job of circulating *The Partisan Leader* to the American public. Although *The Partisan Leader* presented Southerners as a noble, courageous people who had been wronged by the North, the scant attention that it paid to the slavery issue frustrated Green. In September, just before the novel was released to the public, the agent expressed his disapproval to Tucker, lamenting that the author had made "the tariff the prominent idea when I think you should make the slave question the basis of your supposed separation." By January of 1837, Green had printed only 1,900 copies of *The Partisan Leader*, a mere 1,295 of which had actually reached book distributors. "It is questionable," a Tucker biographer later concluded, "whether Green ever found time to see that *The Partisan Leader* was effectively advertised and made available to the public." Searching in Columbia, South Carolina, for example, neither Senator William

[25] Quoted in Brugger, *Beverley Tucker*, 108.

Campbell Preston nor any of his friends who lived there could find a trace of the novel. *The Partisan Leader*, Preston believed, had not been "sufficiently published." Because Green disagreed with Tucker's method of promoting the Southern cause, the novel that the *Southern Literary Messenger* deemed "worthy, in a high degree, of public attention" drew in few Northerners, if any, to the proslavery cause.[27]

Green's broader hope that the South might produce a literature of its own to promote the Southern way of life ultimately floundered in the face of slaveholders' general distaste for marketing their literary endeavors to the public. "Nothing is more repulsive to our taste," cried the Richmond *Whig* haughtily in January of 1836, "than puffing--one of the artifices of book-making and book-selling, reduced in this our time, to a science." A few months later, the *Southern Literary Messenger* sarcastically commented, "Mr. Fay wishes us to believe that the sale of a book is the proper test of its merit." If that were true, the *Messenger* rejoined disdainfully, then "the novel of Norman Leslie is not at all comparable to the Memoirs of Davy Crockett, or the popular lyric of Jim Crow." The anonymous author of the anti-abolitionist tome *The South Vindicated* claimed that the antislavery movement had gained popularity because "few schemes of imposture or fanaticism are too gross for popular credulity." The elitism of the anti-abolitionists meant that the public was not to be trusted; "human nature is not always to

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[26] [Nathaniel Beverley Tucker], *The Partisan Leader; A Tale of the Future* (Washington, D.C., 1836), v. 2, 6-7.

[27] *Human Rights*, September 1835; Duff Green to Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, September 13, 1836, quoted in Brugger, *Beverley Tucker*, 241, nt. 20; Beverley D. Tucker, *Nathaniel Beverley Tucker: Prophet of the Confederacy, 1784-1851* (Tokyo: Nan'un-do, 1979), 349; Brugger, *Beverley Tucker*, 241, nt. 19; *Southern Literary Messenger* 3 (January 1837), 57.

be depended on," the same author advised. In theory, then, too large a degree of popularity might render a novel suspect in the eyes of conservative elites.[28]

Even when an anti-abolitionist novel did manage to gain a popular audience, the subtlety of its appeal on the issue of slavery often allowed uninitiated readers to ignore its political overtones. William Gilmore Simms's novel *The Yemassee*, for instance, sold thousands of copies and went into three American editions within nine months of its initial publication in the spring of 1835. Although Simms was an ardent supporter of Southern rights in the union and of the slave system, he restricted his treatment of slavery in *The Yemassee* to widely scattered references to loyal black slaves. The plot itself did not overtly concern the institution of slavery, the nature of African Americans, or the relationship between Southern slaves and their masters. Simms introduced the issue so subtly that the *New England Magazine* did not mention slavery or slaves once in its review of the novel. The same held true when Simms wrote *Mellichampe* in 1836, after the abolitionist campaign was in full gear, and *The Sword and Distaff* in 1852, which came out just after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Although both of these later novels merely touched on the slavery question from time to time, Simms nevertheless considered these fictional works direct answers to antislavery propaganda. *The Sword and Distaff*, he wrote to James Henry Hammond just after the novel's publication, he judged "probably as good an answer to Mrs. Stowe as has been published." As popular as Simms's novels usually were in the North as well as the

[28] *Southern Literary Messenger* 2 (April 1836), 340; *South Vindicated*, 189.

South, however, their subtlety on the issue of slavery gave them little chance of converting Northern readers to the proslavery cause.[29]

Anti-abolitionist authors besides Simms and Tucker chose to touch on the issue of slavery only lightly in the fiction they produced in the 1830s. Relatively few straightforward polemics blasting abolitionists or championing the cause of slavery emerged in that decade. Instead, anti-abolitionists like Philadelphia author Robert Montgomery Bird and Tarrytown, New York, native James Kirke Paulding provided partly veiled fictional responses to the American Anti-Slavery Society that appeared to produce little effect on the public. In his review of Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, for instance, the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* could condense a fifteen-chapter section on slavery into two brief sentences within an article that ran to nearly forty paragraphs. The reviewer passed over the scenes of a harrowing slave rebellion by characterizing it merely as "spirited." Although Paulding later issued a caustic proslavery polemic entitled *Slavery in the United States*, his 1832 novel *Westward Ho!* closely resembled Tucker's gingerly treatment of the subject in *The Partisan Leader*. While the introduction to *Westward Ho!* suggested that Paulding felt the issue of slavery to be a central element in the novel, the main plot had little to do with the topic, and only two short chapters out of two volumes of text dealt at all with slaves and their situation. Readers perusing Paulding's text for entertainment might easily have overlooked the few episodes in which slaves cried over being separated from their master, danced with forgetfulness despite

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[29] Mary C. Sims Oliphant et al, eds., *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1954), III, 222-23.

their impending sale to a new owner, and expressed horror at the wretched condition of free blacks in Philadelphia. For the most part, their minds would have been occupied with the plight of the white slaveholding family as they faced bankruptcy and removal to the "wilderness" of Kentucky.[30]

When they did not neglect the issue of slavery, anti-abolitionist novels often subverted their own cause by using their fiction to work out their own fears about the place of black men in American society. Abolitionists, with all their egalitarian impulses, generally shied away during this period from depicting acts of violence by men with black skin against white Americans. Crusaders against Southern slavery understood that even the mention of African-American attacks on whites could make the blood of their readers run cold. In contrast, the failure of anti-abolitionist fiction to resonate with the few readers it managed to reach in the 1830s can almost certainly be traced to the specter of violent, duplicitous black men that lurked just below the surface of these authors' portrayals of loyal, contented slaves. After his tour of the United States during the height of the Nat Turner episode, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "the danger of a conflict between the white and the black inhabitants of the Southern states of the Union . . . perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans, like a painful dream." In Tocqueville's experience, the Southern slaveholder did not "communicate his apprehensions to his friends" and even tried "to conceal them from himself," but "the inhabitants of the North" made slave revolt "a common topic of conversation" and

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[30] *Southern Literary Messenger* 3 (September 1836), 662-8.

"vainly endeavor to devise some means of obviating the misfortunes which they foresee." When, only three to four years after Tocqueville had returned to France, novels depicted the side of slavery most threatening to whites, neither Northern nor Southern readers could offer their unqualified endorsement of those texts. Together, Northerners' "clamorous fears" of black violence and "the tacit forebodings" of Southerners likely thwarted the popular acceptance of many of the anti-abolitionist novels of 1835 and 1836.[31]

White Americans' fears in the 1830s concerning black violence could be traced in large part to the traumatic ordeal of Nat Turner's rebellion that had alarmed the entire nation in 1831. The first of the anti-abolitionist novels published in the mid-1830s was completed three years after the revolt had taken place. In the wake of the Turner rebellion, many of the anti-abolitionist authors of the decade had indicated privately their own trepidation arising from the Southampton episode. Robert Montgomery Bird, for instance, recorded his apprehensions about the dark future of the United States as the news of the revolt was just beginning to spread throughout the country. "At this present moment there are 6 or 800 armed negroes marching through Southampton County, Virginia," he erroneously noted in his diary on August 27, 1831, "murdering, ravishing, and burning those whom the Grace of God has made their owners." Responding to such terrifying information, Bird prophesied that "some day we shall have it, and future generations will perhaps remember the horrors of Haiti as a farce compared with the

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[31] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1981), v. 1, 242.

tragedies of our own happy land!" Bird's *Sheppard Lee* and the other anti-abolitionist novels completed in 1835 and 1836 reflected the kind of profound disquiet that Bird and his fellow authors had frequently revealed in a forthright manner only to themselves.[32]

To downplay the risks that black violence posed to white Americans because of slavery, anti-abolitionist authors in the 1830s contested the antislavery suggestion that black men responded to slavery in the same ways that a white man would. In the years since the Turner revolt, abolitionist propagandists had urged white readers to empathize with the plight of the slave. To counter the idea that slaves suffered under an oppressive system just as whites would were they to be enslaved, anti-abolitionists emphasized that the character of African Americans was fundamentally different from that of whites. Beverley Tucker's character B--, for instance, noted in *The Partisan Leader* that Northerners thought slaves "to be even such as themselves." As a result, he argued, they "cannot therefore conceive that [a slave] is not ready to cut his master's throat, if there is any thing to be got by it." J. H. Ingraham, himself a New Englander who had only recently moved to Mississippi, explained in *The South-West* that "a northerner looks upon a band of negroes, as upon so many *men*" and therefore fears them, while the Southerner, "habituated to their presence, never fears them, and laughs at the idea."[33]

In their novels, anti-abolitionist authors of the 1830s highlighted several critical distinctions between blacks and whites that worked to prevent slaves from violently

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[32] Robert Montgomery Bird diary, August 27, 1831, quoted in Richard Harris, "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records* of R. M. Bird" *The (University of Pennsylvania) Library Chronicle* 25 (Winter 1959), 16, 17.

turning against their masters. Yet in demonstrating each of these characteristics, opponents of abolitionism also indicated the frightening results when slave loyalty, cowardice, and weak-mindedness were played out to their furthest extreme. Rather than assuring readers of the safety of the slave system for whites, these fictional portrayals of African Americans instead served to undermine dramatically the anti-abolitionist message. Anti-abolitionist authors would have a difficult time persuading their readers they should "laugh at the idea" that they had anything to fear from black men, when the stories these writers told abounded with scenes of destruction caused by African-American slaves.

Anti-abolitionist novels of the 1830s used even the classic proslavery notion that slaves possessed an undying loyalty to their masters as a premise for presenting horrifying displays of black violence. In the novels of William Gilmore Simms written during that decade, for example, black slaves often faced a choice between allowing their masters to die and defending them by inflicting violence on another white man. Loyalty to the master dictated that the slave must act, even if it meant disturbing the racial order. Although they generally did so with reluctance, or even without full awareness of their actions, Simms's black characters fought back with ruthless, sometimes sickening brutality. The graphic descriptions of these savage acts revealed that Simms himself harbored fears that slaves had the capacity and the inclination to commit stunning deeds of violence against white Americans.

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[33] Tucker, *The Partisan Leader*, v. 2, 7; [Joseph Holt Ingraham], *The South-West. By a Yankee* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1835), v. 2, 260, 93.

In *The Yemassee*, composed only three years after the Southampton insurrection had taken place, Simms designated Native Americans rather than white men as the objects of brutality by black slaves. Although the loyal slaves depicted by Simms hesitated to use violence deliberately, even in defense of their masters, they ultimately did so, and with deadly results. Hector, a devoted slave who later indignantly refused the freedom his master offered him, initially shrank from carrying a gun, even though it might be used to protect his master, Gabriel Harrison, from Indian attacks. "I no want gun," Hector protested to Harrison's betrothed, "I 'fraid ob' em . . . I no like 'em." When a crisis arose, however, Hector put his master's gun to use by shooting an Indian who threatened to overpower Harrison in an episode of hand-to-hand combat. A second slave in *The Yemassee*, July, used force to defend his master's house against invading Indians, but, strangely, remained completely unaware of his own actions. When a band of Yemassee began breaking down the outer door behind which July slept, he rose, "with a sort of instinct," and as if in a trance. "Like most negroes suddenly awaking," Simms explained, July "was stupid and confused." But, while "rubbing his eyes with the fingers of one hand," Simms related, "he stretched out the other to the bar, and, without being at all conscious of what he was doing, lifted it from its socket." Finally, "with the uplifted bar still in his hand, he felled the foremost of those around him."[34]

In addition to these two individual slaves, Simms also included in *The Yemassee* a faceless mass of anonymous African Americans whose only role in the novel involved

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[34] William Gilmore Simms, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964 edition), 322, 327.

volunteering to fight out of loyalty to their masters and then engaging in the ruthless slaughter of helpless Indian combatants. Rather than depicting white men in the act of finishing off their noble Indian enemies, Simms chose to enlist black men to fulfill this dishonorable, barbaric function. As one battle between the Yemassee and the Americans came to a close, Simms related that "the negroes cleared the woods with their clubs, beating out the brains of those whom they overtook, almost without having any resistance offered them." Later, when final defeat of the Indians seemed certain, the dignified chief of the Yemassee began singing "his song of many victories" to prepare for death. In the midst of this touching scene, Simms designated African Americans once again to serve as the contemptible executioners: "The pursuers were at hand, in the negroes, now scouring the field of battle with their huge clubs and hatchets, knocking upon the heads all of the Indians who yet exhibited any signs of life." Though rarely allowed to engage in such activity, Simms suggested black men are perfectly suited for this cowardly, animalistic type of murder. "As wild almost as the savages," Simms comments, "they luxuriated in a pursuit to them so very novel, . . . sparing none, whether they fought or pleaded, and frequently inflicting the most unnecessary blows, even upon the dying and the dead."[35]

In *Mellichampe*, published in 1836, Simms presented his fears of black violence more directly, in a lengthy scene where a fiercely loyal slave murdered a white Englishman rather than one of the "howling savages." Scipio, Simms emphasized, "loved his master . . . with a fondness which would have maintained him faithful, through torture, to his trust."

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[35] Simms, *Yemassee*, 383-4, 414

In demonstrating this fidelity, however, Scipio brutally killed a white army officer fighting against his master, Mellichampe, on the side of the British in the Revolutionary War. Before striking, Scipio articulated his apprehension about harming a white man: "I 'mos' 'fraid," he confessed to his master, "he dah buckrah [white man]--I dah nigger." He finally struck the blow, because, the slave explained resignedly to his victim, "Dis dah my mossa,--I hab for mind um." After doing so, Scipio fell into a daze similar to that experienced by July in *The Yemassee*, because he could not believe what he had done. All the praises heaped upon him then, Simms related, "fell upon unheeding senses, for the stupefied Scipio at that moment heard them not." Instead, he "stood gazing in stupor upon the horrid spectacle--his own deed--before him."[36]

Despite the qualms Scipio expressed about inflicting physical harm on a white man, the description Simms included of both the murder and its immediate aftermath starkly illuminated the horrifying nature of violence committed by an African American against a white subject. Simms, first of all, prolonged the scene, stretching Scipio's deliberations about whether he should follow his master's instructions and kill a white man, plus the murder itself, to three pages. In those three pages, Simms painstakingly laid out each detail of the slaying in all its grisly drama. When Scipio first received the command to kill the Englishman, Simms related that "the negro seized a billet--a ragged knot of the richest pine wood that lay at hand." Then as Scipio "approached and planted one of his feet between the bodies of the two combatants," Simms continued, "the heavy

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[36] Simms, *Yemassee*, 268; William Gilmore Simms, *Mellichampe: A Legend of the Santee* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 147, 224.

pine-wood knot was lifted above the head of the tory." Although the Englishman "threw up his arms vainly," Simms recounted, "the blow descended and silenced him for ever." Then Simms turned to the body over which the black man continued to stand with the "ragged" club in his hand. "The billet was buried in his brains," Simms declared, and "the scull lay crushed and flattened, and but a single contraction of the limbs and convulsion of the frame attested the quick transition of life to death--so dreadful had been the stroke."[37]

Scipio's reaction to the act of violence he had committed dramatically reflected the darkest fears of white Americans about the pleasure that black men might take in killing whites. Although Scipio appeared to contemplate the terrible nature of his act as he "stood gazing in stupor upon the horrid spectacle--his own deed--before him," his "stupor" could more rightly be characterized as a curious fit of ecstasy. This delight was prompted not by relief at having successfully saved his master's life, but by glee at having killed a white man. As he ran from the scene, Scipio cried, "in tones like a maniac, and in words which indicated the intoxicating effect of his new-born experience upon him," the jubilant phrase, "Ho! ho! I kill buckrah. I's a nigger, I kill buckrah!" This triumphant response would have triggered among antebellum readers the dread that David Walker had been right when he promised in 1829, "Get the blacks started, and if you do not have a gang of tigers and lions to deal with, I am a deceiver of the blacks and of the whites."[38] If Simms's confidence in the loyalty of slaves could not prevent his

[37] Simms, *Mellichampe*, 223-25.
[38] Simms, *Mellichampe*, 224, 225; David Walker, *Appeal*, 25.

hidden fears of black violence from surfacing in *Mellichampe* and *The Yemassee*, neither could J. H. Ingraham's professed belief in the innate cowardice of African Americans as a race keep black violence out of his anti-abolitionist books of the 1830s. In *The South-West*, published in 1835, Ingraham declared confidently that "the negro is wholly destitute of courage," and that "cowardice is a principle of his soul, as instinctive as courage in the white man." He then went on to add that "the negro has a habitual fear of the white man, which has become for him a second nature." This timidity, predicted Ingraham, would "operate to prevent any serious evil resulting from their plans" for revolt. Yet *Lafitte*, the novel that Ingraham released only a year later, indicated the depth of the author's apprehension about the violent nature of black men. Although they might be cowards, Ingraham suggested in *Lafitte*, black men could also resemble beasts in the acts of savagery they were capable of carrying out.[39]

Lafitte featured the hideous slave Cudjoe, whom Ingraham first presented as the fiercely loyal servant of the novel's protagonist, but who would ultimately emerge as an enraged animal that the author would unleash against white and black characters alike. Lafitte had rescued Cudjoe from a slave ship, and therefore, Ingraham explained, "gratitude to his master . . . had bound him to him, with a faithfulness and attachment nothing could diminish, and death only terminate." Though Ingraham noted that Cudjoe's "natural disposition was gentle and affectionate," this physically disfigured slave harbored a world of resentment and violent fantasies toward the white men who

[39] Ingraham, *The South-West*, v. 2, 260, 93, 259.

had, throughout his life, mocked his extensive deformities. "Deep and bitter was the hatred rankling in his dark bosom" against his white enemies, Ingraham related, "for tampering with his deformities." Through their mockery of Cudjoe's appearance, these men "were sowing, unconsciously, seeds of revenge in the heart of the deformed negro, of which they were . . . destined to reap the bitter fruits." The slave was biding his time, "while he gloated over his terrible schemes," but he swore inwardly that "revenge . . . should one day be his."[40]

Cudjoe's character and his outward appearance marked him as an inhuman savage who might violently wreak his vengeance on a white man at any time. Ingraham referred to the quality in Cudjoe that made this possible as "animal courage," suggesting that only when they took on the form of animal could slaves pose a danger to whites. Throughout the novel, Ingraham consistently likened Cudjoe to a variety of different creatures, including an alligator, a wild boar, and an ape. The slave's most distinctive physical feature, Ingraham remarked, resided in his "glittering white teeth, two of which flanking his capacious jaws, projected outwards, with the dignity of the embryo tusks of a young elephant." Cudjoe's "long arms," Ingraham noted, "hung down like those of an ourang-outant, terminating in short stunted fingers, of which useful appendages two and a half were wanting." These bestial characteristics translated directly into the type of

[40] [Jospeh Holt Ingraham], *Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), v. 2, 34, 51, 33-4, 54-5.

personality that this slave possessed: "When roused to revenge," Ingraham warned his readers, "he was more terrible than the uncaged hyena."[41]

Ingraham ultimately destroyed any hopes white readers of *Lafitte* might have that black violence would never come to actual fruition when Cudjoe, in a rage, murdered a white man as well as two fellow African Americans. "Cudjoe want revenge ob hell!" the slave announced to Oula, an African priestess whom he had enlisted to effect retribution against those who had mocked him. When Oula double-crossed him because of her alliance with a Spaniard named Martinez, Cudjoe exacted the "revenge ob hell" not only on Oula, but also on Martinez and on Oula's son. "Before Oula could comprehend his motives," Ingraham related, "the reeking blade passed through her withered bosom." In triumph, Cudjoe cried out, "Take dis, hag ob hell! . . . You make no more fool ob Cudjoe, for de curs' Spaniard." In his confrontation with Martinez, Ingraham wrote, Cudjoe's "long knife passed directly through his heart," and, "without a word or a groan, he fell dead at his feet." Finally, Cudjoe finished off Oula's son, who had attacked him: "The thrust was skillful, and fatal to the boy" Ingraham reported, "who released his grasp, and fell back in the agonies of death, to the ground."[42]

Even the simple-mindedness with which proslavery authors imbued their slave characters contributed to their tendency to commit acts of retribution against white Americans. In Robert Bird's novel *Sheppard Lee*, the weak intellects possessed by the slaves Bird depicted simply provided a means for abolitionists to turn contented slaves

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[41] Ingraham, *Lafitte*, v. 2, 32, 33, 34.
[42] Ingraham, *Lafitte*, 182.

against the only man they could call "a great and powerful friend"--their benevolent master. Bird intended the massacre that ensued as a warning to his Northern readers against abolitionist proselytizing among the slaves. But more likely, readers would view the chilling slave rebellion in *Sheppard Lee* as a danger inherent in the slave system and, therefore, a reason to bring the institution to an end as quickly as possible.

Despite Bird's insistence that the slaves in *Sheppard Lee* had been content with their condition until coming across the abolitionist pamphlet, the ease with which the booklet turned these men against their master calls into question the true depth of their loyalty. When Bird introduced an antislavery pamphlet entitled "The Fate of the Slave" into the idyllic tableau of contented slaves and revered slaveholders he had depicted, an insurrection became almost inevitable. Once the slaves had read the pamphlet and seen the pictures in it, Bird reported that these simple-minded creatures "began to have sentimental notions about liberty and equality, the dignity of man, the nobleness of freedom, and so forth." This incendiary tract persuaded the slaves that they were "the victims of avarice, the play-things of cruelty, the foot-balls of oppression," and "the most injured people in the world" at the hands of their master. The slaves thus began to hate and fear this man, when "a week before there was not one of them who would not have risked his life to save his master's." One thin abolitionist text, the narrator lamented, ultimately "had the effect to make a hundred men, who were previously content with their

lot in life . . . the victims of dissatisfaction and rage, the enemies of those they had once loved, and, in fine, the contrivers and authors of their own destruction."[43]

Although Bird blamed the slave insurrection that ensued on the abolitionists who had produced and distributed the incendiary pamphlet, his white readers could not have avoided reacting with discomfort to this section of the novel itself, given its descriptions of savage slave violence against genteel, benevolent whites. The episode took on the character of a nightmare, with Bird depicting in concrete terms the kind of "painful dream" to which Tocqueville alluded. The setting received its illumination from the ominous glow of the fire the slaves had started, which, Bird claimed, produced "a light equal to that of noon, though red as blood itself." Confusion abounded, as a "violent . . . rush of assailants" and a "wild . . . tumult" initially obscured the narrator's view of the events. At first, Sheppard Lee saw only his "master's gray hairs . . . floating an instant over the heads of the assailants; but the next moment they had vanished." Later, he merely heard the "savage yells of triumph" that marked the off-stage slaughter of the slaveholding family's youngest children. Despite Sheppard Lee's obstructed vantage point, however, he did see the conspirators fire "six or seven guns" at his master and then witnessed firsthand members of the master's family being "set upon by others with the spears." He observed his master and the overseer's son dying on the porch after they had been attacked, and he looked on as the overseer was "cut down on the spot." Finally, Sheppard Lee watched as the oldest daughter sacrificed her own life and that of her sister

[43] Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee. Written by Himself* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), v. 2, 192, 191, 200.

to escape "a fate otherwise inevitable" at the hands of Sheppard Lee's "ruffian companions." "The frail figure of the little sister was hurled from her arms," Bird's narrator reported, "to be dashed to pieces on the stones below."[44]

The shocked reaction of white characters who witnessed such events further underscored the horror of violent actions committed by black men. In *Sheppard Lee*, the title character was a white man whose spirit had taken up residence in the body of a slave named Tom. Although Sheppard Lee as Tom had somewhat inadvertently helped set in motion the revolt on his master's plantation, he nevertheless expressed alarm at the plans and actions of the rebels when he realized the full implications of his actions. "Seized with terror," Sheppard Lee suddenly "began to think with what kindness I had been treated by those I had leagued to destroy; and the baseness and ingratitude of the whole design struck me with such force" that he would have revealed the plot to his master, had he not feared the rebels' vengeance against himself. When the night of the insurrection arrived, Sheppard Lee found himself filled with "gloom and horror" and entered a state of "stupid distraction." Watching his master's son threatened by the mob after several of the family have been killed, Sheppard Lee declares, "I would have defended him at that moment with my life, for my heart bled for what had already been done."[45]

Similarly, in *Mellichampe*, a group of respectable white women emphasized the proper reaction of white readers to Scipio's murder of the white Englishman. Just after the incident had taken place, Scipio described to Mellichampe's betrothed and several of

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[44] Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, v. 2, 204, 203, 207, 205.
[45] Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, v. 2, 205.

her friends in graphic language what had transpired: "'Tis Mass Barsfield I been knock on de head," Scipio explained. "I take lightwood-knot, I hammer um on he head tell you sees noting but de blood and de brain, and de white ob he eye." To assure his incredulous listeners that he was indeed speaking the truth, Scipio rejoined, "I knock um fur true! I hit um on he head wid de pine-knot. De head mash flat like pancake. I no see um 'gen." In response, Simms related, "the maidens shuddered at the narration."[46]

A misunderstanding between Scipio and the women immediately preceding this exchange revealed significantly the fear of slave insurrection concealed beneath the horror of black violence that Simms, his white characters, and his white readers harbored. Before she knew of her lover's rescue by Scipio, Mellichampe's fiancee, Janet, pressed the slave for news of his master. "Where is he?" she pleaded, "Tell me he is safe." Scipio, still focused on the bloody act he had committed against the Englishman, responded distractedly, "He dead!--I kill um!" At this declaration, which Janet accepted at once, without questioning it, Simms reported that the lady "shrieked and fell." This incident suggests that the white characters in *Mellichampe* "shuddered" in response to an act of black violence because it recalled the deeply entrenched fear, vividly presented by Bird in *Sheppard Lee*, of slaves rising up and slaughtering their masters. Four short years after Nat Turner and his band successfully murdered their own masters, Northerners and Southerners still retained the "clamorous fears" and "tacit forebodings" Tocqueville had observed in them during that crisis. Novels like *Mellichampe* and *Sheppard Lee* only

[46] Simms, *Mellichampe*, 226.

helped to sustain white readers' anxiety about the violent nature of African Americans and the constant threat of slave insurrection in the Southern states.[47]

In the aftermath of the black violence they depicted, anti-abolitionist authors attempted to restore the proper social order by portraying punishment against the African-American characters who had carried out acts of brutality against whites. But the poetic justice these writers imposed on their black characters generally appeared as a forgettable afterthought to the graphic act of violence itself, minimizing its effectiveness. In *Sheppard Lee*, for instance, Bird noted the execution of those who had participated in the rebellion merely as a postscript to his vivid scenes of the massacre that had decimated an entire white family. In *The Yemassee*, Simms penalized the slave Hector for shooting an Indian, even though Hector had saved his master's life by doing so. "Unaccustomed . . . to the use of gunpowder," Simms explained, "the black had overcharged the piece, and the recoil had given him a shock which, at the moment, he was certain could not have been a job less severe than that which it inflicted upon the Coosaw he had slain." In allowing Hector to suffer for his violent act, Simms voiced his own literary objection to black violence against non-blacks. But the ache in Hector's jaw that the incident produced did not measure up to the fatal blow that the slave had inflicted on his Native American victim. Simms, in fact, even subtly ridiculed Hector for feeling that the two men had suffered to the same degree as a result of the shooting. In a different incident in the same novel, the slave July paid more dearly for his attack on an invading Indian.

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[47] Simms, *Mellichampe*, 225.

After striking one assailant dead, Simms related, July "rushed bravely enough among the rest." But the courageous black man did not fare well among the enemy. Although he struggled valiantly with one of their number, Simms recounted, "the hatchet was in the hand of the Indian, and a moment after his fall it crushed into the skull of the negro." A year later, however, Simms would allow Scipio to murder a white Englishman in nearly the same grisly manner without enduring any repercussions whatsoever for this brutal act.[48]

Despite the overtly anti-abolitionist intentions of books like *Sheppard Lee* and *The Yemassee*, then, sinister messages about slaves and slavery lurked below the surface in these novels. Unlike their counterparts in the 1850s, the authors of such texts made little effort in the 1830s to eliminate conflicting attitudes toward the institution of slavery from their works. Bird, Simms, and their counterparts attempted to neutralize the effect of the violent episodes they included in their narratives by punishing the black perpetrators who committed these acts. But in the end, it was the act of black violence itself, and the shocked reaction of the whites in the story to that violence, that invariably overshadowed this punishment and remained indelibly etched in American memory.

By 1840, it had become apparent that anti-abolitionists had failed to increase nationwide support for their cause during the previous five years. The hesitancy with which elitist anti-abolitionists created propaganda to further their cause with the general public, and their treatment of black violence within the texts they did produce, prevented

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[48] Simms, *Yemassee*, 382, 328.

a mass conversion to anti-abolitionist principles among the American public. At the same time, their violent treatment of abolitionists themselves, along with the blatant violations of civil rights that anti-abolitionists committed against their enemies, provided antislavery activists with an ideal means with which to attract tens of thousands of Northerners into the abolitionist camp.

Abolitionists took heart from their successes of the 1830s and continued to devise new and more popular forms of antislavery propaganda during the 1840s in their enduring efforts to attract the support of the Northern masses. As ideas of equality took stronger hold on the American public, abolitionist writers and organizers began to downplay the notion that black violence against whites constituted an inevitable result of the slave system. The clear apprehension that such portrayals of slave retaliation against their masters triggered in ordinary white Americans led abolitionists to all but eliminate this specter from their publications and to focus instead on the concept of black martyrdom in their portrayals of Southern slaves. This approach allowed abolitionists to move their propaganda more easily into the increasingly popular direction of Victorian sentimentality, an ethos that would come to dominate American literary culture by the 1850s. Once again, the keen understanding of changing American values and ideals that abolitionists possessed would help movement activists propel their ideas to the forefront of public consciousness in the North. By their skillful manipulation of these values, abolitionists would ultimately play a critical role in turning Northerners against the South and, finally, against the institution of black slavery that it supported.

In 1835, however, no American counted emancipation thirty years in the future as a foregone conclusion. Conservative Northerners and Southerners at that time feared the effect that the rising force of abolitionism might have on their countrymen and women. But defenders of slavery held a strong position in both regions, with a widespread adherence to traditional hierarchical values and, perhaps more importantly, a widespread public apathy working in their favor. Had anti-abolitionists been willing to compete with their opponents in the realm of propaganda and capitalize on their continued advantages in American society, they might have retained a firm stronghold of support in the Northern states. By dismissing the importance of Northern public opinion and turning instead in later years to keeping Southerners united in their proslavery sentiment, anti-abolitionists in the 1830s helped ensure that Americans would eventually divide along sectional lines on the issue of slavery. Without more appealing propaganda to combat the effective deluge coming from the pens and the presses of abolitionists, anti-abolitionists helped lead the country toward Civil War and, ultimately, the emancipation of Southern slaves that they had so dreaded.

Chapter 3 From Rebel to Martyr: Shifting Antislavery Strategies, 1836-1852

Through abolitionists' skillful treatment of popular values in the propaganda they produced during the 1830s, the antislavery movement had developed a loyal base of support in the North by 1840. Abolitionists had not yet succeeded, however, in transforming public opinion to the point where most Northerners would endorse basic antislavery principles. Of the ten million Americans who lived in the Northern states in 1840, only some two hundred thousand identified themselves formally with the abolitionist cause. To effect a revolution of sentiment in the North, abolitionists would have to frame their message in a way that would more readily appeal to ordinary Americans. They would also have to present this message using media that would attract a popular audience. In the 1840s, fugitive slaves began using the compelling narratives of their escape from slavery to entice ordinary readers with the adventure and danger inherent in these experiences. At the same time, abolitionists aligned themselves more closely with the sentimental values many Americans embraced with increasing enthusiasm as the decade wore on. Antislavery texts of the 1840s thereby prepared the ground for the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 and for the spread of antislavery principles throughout the Northern population in the ensuing decade.

The negative reception that Richard Hildreth's *The Slave, or the Memoirs of Archy Moore* met in 1836 demonstrates the unpopular status of the antislavery movement prior to the 1840s. When Hildreth sought a publisher for his fictional slave narrative, he found no company in either Boston or New York City willing to take such a commercial

risk in the midst of a pervasive anti-abolitionist sentiment in the North. When no publishing house would consent to issue his book, Hildreth had it printed at his own expense. Once released, *The Slave* received enthusiastic acclaim from abolitionists. Its revolutionary approach gave rise among antislavery activists to an optimism that the book might bring in converts to the cause from the public at large. Hildreth's novel, William Lloyd Garrison predicted, would "find its way into the hearts of thousands of fashionable females, who would read nothing relating to slavery in any other form." *The Slave* enjoyed brisk sales, totaling some 7,000 copies over the next year. By 1848, seven editions had been produced. But it fell short of Garrison's expectations, failing to attract readers from outside antislavery circles and instead garnering most of its popularity from those men and women who had already become committed to the movement through other means. "Almost the only persons who ventured to look into it," Hildreth later recalled, were "the small . . . sect of the abolitionists" in existence at the time.[1]

The narrow base of support for Hildreth's novel contrasted dramatically with the explosive popularity that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would achieve fifteen years later, selling 300,000 copies in the same amount of time Hildreth required to sell 7,000. Not only committed abolitionists, but hundreds of thousands of Americans who had previously thought little about Southern slavery, eagerly devoured the novel. It drew praise from nearly all quarters, winning effusive commendations even from those who thought Stowe

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[1] *The Liberator*, Apr. 14, 1837, quoted in Evan Brandstadter, "Uncle Tom and Archy Moore: The Antislavery Novel as Ideological Symbol" *American Quarterly* 26 (May 1974), 169; Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore, The White Slave; or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), xv.

had exaggerated the evils of the institution. Although not strictly in keeping with the Garrisonian principle of racial equality, Stowe's narrative drew large numbers of Americans into the debate over slavery for the first time. By 1853, scarcely any man, woman, or child could have been found in the country who could not have identified Uncle Tom, little Eva, or the mischievous Topsy. The novel also suggested to Americans in a powerful way the fundamental immorality of the institution of slavery. Many formerly apathetic readers cried over the fate of Tom as hard as they laughed at Topsy's minstrel-show antics.

Uncle Tom's Cabin could never have caused such a stir without the changes in political climate that had taken place in the North during the previous decade. When *Archy Moore* was published in 1836, public sentiment generally concurred that abolitionists had succeeded in stirring up dangerous excitement within their region without effecting any good to justify the agitation. Northerners like James Watson Webb even suggested that these "modern haberdashers of murderous negro tracts" should be stamped out like "reptilian eggs." Although most Northerners did not condone physical attacks against antislavery activists, the repeated outbreaks of anti-abolitionist violence led them to view antislavery texts as dangerous materials that brought about social chaos and threatened disunion. As a result, publishers and book shops steered clear of outright abolitionist works like *Archy Moore*. "No bookseller dared to publish anything of the sort," Hildreth reflected on his experience in Boston and New York during 1836, "and so complete was the reign of terror, that printers were almost afraid to set up the types." At

the time, the Boston *Daily Advocate* predicted that "the booksellers won't dare to sell it, and a copy of it will never get into a southern latitude." Reviewers who admired the book as "a stirring and interesting work of fiction," or even "the most extraordinary book of the day," heartily objected to its publication. "*We cannot too much deprecate the publication of such works*," the Boston *Atlas* emphasized, because they contributed to "*sustaining and impelling a dangerous excitement.*" For his part, the editor of the *Daily Advocate* worried that *Archy Moore* would "produce more sensation, if it is ever read south of the Potomac, than the massacre at Southampton--whether for good or evil, we cannot pretend to say, but we fear the latter."[2]

By the early 1840s, Northerners no longer feared as intensely that conflict over the slavery question would bring about the destruction of their society and of the federal union. After the Panic of 1837, Americans in the North turned away from slavery as the most politically and emotionally charged issue of the day and focused instead on pressing economic concerns. Even Northerners who despised abolitionism came to accept that the abolitionists would remain an established part of their society and turned their attention to other matters. As the number of new auxiliaries being formed decreased and antislavery organizations became permanent fixtures in Northern communities, violence against antislavery advocates declined from a high point of 64 incidents in 1836 to only 4 by 1840. The Gag Rule and the acquisition of no new territories by the federal government also helped to eliminate the slavery question from national political discussions until the

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[2] Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970), 164; Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, ix; Boston *Daily Advocate*, reprinted in Hildreth,

controversy over the Mexican War and Texas at mid-decade. As the issue of slavery faded into the background of national politics during the early 1840s, Northerners began to regard abolitionist propaganda as a relatively benign force in which they might safely take a mild interest or ignore at will. As a commentator on the genre noted in 1849, Northern readers could pore over slave narratives in the 1840s for the "poetry and romance" they provided, or read them as another thrilling "example of genius struggling against adversity" without risking riots in the streets or the stability of the national union.[3]

Once Texas became a central issue in American politics, however, a powerful resentment of Southern slaveholders began to overshadow Northerners' quiet apathy toward abolitionism in the North. As Southern politicians pushed Congress to annex Texas, thereby nearly doubling American holdings of prime cotton-producing land, many Northerners suspected that these "aggressions of the slave power" were intended strictly "for the benefit of the South; for the strengthening of her institutions; for the promotion of her power; . . . [and] for the advancement of her influence." By the time Congress approved the Compromise of 1850, which included the hated Fugitive Slave Law, Northerners had almost completely transferred their ire from those who attacked the slave system to those who upheld it and profited from it most directly. Even James Watson Webb, the editor of the conservative New York *Courier and Enquirer*, turned his political allegiance to the Free Soil movement in the early 1850s. How much longer could

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Archy Moore, xii; Boston *Atlas*, December 24, 1836, reprinted in Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, x.

[3] Statistics on the decline of mob violence listed in Richards, *"Gentlemen,"* 157; Ephraim Peabody, "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves" *Christian Examiner* 47 (July-September 1849), reprinted in Charles T.

Northerners, he demanded, remain "under the lash of the Slave Power" and submit to be "bullied, whipped, and '*kicked*' into any course or policy which they may please to dictate to us?"[4]

The resentment of Southern slaveholders that the Texas controversy awakened encouraged Northerners to embrace Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional indictment of the Fugitive Slave Law and Southern slavery when it emerged in novel form in 1852. No longer did the Northern public fear, or casually dismiss, texts such as Stowe's. Instead, eager American consumers kept fourteen presses running day and night, frantically churning out hundreds of thousands of copies of Stowe's "vehement and unrestrained argument" against Southern slavery. The "unprecedented" sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* believed, constituted "strong evidence of the strength of the feeling existing in the North on the subject of slavery." Observers noted that Northerners who had "heretofore been ignorantly and cruelly bitter in their prejudices against color" attended plays based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and offered "much applause . . . at the expression of the sentiments of love of liberty and equality of rights, (among men, whatever be their color)." Performances of the antislavery play were sold out for weeks in Northern cities, as audiences clamored for a seat even at the productions that were "thoroughly abolition" in nature.[5]

Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 20; quoted in Davis & Gates, *Slave's Narrative*, xvii.

[4]Leonard L. Richards, *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), 155, 147, 164.

[5] *The* (London) *Times*, September 3, 1852, reprinted in Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 478; *The*

Though the insolent behavior of Southerners in the political arena served as the immediate catalyst for Northern rage in the 1850s, the abolitionist propaganda released during the previous decade proved critical in preparing the ground in the North for sectional antagonism. In his *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, Michael Holt argued that Northerners gauged Southern encroachments on their liberties before the Civil War through the ideological framework of classical republican values. Their complaints about the "Slave Power," Holt suggested, stemmed from their fears of "the enslavement of white Americans in the North by despotic slaveholders bent on crushing their liberties, destroying their equality in the nation, and overthrowing the republican principle of majority rule." Northern grievances, however, were not based purely on abstract principles commonly used by nineteenth-century Americans as a political reference point. When Northerners in the 1850s charged Southerners with treating them like slaves, they not only had in mind "subordination to tyranny, the loss of liberty and equality, [and] the absence of republicanism." The language that Northerners directed against the "slave power" also evoked concrete images of actual slaves suffering from the repression imposed on them by their Southern masters. When James Watson Webb protested that the North had come "under the lash of the Slave Power," for instance, his words conjured up for Northern readers the ubiquitous abolitionist representations of a slave being beaten

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National Era, Washington, D.C., 7 (October 27, 1853). Not all dramatic interpretations of Stowe's novel, of which there were many, conveyed a strong antislavery message. The versions that emerged in the first years after the novel was published, however, did tend to be either abolitionist in tone or, alternatively, scathing parodies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Tom-shows that emerged later in the century generally downplayed the political aspect of the novel, particularly after the Civil War, but also in the later part of the 1850s. See Thomas F. Gossett, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* (Dallas, Tex.: Southern

by his master. The propaganda of the 1830s and 1840s suffused Northern culture with pictures of cruel, despotic slaveholders taking out their wrath on innocent, defenseless victims, providing Northerners with a vivid picture of slaveholders' anti-republican tendencies in action.[6]

Antislavery propaganda of this period was able to contribute to Northerners' resentment of slaveholders, however, only because authors like Stowe had significantly revised earlier abolitionist portrayals of slave characters to make their publications more acceptable to ordinary Northern readers. Although Richard Hildreth had gone out of his way to make Archy Moore a slave with whom Northern white readers might easily identify, the strong-willed, intelligent Archy and his darker, more violent friend Thomas manifested personal qualities that would have prevented most white readers from giving these characters their unqualified support. Throughout the next decade, fugitive slave narrators and their advisors put forward to the public slave personas who would convince white audiences to accept them as objects worthy of their sympathy. It was not until Harriet Beecher Stowe created Uncle Tom, however, that white Americans encountered a slave character they could endorse without reservation. Tom's dark skin color, humble demeanor, and intense horror of committing violent acts against whites made him both an easily believable and a non-threatening figure for white readers in the North.

When *Archy Moore* was published in 1836, white Americans in most parts of the North had had little firsthand experience either with actual slaves or with sympathetic

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Methodist University Press, 1985) for more details on Tom-shows and other cultural outgrowths of Stowe's novel.

representations of them in cultural media. *Post nati* laws had all but ended slavery in the Northern states by 1830, and travel to the South proved relatively rare for most Northerners, especially before the more extensive building of railroads in the 1850s. In 1830, only 48 slaves remained in the whole of New England--down from almost 4,000 in 1790. Among the Mid-Atlantic states, Pennsylvania had had relatively few slaves within its borders since the first decade of the century, although the number of slaves in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware had declined substantially in much more recent years. New York, for example, contained some ten thousand slaves in 1820, but by 1830 that number had fallen to 75. With the exception of Illinois, which reported 747 slaves in 1830, the newer states of the Northwest had scarcely a handful of people remaining in bondage by the time Hildreth's book was released. Even whites who had resided in New York or Illinois since before slavery had ended there had much less chance of having known a slave personally than did the inhabitants of any Southern state in the 1830s. By that decade, only the newer states of Arkansas and Mississippi and the border state of Missouri contained fewer than 100,000 slaves, and most contained more than twice that number.

In general, Northern familiarity with slaves was limited mostly to figures who had become well-known through popular culture media, like the sinister rebel Nat Turner or the carefree, absurd Jim Crow. These images, combined with those prevalent in the plantation fiction and abolitionist propaganda of the time, provided a range of stereotypes

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[6] Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 152, 190.

from which Northerners might choose in forming their conceptions of Southern slaves. As a result, Northerners in 1836 could accept slave characters who were darkly menacing, fun-loving, or simple-minded. None of these images, however, were inclined to elicit sympathy or respect from the average white person living in the North at the time.

Northerners' lack of familiarity with slaves had contributed to the skeptical response with which they had met Richard Hildreth's portrayal of Archy Moore as a well-spoken, morally indignant, courageous slave. The *Christian Examiner* of Boston, for example, had deemed Archy's character "a constant violation of probability." "We read, in what professes to be the language of a slave," the *Examiner* explained, "that which we feel a slave could not have written." Looking back on this review fifteen years later, Hildreth acknowledged that its author had "no doubt expressed the sentiment current about him" when he assumed that "to have been bred a slave, was . . . to have grown up destitute of intellect and feeling."[7]

The first slave narratives to emerge in the mid-1830s encountered the same dubious reception by the Northern public that Hildreth's novel had elicited. Charles Ball's gripping tale *Slavery in the United States*, which was published the same year as *Archy Moore*, was discounted by Northerners as fiction, though no evidence existed that Ball's story was untrue. Similarly, when the highly regarded poet John Greenleaf Whittier published the life story of the fugitive slave James Williams in 1838, white Southerners and Northerners pronounced the narrative a fraud. "The statements in the

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[7] Boston *Christian Examiner* (March 1840), quoted in Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, xvii; Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, xix-xx.

narrative," the *African Repository* proclaimed, "are wholly false, and therefore they cannot with propriety ask for the confidence of the community in any of the statements contained in the narrative." William Lloyd Garrison scoffed at this response, arguing that "it seems as if our northern citizens had determined to resist all evidence respecting the practical concerns of slaveholding, until they are ocularly convinced, while they have resolved never to witness *Life in the Negro Quarters*."[8]

White readers also rejected these early narratives because they featured admirable black slaves who threatened, or actually carried out, violence against white characters. Although abolitionist propagandists of the 1830s did not want to frighten white Americans with such images to the point that the public would shun their publications outright, abolitionists hoped to play on the omnipresent fears of Northern and Southern whites about large-scale slave insurrection and murder. The fictional and visual images they produced frequently contained ominous reminders that slavery kept alive the possibility black men might rise up at any time and take their revenge against the men and women who had kept them in bondage against their will. Despite the subtlety with which abolitionists attempted to treat the subject, the fears that these threatening black figures generated in white readers generally prompted whites to shy away from abolitionist propaganda rather than to throw in their lot with the antislavery cause. The specter of black violence struck terror in the consciousness of white Americans so deeply

[8] *African Repository* 15 (June 1839), 161-66, reprinted in Davis and Gates, *Slave's Narrative*, 14; *The Liberator*, March 9, 1838, reprinted in Davis and Gates, *Slave's Narrative*, 9.

that in most cases they preferred to banish the subject from their minds rather than taking action to prevent it from coming to fruition.

The presence in *Archy Moore* of an ominous, violent black character named Thomas contributed to the hesitancy with which the white reading public received the novel. The murder of his wife by a cruel overseer, as Hildreth related the story, transformed Thomas from a pious, obedient slave into a vengeful renegade. This slave, with his "unmixed African blood" and "stout muscular frame," stood at the grave of his wife and resolved quietly, "Blood for blood; is it not so, Archy?" When Archy and Thomas later overpowered the overseer in the woods, Thomas, while "his eyes flashed fire," declared to his friend, "That man dies to-night." After allowing the overseer half an hour to prepare himself for death, Thomas calmly shot the white man in the head. At the end of the novel, Hildreth sent the more skittish, whiter-skinned Archy to England, but left the threatening black Thomas in the heart of the slave South, roaming the woods, free to terrorize any other whites he encountered. This lingering image proved an unsettling one for whites who preferred the "slavish fear and servile timidity" of Archy to the "bolder spirit" of Thomas, who felt no compunction about effecting "just retribution" against a white man.[9]

Likewise, Charles Ball introduced a manly, yet ominous, description of his slave father in the opening chapter of *Slavery in the United States*. The virility of Ball's father, whom he cited as "a very strong, active, and resolute man," posed a direct threat to the

[9] Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, 173, 182, 202, 203, 206.

white slaveholders in his midst. "It was deemed unsafe," Ball explained, "to attempt to seize him, even with the aid of others." Not only was this formidable slave physically agile, but, in addition, "it was known he carried upon his person a large knife." Before running away for good, Ball noted that his father began spending "nearly all his leisure time with my grandfather, who," Ball claimed, "had been a great warrior in his native country." The notion of an African warrior and his bold descendants living in the heart of the United States proved highly disturbing to white readers who, even if they opposed the slave system, preferred that African Americans remain safely in a subordinate position.[10]

An abolitionist print from 1840 entitled "Fourth of July Celebration, or Southern Ideas of Liberty," demonstrates the subtlety with which early antislavery propagandists incorporated images of the threatening black man into their appeals to the public for an end to the slave system. As the title indicates, this woodcut primarily focused on the contradiction inherent in Southerners' veneration of American freedom while they enslaved millions of black men and women and persecuted those who spoke out against the system. The most striking image of the piece was not accompanied by commentary, as were the other scenes depicted, nor did the illustrator provide an explanation for its presence in the print. In one corner of the picture, a young black man partially concealed himself behind a tree, revealing only one of his eyes and a muscular shoulder and upper arm. Unlike the other figures in the print, this man looked directly at the viewer in an arresting gaze. The message he was clearly meant to convey, below the conscious level

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[10] Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man* (John S. Taylor, 1837), 19.

on which the artist presented the other activity of the drawing, was that the slaveholder could not escape his sin, that black men were watching and keeping score, and that they would eventually have their revenge for the wrongs they were witnessing and experiencing among their people.

The vivid images that Lydia Maria Child depicted in her 1841 story "The Black Saxons" brought to life the racial nightmare that Tocqueville claimed "perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans." In this short tale, the benevolent and slightly naive slaveholder Mr. Duncan attended a meeting in disguise where slaves debated whether to rise up and kill their masters. Child set the stage for this chilling scene with an ominous description of the slaves as Duncan first saw them upon arrival at the gathering. "As they glanced about, now sinking into dense shadow, and now emerging into lurid light," Child related, "they seemed to the slaveholder's excited imagination like demons from the pit, come to claim guilty souls." As an "athletic, gracefully-proportioned young man" rose to speak, Duncan observed that "the light of a dozen torches, eagerly held up by fierce revengeful comrades, showed his back and shoulders deeply gashed by the whip, and still oozing with blood." This young slave, however, did not play the role of the Christian martyr. "Boys!" this youth demanded, "*shall* we not murder our masters?" The other suggestions advanced by embittered slaves would have chilled the blood of any white reader in 1841. "Ravish wives and daughters before their eyes, as they have done to *us!*" proclaimed a "tall, sinewy mulatto" slave. "Shoot them down with rifles, as they have

shot *us!* Throw their carcasses to the crows," he declared in conclusion, "and then let the Devil take them where they never rake up fire o' nights."[11]

By the late 1830s, abolitionists were beginning to realize the ineffectiveness of such scare tactics in promoting their cause among white Americans. Authors and artists who opposed slavery began instead to try to "enlist the kindly sympathies" of their audience in hopes that they might "raise up a host of enemies against the fearful system of slavery." To that end, Theodore Dwight Weld published the groundbreaking abolitionist tract *American Slavery As It Is* in 1839. The release of *American Slavery* marked an important step in the transition from rebel to martyr in abolitionist portrayals of slaves. Weld's text featured thousands of stories culled from Southern newspapers of slaves who suffered horrific violence and cruelty at the hands of their masters. As his introduction promised, these accounts presented hard evidence that slaves endured, among a host of other tortures, having "their ears cut off, their eyes knocked out, their bones broken, their flesh branded with red hot irons" and that often "they are maimed, mutilated and burned to death over slow fires." The images of slaves as mangled victims proved much more entrancing for white Northern readers than slaves who were bolder agents of their own destiny, like Hildreth's Archy or Thomas had been. Within a short time, *American Slavery* became the most widely distributed antislavery publication of its day, selling over 100,000 copies within twelve months.[12]

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[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1981), v. 1, 242; Carolyn L. Karcher, *A Lydia Maria Child Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 186, 188, 187.
[12] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 1, 1852; Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 9.

By relying on evidence from Southern newspapers, Weld hoped to use slaveholders' own words to demonstrate the inhumanity of the slave system. This technique, however, relegated the slaves themselves to the role of silent victims. Unlike in Hildreth's novel, African-American bondsmen did not appear as intelligent, manly beings, but instead as nameless, faceless objects of slaveholders' wrath and barbarity. These representations of helpless, persecuted slaves tied into common assumptions about slaves as simple-minded children, dependent on the guidance of whites to survive. As a result, Weld's tome enabled white readers to pity the black men and women he portrayed without feeling threatened by them.

In the next decade, a new group of abolitionists arose who strove to produce texts prompt Americans to sympathize with slaves, as *American Slavery* had, while directly challenging the view of black slaves as helpless victims that had helped make Weld's book such a commercial success. Beginning with Frederick Douglass in 1841, former slaves residing in the Northern states began lecturing about their experiences in bondage and then publishing their narratives for a wider audience. Abolitionists promoted slave talks and written narratives as an effective way of reaching the masses and turning them against the Southern system. "We see in it," the Boston *Chronotype* wrote of fugitive slave literature, "the easy and infallible means of abolitionizing the free states. Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry;" the *Chronotype* pointed out, "but narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men." As editor Lucius C. Matlack wrote in 1849 in the introduction to the *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, a

slave narrator leveled the most effective blow against Southern slavery when his autobiography offered "a revolting portrait of the hideous slave system, a thrilling narrative of individual suffering, and a triumphant vindication of the slave's manhood and mental dignity." If through their narratives they could convince white Americans that African-American slaves could be manly, fugitive slave authors hoped that an end to the slave system and equal rights for free blacks might not be far away.[13]

Slave narrators succeeded in drawing a substantial following among white Northerners in the 1840s, causing their message to reach many ordinary Americans who otherwise likely would have ignored the slavery issue. A widespread curiosity about people who had actually lived in slavery in their own country had led Northern whites to attend fugitive slave lectures and to read slave narratives in increasing numbers. As early as January of 1842, the general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society wrote to William Lloyd Garrison, "Our cause is so far advanced, that the public have itching ears to hear a colored man speak, and particularly A SLAVE. Multitudes will flock to hear one of this class speak." The fugitive Lewis Clarke estimated that since the autumn of 1843, he had spoken at some five hundred meetings in towns throughout New England, except in the state of Connecticut. "I have generally found large audiences," he noted in the *Narrative* he published with his brother Milton in 1846, "and a great desire to hear about slavery." Milton Clarke conjectured that "hundreds of thousands have listened with interest to the story of our wrongs." Fueled by these fascinating lectures, slave

[13] Quoted in William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint, 1999), 4; Lucius C. Matlack, ed.,

narratives began to develop their own cult following in the North. Besides Douglass's *Narrative*, which proved the most popular in the 1840s, Moses Roper's autobiography went into ten editions between 1837 and 1856. Four editions of the *Narrative of William Wells Brown* were printed within a year of its initial release, and within two years, it had sold eight thousand copies. "Scattered over the whole of the North," Ephraim Peabody noted in 1849, "these biographies of fugitive slaves are calculated to exert a very wide influence on public opinion."[14]

Fugitive slave narratives, though, never approached the level of popularity that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would later enjoy. The assertiveness of their black protagonists made white readers who preferred more submissive African Americans like Uncle Tom uneasy. Like Weld's silent slaves, Stowe's most revered character threatened the racial status quo to a far less extent than the slave narrators did. To retain the manliness of their black heroes, slave narrators sacrificed the popular success of their texts. These authors nevertheless prepared the ground for the more widely accepted formula of cheerful black martyrdom that Stowe would follow in the succeeding decade.

To retain the interest of white Americans, black writers and orators of the 1840s first had to address with particular caution the sensitive topics of violence committed by and against black slaves. A subtle tension in the narratives often resulted, as black

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Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb (New York: The author, 1849), i.

[14] Letter from J. A. Collins to William Lloyd Garrison, printed in *The Liberator*, January 21, 1842; Lewis and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1846), reprinted in Andrews and Gates, *Civitas Anthology*, 632; 651; Davis and Gates, *The Slave's Narrative*, xvi; Ephraim Peabody, "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves" *Christian Examiner* 47 (July-September 1849), reprinted in Davis and Gates, *Slave's Narrative*, 20.

authors restrained themselves from fully voicing their intense resentment toward the men and women who had held them captive and had abused and deprived them for much of their lives. A reviewer of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, published in 1845, noted the self-control that Douglass showed in his first autobiography. The reviewer contrasted William Lloyd Garrison's "violent invective and denunciation" of slavery in the preface with Douglass's "just and temperate" tone." Yet this kind of compromise achieved important results for fugitive slave activists, amassing a considerable audience for slave narratives among Northern whites as the 1840s wore on.[15]

Through personal experience and exposure to other cultural forms of their day, slave narrators understood that presenting slaves as helpless victims of an unjust system elicited a sympathetic response from white audiences. This strategy allowed Northerners to level their indignation at slaveholders without becoming uneasy about the lurking black avenger who might at any moment wreak his vengeance on a white man. Most slave narrators, therefore, stressed the hardships that slaves were forced to endure under the slave system rather than the means by which slaves fought back against them. "A book of a thousand pages would not be large enough to tell of all the tears I shed, and the sufferings I endured," Lewis Clarke remarked about the childhood years he spent with a cruel mistress. "Words can never tell what I suffered," his brother Milton similarly stated. Fugitives like the Clarkes nevertheless recited litanies of merciless beatings, rapes, and familial separations, along with instances of starvation, exposure, humiliation,

[15] *New York Tribune*, June 1845.

and back-breaking work. In doing so, slave narrators hoped to demonstrate what Frederick Douglass referred to as "the soul-killing effects of slavery" on the men and women caught in the system. Moses Grandy described his experience with a particular master as "cruel living; we had not near enough of victuals or clothes," Grandy reported; "I was half-starved for half my time," and "in severe frosts, I was compelled to go into the fields and woods to work, with my naked feet cracked and bleeding from extreme cold." Likewise, when Josiah Henson thought of slavery, he recalled "memories of miry cabins, frosted feet, weary toil under the blazing sun, curses and blows." For Henry Bibb, the mention of slavery brought "fresh to mind the separation of husband and wife; of stripping, tying up and flogging; of tearing children from their parents, and selling on the auction block," as well as "female virtue trampled under foot with impunity." By describing countless individual incidents of these horrors, slave narrators elicited sympathy for slaves and disgust for the system that caused them such unspeakable suffering.[16]

Unlike antislavery propagandists like Weld, however, slave narrators did not want to leave their audience with the impression that black men should be thought of as merely the passive victims of a totalitarian system. The prevalence in American culture of black figures like the kneeling, shackled slave in the abolitionist print, "Am I Not a Man and a

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[16] Lewis and Milton Clarke, *Narratives*, 611; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave*, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: The* Narrative *and Selected Writings*, Michael Meyer, ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 1984), 29; Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America* (London: C. Gilpin, 1843), 10-11; Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger Than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (Boston: J. P. Jewett and Company/Cleveland: H.P.B. Jewett, 1858), 19; Bibb, *Narrative*, 44.

Brother" had promoted the notion that African Americans merited benevolent aid for their cause, but not social or political equality with whites. To convince ordinary Northerners that slaves deserved not only their freedom, but also citizenship and equal protection under the law once they became free, black authors would have to show that their race possessed the kind of manly attributes antebellum Americans respected and rewarded. As a result, the typical plot of slave narratives in the 1840s followed a formula by which the central character endured for a period of time the "soul-killing effects of slavery," but then resolved to fight back against his lot by somehow casting off his chains, generally through flight. Frederick Douglass's narration described this pattern succinctly: "You have seen how a man was made a slave," he informed his readers; "you shall see how a slave was made a man." The martyr over whose cruel fate white audiences could shed tears became transformed over the course of the narrative into a victor who merited the cheers and the respect of white readers for his courage and success.[17]

The method by which most slave narrators had escaped slavery, running away, provided an opportunity for these authors to depict themselves resisting slavery in a manner that did not pose an implicit threat to Northern whites. Flight, in fact, was often represented as a species of martyrdom for fugitive slaves. As a result, white readers could admire Charles Ball because he informed them that "in all the toils, dangers, and sufferings of my long journey, my courage had never forsaken me." They could also feel

[17] Douglass, *Narrative*, 75.

sorry for him, rather than fear him, when he described the hardships involved in his flight, "which none can appreciate, except those who have borne all that stoutest human constitution can bear, of cold and hunger, toil and pain." The fugitive status of narrators like Ball even after they had reached the free states added to the picture of black martyrdom that so appealed to white readers. "I expect to pass the evening of my life," Ball reported, "in working hard for my subsistence, without the least hope of ever again seeing my wife and children:--fearful, at this day, to let my place of residence be known, lest even yet it may be supposed that as an article of property, I am of sufficient value to be worth pursuing in my old age."[18]

Fugitive narrators, however, also emphasized the active, manly resistance that fleeing slavery required. Henry Bibb stated drolly in his autobiography that "among other good trades I learned the art of running away to perfection." Proud of his rebellion, Bibb asserted that he "made a regular business of it, and never gave it up, until I had broken the bands of slavery, and landed myself safely in Canada, where I was regarded as a man, and not as a thing." Bibb argued that "if a white man had been captured by the Cherokee Indians . . . and could see a chance to escape," he would be obliged to take that opportunity. "Such an act committed by a white man under the same circumstances, would not only be pronounced proper, but praiseworthy," Bibb reasoned, "and if he neglected to avail himself of such a means of escape he would be pronounced a fool." Josiah Henson emphasized the manliness involved in escaping bondage when he recalled

[18] Ball, *Slavery*, 466, 132, 517.

a time he had believed that running away "seemed like outright stealing." Henson pointed out, however, that it was only during his "days of ignorance" that he had embraced this notion. At that time, Henson lamented, "I knew not the glory of free manhood. I knew not that the title-deed of the slave-owner is robbery and outrage." [19]

In the republican language current among antebellum Americans, displaying the willingness to risk death rather than be enslaved classified fugitive slave narrators as men in the most honorable sense of the word. "The black man is as anxious to possess and to enjoy liberty as the white one would be," narratives like Charles Ball's attested. Time and again, slave narrators included in their autobiographies the bold declaration that they preferred death to slavery. "Buoyed up by the prospect of freedom and increased hatred to slavery," Henry "Box" Brown remembered, "I was willing to dare even death itself rather than endure any longer the clanking of those galling chains." Henry Bibb "thought if I must die, I would die striving to protect my little family from destruction, die striving to escape from slavery." Frederick Douglass asserted simply that he "preferred death to hopeless bondage." When William Hayden's master and a group of other white men had tried to force him to return to slavery, Hayden told them, "You will find me ready to shed the last drop which supports life, before I will serve either you, or any other dealer in the God-like attributes of man."[20]

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[19] Bibb, *Narrative*, 15-16, 163; Henson, *Truth*, 53-54.

[20] Ball, *Slavery*, 379; Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Manchester, U.K.: Lee and Glynn, 1851), 51-2; Bibb, *Narrative*, 127; Douglass, *Narrative*, 92; William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave, in the South* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1846), 100.

A few slave narrators went a step further in the assertion of their manhood by relating instances in which they had used force to defend themselves against unjust encroachments upon their liberties. Self-defense in the face of tyranny constituted a central aspect of both Victorian manhood and classical republican principles in antebellum America. Yet African-American men trying to appeal to the sensibilities of whites in this manner ran the risk of alienating their audience by conjuring up frightful notions of black violence against whites. Writers like Frederick Douglass therefore had to craft their language very carefully to avoid painting a picture of sinister, underhanded black violence and instead to present their actions as justifiable, forthright expressions of their rights as men.

To set their narratives apart from typical scenarios of slave rebellion, both Douglass and William Hayden avoided representing themselves as motivated by revenge or as secretly plotting an attack against their masters. Douglass, in fact, suggested that he was as surprised at his own assertiveness as the white man he attacked had been. Douglass stated that when he was struck by Mr. Covey, it was only "at this moment--from whence came the spirit I don't know--I resolved to fight." Douglass told his white adversary candidly that he would resist Covey's chastisement of him simply because Covey "had used me like a brute for six months, and . . . I was determined to be used so no longer." Hayden likewise had determined that he would not plan an assault against the men to whom he had been hired, but that if they tried to flog him, "they would find me able and willing to defend myself." Hayden's description of the resistance he offered

these white men when they attempted to subdue him recalled a typical antebellum description of a fight between equals. Although the whites tried to treat Hayden like a slave, the slave asserted himself as a man. When the men ordered him to "strip for a castigation," Hayden told his readers, "I immediately complied, throwing off my coat, rolling up my sleeves, and arming myself with weapons of defence." Douglass likewise credited his fight with Covey for the revival of "a sense of my own manhood." Once he managed to subdue his white tormentor, Douglass recalled, his "long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."[21]

The light skin tone that many of the most celebrated slave narrators possessed helped account for white Northerners' general acceptance of such scenes of manly slave resistance against whites. The appearance of Frederick Douglass as a fair-skinned mulatto, for example, and his use of standard English in speaking inclined white Americans to tolerate the fight with Covey more readily than if Douglass had been a darker man who spoke in black dialect. Similarly, when Milton Clarke picked up an ax with the intention of killing his master, he did not feel compelled, as Josiah Henson did, to denounce such murderous violence as unchristian and wrong. Clarke had such European features and a light complexion that the residents of Madison, Ohio, referred to him as "the white nigger," and a bounty hunter was not able to select him as the fugitive

[21] Douglass, *Narrative*, 80; Hayden, *Narrative*, 75, 76; Douglass, *Narrative*, 81.

slave among a wagon-full of whites. Henson, on the other hand, had predominantly African ancestry and clearly appeared black. While Henson stressed in his narrative that he had desisted from killing his master because he recognized it as "a crime that would destroy the value of life," the nearly white Clarke instead stated merely that his mother had persuaded him not to confront his master, for fear of the retribution that would be enacted against Milton were he to strike and, especially, to kill a white man.[22]

By the time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was released in 1852, widespread exposure to fugitive slaves like Frederick Douglass and the Crafts had prepared a substantial number of Northerners to accept the well-spoken, pale-skinned George Harris as a credible representation of a Southern slave. The same Northerners who had in the late 1830s called the articulate, nearly white Archy Moore a "constant violation of probability," offered no objections in 1852 to a slave character whom his master advertised as "very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write," and who would "probably try to pass for a white man." They even accepted George Harris's violent attack against two low-class white characters, committed in self-defense and in defense of his family. This marked a significant shift in white readers' attitudes, though it did not signify a broad acceptance of slaves' rights regardless of their color.[23]

That Harris ultimately exiled himself to Liberia rather than remaining in North America also contributed to the comfort white readers felt with this capable, determined slave. Archy Moore, who had shared George Harris's yearnings for personal freedom

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[22] Clarke, *Narratives*, 647; Henson, 91.
[23] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 91.

and resolve to rescue his family from slavery, had given whites much more anxiety at the end of the 1836 version of *The Slave*. Although Archy had bitterly agreed with Harris that slavery left no place for him in the country of his birth, he nevertheless threatened at the close of Hildreth's novel to return to the United States and cause more mayhem for slaveholders in order to recover his family from bondage. "I have resolved it," he declared in the final chapter. "I will revisit America, and through the length and breadth of the land, I will search out my child. I will snatch him from the oppressor's grasp," Archy vowed, "or perish in the attempt." White America, Hildreth intimated, had not seen the last of this bold and intelligent white slave. Stowe, on the other hand, concluded her discussion of Harris's fate by informing her readers at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that "George, with his wife, children, sister and mother, embarked for Africa," where he had determined to devote his life to the uplift of his race in the nation of Liberia. Stowe left no doubt that white Americans need no longer worry that George might return to challenge either Southern slavery or Northern racism. George himself declared to Stowe's readers that he had gone to Africa "to work *hard*; to work against all sorts of difficulties and discouragements; and to work till I die."[24]

Although Northern audiences seemed relatively at ease with Stowe's intelligent, manly slave character, George Harris nevertheless played a much more minor role than Archy Moore had, both in the main plot line of the novel and in the imaginations of ordinary readers. He appeared in a mere eight chapters out of the forty-five that made up

[24] Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, 237; Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 376.

Uncle Tom's Cabin. Harris, moreover, was one of the least discussed, least emulated slave characters to emerge from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into other cultural media. Few Northern reviewers of the novel mentioned Harris at all, and rarely did the decorative plates, figurines, and other *Uncle Tom's Cabin* memorabilia that proved so popular among American consumers depict images of the fiery mulatto slave. Though the public was willing to accept Stowe's depiction of Harris as plausible, they were less enthusiastic about championing the cause of a light-skinned slave who had more sense and ability than his white master and who did not hesitate to shoot a white man to make his escape from slavery. Had Stowe made George Harris the centerpiece of her novel rather than Uncle Tom, she would have seriously compromised the potential of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to achieve an overwhelming commercial success.

Both Stowe and the slave narrators offset their portrayals of light-skinned slaves who committed manly acts of violence with firm statements against subversive violence by black slaves as it had been presented in Child's "The Black Saxons" or the "Fourth of July" print from 1840. Some authors of fugitive accounts chose simply to avoid any mention of murderous acts or sentiments by slaves against whites. Only two years after the release of his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass classified himself during his days in slavery as a "man of war" who had "had dreams, horrid dreams of freedom through a sea of blood." The *Narrative* itself, however, revealed no hint of these "bloody visions," presenting instead Douglass's more benign yearning to be as free as the ships he saw sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. This conspicuous omission indicates a deliberate strategy

on Douglass's part to avoid alienating skittish white readers by eliminating any mention of retributive black violence from his memoir.[25]

Slave authors often assured their white readers that any attempt on the part of a slave to use force against whites would not only invariably prove futile, but would also be met with brutal repression. "It is useless for a poor helpless slave, to resist a white man in a slaveholding State," Henry Bibb pointed out in his autobiography. "Resistance in many cases is death to the slave, while the law declares, that he shall submit or die." To prove a similar point, William Wells Brown related the story of a strong-willed slave named Randall whom he had known in Kentucky. "I have often heard him declare," Brown recalled, "that no white man should ever whip him--that he would die first." When called upon to uphold this manly conviction, Randall knocked down the overseer and two other white men who had tried to seize him. Despite the strength and determination of Randall, however, the overseer ultimately shot Randall, and then "the others rushed upon him with their clubs," Brown reported, "and beat him over the head and face, until they succeeded in tying him." Randall then received over a hundred lashes and was fitted with a ball and chain around his leg.[26]

In an even more horrific incident of punishment for rebellion, Josiah Henson told of the consequences when his father prostrated an overseer who had attempted to rape Josiah's mother. "The fact of the sacrilegious act of lifting a hand against the sacred temple of a white man's body," Henson recalled with bitter irony, "was all it was

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[25] *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 18, 1847, reprinted in Meyer, ed., *The Narrative*, 258.

necessary to establish." For this attempt to protect his family, Henson's father received a severe flogging, followed by the severing of his right ear from his head. "Sullen, morose, and dogged" after this incident, the formerly "good-humored" and proud man was finally sold to Alabama, permanently ending all communication between him and his family.[27]

Other slave narrators condemned underhanded black violence outright. William Hayden, for instance, cited in his *Narrative* an instance in which a group of slaves planned to overtake and kill the whites on board a ship taking them down the Mississippi. "The miscreant who, could in cold blood conceive so damning a plot," Hayden remarked indignantly, "richly merited" death for his actions. Josiah Henson wrote of a similar incident in which he himself had entertained thoughts of murdering his master to escape bondage before realizing the wrongfulness of pursuing such a course. "My hand slid along the axe-handle," he recalled; "I raised it to strike the fatal blow,--when suddenly the thought came to me, 'What! commit *murder!* and you a Christian?'" At that moment, Henson wrote, "the truth burst upon me that it was a crime," and he "shrunk back, laid down the axe, and thanked God, as I have done every day since, that I had not committed murder."[28]

Uncle Tom's Cabin went beyond the relatively minor compromises to white racism that slave narrators had made during the 1840s by featuring a slave who did not merely denounce retributive black violence, but even submitted cheerfully to the violence

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[26] Bibb, *Narrative*, 17; William Wells Brown, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Boston Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), 17-18, 20.
[27] Henson, *Truth*, 3-4.
[28] Hayden, *Narrative*, 77; Henson, *Truth*, 90-1.

inflicted on him by his white masters. In Uncle Tom, Stowe created a black male character who lacked the admirable Victorian manliness slave authors had emphasized in their portrayals of black protagonists. In the slave narratives, black men had resisted slavery in active ways that would benefit them and their families in their present world. Uncle Tom, on the other hand, allowed himself to be sold away from his family and then tortured to death in anticipation of "glory" and "the victory" beyond the grave. Unlike the slave narrators, Uncle Tom also sacrificed his freedom and a reunion with his family for the white characters in Stowe's novel. When Augustine St. Clare, Tom's indulgent master in New Orleans, offered him his manumission papers and urged him to "go home to your wife and children," Tom's concern for his master's soul caused him to remain in slavery. "I'll stay with Mas'r as long as he wants me," Tom informed St. Clare, "--so as I can be any use." In the end, this decision cost Stowe's martyred black hero his life, as St. Clare died before emancipating him, causing Tom to be sold to the man who would ultimately kill him.[29]

The far greater popularity of Stowe's novel compared to even the most successful of the slave narratives indicated the preference of the Northern public for humble black characters like Uncle Tom over more assertive figures like Frederick Douglass and George Harris. Although Stowe had drawn heavily on slave narratives for the characters and situations she sketched in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, none of these factual autobiographies ever rivaled the commercial success of Stowe's fictional text. Even the narrative of

[29] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 362, 266.

Josiah Henson, the fugitive slave whom Stowe allegedly used as a model for Uncle Tom, failed to compete with the phenomenal sales of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In 1852, *The Life of Josiah Henson*, which had first been published in 1849, sold a mere 6,000 copies. Stowe's claim that Henson had been "the real Uncle Tom" later boosted sales considerably, but not enough to rival the extraordinary success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* worldwide. By 1878 Henson's publisher claimed that 100,000 copies of his narrative had previously been sold in the United States and abroad. Though impressive, the success of Henson's *Life* paled in comparison to that of Stowe's novel, which had sold millions worldwide by the 1870s. White readers, it appeared, favored Stowe's "ebony statue of Christlike patience" over a living black man like Henson who declared himself determined to "pray, toil, dissemble, plot like a fox, and fight like a tiger" to escape bondage.[30]

The skillful way in which Stowe negotiated the racial beliefs and prejudices of white Americans in fashioning the character of Uncle Tom accounts for the movement of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* squarely into mainstream popular culture. In Tom, Stowe had succeeded in creating a black figure whom whites could pity and respect without having to wrestle with fears of black equality. Tom's submission to his lot distinguished him as a model Christian for Victorian Americans to admire, while it also confined him within the bounds of acceptable behavior for a black man in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Readers commended Tom on the grounds that "no insult, no outrage, no suffering

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[30] *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), April 22, 1852; Henson, *Truth*, 61.

could ruffle the Christ-like meekness of his spirit, and shake the steadfastness of his faith." The "meek, and gentle, and forgiving character" that Tom possessed, an English admirer pointed out in the New York *Independent*, would allow "multitudes while sympathising with the injured slave" also to "learn the nature of real Christianity." Whites praised Uncle Tom, in particular, because "towards his merciless oppressors, he cherished no animosity, and breathed nothing of retaliation." While Stowe emphasized that such traits had led African Americans like Tom to "exhibit the highest form of the peculiarly *Christian life*," the meekness that Tom possessed also removed any possibility that this strong black male might pose a threat to the safety or the superiority of whites. Tom's loyalty to his masters, genuine concern for their well-being, and refusal to engage in violent acts against them made Tom an attractive black character to Northern readers who felt uneasy about African-American assertiveness and about black violence against whites.[31]

Stowe created the most popular slave character in American history partly by fundamentally revising texts that slave narrators had used in the 1840s to demonstrate the manhood that resistance required of the slave. A great deal of truth lay in Martin Delany's somewhat bitter observation that "Mrs. Stowe has draughted largely on all the best slave narratives" to fashion the characters and incidents of her commercially successful novel, as Stowe herself acknowledged soon thereafter in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe, however, often transformed the message of the slave narrators in

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[31] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 156; *The Liberator*, March 26, 1852; letter from Rev. John Angell James of Birmingham to Harriet Beecher Stowe, excerpted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 15, 1853.

significant ways to make her characters appeal more directly to a white audience. It was her particular way of manipulating these texts, rather than the substance of the texts themselves, that won for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* such a following among whites.[32]

Stowe's interpretation of an incident that she drew from the *Life of Josiah Henson* illustrates the ways in which she often twisted the message of slave narrators for her own purposes. In arguing that she had based the submissive character of Uncle Tom partly on Henson, a real slave, Stowe cited an instance when Henson had conveyed his master's slaves to Kentucky through the free state of Ohio without allowing them to claim their freedom. Stowe deemed Henson's refusal to allow his fellow slaves to escape bondage a "most sublime act of self-renunciation in obedience to [the Bible's] commands." Henson, on the other hand, characterized this choice in his autobiography as morally wrong and something for which he had "wrestled in prayer with God for forgiveness." While Stowe held up Henson's action as a moral lesson for those who "teach that it is right for us to violate the plain commands of God," Henson instead labeled his decision "madness" and an "error of judgment." "Often since that day has my soul been pierced with bitter anguish," he lamented, "at the thought of having been thus instrumental in consigning to the infernal bondage of slavery so many of my fellow-beings." Henson intended this powerful incident to demonstrate the emasculating effects of slavery on the enslaved who automatically adhered to their master's will rather than their own. The blame for his action, he charged, "lies at the door of the degrading system under which I had been

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[32] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 29, 1853.

nurtured." Stowe, meanwhile, celebrated the emasculation of Uncle Tom, both when he refused to leave St. Clare to return to his family and when he cheerfully submitted to death at the hands of Legree, as a voluntary and noble sacrifice on the part of an admirably devout black man.[33]

Stowe's success in soliciting public attention and sympathy among Northern whites for the plight of African Americans in bondage led most black abolitionists to endorse *Uncle Tom's Cabin* publicly. "Uncle Tom's Cabin, by Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, has come down upon the dark abodes of human bondage like the morning sunlight," the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society proclaimed in August of 1852, "unfolding to view the enormities of slavery in a manner which has fastened all eyes upon them, and awakened sympathy for the slave in hearts unused to feel." Frederick Douglass praised Stowe for bringing "to the presence of mankind our people long buried out of sight by slavery and oppression." Through *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Douglass argued, Stowe had "invested our despised and neglected cause with a new and powerful interest, and has added a bright ray to the almost gone out lamp of our hopes." William Wilson celebrated the more concrete impact Stowe's novel had had on Northern whites: "Shopkeepers that heretofore exposed for sale . . . ponderous volumes for the benefit of Southern slavery," he noted, "or, exhibited in their windows Zip Coon or JIM CROW . . .

[33] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1854), 419-20; Henson, *Truth*, 53, 59, 54.

for general amusement, profit and loyalty to the Southern God, are now proud to illume those very windows through the windows of my *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*"[34]

The willingness of Uncle Tom to be symbolically emasculated, however, struck more radical abolitionists as a betrayal of the egalitarian values that they believed lay at the heart of the abolitionist movement. Although, as the radicals recognized, Stowe's representation of Tom as a martyr to slavery had helped draw sympathy for their cause, it also led some in the movement to express a decided ambivalence about *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* "If any man had too much piety," William Allen wrote in May of 1852, "Uncle Tom is that man." William Lloyd Garrison simply inquired of Stowe, "Are there two Christs?" The novel, Garrison suggested, promoted the assumption "that all slaves at the South ought, 'if smitten on the one cheek, to turn the other also' . . . 'be obedient to their master,' wait for a peaceful deliverance, and abstain from all insurrectionary movements." White Americans accepted such a notion, argued Garrison, strictly "because the VICTIMS ARE BLACK." Stowe had intimated in her different treatments of Uncle Tom and George Harris, Garrison submitted, that there existed "one law of submission and non-resistance for the black man, and another law of rebellion and conflict for the white man." Henry C. Wright complained that, for Stowe, "God, in the slave's heart, is but a call to submit the question of his liberty to the will and pleasure of his master." According to Wright, Stowe had overlooked the fact that "God, in the heart of a slave, is but a call to freedom; and an instigation to exert his own will and energies to

[34] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, June 10, 1853; April 15, 1853.

obtain it." An expatriate African American living in Canada summed up his reproach against Stowe succinctly: "Uncle Tom must be killed,--George Harris exiled!" the anonymous commentator lamented. "Heaven for dead negroes!--Liberia for living mulattoes! Neither can live on the American Continent! Death or banishment is our doom."[35]

In the years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first made its indelible impact on American conceptions of African Americans and slavery radical abolitionists faced even greater fictional challenges to their core ideals of racial justice and equality than Stowe's novel had presented. In the 1850s, authors who often held more tenuous connections to the abolitionist movement than Stowe published a rash of antislavery novels, plays, and stories that served to diminish even further the manly conception of black slaves that slave narrators had sought to establish in the 1840s. Most of these texts featured as the principal slave character a light-skinned young woman or girl trying to escape from an unjust enslavement or the lustful pursuit of her white master. Generally in these stories, black slaves disappeared altogether or else helped or hindered the main white character to achieve her freedom. The overall message that emerged from these texts condemned slavery not because it oppressed African Americans who were either just as much men as whites or more childlike and therefore more vulnerable to abuse. Instead, "octoroon" novels and plays painted slavery as immoral because of the adverse affect it could and did have on vulnerable women (and sometimes men) who were at least as white-skinned,

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[35] *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 20, 1852, reprinted in Ammons, ed., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 463; *The Liberator*, March 26, 1852; *The Liberator*, July 9, 1852; "C.V.S.," (Toronto) *Provincial Freeman*, July 22,

genteel, and chaste as most middle-class white women in the Northern states. The development of this phenomenally popular genre during the 1850s drove antislavery fiction into the realm of pure sentimental romance and effectively rendered the plight of the black man irrelevant to the mainstream antislavery cause.

The antislavery fiction of the 1850s, therefore, proved both a popular triumph and an ideological defeat for the slave narrators whose work in the previous decade had helped make such fiction possible. For the first time in American history, white Northerners in large numbers became captivated with antislavery texts, buying and reading them by the thousands and tens of thousands. The Northern masses abolitionists had finally attracted, however, did not rise up to protest the cruelty and inhumanity that the slave system imparted on the black men and women who most often fell into its trap. The kind of narrative that so effectively persuaded the Northern masses to turn against slavery also banished African Americans to the fringes of the antislavery movement, merely reinforcing the racism inherent in white American culture.

1854.

Chapter 4 In the Shadow of Uncle Tom: The Proslavery Response, 1852-60

Not all white Americans had been converted to the antislavery cause with the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Beginning that year, Stowe's novel gave rise to a considerable backlash of proslavery, unionist, and anti-abolitionist sentiment in both the North and the South. As the Northern presses continued to churn out copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in record numbers, white Americans from Buffalo to New Orleans denounced the novel for its divisive effects on the nation and its destructive intentions toward Southern slavery. Many of these reactions against *Uncle Tom's Cabin* took the form of novels intended to counter Stowe's arguments using the same medium that the now world-famous author had herself employed. In the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, proslavery activists for the first time deliberately created a substantial body of literature designed specifically to oppose an antislavery appeal.

In their attempts to reach a wide audience, these "anti-Uncle Tom" writers sought to rectify many of the problems that had inhibited the popularity of earlier proslavery texts. Most importantly, they all but eliminated references to black violence against whites from their novels. The majority of these authors also tried to emulate the methods Stowe had used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by employing the trappings of sentimentality much more liberally than proslavery authors had ever done before. These strategies were designed to relieve the uneasiness with which white readers had generally received proslavery fiction in the mid-1830s and 1840s and to draw the same genteel, middle-class audience that Stowe's novel had managed to attract.

Despite these seemingly sensible tactical moves, however, anti-Tom fiction fell drastically short of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in achieving popular success. Only weeks after the first anti-Tom novels appeared, sales of these volumes fell off dramatically, while Stowe's epic continued to break records. Northerners and Southerners alike quickly lost their enthusiasm for novels written to defend Southern slavery and to discredit antislavery activists like Stowe. Although a smattering of periodicals continued through 1854 to notice the fictional answers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, none of the anti-Tom novels released after 1852 managed to elicit much response from editors in any part of the country.

Unlike Stowe, anti-Tom authors were not in touch with the men and women who made up their intended audience. In making their arguments against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, these writers tried to follow a particular sentimental formula that Stowe herself had helped to establish. They failed to realize, however, that they were choosing their villains and their victims from the wrong camps, thereby offending the very readers many of them sought to attract. Anti-Tom writers, moreover, underestimated the importance of the religious message that had been essential to the popularity of Stowe's novel when they virtually omitted all mention of Christianity from their texts. Above all, these authors failed to take into consideration the changes that political events of the previous few years had wrought in Northern attitudes toward Southern slaveholders. With *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe had moved in the same direction as Northern popular opinion, pushing it even further along its anti-Southern trajectory as she did. To succeed, anti-Tom authors would have had to manipulate current cultural trends into

changing their course dramatically, especially after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had captured the imaginations of an eager Northern audience. Instead, they created substandard works that even Southerners already committed to the proslavery cause refused to support.

The vast exposure that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* received ensured that Stowe's novel would dwarf any literary efforts that tried to rival it. "No literary work of any character or merit, whether of poetry or prose, of imagination or observation, fancy or fact, truth of fiction, that has ever been written since there have been writers or readers, has ever commanded so great a popular success," *The Literary World* of New York declared in December of 1852. Even readers who did not agree with the novel's antislavery message became entranced by its characters, impressed by its literary merits, and enthralled with its story. "The falsehoods are generally well told," admitted the otherwise hostile *Western Journal and Civilian Review* of St. Louis. The book, the *Western Journal* noted, "has too much literary merit to deserve to be hastily read, and carelessly thrown aside." George Graham, who denounced Stowe's plot as "feeble" and "clumsily constructed," nevertheless grudgingly acknowledged that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had "a certain feminine vivacity of style which takes the reader, in spite of its faults." For men as well as women, children as well as adults, and Southerners as well as Northerners, the plot and characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became part of a cultural vocabulary that nearly all Americans came to share. For decades after the book's publication, whites and blacks alike would

use these elements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as reference points in their discussions of slaves and slavery.[1]

The phenomenal popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* allowed Stowe to set the terms of the debate over slavery that authors would conduct in the ensuing decade. As the first anti-Tom novels began to appear, Virginia professor George Frederick Holmes pointed out that a novelistic response to Stowe's work would merely place "the replicant in a secondary position, and exhibits him in the false light of a mere imitator and plagiarist, by way of opposition, thus obviously yielding the vantage ground to the offender." However compelling the novels produced by anti-Tom authors might have been, Holmes reminded proslavery authors, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had set the standard by which American readers would judge the fictional works of all authors who sought to rival it.[2]

Stowe also made it difficult for her opponents to plead their case because of the concessions she made in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to various proslavery arguments. In part, Stowe acknowledged certain tenets often used to defend slavery in hopes of appealing to the "generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South" to end slavery themselves. She also introduced proslavery assertions, however, so that she might nullify their significance, thereby overturning the proslavery argument as a whole. The depiction of happy slaves living on an idyllic plantation and governed by a benevolent master could no longer serve as sufficient justification for continuing the slave system, for example, when Stowe's novel included two of the most favorable pictures of slave life in

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[1] *The Literary World* (New York), December 4, 1852; *Western Journal and Civilian Review* (November 1852), 134; *Graham's Magazine Review* (February 1853), 210.

nineteenth-century literature. The plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrated that no matter how happy slave life could be in certain cases, Southern laws made it possible for that happiness to be taken away at any time, no matter how well-intentioned a master might be. Stowe also pointed out that while kind masters certainly existed, slaves could legally fall under the control of the most brutal taskmasters and have no recourse to justice, even if their master ultimately beat them to death. In another compromise with Southerners, Stowe made the evil slaveholder who inflicted this fate on Uncle Tom a New Englander by birth. Even if the cruelest masters proved to be of Northern origin, Stowe emphasized that the slave system allowed such masters free reign over their slaves, including pious, hard-working slaves like Tom.[3]

Like many proslavery authors, Stowe also acknowledged that white Northerners could harbor more intense prejudices against African Americans than Southern slaveholders. Anti-Tom authors who chastised Northerners for their prejudices against and cruel treatment of African Americans merely echoed the reprimands that Stowe had directed toward whites in her own region. "Northern men, northern mothers, northern Christians, have something more to do than denounce their brethren at the South," Stowe advised in her final chapter, "they have to look to the evil among themselves." Finally, Stowe, to the chagrin of most abolitionists, anticipated the suggestion her detractors would make that the best course of action for men and women of African descent involved going to Africa as Christian missionaries. Stowe urged Northern churches to

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[2] *Southern Literary Messenger* 18 (December 1852), 727.

educate freed slaves "and then assist them in their passage to those shores, where they may put in practice the lessons they have learned in America."[4]

Realizing that the concessions Stowe had offered to their arguments had put them at a disadvantage, some proslavery advocates began to downplay the importance of fiction in swaying public opinion toward either side of the slavery issue. The *Florida Sentinel* of Tallahassee, for example, reassured its readers that even though the South lacked the printing facilities for its authors to provide satisfactory and timely responses to Stowe's novel, fiction did not play a significant role in the larger debate over slavery anyway. "Prejudice . . . which can be successfully reached by these myths of fancy is not probably of a very inveterate or dangerous character," the editor of the *Sentinel* posited. "An assault on a solemn interest, moral or social, conveyed under the garb of fiction," George Frederick Holmes suggested in a similar vein, "would be too trivial to be worthy of . . . an elaborate defence." Holmes went on to explain that it was "degrading to the serious character of the subject, it is trifling with the earnest and grave import of the question, to dress it up in the geegaws and tawdry finery of a mere counter-irritant."[5]

Dozens of proslavery authors, however, evidently disagreed with Holmes in his dismissal of fiction as a worthy medium for debate. During the 1850s, some twenty-seven novels appeared as a counter-argument to Stowe's condemnation of Southern slavery. Of the approximately fourteen anti-Tom novels produced in the year following

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[3] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 383.
[4] Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 386.

the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in book form, the first few that went into print managed to attain a respectable following. *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, written by Southerner Mary Eastman, reportedly sold some 18,000 copies within weeks of its debut during the summer of 1852. The next anti-Tom book to appear, W. L. G. Smith's *Life at the South; or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" As It Is*, boasted sales of 15,000 copies in only 15 days. The Boston *Merchants' Journal* noted in October that "a new edition of this work has just been released in this city," and that "it has met with a large sale." George Graham, editor of *Graham's Magazine* in Philadelphia, complained in February of 1853 of the popularity of books about slaves in the past year. "We have a regular incursion of the blacks," Graham bemoaned. "The population of readers has gone a wool-gathering!"[6]

Effective publicity efforts helped explain the initial interest with which the public greeted the anti-Tom novels that emerged in the summer of 1852. One correspondent explained to William Lloyd Garrison that advertising prior to publication deserved responsibility for enticing many readers to purchase Smith's *Life at the South.* "The widely distributed prospectus had such a capital portrait of Uncle Tom, its hero," critic "C.K.W." reported in *The Liberator*, "that great curiosity was excited to see the book." The most successful promoter of the anti-Tom novels, though, proved to be Harriet

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[5] *Florida Sentinel* (Tallahassee), reprinted in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 9, 1852; *Southern Literary Messenger* 18 (December 1852), 727.

[6] S. Austin Alliborne, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1871), v.1, 539; v.2, 2164; Boston *Merchants' Journal*, quoted in *The Liberator*, October 8, 1852; *Graham's Magazine Review* (February 1853), 209.

Beecher Stowe herself. As her novel swept the country, readers hungered for more illustrations of "Sambo's woes, done up in covers," as George Graham put it disgustedly.[7]

Anti-Tom novels succeeded, on occasion, in gratifying the literary tastes of eager consumers of this new literary genre. *The Cabin and Parlor*, in particular, published under a pseudonym by successful periodical editor Charles Jacobs Peterson, met with the approval of magazine critics when it appeared in the fall of 1852. Even the *Liberator* acknowledged that "the book is very interesting, and well written." Southern periodicals, which did not always look with favor on anti-Tom novels, praised Peterson's work. "Good in all respects," pronounced the *Southern Literary Messenger*. "The style is that of a well educated and practised writer; the incidents are striking and told with spirit," the reviewer declared, while "pathos alternates with humor throughout the story." The *Southern Quarterly Review* called Peterson "a writer of considerable talent" who "makes a touching story." Other anti-Tom novelists from the North received similar commendation by the *Review*. The magazine referred to Philadelphian Baynard Hall, the author of *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, as "a man of ability, who writes with vigour," and called his story "a lively one" that he had found "quite readable." Later in the year, the same publication praised Maria McIntosh's *The Lofty and the Lowly* as "a very pleasant and instructive story," even to "the indifferent reader, who seeks amusement

[7] *The Liberator*, November 5, 1852; *Graham's Magazine Review* (February 1853), 209.

only." McIntosh's treatment of the slavery issue aside, the *Review* claimed that her story was "to be commended as pure, honest, christian, and pleasantly good."[8]

In most cases, however, Southern periodicals freely admitted that the literary quality of anti-Tom novels typically fell far short of that reached by Harriet Beecher Stowe's beloved masterpiece. In 1853, the *Southern Quarterly Review* tersely denounced both *Louise Elton*, penned by Kentucky resident Mary Herndon, and *Antifanaticism*, written by the young South Carolinian Martha Haines Butt. The *Review* remarked that Herndon's cousin John had "erred in his counsel" when he had urged Mary to write a novel, and that Louise Elton "makes an unhappy heroine." With regard to *Antifanaticism*, the *Review* commented that although the author had intended to "pay Mrs. Beecher Stowe off in her own currency, . . . Martha is not a good match for Beecher [Stowe]. She is too young," the critic continued, and "the good intentions which are said to pave Hell . . . make very bad payments." As late as November of 1860, the *Southern Literary Messenger* bluntly dismissed *The Ebony Idol*, a scathing attack on Northern abolitionists, for its lack of literary merit. In a comment that applied to most of the anti-Tom texts, the *Messenger* observed that with Mrs. Flanders's novel, "conception" had proved "much better than execution."[9]

Despite its early commercial success, the second anti-Tom novel to appear, *Life at the South*, awakened Northern critics to the inadequacies from which many of the genre

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[8] *Southern Literary Messenger* 18 (November 1852), 703; *Southern Quarterly Review* 7 (January 1853), 233; *The Liberator*, November 5, 1852; *Southern Quarterly Review* 7 (January 1853), 238; 8 (July 1853), 268.

would suffer. The *Liberator* pointed out that before Smith's book was published, "some expectation" had arisen that *Life at the South* "would display originality, if not merit." Instead, Garrison's reviewer reported, "The book was *bosh*, nothing; it contained not a single interesting chapter or page." Publications ranging from the New York *Tribune* to *The Ladies' Repository* of Cincinnati concurred with the *Liberator*'s assessment. "Its matter is insufferably tedious," the *Tribune* complained; "it is a mere collection of 'nigger talk,' pointless and prosy." The critic, moreover, found the author's dialogue "awkward and terribly verbose, while his management of plot and incidents is that of a school-boy." In sum, the *Tribune* concluded, "The book is mere literary trash." Because the reviewer from *The Ladies' Repository* believed "the work is written in an indifferent, slovenly manner," the editor regretted "the time wasted in its perusal, and hope that we may not be induced soon again to perpetrate such folly." Even the *Daily Republic* of Buffalo, New York, the author's hometown, reported that the "literary humiliation" Smith's novel brought to Buffalo had been "hard to bear." Although the *Republic* wished *Life at the South* "were worthy of a more favorable notice," its editor sadly predicted that "whoever compares it with that gem of literary and moral excellence, which so vividly reflects the refined intellect and lofty genius of Mrs. Stowe, will look upon Buffalo with mingled pity and contempt."[10]

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[9] *Southern Quarterly Review* 8 (October 1853), 542, 543; *Southern Literary Messenger* 31 (November 1860), 399.

[10] *The Liberator*, November 5, 1852; New York *Tribune*, October 8, 1852; *The Ladies' Repository* 12 (October 1852), 399; quoted in *The Independent* (New York), August 19, 1852.

Although they found themselves at a decided disadvantage in their rivalry with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, defenders of slavery tried to compete with Stowe first by eliminating the threat of black violence against white characters. Proslavery authors of the early 1840s had taken advantage of the diminished political attention directed at the slavery issue to explore the highly sensitive subjects of slave violence and rebellion. Once political events and the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* thrust slavery into the national spotlight again in the early 1850s, however, proslavery authors recognized that the depiction of black slaves who posed a threat to whites compromised the proslavery cause with ordinary Americans. As a result, the open portrayals of rebellious slaves and violent African Americans that had graced proslavery fiction during the previous decade effectively vanished from these literary forms by the time anti-Tom novels began appearing on the American cultural scene.

Southern authors, in particular, mentioned slave revolt after 1852 only to dismiss the possibility that it might ever occur. J. W. Page of Virginia, for instance, had one of his Southern characters assert confidently that if the slaves possessed "any reasoning powers (and we all know they have), they must see the utter impossibility of effecting anything by insurrection, than their own destruction." Caroline Lee Hentz, who had lived half her life in the South by 1852, offered perhaps a fittingly conflicted commentary on slave rebellion. Hentz's Southern hero in *The Planter's Northern Bride*, Mr. Moreland, charged his future father-in-law, a pretentious abolitionist, with "blowing the flames of insurrection" in the South. Like Northern anti-Tom authors, Hentz used the threat of

insurrection to turn her readers against abolitionists. "No language can convey the faintest conception of the horrors that may ensue," Moreland predicted darkly. "The time will come when waves of blood may roll over the land," he warned, when a man could not protect his wife "from the unimaginable horrors of servile warfare." Yet Hentz retreated almost immediately from this harrowing image of black violence and white bloodshed, hastily falling into the more consoling image, common among Southern writers, that slave revolt posed no real threat to them. "I did not intend to express myself so strongly," Moreland apologized. "So firm is my reliance on the fidelity and affection of my own negroes," he concluded, that "I believe, if an insurrection really took place, they would die in my defence."[11]

Northern proslavery authors, for their part, transformed all representations of the manly black rebel into a figure that might best be described as the anti-rebel. In these instances, the heroic slave did not engage in a battle against white men for the liberty of his people. Instead, he fought to thwart a rebellion in progress or to protect his white owners from the horrible consequences of such an event. Slavery, anti-Tom novelists insisted, generated the loyalty and affection of slaves for their masters, not resentment and a yearning for revenge.

The anti-rebel character allowed Stowe's detractors to demonstrate in their fiction that slave violence most often occurred to protect rather than to harm Southern masters and their families. Frank Freeman, the noble black hero of *Frank Freeman's Barber*

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[11] J. W. Page, *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia, and Tom Without One in Boston* (Richmond, Va.: J.W. Randolph, 1853), 79; Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride; or, Scenes in Mrs. Hentz's*

Shop, arose as a shining example of the loyal slave acting to save his imperiled master. When an evil Northern abolitionist incited a rebellion among the slaves who lived on or near the Freeman plantation, Frank lured the abolitionist away to save the lives of slaveholders who held a special place in his heart. Frank later explained that when he thought "of the kind white folks here," he "could not know that Mrs. Freeman, and Mr. Wardloe, and Miss Mary, were that night to lie weltering in a bloody bed--and remain silent." In Sarah Hale's *Liberia*, the slaves on the Peyton estate also took active steps to save the white family from a general insurrection that had broken out in the neighborhood. Nathan, "one of the older and most trusted servants, a man who had been 'born and raised' in the family, and upon whose judgment and fidelity" the family could rely, vowed to his mistress that he would stand by the Peytons, "till I die, Miss Margaret." To protect his owners, Nathan even assembled a small army of family slaves, distributing among them firearms as well as the typical weapons involved in slave revolts--"pitchforks, hoes, and rails." This rude guard, whose members had assured their convalescent master they would "defend him with their lives," served as the antithesis of the more common notion of the slave army bent on destroying the men and women who held them in bondage. In their discussion of slave rebellions, therefore, both Baynard Hall and Sarah Hale sought to replace the haunting picture of Nat Turner's band of murderers with scenes of slave loyalty and white trust.[12]

Childhood (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson & Brothers, 1854; 1870 edition), 166, 167.

[12] Baynard Rush Hall, *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop, A Tale* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852), 63; Sarah Josepha Hale, *Liberia; or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 18, 19, 23, 34.

Eliminating black violence, however, did not make up for the more powerful short-comings of anti-Tom fiction. Proslavery novelists of the 1850s attempted unsuccessfully to fashion their fictional answers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* using a formula similar to the one that Stowe had employed to such acclaim. Realizing that a sentimental portrayal of slaves, in particular, had appealed to white readers, anti-Tom authors depicted their own share of victims and martyrs in the novels they produced. Yet the subjects anti-Tom novelists selected to appeal to white Northerners' sympathies generally indicated that, unlike Stowe, anti-Tom authors remained woefully out of touch with the sensibilities of their audience. These writers, in fact, inadvertently chose the two groups for whom Northern whites in the early 1850s would have felt the least compassion. The black martyrs anti-Tom authors portrayed usually took the form of fugitive slaves who had exchanged an easy life on their master's plantation for one of toil and suffering in the inhospitable North. These runaways pined for their masters, who, they claimed, "were good to us, who clothed and fed us, and giv' us warm and comfortable houses, and took keer of us when sick and helpless." Northern readers considered the free black community in their midst, however, to be largely responsible for bringing degradation, crime, and filth to their cities. This conception of free African Americans allowed white Northerners to extend little sympathy on behalf of these alleged victims.

Although Stowe had acknowledged Northern prejudice toward African Americans in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, anti-Tom novelists nevertheless made the tragic effects of this prejudice a central component of their sentimental argument in favor of slavery. "I've

tried my best," the freed slave Ben told his master sadly in Sarah Hale's *Liberia*, "and I ain't any thing but a nigger, and never shall be." As a result of "the turn-up noses of the whites" in the North, black families suffered the kind of cruelty and deprivation that slave narrators had chronicled in the 1840s for slaves on Southern plantations. In *Ethel Somers*, fugitive slaves encountered "the misery of the want of somethin' to eat at all seasons of the year, and of the shiv'rin cold of the winter, without food, fire, blankits, or clothin'" once they reached the free states. They lived in appalling "black suburbs" that were "dirty beyond imagination" and characterized by "filthy water," children with "repulsive deformities," and "drunken, quarrelsome men, the lowest types of degraded humanity." As one slave put it, "This place, Mars Charles, is a hell for niggers. . . . I'm wurse than a slave here. I'm a dog; treated like a dog; kick'd like a dog; an' thar's nobody to keer for me, or see justis dun me." In *Life at the South*, the runaway slave Tom encountered only squalid conditions and brutal treatment when he found freedom in Canada. As a hired laborer in the boarding house of an abolitionist, Tom slept in a bed "filled with vermin," wore clothes that were "much soiled with dirt," and ate half-cooked food on a tablecloth that was "stiff with grease and butter." When he entered a grocery store, the proprietor began beating him with a "raw, heavy lash" to make him leave. "I beg you! Oh! do stop!" Tom cried out as the blood began "fast trickling down the back even to his feet, and each repeated blow tearing the wound of the previous one, until he felt as if his back was raw with the deep cuts of the whip-lash." While Tom lived to return to his master's plantation, in several instances repentant black runaways died in

this hostile environment "a monument to Northern philanthropy," which had refused to help them as, these authors pointed out, their masters at home would surely have done.[13]

Northern whites, especially those inclined to read a proslavery novel, would have harbored little compassion for runaway slave characters who lived and died in the squalor of a Northern ghetto. Anti-Tom novelists themselves, in fact, revealed a distinct hesitation about pouring out their heartfelt sympathies to this particular class of Americans. Even as Tom in *Life at the South* cried over his misfortunate state "upon his knees, both hands upon his breast, his eyes cast upward," the genteel white traveler who witnessed this display assessed the scene as "ludicrous," remarking that he "was more inclined to mirth than sorrow." Another white man in William Smith's novel informed Tom that "Buffalo is a hard place, in the winter, for the poor," but he also felt "less pity for the negro because he abandoned so good quarters at the South." "They bring sorrow on themselves," declared Doctor Worthington in *The Cabin and Parlor*, referring to fugitive slaves like Tom. A runaway named Cora agreed, telling her dying husband that their troubles had "come on us for our sins, . . . because we left young missis." Similarly, the faithful nurse Mammy Betty in *Uncle Robin in His Cabin* reproved the ailing slave Tom for leaving his master: "Tom, de Lord giv' you good sitiation, an' you lef' it, an' brung all dis 'pun you." On the whole, authors who thought of free blacks as primarily foolish, lazy, or devious could not bring themselves to present black runaways

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[13] Hale, *Liberia*, 111; Smythe, James M. Smythe, *Ethel Somers; or, the Fate of the Union* (Augusta, Ga.: H. D. Norrell, 1857), 118; J. Thornton Randolph [Charles Jacobs Peterson], *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1852), 123; Smythe, *Ethel Somers*, 116, 117; W. L. G.

purely as the noble and innocent victims of evil abolitionists. Unlike Uncle Tom, who died sinless at the hands of the brutal slaveholder Simon Legree, these black martyrs shared heavily in the responsibility for their own sad fate.[14]

In contrast to the death scenes of fugitive slaves in anti-Tom novels, the poignancy of Uncle Tom's death for British and American readers had derived in significant degree from his faithfulness to the Christian religion in the face of death. As the Reverend John Angell James of Birmingham, England, wrote to Stowe, "The character of the martyred negro, the hero of the tale, is an embodiment of our holy religion. The world sees in him the true type of Christianity." Antebellum Americans honored Tom for giving up his life for his belief in Christ because this action duplicated so closely the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ that formed the cornerstone of their evangelical Protestant religions. "After all, is it not the meek, and gentle, and forgiving character," Reverend James pointed out, "that is most like that of our divine Lord?" The *Independent* of New York cited as number one among the "good points" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the Christian character of Uncle Tom. "Uncle Tom is a truly pious negro slave," the editor commented, "a really conscientious, simple-hearted, evangelical Christian." Similarly, the [xxx] praised "the deep religious feeling 'Uncle Tom' excites" and argued that "by the agency of 'Uncle Tom'" Stowe "preaches the Gospel to all classes." When a sinful slaveholder beat the pious Tom to death, readers were awed by Tom's unshakable

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Smith, *Life at the South: or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" As It Is* (Buffalo: Geo. H. Derby and Co./Cincinnati: H. W. Derby and Co./Chicago: D. B. Cooke and Co., 1852), 346, 336, 348, 460; Page, *Uncle Robin*, 253.

[14] Smith, *Life at the South*, 340, 382; Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 317, 216; Page, *Uncle Robin*, 251. Spelling is as in the original text.

faith that God would bring him "the victory" in the next life. At the same time, they also came to think of slavery, personified in Simon Legree, as a mortal enemy of Christian love and charity. Thus, Stowe accomplished both her religious and her antislavery purposes by depicting Tom as the ultimate Christian martyr.[15]

In trying to duplicate the effect of Uncle Tom's death while also promoting the proslavery cause, anti-Tom authors depicted slaves who sacrificed their own comforts out of devotion, not to God, but to their masters. For slaveholders, the paternalistic compact between slaves and masters formed a central component of the Christian doctrine in which they believed. In *The Cabin and Parlor*, Uncle Peter reminded a fellow slave of a verse of scripture that remained a favorite among slave owners: "De Bible says, 'Servants obey yer massas.'" Slaves in anti-Tom novels, however, went beyond rote compliance with this biblical mandate. Just as Uncle Tom's evangelical religion was founded on deep emotion and, specifically, love for his heavenly master, slaves in anti-Tom novels felt a stirring devotion to those they were compelled to obey. Southern author Theodore Mathews included a typical description of the touching sentiments slaves supposedly harbored for their masters in his 1860 novel *Old Toney and His Master*. "How the humble, the tried, the devoted slave gloried in his young master," proclaimed Mathews. "How great his homage; how unselfish his love! He could have kissed the ground upon which Langdon trod, and licked the dust from his feet, not through servile fear--no, no!--but through the same spirit of adoration with which he would have licked the polluting

[15] Letter from Rev. John Angell James to Harriet Beecher Stowe, February 15, 1853, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, April 15, 1853; New York *Independent*, November 4, 1852.

dust from the sandals of a Divinity." In anti-Tom novels, the slave master took the place in the hearts of his slaves of the Christ to whom Stowe's Tom had been so passionately attached. In reality, slaveholders often promoted the conflation between themselves and God, as is evidenced by fugitive slave Henry "Box" Brown's belief until he was eight years old that his "old master was Almighty God, and that the young master was Jesus Christ!" Making sacrifices to such an earthly master corresponded directly, in slaveholders' minds, with the holy act that Tom had performed in dying for his faith.[16]

As an extension of the blind devotion slaves gave their masters in anti-Tom novels, slave characters offered to give up everything they held dear for the men and women who served as their protectors. In *Liberia*, for instance, the bedridden planter Charles Peyton fled from a neighborhood slave revolt under the protection of his own slaves, who assured him that "they would defend him with their lives." In *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, Ellen Haywood's mammy declared to her steadily declining mistress, "You know I would die for you if 'twould do you any good." Uncle Peter in *The Cabin and Parlor* likewise promised his poverty-stricken former mistress, "I'd go to Georgy or Lousyanna to work in de cane brake, if it 'd help yer, 'deed I would." Uncle Peter made a less dramatic, but nevertheless difficult sacrifice when he began anonymously giving his mistress's family chickens from his own yard. At Christmas, Peter donated his family's turkey, leaving the slave, his wife, and his children with only "a solitary fowl, of which they ate almost the whole, for it was the first one they had seen for many a long week."

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[16] Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 46; [Theodore Dehone Mathews], *Old Toney and His Master; or, The Abolitionist and the Land-Pirate* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southwestern Publishing House, 1861), v. 2, 19-20;

Nor did Peter partake even of the "solitary fowl," Peterson related, but "the parents denied themselves in order that their children might have enough."[17]

In *The Sword and the Distaff*, slaveholder Captain Porgy took for granted his slave's willingness to die rather than allow Porgy's creditors to sever the sacred bond between master and slave. "Let a sheriff touch him," Porgy resolved, "and I'll put a bullet through his diaphragm." Rather than let his slave "fall into the hands of a scamp," Porgy explained to his companion, "I'll shoot *him*--him, Tom, in order to save him." Due to his slave's faith in the paternalistic code, Porgy knew that Tom, like other anti-Tom slaves, "would rather die my slave than live a thousand years under another owner." Emphasizing the sacred nature of such an act, Porgy suggested that in killing Tom, he would "sacrifice him as a burnt-offering for my sins and his own."[18]

The emotional impact that slave martyrdom had on readers of anti-Tom novels was limited by the fact that, like Porgy's Tom, faithful slaves never officially became martyred, because none of them actually died. The sacrifices they made out of devotion to their masters, therefore, exerted a less powerful effect on a white Northern audience than the ultimate sacrifice offered by Uncle Tom had. Tom's battered body lying on a bed of straw while the dying slave forgave his tormentors proved a more effective image for Christian readers than did Uncle Peter's abstention from chicken or a slave's sincere but merely hypothetical offer to die for his master. As a result, anti-Tom novels

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Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Manchester: Lee and Glynn, 1851), 4.
[17] Hale, *Liberia*, 34; Mrs. Mary H. Eastman, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin; or, Southern Life As It Is* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 41; Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 71, 159-60.

necessarily lacked the emotional force with which their arch-rival had won over hundreds of thousands of Americans who harbored the sentimental tendencies of their mid-nineteenth century culture.

In WIlliam Simms's *The Sword and Distaff*, the garb of martyrdom in which Simms had enveloped his black character gave way promptly to menacing violence on the part of the slave, preventing readers from offering fully their heartfelt sympathies to the nearly sacrificed slave. In a symbolic reclamation of his manhood, Tom shed the womanly kitchen equipment that had signaled his emasculation in the early part of *The Sword and Distaff* and exchanged it for the manly weaponry of two pistols. As he entered this scene, Tom complained that he had "a hundred poun' of pot and kettle on dis nigger t'ighs!" Porgy's slave emphasized the emasculating effect of these implements when he claimed they amounted to "'nough to bury any man, eben ef he bin name Samson," the biblical epitome of manliness. A gridiron is strapped to his thigh, a significant body part that, Simms remarked, one of the men aiding Tom nearly pulled away. Once Tom became free of his cooking gear, Simms related, he "was provided with . . . pistols," which he promptly pointed directly at a white captive. "Now, buckrah," Tom informed the man, "jes you be easy and cibil, . . . or I'll g'e [give] you the benefit of dese yer two barking puppies," and he presented "the two pistols in ugly proximity to the outlaw's jaws as he spoke." Although he made these threats expressly on behalf of his master, Tom in this scene nevertheless defied the anti-Tom formula set up by Stowe that

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[18] William Gilmore Simms, *Woodcraft; or the Hawks about the Dovecote* (Chicago, New York, and San Francisco: Belford, Clarke, & Co., 1888), 112.

eliminated black violence against whites in favor of black martyrdom. As a result, the Tom that Simms created remained outside the boundaries of popular consciousness that Stowe's Tom had penetrated so thoroughly.[19]

Finally, the concept of slave martyrdom on behalf of the paternalistic ideal failed to resonate with Northern readers because in recent years they had ceased to view Southern slaveholders as worthy of such profound devotion. Antislavery propaganda had for the past decade depicted slave masters as avaricious, cold, and sadistic, an image that began to rival, if not supersede, the figure of the genteel, benevolent paternalist featured in earlier plantation novels. By 1852, political events had borne out for Northerners the suggestion of Simon Legree as the quintessential slaveholder. The annexation of Texas, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise had led to an increased resentment of Southern elites among Northern whites that hindered their capacity to empathize with the suffering of slaveholders in anti-Tom novels. The uproar over the Fugitive Slave Law, in particular, revealed Southerners' true motives in holding slaves as strictly mercenary and showed that these men would go to ruthless lengths to hold on to their property. Scenes of federal marshals lining the streets of Boston as troops escorted the fugitive slave Anthony Burns back into slavery in April 1854 further exposed the lie behind slaveholders' arguments that the system worked for the benefit of all concerned. By the time Northerners heard of Southerners gunning down Free Soilers in cold blood in Kansas and brutally attacking Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S.

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[19] Simms, *Woodcraft*, 134.

Senate in 1856, it had already become difficult for Northerners to accept the anti-Tom fiction that slaveholders merited, through their disinterested benevolence, the self-sacrificing love of their cherished slaves.

Seemingly oblivious to the hostility Northerners had increasingly begun to direct toward Southern slaveholders, anti-Tom novelists attempted to use genteel white Southerners as the ultimate martyrs in their fictional responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* In *The Cabin and Parlor*, for instance, Charles Peterson focused on the tribulations of the aristocratic Courtenay family following their sudden plunge into destitution. Through no fault of their own, Mrs. Courtenay, her daughter Isabel, and her two young sons fell into such dire poverty that they could barely earn enough money to pay for food. When Isabel learned that the family slaves would have to be sold, she wept for their fate. But the doctor who had become the protector of the Courtenays protested, "They will suffer far less than you, my dear." Women like Isabel, Dr. Worthington complained angrily, "pity those that don't deserve pity half as much as yourselves." The Courtenays' most revered slave, Uncle Peter, reinforced this message, remarking that "poor white folks hab a wus life dan de wus slave." The experience of thirteen-year-old Horace Courtenay bore out this truth, as the young boy was forced to go North to try to make his own living as a stock boy. In a chapter entitled, "The Northern Slave," Horace came to the realization that as a poor boy in the North, he had little chance of escaping his desperate financial situation. "Oh! ye, who see only the misery of the slave child, torn from his parents," Peterson intoned, "have ye no tears for the delicately nurtured lad, forced from his home,

and consigned to a life a thousand times more harrowing because of his previous habits?" After months of living in "filth and misery" with no friends or family near him, Horace died a pitiable death from overwork and desperate poverty, making for the "touching story" that the *Southern Quarterly Review* so zealously praised.[20]

Anti-Tom novels had a more remote chance of provoking the sympathies of Northern readers when the white victims they portrayed endured far less tragic misfortunes than Horace Courtenay. Horace's sister Isabel, for instance, faced a situation in which she would have to teach school as a means of providing for her mother and younger brother. Peterson presented this fate as a dreadful and potentially fatal sentence for the eighteen-year-old girl. "Teach school my dear!" Doctor Worthington replied when Isabel suggested this course of action. "It will kill you." Uncle Peter likewise observed compassionately, "Poor young missis, dis hard work for yer, killing yer rite down dead." In *The Lofty and the Lowly*, a young woman nearly identical to Isabel in her tender upbringing and delicate temperament resolved to teach the slaves on the plantation to read. Author Maria McIntosh chronicled the grievous results: "Poor Alice! many a time would she have fainted and grown weary, had her strength been in herself," McIntosh lamented. "To a sensitive and timid girl, all this was a species of martyrdom," she explained, "and many a time did Alice retire to her room to weep in secret, and to ask herself if she must indeed continue what was so disagreeable to herself." With Uncle

[20] Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 316, 43, 96, 93; *Southern Quarterly Review* 7 (January 1853), 238.

Tom's cruel death by flogging fresh in their minds, teaching school did not stand as a severe hardship.[21]

Northerners' resentment of slaveholding Southerners stemmed as much from the economic privilege enjoyed by their class as it did from the political domination the Slave Power seemed to wield over the rest of the nation. This class-based animosity further dampened Northern readers' capacity for sympathy toward slaveholding characters. Thus, when anti-Tom authors pleaded for the alleged hardships that masters had to endure, these writers only reminded Northern readers of the wealth and prestige these aristocrats had accumulated through little effort of their own. In *The Master's House*, by Northern-born Louisiana resident Thomas Thorpe, the hero of the piece had to shepherd his slaves from North Carolina down to a new plantation in Louisiana. Thorpe presented the task as a burdensome one for Graham Mildmay, the orphaned heir of a large fortune and hundreds of slaves. "The care and responsibility that rested upon Mildmay, hourly changed the giddy thoughts of youth into the solemn reflections of sobered maturity," Thorpe reported. "There were times when sorrow and vexation came upon him, and then he envied those whose birth had relieved them of the heavy responsibilities that had been by Providence placed upon him." These "heavy responsibilities," accompanied as they were by the vast material and financial benefits that most Northerners could not even

[21] Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 38, 71; Maria J. McIntosh, *The Lofty and the Lowly; or, Good in All and None All-Good* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1853), v. 1, 207.

imagine for themselves, inspired little compassion from ordinary readers of Thorpe's book.[22]

Likewise, the oft-cited idea in anti-Tom novels that "the greatest slave on a plantation is the mistress" elicited little pity from women readers in the North who ordinarily took care of their families and homes with little assistance from servants. In *The Cabin and Parlor*, Peterson attempted to summon pathos for Mrs. Courtenay because of the desperate situation into which she had fallen. Uncle Peter summed up his former mistress's plight when he lamented that she would now "hab no one to wait on her; she hab to work for herself, wid her own lily hands." Yet Mrs. Courtenay proved utterly incapable of contributing to her own support, having always been sheltered from unpleasant realities such as work. "Accustomed for a long life to luxurious indolence," Peterson explained to readers who had come from a far different background, "it was just as difficult for her, after months of poverty, to dress herself" and "to perform any but the lightest household work." The likely response by Northern women to such a situation might have resembled the sentiment Anthony Trollope had longed to express when encountering self-pitying slave mistresses on his travels throughout the South in the 1850s: "Madam--dear madam, your sorrow is great; but that sorrow is the necessary result of your position."[23]

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[22] Thomas B. Thorpe, *The Master's House; Or, Scenes Descriptive of Southern Life* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1855, 3rd ed.), 73.

[23] Caroline Rush, *The North and South, or, Slavery and Its Contrasts: A Tale of Real Life* (Philadelphia: Crissy & Markley, 1852), 226; Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 43, 153; Anthony Trollope, *North America* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1862), 343.

Northern writer Caroline Rush tried to circumvent this strategic problem by shifting the focus away from slaveholding Southerners and concentrating instead on the sad fate of a white family in the North. In *The North and South*, Mrs. Harley and her several children were forced to fend for themselves when Mr. Harley lost his job and then his life because of excessive drinking. In chronicling the various hardships of the Harley family, Rush continually compared the sad fate of her white characters with those of the black slaves found in novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Gazella, the oldest daughter, had worked with her mother, sewing day and night, from the age of eleven, to provide medicine for her dying father and sustenance for her brothers and sisters. Rush claimed that Gazella had been "a real true character, taken from life" and promoted her as "an object worthy to share some of the sympathies you have been giving so lavishly to that abused creature of the imagination, 'Uncle Tom.'" Gazella, Rush continued, "was one of those White Slaves of the North whose sympathies are unheeded," even though her life consisted of "more real and degrading slavery, than falls to the lot of any twenty slaves of the South."[24]

To intensify the comparison between black slavery and white poverty, Rush had the other Harley children in *The North and South* suffer the same kind of corporal punishment that Simon Legree and his drivers had inflicted on black slaves. "Poor Lily," for example, was bound out to an abolitionist woman who beat her often for imagined acts of insolence. The young girl, at one point, "was severely whipped and sent into an

[24] Rush, *North and South,* 30-31.

empty garret, in which was only a case containing two skeletons." When her sister Rose visited her, Rush related, "the little forlorn child stood up before her sister, marked with the horsewhip from head to foot." Finally, the conflict between Lily and her mistress, like that between Tom and Legree, came to a head. "Mrs. Anson, a candle in one hand and horsewhip in the other, approached the bed of straw" on which Lily lay in the garret. "The lash fell on her little limbs, cutting the flesh and bringing the blood at almost every blow," Rush recounted. Then Mrs. Anson matched the grim resolve of Simon Legree, when he said to Tom, "I'll *conquer ye, or kill ye!*--one or t'other." To the abused little girl, Mrs. Anson calmly reported, "Will you be quiet now; I have tied you; I am determined to conquer you." Ellen and Harry Harley endured similar cruelty at the hands of the men and women to whom they had been bound. "She beat my head against the wall," Ellen told her mother, "'till I had such a queer feeling in it, and I could see sparks of fire in my eyes. Then Mr. Wilson used to kick me all about the room." Harry later mused over his most harrowing experience with the "Hardgripes" in a tale that might have come straight from a fugitive slave narrative. "I recalled . . . my whipping when tied to a tree, and the exquisite torture I suffered when he bathed my gashes with lemon-juice; and then my thirst, my intolerable burning thirst, I lived them all over again."[25]

Although she entitled her book *The North and South*, Caroline Rush focused almost exclusively on the North, seeking to prove that slavery "exists at the North as well as the South: the only difference being in the color." In arguing her case, Rush pointed

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[25] Rush, *North and South*, 62, 98, 170, 107, 324.

to the disreputable nature of the slums in Northern cities where poor whites were compelled to live. In the "den of wretchedness" to which the Harleys had to move, "the air," Rush explained, was "close and fetid, and is rendered still more so by the fact, that all the refuse vegetable matter of some thirty families is thrown into the gutter before the doors." She also held up the system of physical punishment espoused by many Northern institutions as a shameful practice: "There is no slavery more degrading, more insulting, than this horrible system of flogging," Rush declared, "which is carried on in our schools, in our nurseries, our kitchens and our work-shops." Ultimately, Rush intended her readers to determine from her novel "whether 'the broad-chested, powerful negro,' or the fragile, delicate girl, with her pure white face, is most entitled to your sympathy and tears."[26]

While Rush's focus on the suffering of innocent whites rather than on that of enslaved blacks appealed to the racist sensibilities of white Americans, her choice of strategy also offended the sectional pride of Northern readers. Northern readers resented novels like *The North and South* because they portrayed residents of the free states as cold and unfeeling toward those less fortunate than themselves. Rush admonished her readers in the North to "consider the poor; the poor that are in your midst; those who starve and die around you, in the vile dens of your own enlightened cities." Charles Peterson likewise denounced "the North, with thousands of Pariahs, both white and black, left to grow up neglected, especially in its cities, so that it educates them, as it were, for

[26] Rush, *North and South*, 32, 76-7, 103, 128.

the gallows." One reviewer, incensed at the charges against his region that Peterson leveled in his book, responded hotly to such denials of Northern benevolence. "C.K.W." acknowledged in his letter to *The Liberator* that Peterson's representation "of the privation, suffering contumely and outrage to which colored people are exposed in the city of Philadelphia, and of the vicious and degraded state in which many of them live there" could be considered both "very graphic and very faithful." Peterson, however, had made a mistake, this critic alleged, in suggesting "that the negroes of Philadelphia fairly represent those of all the Northern States and Canada," and "that the most vulgar and brutal portion of the white people in Philadelphia fairly represent the entire white population of the North."[27]

Anti-Tom authors, therefore, alienated Northern readers by maligning the character of the region and its people. Peterson had presented the city of Philadelphia as "a vast machine, that went on day and night roaring and crunching, forever and forever" producing only "dirt, destitution, and misery intolerable." Although the young Southern author Martha Butt had asserted her hope in the introduction to *Antifanaticism* that "her remarks will not create any unpleasant feelings among her Northern friends," she nevertheless continually referenced the "vast difference between the warm-hearted Southerners and the Northerners." A Northern woman acknowledged in Butt's novel that men and women of the region were "more reserved," and her husband bluntly declared, "I will admit that we are more cold-hearted." Similarly, in *Ellen*, Mrs. V. G. Cowdin of

[27] Rush, *North and South*, 347; Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 247; *The Liberator*, November 5, 1852.

Alabama stressed the coldness of the Northern climate and character, which claimed as its victims both the Southern wife of an abolitionist and her beloved son. The wife, Cowdin related, "had left her luxurious Southern home to find neglect and hardship in the cold, ungenial North." As a result, she had degenerated from a "beautiful and healthful wife" into a "pale care-worn being" after seven long years. Given the "holier than thou" attitude of Northerners like Stowe, contrasted with the cruel realities of Northern life, Charles Peterson asked whether it was "to be wondered at that these things exasperate Southerners?" Just as Stowe's novel had provoked the ire of Southern readers, however, so did the harsh indictments of Northern society that anti-Tom authors offered often "exasperate" readers and potential readers in the North.[28]

In the end, anti-Tom novels attracted as few Southerners to their texts as they had Northerners. In addition to the poor quality of most of the novels, Southern critics objected to the lukewarm support that they believed many of these authors gave to the slave system. While they had tried to extract white readers' sympathy for bankrupt slaveholders or poverty-stricken white Northerners, anti-Tom novelists had not loudly proclaimed the virtues of Southern slavery. In fact, by labeling the North callous and cruel towards its "white slaves," authors like Rush merely implied that the Northern system for dealing with the poorer classes was just as bad as the Southern institution of slavery. "Once admit there is a wrong, and a crime" involved in the system, George Frederick Holmes reasoned, "and it must be followed by expiation and atonement. In the

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[28] Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 114-5; Martha Haines Butt, *Antifanaticism: A Tale of the South* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1853), v. 2, 17, 94; Mrs. V. G. Cowdin, *Ellen; or, the Fanatic's*

South, we think otherwise," Holmes continued. "We hold the African under moral and just titles, founded upon his characteristics, his nature, his necessities and our own." Southerners preferred a defense of slavery like that offered by Mr. Frazer in *Uncle Robin*: "It's a good institution, madam," Frazer told the Northern-born Mrs. Boswell. "I almost wish I was Dr. Boswell's slave." If he had been, Frazer pointed out, he wouldn't have had to worry about what would happen to his large family if he died. "I wouldn't have a care about them, because he would take better care of them than ever I could."[29]

In both the North and the South, therefore, anti-Tom authors misjudged the audiences they sought to attract to their polemical novels. Although these proslavery writers tried to play upon the sympathies of their fellow Americans by producing poignant stories and pitiable characters, they instead managed to alienate potential readers with their shoddy prose and offensive representations of Southerners and Northerners, white and black. As a result, most of the anti-Tom novels failed to draw in even the most passionate advocates of the slave system and the fiercest opponents of the abolitionists. Rather than "pay Mrs. Beecher Stowe off in her own currency," the authors of these works succeeded only in proving their inability to compete with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the loyalties of the nation's readers.[30]

In addition to their inferior literary quality and clumsy strategies, anti-Tom novels also suffered from poor timing. Antislavery and, more importantly, anti-Southern

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Daughter (Mobile: S. H. Goetzel & Co., 1860), 51; Peterson, *Cabin and Parlor*, 247-8.

[29] Rush, *North and South*, 32, 128; *Southern Quarterly Review* 7 (January 1853), 238; Page, *Uncle Robin*, 59.

[30] *Southern Quarterly Review*, 8 (October 1853), 543.

sentiment, had already begun to influence the perceptions of Northern white readers by the early 1850s. No longer did Northern whites harbor a patriotic affinity with slaveholders that transcended sectional rivalries and political agendas. Instead, battles over Texas and the provisions of the Compromise of 1850 had largely desensitized Northern whites to slaveholders' appeals for justice and compassion. In addition, novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had provided Northerners with concrete examples of the men who comprised the Slave Power, thereby enabling them to personalize, and thus intensify, sectional hostility. Before mid-decade, with the national Whig Party in shambles and the Kansas-Nebraska Act further dividing the nation, Northern readers turned completely away from anti-Tom fiction. They began, in its place, to embrace novels that vilified Southern slavery and held up free Northerners and respectable white women as the innocent victims of its barbarism. With the advent of the popular quadroon novel in the mid-1850s, Northern readers fully rejected the anti-Tom suggestion that a slave should sacrifice himself to save his master in favor of the notion that a white slave should instead risk her life to escape a slaveholder's clutches. This shift in popular fiction that dealt with slavery revealed that in the mid-1850s Northerners had taken an important step in preparing themselves mentally to take up arms against the South.

Chapter 5 Leaving the Black Martyr Behind: Antislavery Fiction, 1852-1860

After the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, authors in the North sought to capitalize on the popularity of Stowe's novel by producing their own fictional narratives to expose the evils of the Southern slave system. Between 1852 and 1860, a rash of antislavery books emerged, flooding the Northern market with what one commentator dismissed scornfully as "woolly-headed literature." The most successful antislavery novels of the 1850s, though, did not focus on black characters like Uncle Tom at all, but instead centered on female slaves with lighter skin and a more genteel nature than Stowe's famous martyr. Though these "tragic octoroons" had appeared in fictional texts prior to 1852, this figure developed into an entire sub-genre of American literature in the decade leading up to the Civil War.[1]

None of the octoroon novels of the 1850s approached the extraordinary success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but many of them nevertheless gained a respectable following among Northern white readers, becoming moderate best-sellers in their day. *Ida May* by Mrs. Mary Hayden Green Pike ranked as the fourth most popular antislavery novel of the decade, selling some 60,000 copies after it was published in 1855. About 100,000 copies of the dime novel *Maum Guinea* reached the general public upon publication in 1861.

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[1] George Graham, "Black Letters: Or Uncle-Tom Foolery in Literature" *Graham's Magazine Review*, February 1853. For secondary sources on the tragic octoroon figure and plot in antebellum literature, see Jules Zanger, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction," *American Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1966), 63-70; Hannah S. Goldman, "The Tragic Gift: The Serf and Slave Intellectual in Russian and American Fiction" *Phylon* 24 (Spring 1963), 51-61; Joseph R. Roach, "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance" *Theatre Survey* 33 (November 1992), 167-187; and Nancy Bentley, "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction" in Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson, eds., *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from* Oroonoko *to Anita Hill*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

From all accounts, *Neighbor Jackwood* by J. T. Trowbridge proved a decided commercial success, and the play based on the novel enjoyed a long run in Boston. Finally, Dion Boucicault's drama *The Octoroon*, which opened in New York in 1859, became one of the best-known and most highly acclaimed dramas of the century.[2]

This new brand of antislavery fiction attracted Northern readers because it played on the common assumptions about race that many white Northerners still embraced on the eve of the Civil War. The men and women who penned octoroon novels eschewed abolitionist beliefs in equal justice and equal rights for African Americans, instead targeting their protests at the abuse that Southern slaveholders heaped on their fellow white Americans. Though they often hesitated to paint wealthy masters in a negative light, authors of octoroon texts introduced white overseers and slave traders whose licentiousness had led them to disregard the chastity of young women with white complexions and refinement of manners on par with that of the most well-bred white woman in the North. Black characters, on the other hand, remained confined to the comic and repulsive roles that minstrel shows and plantation novels had previously assigned them. These novels often ended with a white hero from the North arriving to rescue the defenseless young woman from the evil Southern slaveholder. Once the white female character had been successfully redeemed from a life of bondage, the black slaves in the narrative faded harmlessly into the background. Their apparent destiny, to live out their

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[2] S. Austin Alliborne, *A Critical Dictionary of English* Literature (Philadelphia, 1870), v. 2, 1595; Donald E. Liedel, "The Puffing of *Ida May*: Publishers Exploit the Antislavery Novel" *Journal of Popular Culture* 3 (Fall 1969), 288; Alliborne, *Critical Dictionary*, v. 3, 2523; Charles M. Harvey, "The Dime Novel in American Life" *Atlantic Monthly* (July 1907), 39.

lives under the thumb of the Southern slaveholder, seemed far less troubling to these antislavery authors as long as the victims of the system had dark skin.

While octoroon novels conformed to the accepted racial beliefs of many Northern whites, a number of abolitionist texts emerged in the same period that challenged these safe views of African Americans' place within antebellum society. Unlike the authors of octoroon novels, these bolder crusaders against slavery did not dismiss black slaves as irrelevant to the antislavery cause by banishing them to the margins of their texts. Nor did they follow Stowe's lead by appealing to the sympathies white readers harbored for submissive black victims of slavery. Instead, abolitionist authors of the 1850s focused their texts around manly black avengers who sought to right the wrongs that African Americans had endured for centuries at the hands of heartless Southern masters. As a result, radical abolitionist works of the 1850s enjoyed scant popular success with a Northern public that remained reluctant to accept even the fictional transformation of a black martyr into a black rebel.

In the end, neither octoroon nor radical abolitionist novels captured the hearts and minds of Northern readers in the way that Stowe had with *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Even Stowe's considerably less popular second antislavery novel, *Dred,* far exceeded the sales of any antislavery text that was produced by either camp during the 1850s. Though opposition to slavery hovered at an all-time high among white Northerners in the late 1850s, the authors who tried to tap into that sentiment failed to strike a cord that would resonate effectively with the newly converted masses. It would take the cataclysmic

event of the Civil War before the creators of Northern popular culture would successfully combine antislavery and abolitionist ideas to produce a collection of texts that most white Northerners could support without reservation.

Octoroon texts seemed the most promising means of attracting a popular audience in the North as the sectional debate intensified in the mid-1850s. Antislavery authors writing after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* hoped the theme of the tragic octoroon would appeal to both the widespread bitterness that the Northern public directed against the "Slave Power" and the corresponding distaste that many white Northerners felt for black slaves. By the mid-1850s, as Lydia Maria Child pointed out, "the sentiments of the original Garrisonian Abolitionist" had become "very widely extended" to a large portion of the population, but Northern whites had adopted abolitionism in "forms more or less diluted." Many Northerners opposed slavery strictly because they resented the arrogant aristocrats who benefited from the system without putting in an honest day's work themselves and who also callously trampled on the rights of Northern whites. The bitterness that these ordinary Americans felt toward the Slave Power generally did not translate into a concern for the welfare of the black slaves forced to support the hated institution with their backbreaking toil and their continual deprivation. Free Soil advocate David Wilmot eloquently encapsulated Northern attitudes toward both Southern slaveholders and the race they kept in bondage when he vowed, "by God," that

"men born and nursed of white women are not going to be ruled by men who were brought up on the milk of some damn negro wench."[3]

In explaining his decision to craft an octoroon novel during the 1850s, author J. T. Trowbridge later claimed a conscious attempt on his part to appeal to the existing racial sensibilities of Northern readers. "I shrank from the thought of making a black man my hero," Trowbridge admitted, looking back from a turn-of-the-century vantage point. "Sympathy will be more easily enlisted for a woman, white, with native refinement and sweetness of character," he remembered thinking, "and yet born a slave, with all the power and prejudice of legal ownership and cruel caste conspiring to defeat her happiness." After all, Trowbridge had reasoned, the Southern institution "condemned to a degrading bondage, not those of African blood alone, but so many of the disinherited descendants of the proud, white master race."[4]

As Trowbridge had anticipated, many Northern white readers identified with the light-skinned female slaves of octoroon fiction to a much greater extent than they did with dark-skinned characters of either sex. To maximize the sympathy that white readers might feel for their octoroon characters, the authors of these texts fashioned their enslaved heroines as perfect expressions of antebellum femininity. H. L. Hosmer described his central character, Adela, as "really beautiful" and "endowed with a strong

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[3] "Correspondence Between Lydia Maria Child, and Governor Wise, and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia" (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 10; Wilmot quoted in Charles Buxton Going, *David Wilmot, Free-Soiler: A Biography of the Great Advocate of the Wilmot Proviso* (New York: D. Appleton, 1924), 175, n9.

[4] John Townsend Trowbridge, *My Own Story, With Recollections of Noted Persons* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), 224-5.

mind, which had been carefully cultivated." The physical traits of Adela closely paralleled those of most fictional octoroon women of the period. "Her complexion was dark, but clear," Hosmer related, "and her brilliant black eyes expressive of vivacity and intellect." Helen and Charles, the octoroon siblings in *Caste* by Mary Pike, both exhibited a "clear, dark complexion, and large, soft, black eyes." Pike added to this description an "erect, graceful figure" and, on Helen's part, "masses of raven hair." These characteristics came together, Pike contended, so that the sister and brother "might have been taken for models of masculine and feminine beauty." Similarly, Elizabeth Livermore in *Zoe; or the Quadroon's Triumph* noted that her heroine's "hair was black, wavy, and abundant, her eyes soft and dark, her face oval and delicate in its form." In *Maum Guinea*, the octoroon Rose had "dark, liquid eyes" and a "slender form" that helped make the young woman her black lover's "ideal of female beauty."[5]

Readers of octoroon novels could identify with their female protagonists not only because they adhered to typical standards of Victorian beauty, but also because of the Northern connections of these exquisite protagonists. Most octoroon heroines possessed fathers, lovers, or husbands who hailed from the North, giving them a close, personal association with the region. Ida May, for instance, had been born in Pennsylvania, of white parents, and had been abducted by slave traders who stained her skin a darker shade

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[5] H. L. Hosmer, *Adela, The Octoroon* (Columbus: Follett, Foster & Co., 1860), 4; [Mrs. Mary Hayden Green Pike], *Caste: A Story of Republican Equality* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company/New York: J. C. Derby, 1855), 25; Mrs. Elizabeth D. Livermore, *Zoe; or The Quadroon's Triumph. A Tale for the Times* (Cincinnati: Truman and Spofford, 1855), 20; Mrs. Metta V. Victor, *Maum Guinea, and Her Plantation "Children;" or, Holiday-Week on a Louisiana Estate* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1861), 20, 6.

to sell her as a slave. Thereafter, Ida's heart-broken father left his home in the North to spend years searching for his kidnapped daughter. Other light-skinned slaves had surrogate fathers or brothers from the North who protested against their enslavement. In *Maum Guinea*, a local constable in New York who had been commissioned to recapture Maum Guinea's daughter Judy refused to follow the law once he had seen the girl himself. "She's whiter dan I am, and a darn sight purtier," he asserted. "I'd as soon help cotch my own sister." In Trowbridge's novel, Abimilech Jackwood expressed similar sentiments about Charlotte after she had lived with them several weeks. "Back to slavery?" Jackwood exclaimed, "Our Charlotte! I'd as soon think o' lettin' my own darter go!" Over the course of the novel, Charlotte also married a Northern man named Hector who ultimately bought her freedom from the Southern master who laid claim to her.[6]

In a number of media besides fiction, antebellum Americans had previously revealed their fascination with the figure of the tragic octoroon. Trowbridge recalled, for instance, that he had been encouraged to create a novel about a white slave woman because of the outpouring of sympathy the Northern public had given real-life octoroon and former slave Ellen Craft. Craft and her husband William had escaped from slavery in December of 1848 and then traveled with William Wells Brown during 1849 as he lectured throughout New England. Ellen Craft, *The Liberator* had reported in February 1849, was "so light as not to be distinguished from a white woman" and possessed

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[6] Victor, *Maum Guinea*, 184; John Townsend Trowbridge, *Neighbor Jackwood* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1895), 433.

"straight hair" and "regular features." When she appeared on stage at an abolitionist rally in New Bedford, Massachusetts, one of William Lloyd Garrison's correspondents inferred from the "expression of astonishment [that] arose from the audience" that "surely, many of the mothers, wives, and sisters in that audience, must have felt the question of slavery brought close home to their hearts as they looked upon her."[7]

The year before the Crafts began their tour of New England, a statue by Hiram Powers depicting a white woman in chains circulated throughout the United States, winning great popular acclaim in every city where it was displayed. Between 1847 and 1848, over 100,000 Americans paid to see "The Greek Slave" when it made stops in a dozen cities, including Boston, New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and St. Louis. "Its presence is a magic circle," the New York *Courier and Enquirer* explained, "within whose precincts all are held spell-bound and almost speechless." Powers's later production of five more full-size castings of the statue, as well as dozens of smaller versions, allowed Americans to remain entranced by "The Greek Slave" throughout the succeeding decade.[8]

The octoroon novels of the 1850s, however, made clear the connection between American slavery and the exploitation of these ideal young white women in a way that Powers's statue had failed to do. As "The Greek Slave" continued to draw phenomenal

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[7] *The Liberator*, February 16, 1849, quoted in Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 235.

[8] New York *Courier and Enquirer*, August 31, 1847; for an extended treatment of the statue and its reception in the United States, see Joy S. Kasson, "Narratives of the Female Body: *The Greek Slave*" in Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

crowds throughout the country, opponents of slavery had complained that Americans shed tears for an image cast in marble, but refused to bestow any of their compassion on the human slaves in their midst. "There were fair breasts, that heaved with genuine sympathy beneath the magic power of the great artist," the *National Era* scolded, "that have never yet breathed a sigh for the sable sisterhood of the South!" While the octoroons of 1850s fiction appealed to Northern readers with their beauty and their delicate natures, the authors who created them also made it clear that the institution of Southern slavery was directly responsible for the suffering of these women. Provoked by the cruel enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, by Southern threats to extend slavery into the territories, and by the international shame that slavery brought to the United States, authors of octoroon fiction deliberately sought to demonize the slave system in their narratives. While Powers's statue allowed American viewers to distance themselves from the tragedy they beheld in this work of art, writers of octoroon novels unambiguously linked the tragedy in their texts to the continued legality of a system that Americans allowed to persist in their own country.[9]

The threatened sexual abuse of delicate slave women with white, or nearly white, skin tones awakened both the tenderness and the outrage of Northern readers much more effectively than slaveholders' violations of the bodies and the dignity of African Americans could. When the coarse overseer M'Closky paid $25,000 for Zoe in Boucicault's *The Octoroon* and promised her, "I'll set you up grand" as the "mistress of

[9] *The National Era*, Washington, D.C., September 2, 1847.

Terrebonne" plantation, white readers understood the sexual implications and could not help feeling indignant about a system that would allow a white woman's virtue to be sold to the highest bidder. Hildreth evoked similar emotions when Eliza, the "beautiful and elegant girl" in *The White Slave* whom Archy's wife "claimed and wept for as her dear, dear daughter," was sold through underhanded means to an unscrupulous slaveholder who planned "to reduce her to slavery and concubinage." Mr. Gilmore, Hildreth explained, "had been so captivated at first sight by her personal charms and Boston accomplishments, as to have come at once to the conclusion to appropriate her and them to his own use, under pretence of ownership, and by the rights which the law gives a master." For Northern readers who regarded their chastity, or that of their own daughters, as sacred, that many other light-skinned young women in the South found themselves in the same predicament as Eliza instituted for them a particularly shameful mark against the institution of slavery.[10]

White characters in octoroon novels reacted to the unfortunate situation of these tragic victims with the same dread and indignation that authors expected from their white readers. When the hero of *Ida May*, Walter Varian, first encountered the young child Ida, for instance, Pike provided a discreet hint of his thoughts. "His face grew crimson," Pike recounted, "as he thought of what would probably be the fate of one who bid fair to be so surpassingly lovely." In *Maum Guinea*, Mrs. M. V. Victor explored the guilt that Judge

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[10] Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, from Peter Thomson, ed., *Plays by Dion Boucicault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 142; Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore, The White Slave: or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971, reprint of the 1856 edition), 384, 389, 396, 390. Spelling is as in the original.

Bell felt when he consented to sell the lovely octoroon Rose to a licentious slaveholder to pay off his debts. "His conscience, as a man, was troubled," Victor reported, "for he knew, much better than his child, the object of the purchase, and he could not *quite* persuade himself that the mulatto-girl, always modest and virtuous thus far in her young life, was just the creature for that kind of a sale." Trowbridge tried to heighten his readers' sense of the tragic situation in which the octoroon woman Charlotte found herself as slave catchers made ready to return her to bondage. The poor girl had "a fate more horrible than a thousand deaths awaiting her!" Trowbridge lamented, "and she alone, defenceless, helpless, delivered over to ruffians by the LAW itself!" Although Charlotte, Ida May, and Rose all ultimately managed to avoid being forced into concubinage, the threat of that miserable form of degradation preyed on the minds of white readers who could scarcely have imagined themselves or their daughters condemned to such a life of moral disgrace by the evil system of Southern slavery.[11]

Octoroon novels capitalized on the growing belief among Northerners that Southern slaveholders would treat not only black slaves but also powerless whites in their midst in an unscrupulous, abusive manner. Polemical literature that condemned slave masters for the shameful way they treated poor Southern whites, in particular, won a substantial following in the mid-1850s. Frederick Law Olmsted's *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, for instance, highlighted the injury and neglect that non-slaveholding whites endured at the hands of haughty, disdainful slaveholders. Olmsted,

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[11] [Mrs. Mary Hayden Green Pike], *Ida May: The Story of Things Actual and Possible* (Leipzig and Dresden: A. H. Payne, 1855), 71; Victor, *Maum Guinea*, 120; Trowbridge, *Neighbor Jackwood*, 440.

an opponent of abolitionism who had admonished Stowe and her supporters three years earlier for acting as "indignant sympathizers" with black slaves, complained in *Journey* that slaveholders treated poor Southern whites "as a distinct and a rather despicable class, and wanted to have as little to do with them as [they] conveniently could." Because of slavery, Olmsted reported, this class of people "are said to be extremely ignorant and immoral, as well as indolent and unambitious." In the more democratic environment of the free states, such men would be able to earn their living, but the dependence on slave labor in the South meant that those who ruled it had nearly squeezed free labor out of the economy altogether. Northern readers were bound to be attracted by such an argument, as it exalted the economic system practiced in the North and condemned the Southern slave system as both inefficient and undemocratic. The fascination with which Northerners greeted *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* required that five editions of this combination travelogue and economic analysis be printed during 1856 alone.[12]

Similarly, North Carolinian Hinton Helper lamented in *The Impending Crisis* the pitiable situation to which poor Southern whites had sunk because of the slave system. *The Impending Crisis* proved even more condemnatory than Olmsted's *Journey* of the slaveholders whose passion to rule, Helper argued, had given rise to this situation. "The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks," Helper thundered, "but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely

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[12] "The South" Number 10, *New-York Daily Times*, April 8, 1853, reprinted in Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, eds., *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Volume II, Slavery and the South, 1852-1857* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 131-2; Frederick Law Olmsted,

nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated." Those who governed the Southern states, according to Helper, constituted an "oligarchy" that prevented nonslaveholders, who held a five-to-one majority over slaveholders, from taking any part in "framing the laws under which they live." Slaveholders, in short, controlled the knowledge, the laws, and the economic position of these "stupid and sequacious masses, the white victims of slavery" who inhabited the South. The Northern public responded to Helper's claims with enthusiasm. Within three years of its initial publication in 1857, some 75,000 copies of *The Impending Crisis* had been distributed throughout the free states.[13]

Octoroon novels echoed the indignation that Olmsted and Helper had leveled at slaveholders for their blatant disregard of the rights of poor white Southerners. In *The White Slave*, Richard Hildreth's expanded version of *Archy Moore*, a kindly planter remarked of poor whites, "The operation of our system hangs like a millstone around their necks." The planter further suggested that "there may be some, among our rich planters, who would think it a very good thing to reduce these poor white men to slavery." Similarly, a member of the wealthy slaveholding elite in Mary Pike's *Ida May: The Story of Things Actual and Possible* voiced his opinion that "there *must* be two classes in every society." In addition to the upper classes, this gentleman explained, "the labouring classes must be the plebians, and it makes little difference whether they are

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A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, With Remarks on Their Economy (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 84.

black or white." These authors bemoaned the state of the "plebians" in the slave states, describing them as "clay eaters" and detailing the disreputable condition in which slave system in their midst forced them to live. "They are squalid and emaciated to a frightful degree," reported Mrs. Pike, "with yellowish, drab-coloured complexions, eyes that are dull and cold as the eyes of a dead fish, and faces, whose idiotic expression is only varied by a dull despair, or a devilish malignity." A poor white woman in *The White Slave* lamented that "poor people in Carolina don't have any chance at learning; no schools, and nothing to pay the teacher with, if we had any." In her less popular novel *Caste*, Pike described these "wretched beings" as "too stupid to think." In sum, Pike explained, these men and women were "crushed and degraded to the last extreme of poverty and ignorance by the operation of slavery, that cuts them off from all the labor to which their capacities are suited."[14]

The authors of octoroon novels could not allow slaveholders who had flagrantly violated the rights of poor whites and beautiful, fair-skinned women to succeed in their plot to dominate the weak men and women who surrounded them. In the end, the octoroon narrative relied on a white man, invariably from the North, to deliver the delicate white protagonist unharmed from the power of her slaveholding tormentor. Sometimes, in the process of tying up loose ends, the valiant white hero also enacted a just revenge against the villainous master. In *The White Slave*, for example, Archy

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[13] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How To Meet It* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1860), 43, 42, 44; Hugh C. Bailey, *Hinton Rowan Helper: Abolitionist Racist* (Montgomery: University of Alabama Press, 1965), 81.

[14] Pike, *Ida May*, 125, 281; Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, 286; Pike, *Caste*, 204.

Moore's white son redeemed the lovely Eliza from the power of Mr. Gilmore, the licentious man who through deception had purchased her as his slave. Montgomery, who had even less black blood than his octoroon father and who had lived most of his life in the North, arrived just in time to interrupt Gilmore's attempts to pressure Eliza into submitting to his sexual advances. To liberate the octoroon in distress, Montgomery found it necessary to seize Gilmore by the throat, and then the young hero "pitched him head foremost into the corner," whereupon he quickly ushered his betrothed out of the building before Gilmore could recover. In *Maum Guinea*, it was the white Northerner Captain Slocum who had saved Maum Guinea's "poor, beautiful white chile" from a life of bondage. Years later, Slocum returned to the South to redeem his wife's quadroon mother from slavery and take her to live with them in the North. In doing so, he also prevented the light-skinned slave Rose from being sold to an immoral slaveholder who planned to establish her as his concubine. Although Slocum did not, in the end, actually perpetrate violence against Southern slaveholders, he had vowed earlier that if the men who owned Maum Guinea and Rose stood in his way, he would not hesitate to "thrash those two old fogies within an inch of their lives."[15]

White heroes in octoroon novels, however, did not even consider the possibility of fighting on behalf of a slave character with dark skin who could anticipate the same debasing fate as these beautiful, nearly white young women. Black characters in octoroon novels merely reinforced contemporary notions of white superiority by

[15] Hildreth, *Archy Moore*, 402; Victor, *Maum Guinea*, 184, 205.

mimicking the negative stereotypes about African Americans that were familiar to white readers. In *Ida May*, author Mary Pike appropriated her peripheral character Uncle Ned directly from contemporary minstrel shows. Ned, the official fiddler on his master's plantation, appeared both comic and repulsive while at this task. Pike related that as he played, Ned sat "nodding his head, and rolling his eyes, and opening his mouth so that every one of his white teeth glistens in the light that streams over him." Any observer, Pike added, "might almost see down his capacious throat." Pike directly linked the other black slaves in *Ida May* to various kinds of animals. Even the slave woman whom Ida May came to love as her "mauma" appeared in a bestial light. When Venus laughed, Pike reported, "all the sombre dignity of her appearance vanished." At that point, the old woman's "gums with broken teeth" became visible, and her "head ducked down between her shoulders," which "transformed her into something very much resembling a baboon." Pike likewise represented the old slave woman Chloe as "perfectly hideous." In particular, she noted, Chloe's "hands and fingers, bony, long and claw-like, resembled a vulture's talons more than anything human."[16]

Venus and other black slaves of octoroon fiction acted as the sort of dependent and devoted servants that white readers had come to expect from mainstream popular culture. "O, Miss Lizzy was an angel, one o' de Lord's angels, right out o' heaven," reflected the old slave Venus in *Ida May* about her former mistress. "We would 'a laid down and let her walk over us," she assured Ida, in words reminiscent of anti-Tom

[16] Pike, *Ida May*, 139.

novels; "we'd 'a died for her, we would." Having secretly recognized that Ida was white, Venus cared for the young girl in the same self-sacrificial way. Pike related that the old woman "would have slaved night and day, she would have suffered cold and starvation, to obtain comforts and luxuries for this child, whom she loved as if she had been her own and yet reverenced as belonging to a higher race." In *Adela*, by H. L. Hosmer, the slave Zeb in *Adela* adored his mistress, considering her "the best friend I have on earth." This devotion, Hosmer indicated, was intertwined with dependence on the masters and mistresses these slaves loved. Hosmer theorized that "the poor, uneducated, unfriended negro . . . has been all his life dependent upon his owner for food and raiment, and upon his overseer for thought and calculations." He further wondered how former slaves could cope with freedom "without some friend to guide and advise from time to time, and to help, if necessary."[17]

Although octoroon novels conformed closely to contemporary ideas about race, most of them did not take the Northern public by storm when they were released into the market. While the hearts of many white readers went out to the beautiful, delicate victims featured in these texts, some critics brushed aside octoroon characters as unsympathetic and implausible. The *Continental Monthly*, reviewing *Neighbor Jackwood* eight years after its publication, felt that the figure of "poor Charlotte" was "well drawn" and that "her tale is one appealing to all human sympathies." Most other periodicals that published notices of octoroon fiction, however, emphasized the

[17] Pike, *Ida May*, 55, 67; Hosmer, *Adela*, 126, 57-8.

weaknesses inherent in the genre. The *North American Review* argued that Mary Pike's *Ida May* "falls far short" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with regard to "its hold on the sympathies." Had *Ida May* been published before Stowe's novel, the reviewer speculated, "it could have produced no more than a slight surface-swell on the then almost universal indifference and apathy." Referring to the same book, the *New Englander and Yale Review* judged that "the story of this novel has so little plausibility as materially to detract from the pleasure of its perusal." Though *Putnam's Monthly* declared that *Caste*, also by Pike, "cannot be too highly praised," the reviewer also acknowledged that the story behind it was "not probable." As these critics suggested, plot lines and characters that strained the credibility of octoroon novels largely accounted for the lukewarm popularity that most of these texts attracted during the 1850s.[18]

Radical abolitionist fiction of the 1850s failed even more abysmally with the Northern reading public than octoroon fiction did because it presented a direct challenge to the commonly held racial beliefs of the time. Whereas octoroon novels promoted a paternalistic view of helpless, dependent African Americans, the black men in radical narratives did not want or need a white protector or advisor, but relied on their own strength and intelligence for survival. These courageous, independent characters also stood up to the white men who had determined to keep them in bondage, using violence if it became necessary. For African-American writers and other abolitionists with an intensely liberal agenda, this strategy sought to revise the wildly popular image of the

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[18] *Continental Monthly* 5 (June 1864), 720; *North American Review* 80 (January 1855), 267-8; *New Englander and Yale Review* 13 (February 1855), 154; *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 7 (January 1856), 107.

meek Uncle Tom that proslavery and octoroon novels of the 1850s kept alive in popular culture. Unfortunately for the authors of these radical texts, the Northern public much preferred Stowe's docile black martyr to the startling images of assertive black men that graced the pages of abolitionist fiction in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

The manliness with which authors of radical fiction distinguished their black characters proved the first obstacle to popular success that these texts faced. While the black protagonists of abolitionist fiction after 1852 resembled Uncle Tom in their physical strength and generosity of heart, authors like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany also endowed their main characters with intelligence and bravery to emphasize their equality with the most admirable white man. Stowe had introduced Tom as "a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence." Physically, Madison Washington of Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" was, like Tom, "of manly form," but instead of possessing "truly African features," Washington warranted the forthright designation of "comely." Similarly, Delany portrayed Henry in his novel *Blake* as "manly" as well as "handsome." Whereas Tom boasted "grave and steady good sense," Washington appeared instead as simply "intelligent and brave." Blake was "intelligent" and also "bold, determined, and courageous." Finally, the "good nature and kindness" that Washington showed was not tainted with the suggestion of inferior mental faculties that Tom's "confiding and humble simplicity" implied. For his part, Delany pointed out that

Blake was "always mild, gentle, and courteous, though impulsive when an occasion demanded his opposition." Washington was "one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy. By describing Blake and Washington as benevolent, rational beings who nevertheless could and would fight when the necessity arose, Delany and Douglass attempted to establish their black protagonists as heroes more worthy than Uncle Tom of their white readers' respect and admiration. Instead, these authors ensured their characters' disfavor with the white Northern public.[19]

Gambling that the hatred white Northerners felt for Southern slaveholders would induce them to support strong black characters in violent assaults against the slave system, the authors of abolitionist texts in the 1850s often centered their narratives on slave revolts. "The Heroic Slave" served as Douglass's interpretation of an insurrection that had occurred in 1841 aboard the domestic slave ship the *Creole*. Delany's novel followed the fictional Henry Blake throughout the Southern United States and Cuba as he attempted to organize a massive rebellion of slaves in both countries. Austin Steward's autobiography, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, recounted incidents of both individual and collective slave violence against white Southern masters. Finally, Herman Melville built his chilling tale "Benito Cereno" around a slave mutiny on a Spanish ship. Though these authors forwarded a variety of agendas in their diverse texts, their unanimous insistence

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[19] For a discussion of the manly ideal in the antebellum United States, see James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "Violence, Protest, and Identity: Black Manhood in Antebellum America" in Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, v. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 382-383. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 18; Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave" reprinted in *The Narrative and Selected Writings*,

that slave rebellion posed a real and ever-present threat for slaveholders was intended to warn white readers of the dangers that would likely occur if they allowed slavery to persist on American soil.[20]

To alert their audiences to the perils that Southern slavery presented to white Americans, creators of radical texts in the 1850s could scarcely avoid using shock tactics that served to alienate white readers. In an effort to minimize the alarm that his white readers might experience, Frederick Douglass omitted a direct description of the insurrection that Madison Washington spearheaded on the *Creole*. Yet the few images of slave revolt that materialized in "The Heroic Slave" proved disturbing to white readers for whom Tocqueville's words still rang true. Even in the 1850s, "the danger of a conflict between the white and the black inhabitants of the Southern states of the Union," it could still be said, "perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans, like a painful dream." As the slaves prepared to attack, the ship's first mate reported that "the very deck seemed covered with fiends from the pit." At that moment, "the nineteen negroes

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Michael Meyer, ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 1984), 303; Martin R. Delany, *Blake; or the Huts of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 16-17.

[20] Literary critics and historians over the years have offered widely varied and sometimes directly contradictory opinions on the motives Melville had for writing "Benito Cereno." Some of these scholars have characterized Melville as a "subtle abolitionist," while others have deemed this interpretation more "a construction of generous wish than hard fact." In his article "*Benito Cereno*: Melville's De(con)struction of the Southern Reader" in *Literature and History* 12 (Spring 1986), 3-15, Charles Swann has suggested that Southern readers would have silently agreed with Melville's portrayal of black slaves who appeared loyal and docile but were actually wearing masks to conceal a savagery and rebelliousness that perpetually threatened the lives of Southern slaveholders. Swann proposed that Melville had used this tactic to remind Southerners of the dangers slavery posed to them in the hope of moving them further toward abolishing the institution. According to Swann, the subtlety that Melville used in "Benito Cereno" grew out of his desire to offer a veiled critique of Southern slavery while also attracting a readership, as he had not managed to do with the more straightforward treatment of the topic of incest in *Pierre*. The criticism of slavery that Melville offered in "Benito Cereno," Swann argued, was thus "mediated through indirection and irony," using a strategy that was "consciously weak." (11)

were all on deck, with their broken fetters in their hands, rushing in all directions." In the wake of the revolt, two powerful, armed white men--one of whom had had control of the ship and the other of whom had been the owner of the slaves--"lay stretched on the quarter-deck,--both dying." The dramatic reversal of roles that left a "black murderer" in command of the ship and the former captain in the throes of death would not attract white readers who adhered to a traditional vision of the racial hierarchy.[21]

Douglass's sterile report of the *Creole* mutiny contrasted markedly with the equally veiled, but much more disconcerting, account of the shipboard revolt in "Benito Cereno." From the time that the American captain Amasa Delano boarded the *San Dominick* and observed the six Africans who "clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din," Melville's tale abounded with unsettling images of black violence. Observing the shaving of Spanish captain Benito Cereno by his seemingly solicitous body servant Babo, Delano could not resist the fleeting thought "that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white man, a man at the block." Shortly thereafter, Babo cut his master's neck with the razor. "See master," Babo announced ominously, "you shook so--here's Babo's first blood." When Melville finally confirmed for his readers that the slaves had been in control of the ship all along, the canvas concealing the ship's masthead swung away, "suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round toward the open ocean, death for the figure-head, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, '*Follow your leader.*'" The final image with which Melville

[21] Douglass, "Heroic Slave," 344-5;

left his readers provided an equally haunting complement to the murdered slave master's skeleton that graced the ship's bow. After the execution of Babo, Melville reported that the mutineer's "head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites." While the suspense of Melville's plot might draw white readers on, the disturbing message that black rebels continued to watch with steady eyes those who enslaved them would hardly make the story a beloved favorite with Northern white readers.[22]

In *Blake*, Martin Delany, like Melville, relied on dark threats of revolt to serve as a warning that while the slave system continued, the lives of white Americans remained perpetually in danger. The novel itself seemed Delany's attempt to fulfill the vow that Henry articulated in *Blake*, that not until white Americans "let us alone--cease to steal away our people from their native country and oppress us in their own--will I let them alone." Slaveholders, Henry Blake pledged, "shall only live--while I live--under the most alarming apprehensions." Throughout the novel, Delany's characters hinted at the very real likelihood of Southern slaves achieving retribution against their masters. Blake met a slave woman in South Carolina, for instance, who pointed out that the Dismal Swamp contained runaway slaves "in sufficient number to take the whole United States." In Cuba, Blake helped establish an "army of emancipation of the oppressed men and women" of the island. This army recruited ample support to initiate "a grand scheme," with Blake at its head as "Black General-in-Chief," for "a general rebellion of the

[22] Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno" in *Billy Budd, Benito Cereno, and The Enchanted Isles* (New York: The Press of the Readers Club, 1942), 100, 143, 144, 161-2, 184.

Negroes." Though the revolt went unrealized during the novel, Delany hinted that the ultimate success of these black warriors would be inevitable.[23]

Delany concluded *Blake* with the specter of slave violence hanging in the air so that it might continue to haunt white readers, as, he suggested, it did in real life. "The white inhabitants of Cuba, and those of the South," Delany contended, led "a dreamy existence of the most fearful apprehensions, of dread, horror and dismay; suspicion and distrust, jealousy and envy continually pervade the community." He went on to argue that "a sleeping wake or waking sleep, a living death or tormented life is that of the Cuban and American slaveholder." In fact, "a criminal in the midst of a powder bin with a red-hot pigot of iron in his hand, which he is compelled to hold and char the living flesh to save his life, or let it fall to relieve him from torture, and thereby incur instantaneous destruction," Delany declared, "could not exist in greater torment than these most unhappy people." In a society of slaves and masters, Henry Blake contended, it was the whites who had "everything to fear and nothing to hope for," since, "God is just, and his justice will not sleep forever."[24]

Individual characters in *Blake* reaffirmed the validity of the fears that put slaveholders into a state of perpetual fear. At a secret meeting of Blake and his lieutenants, the slave Andy announced that he felt himself able not only to turn against his master and "chop 'is head off," but also to "chop off Miss Mary' head; an' I likes hur." The black runaway Charles seconded Andy's feelings, concluding that his master

[23] Delany, *Blake*, 192, 114, 241, 265.
[24] Delany, *Blake*, 305.

"ole Frank's head would be nothin' for me to chop off" and adding that he "could chop off mistess head, an' you know she's a good woman." Such graphic illustrations of slaves' willingness to commit violence against their masters awakened the alarm rather than the sympathy of white Northern readers for whom slave rebellion emerged as one of their darkest fears.[25]

In his autobiography, black abolitionist Austin Steward lent his support to the notion that Southern masters knew they risked their lives by holding black men in bondage. "The slaveholder is well aware that he stands over a volcano, that may at any moment," Steward observed, "sweep him and his family to destruction." To remind readers of the constant fear under white master lived, Steward explained that "when he lies down at night," the Southern slaveholder "knows not but that ere another morning shall dawn, he may be left mangled and bleeding, and at the mercy of those maddened slaves whom he has so long ruled with a rod of iron." Steward included a specific illustration of the potential for slave violence against white Americans, in which a group of twenty-five slaves attacked and killed several members of a white patrol threatening to break into a slave cabin. "The leader, a gigantic African, with a massive compact frame, and an arm of great strength," Steward related, "clenched his powerful fist, and declared that he would resist unto death." When the patrol entered the cabin, two of the white men "were killed on the spot, and lay drenched in the warm blood that so lately flowed through their veins." In the midst of the fray, another man had his arm broken, and a

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[25] Delany, *Blake*, 127-8.

fourth had been mortally wounded. Finally, Steward recounted, "in the yard lay the keeper of the horses, a stiffened corpse." The threat of slave violence, Steward warned, was a real one for white Southerners that Northern readers should not dismiss lightly.[26]

To justify violent reactions against slaveholders, authors of abolitionist texts in the 1850s painted a horrifying picture of the slave system that only further alienated Northern white readers who had appreciated the lighter side of slave life that Stowe had presented in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although Uncle Tom had ultimately died from a brutal flogging at the hands of Simon Legree, most of his life in slavery had involved kind masters, little hard work, and the fellowship of loving companions, whether black or white. Slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had engaged in harmless teasing, strutted around in the fine clothing their master had cast off, and had even engaged in the occasional "breakdown" or minstrel show antic. In abolitionist texts after 1852, in contrast, authors bombarded their readers with the ugliest side of slavery at every turn. The experience of slavery that authors like Delany and Steward delineated was limited to the kind of eternal torment that slaves experienced on Legree's estate. The unrelenting descriptions that these authors presented of the brutality and indignities that slaves endured were intended to appall Victorian sensibilities, thus further inflaming Northern readers' indignation against the Slave Power. Yet by turning the stomachs of all but the least sensitive readers, these sober narratives could not fail to drive away more Northerners than they attracted.

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[26] Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave, and Forty Years a Freeman* (n.p.: William Alling, 1856), 32, 34, 37.

Abuses against slave children proved one of the most common scenarios that radical authors used in the 1850s to rouse the ire of their white audience against the Slave Power. In *Blake*, Delany related the pathetic story of an eleven-year-old slave boy forced to "perform" for his master's visitors. The incident directly mirrored the scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when Mr. Shelby commanded little Harry to entertain his company by first dancing and singing, then imitating the walk of an old slave, and finally impersonating a local minister in his recitation of a psalm. In his novel, however, Delany revised the scene in meaningful ways. Instead of appearing "remarkably beautiful and engaging" and clothed with garments that were "carefully made and neatly fitted," as Harry was, the young boy in *Blake* displayed a "thin visage," "rather ghastly consumptive look, and emaciated condition." While Stowe did not record Harry's perspective on the incident in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, moreover, Delany focused on the reaction of the slave boy forced to participate in this "performance." The effect proved as repulsive as it was pitiable. When Captain Grason appeared before the boy with a group of men, Delany reported, "the child gave him a look never to be forgotten; a look beseeching mercy and compassion." Delany further recorded that as the boy "trembled with fear," he protested to his master: "'I know wat maus gwine do,' said this miserable child, 'he gwine make me see sights!'" Grason then began what was evidently an established routine with the boy, whipping him each time he wanted him to shift into a different part of his act. Finally, Delany

remarked, the slave, "from the fullness of his soul" cried out, "O maussa, I's sick! Please stop little!" and then began "casting up gobs of hemorrhage."[27]

Abolitionist authors further sought to offend white readers' standards of decency by citing instances in which the slave system rudely stripped black men and women of their dignity and their humanity. In *Blake*, Delany illustrated the Cuban custom of not allowing slaves, no matter what their age, to wear any clothing, a practice that would have suitably horrified any white American in the Victorian age. "Will you not be allowed, after you get home," Henry Blake inquired of an old slave he met on the road, "to keep those clothes on while attending about the house, and waiting on the white folks?" The old man replied, "No, seh, no; I has to take 'em off, an' go 'long so, no matter who's dar." Several times in his autobiography, Austin Steward intimated that slaveholders in the American South similarly did not bestow on slaves the regard due those they considered human beings. At a duel in Kentucky, for example, Steward recalled that "one woman was shot through the face" by accident. "But that was not worthy of notice," Steward remarked bitterly, "for she was only a *colored woman.*" In another incident that occurred at an estate sale, Steward related, "one peaceable old slave was killed by having his head split open with an ax." The slave, however, did not rank high enough on the scale of humanity, in the eyes of whites, for them to seek out the white man who had killed him. "As the white people paid but little attention" to the

[27]Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 3; Delany, *Blake*, 66.

incident, Steward observed, "it soon passed off, and the sorrowful slaves put the old man's remains in a rough box, and conveyed them to their last resting-place."[28]

Throughout their texts, abolitionist authors also highlighted the horrific treatment black women received at the hands of slaveholders. In *Blake*, a slave recounted to Henry Blake the shocking abuse that Henry's wife, Maggie, had suffered at the hands of her Cuban master. When Maggie refused to submit to her master's sexual advances, Delany related, the man "beat her like a dog," a phrase that emphasized the slaveholder's disregard for Maggie's humanity. After striking the defenseless woman "in the breast with his fist," the cruel tyrant next "gave her a kick in the side, which brought her with a scream to her knees." After that blow, the witness told Blake, Maggie "was unable to speak from pain, and when she could speak she screamed whenever she drew her breath." As she begged him to spare her further torment, Delany's readers then learned that the slave master "jerked down that piece of iron there, and struck her across the side of the head, nearly splitting the skull, when she fell, we thought, for dead, and he walked indifferently away."[29]

Because they featured manly black rebels and the gritty realities of slave life, abolitionist texts of the 1850s failed to cultivate an enthusiastic audience of Northern whites. "The Heroic Slave" remained confined to the pages of Douglass's newspaper and to those of Julia Griffiths' *Autographs for Freedom*, compiled in 1853 as a fund-raiser for the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. Although "Benito Cereno" was by far the

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[28] Delany, *Blake*, 171; Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*, 45, 46.
[29] Delany, *Blake*, 128, 178.

longest of the six stories that made up Herman Melville's *Piazza Tales*, critics who reviewed the collection strangely avoided commenting on the alarming story of black revolt on a Spanish slave ship. The book as a whole flopped, selling just over a thousand copies in the first three months of publication. Although sales of Austin Steward's autobiography proved somewhat more successful, it took two years for *Twenty-Two Years a Slave* to warrant a second edition, and three more before a third would become necessary. Delany, for his part, wrote to William Lloyd Garrison that he was "anxious to get a good publishing house to take" his manuscript of *Blake*, "as I know I could make a penny by it." But he never managed to attract a publisher or an enthusiastic audience for the novel. Serialized in *The Anglo-African Magazine* during 1859 and *The Weekly Anglo-African* in 1861-2, *Blake* did not appear in book form until its rediscovery by historians in the 1960s. Though octoroon novels hardly constituted a popular phenomenon, they easily trumped the commercial success of all four of these more controversial abolitionist texts.[30]

Of the many antislavery texts released in the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe's second novel on the subject, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, managed to draw the largest audience among Northern white readers. Stowe had held high hopes for *Dred* when it was released in 1856. When early figures suggested that the novel would fulfill her expectations, Stowe told her husband that she believed "God, to whom I prayed night and day while I was writing the book, has heard me, and given us of worldly goods *more*

[30] Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987); Starling, *The Slave Narrative*, 189.

than I asked." Within three months of publication, *Dred* had sold some 165,000 copies, ultimately producing a profit of more than $20,000 for its author, who had contracted with her publisher for half the proceeds. In crafting *Dred*, Stowe had evidently touched on the sort of characters and themes that resonated with a large segment of the Northern public.[31]

Dred nevertheless did not come close to achieving the phenomenal popularity that American readers, and those abroad, had bestowed on Stowe's earlier fictional protest against Southern slavery. Given that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had made Stowe the best-loved author in the world, the quick sale of 160,000 copies of this much-anticipated second antislavery novel could likely be attributed to a widely held regard for Stowe's previous effort alone. As the editor of *Putnam's* suggested, "Everybody opened *Dred*, to ascertain if it were as good as Uncle Tom." While the demand for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* outpaced the supply, which ran to 300,000 copies in one year, *Dred* sold only another 35,000 copies during the remainder of the nineteenth century. Whereas reviews of the first novel were numerous and almost always thoroughly complimentary--except those that hailed from the most conservative publications in the North and the South--notices of *Dred* proved decidedly mixed. *Putnam's* noted that "the English press in general pronounces *Dred* a failure," and that "private opinion at home, we presume, concurs in that judgment." In a year when the Slave Power had repeatedly outraged white Northerners

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[31] Anne Fields, ed., *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), 216. For Stowe's expectations about *Dred*, see Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 263; for total sales of the novel, see Robert S. Levine, ed.,

with new episodes of unprecedented insolence, the Northern public hardly flocked to Stowe's latest work to confirm the legitimacy of their hatred for Southern slaveholders.[32]

Contemporary reviewers of *Dred* concurred in their assessment of the novel as lacking in artistic unity. "As a work of Art, as a passionate and moving story," the *New Englander and Yale Review* declared, "we judge Dred to be inferior to Uncle Tom's Cabin." The *Ladies' Repository* likewise attributed "the failure of 'Dred; a Tale of the Dismal Swamp'--for it must be admitted to have been comparatively a failure," to the "glaring defects" it sustained "in artistic structure, in the harmony of its parts, and in the finish of its details." Even *Putnam's*, which had declared that *Dred* showed "better mastery of the materials" than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, admitted that "as a work of art, . . . or a pleasure to mere story-readers, *Dred* is not successful."[33]

The novel did, in fact, undergo a dramatic shift in tone halfway through the second volume. During the early part of the story, Stowe introduced a number of light-hearted characters and scenes, liberally interspersed with episodes designed to reveal the injustice of the slave system. These pages focused on the characters that reviewers later designated the most delightful or the most moving of the novel. Nina, for instance, the seventeen-year-old mistress of Canema Plantation, charmed readers with her carefree, childlike nature. "It was Nina's delight," Stowe related at the beginning of the first volume, "to patter about over the plantation, to chat with the negroes among their cabins,

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Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, by Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), ix.

[32] *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* 8 (November 1856), 537.

amusing herself with the various drolleries and peculiarities" that they exhibited. "Nina is a sparkling sketch," the *Putnam's* editor declared in his review, "elusive as a humming bird."[34]

Stowe also revealed chiefly in this section what readers thought of as "the wonderful knowledge of negro life and character which the work shows." Stowe's "wonderful knowledge," in fact, consisted principally of the belief, common in antebellum popular culture, that African Americans lived either to comfort or to amuse the white families to whom they were devoted. The rambunctious Tomtit, for instance, entertained his mistress as well as white readers with his incurable antics. Stowe showed Tomtit, for instance, as he "cut a somerset from the foot-board to the floor, and, striking up, on a very high key, 'I'll bet my money on a bob-tail nag,' he danced out a small table, as if it had been a partner, and deposited it" at his mistress's side. "A constant ripple and eddy of drollery seemed to pervade his whole being," Stowe explained of this "breezy, idle, careless, flighty" character whom the *New Englander* blithely referred to as a "rascal."[35]

Stowe also attracted readers in the first section of the novel by peopling Nina's plantation with slaves whose devotion to their mistress knew no bounds. "Aunt Milly" served as a motherly comforter to Nina, as "mammies" often did in antebellum fiction. "My dear little lamb!" Milly addressed Nina after Nina had "rushed up to her" and

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[33] *New Englander and Yale Review* 14 (November 1856), 519; *Ladies' Repository* 18 (March 1858), 173; *Putnam's Monthly* 8 (November 1856), 537, 538.
[34] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 48; *Putnam's Monthly* 8 (November 1856), 537.

thrown "her arms round her neck, sobbed and wept." "Don't honey!" the kind woman consoled, "Why, bless the dear little soul! bless the dear precious lamb! who's been a hurting of it?"

While Milly's role was to soothe Nina's fears, the mulatto slave Harry played the part of devoted dependent and protector. Harry, who was also Nina's half-brother, looked on this young white woman with "the most entire deference and admiration." Sometimes, Harry even felt "as if he could have worshipped" Nina. "You have always held my heart in your hand!" he told her lovingly. It was Nina alone who prevented Harry's bondage from seeming "galling and intolerable," and his love for her, in fact, made him feel that "her service was perfect freedom." "I love her better than I love myself," Harry explained to Dred. "I will fight for her to the last, but never against her, nor hers!" Both Harry and Milly provided Nina, and Stowe's white readers, with a source of solace in a cold, forbidding world. In doing so, though, these comforting black characters also reinforced the belief that lovable whites like Nina deserved the worship and adoration of those who, many white readers believed, constituted her racial inferiors.[36]

More popular with the critics, and likely with Stowe's general readers, was "Old Tiff." Whereas Harry was a handsome mulatto with personal ambitions for freedom and the recovery of his manhood, Tiff emerged as an "uncomely" slave of "ebony blackness" who lived solely to care for his ailing mistress and her children. "That creature hasn't one particle of selfishness in him," Harry explained to Nina about Tiff. "He just

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[35] *Putnam's Monthly* 8 (November 1856), 538; Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 56, 55; *New Englander* 14 (November 1856), 519.

identifies himself with his mistress and her children." Tiff's manhood was completely subsumed in his role as caregiver to the boy and girl after their mother died several chapters into the novel. Stowe repeatedly pictured Tiff in female garb, performing tasks that a mother would do. At one point, she noted, Tiff "wore, pinned round his shoulders, a half-handkerchief or shawl of red flannel, arranged much as an old woman would have arranged it." As he darned a stocking, Old Tiff "kept up a kind of droning intermixture of chanting and talking to the child on his knee." One reviewer applauded "Old Tiff, with his disinterested devotion to 'dese y'er chil'en." "His nobleness of heart," the commentator explained, "so mixes with his droll manners that we admire and are amused at once." The *Putnam's* critic likewise thought that Tiff was "the most striking character" in *Dred.* "His humor--which is not humor to himself--his affection, and his reversed pride, are perfect." Even more so than Harry, the character of Tiff comforted, but also amused, white readers who delighted in the image of an old black man tenderly caring for genteel, yet defenseless, white characters.[37]

These comforting black characters took center stage in *Dred*, though, only during the first half of Stowe's narrative. As the critic from the *New Englander* pointed out, "after the death of Nina, the interest of the reader rapidly declines." At this juncture, Stowe's tale suddenly became fixated on the darker side of Southern slavery, with few scenes intended to amuse her audience or to relieve them from the weight of this sobering material. Most of the action following Nina's death took place in the "wild, dreary belt of

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[36] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 82, 8, 176, 329; v. 2, 117, 113.

swamp-land" where Dred and his fellow fugitives from slavery lived, giving the entire section an ominous, forbidding feel. A rare appearance by the formerly whimsical Tomtit in the second volume of the novel demonstrated the dramatic change in tone. No longer mischievously cutting "somersets," Tomtit introduced a subtle hint of black revenge to a scene in which Milly reported she had been shot in the head by her white employer. "I thought it wan't right and fit that I should be treated so," Milly explained to her mistress. "Jes so," Tomtit interjected, emerging "at the head of a dark stream of young juveniles" and carrying "a knife half cleaned in his hand." The slaveholder's callous attack on Milly coupled with Tomtit's ominous reaction to it illustrate the troubling turn of events that *Dred* took midway through Stowe's second volume.[38]

In both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*, Stowe ultimately abandoned the light-hearted mood of the first part of the story for a more dismal picture of life in slavery. In contrast to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, the dark tone into which *Dred* descended was not built primarily on the tragic martyrdom of slaves like Uncle Tom, but on the escalating desire among Stowe's slave characters to use violence to overthrow the system that oppressed them. Whereas Tom had shuddered at the thought of using violence to resist his condition, slaves like Dred and Harry thrilled at the idea that when God called them to wrath against slaveholders, the slaves would "slay them utterly, and consume them from off the face of the earth!" Uncle Tom's pacifism was fueled by his adherence to the teachings of Christ, who, as Tom told Cassy, "never shed no blood but his own"

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[37] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 131, 98; *New Englander* 14 (November 1856), 519; *Putnam's Monthly* 8 (November 1856), 537.

and taught his followers to "love our enemies." While Tom approximated Christ in his humility and his dedication to peace, Dred represented "one of the wild old warrior prophets of the heroic ages." The Bible, to Dred, "was not the messenger of peace and good-will," as it was with Uncle Tom, "but the herald of woe and wrath!" This noteworthy shift in philosophy for Stowe between her first and second antislavery novels accounted for much of the general disappointment among white Northern readers in Stowe's later fictional offering. The black martyr, it appeared, had captivated white Americans far more effectively than the black rebel could.[39]

Stowe's call for retribution against slaveholders became decidedly more shrill in the second half of *Dred.* The title character, whom Stowe based on the figure of Nat Turner, did not even appear until page 240 of the first volume. In the first half of the book, Dred sounded a single warning to slaveholders that "the Lord is against this nation" and would make slaveholders "utterly desolate." In the last segment of the narrative, in contrast, Dred's lurking presence repeatedly signified to Southern whites that the "day of vengeance must come." In a powerful scene halfway through the second volume, Stowe described an ominous meeting of black men to discuss the possibility of insurrection after the torture and murder of one of their number. Dred intended at that gathering of "a dozen men, mulatto, quadroon, and negro" in the Dismal Swamp to "prepare their hearts" for "the coming of the Lord." In the first volume of the novel, Harry had informed Dred that he wouldn't "consent to have blood shed," because he wanted his mistress's life

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[38] *New Englander* 14 (November 1856), 517; Stowe, *Dred*, v. 2, 30.
[39] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 2, 232; Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 344; Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 240, 256.

spared. But at the secret gathering in the swamp, Nina's safety was no longer an issue, and Harry declared his support for guerrilla warfare on the part of the slaves, at least "till they were strong enough to get together an army, and fight them openly."[40]

After the meeting, Dred "seemed to be that of a human being who had been seized and possessed," Stowe reported, "by the wrath of an avenging God." From that point on, Dred's followers, particularly Harry, clamored for revolt. Harry's "impulses," Stowe recounted, called for "an immediate insurrection, in which he was careless about his own life, so the fearful craving of his soul for justice was assuaged. To him the morning seemed to break red with the blood of his friend." As a result, Stowe repeated, Harry "would have urged to immediate and precipitate action." Dred, though, like Nat Turner, insisted on waiting until God had given him the sign.[41]

The inclusion of starkly different opinions among respectable African Americans at the meeting in the swamp and the subsequent inability of Dred's band to decide in favor of revolt suggest that Stowe herself was struggling over the advisability of rebellion for Southern slaves. At the midnight gathering, Dred proclaimed God's message that "the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemed is come!" "When the Lord saith unto us, Smite, then will we smite!" this son of Denmark Vesey declared to his followers. Immediately after this speech, however, the bearer of the "eternally interceding love of Christ" appeared in the form of Milly. Echoing Uncle Tom's words, Milly urged the rebel council to "leave the vengeance to Him" and to "love yer enemies."

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[40] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 320; v. 2, 174, 224, 220, 225.
[41] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 1, 320; v. 2, 275, 278.

Soon, Stowe provided hints that "the day of vengeance" would be averted and that Dred would not be able to participate in it. "I am a man of unclean lips," Dred explained to Harry, and, therefore, "it may be that I shall not lead the tribes over this Jordan." Scarcely a dozen pages later, Dred received a mortal wound from a slaveholder's bullet. After Dred's death, "the inspiring symbols and prophetic dreams, which had so wrought upon his own soul," Stowe related, "seemed to pass away with him, and to recede into the distance and become unsubstantial." With Dred's departure, Stowe seemed abruptly to reverse her position on black violence, hinting with this remark that she had never regarded insurrection as a "substantial," or viable, alternative for oppressed slaves.[42]

After Dred disappeared from the narrative, Stowe quickly wrapped up the novel, heading off a violent slave revolt in the South in favor of an escape to the North for her remaining black characters. As the *New Englander Review* complained, "the characters have their fortunes fixed by a summary decision, without permitting the reader to note the steps of their progress." The day after Dred's death, Edward Clayton persuaded Harry of "the undesirableness and hopelessness" of "any attempt to right by force the wrongs under which his class were suffering." The remainder of the novel saw the fugitives establish a happier existence in the North, where they lived out the rest of their days in peace, without even the specter of the rebel to haunt them. Stowe never mentioned Dred in the narrative again. Instead, she pointed out at the end of the story that Hannibal, a former member of Dred's would-be army, had procured "a large farm" in Canada, where

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[42] Stowe, *Dred*, v. 2, 231, 232, 275, 234, 281, 280, 296.

"instead of slaying men," he practiced the art of "felling trees and clearing forests." For Stowe, freedom, hard work, and prosperity outside the slave South had ultimately proved a more satisfying resolution to the plot of her novel than a bloody revolt might have been.[43]

The wrath and violence that Dred himself represented produced a mixed, but generally unfavorable response in many Northern readers. The critic from the *New England Review* stated bluntly that "the hero himself does not take hold on the sympathies of the reader" and that Dred "excites for himself no profound feeling." The eternally positive editor at *Putnam's*, on the other hand, admired Dred, but also hinted at the problematic nature of his character for white readers. "There is certainly something very majestic, although shadowy, in the impression he makes," the review noted. The *Putnam's* commentator seemed most at ease conceiving of Dred as a symbol rather than as a human being. "Dred seems hardly to be a person," the critic mused, "but he looms through the story, a vast presence of wrath and woe." The editor further ventured that "Dred, in the story, represents the wronged and avenged genius of Africa." Even if Dred could elicit sympathy from the Putnam's editor for his "grand, tragic dignity," most white readers would find it hard to open their hearts to this "herculean" black figure, who kept a bowie-knife, hatchet, and rifle constantly about his person, in the same unhesitating way that they had embraced the meek Uncle Tom.[44]

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[43] *New Englander* 13 (February 1855), 518-9; Stowe, *Dred*, v. 2, 301, 331.
[44] *New Englander* 13 (February 1855), 517; *Putnam's Monthly* 8 (November 1856), 538, 537.

The fictional literature that authors of different backgrounds and often competing agendas used in the late 1850s to vilify the Southern slave system appealed to diverse constituencies within the Northern reading public. Octoroon novels tended to attract white Northerners who felt little compunction to support racial justice, as well as those who altogether opposed black equality with whites. A much smaller audience of committed abolitionists gravitated toward texts that featured manly, assertive African-American characters. Finally, Stowe's *Dred*, which in many ways bridged the gap between these contrasting sets of fictional texts, emerged as the most popular antislavery narrative in the late 1850s. It, too, however, proved problematic for white readers in the North whom Stowe had put at ease with her portrayal of the dark-skinned martyr, Uncle Tom. The dark shadow of slave insurrection that loomed throughout the last half of the novel unsettled white Northerners, making them hesitant to endorse Stowe's second antislavery tome without voicing grave reservations.

The inability of *Dred*, the octoroon novels, and radical abolitionist fiction to unify white Northerners behind a common antislavery text in the late 1850s spoke to the splintered condition of the antislavery cause on the eve of the Civil War. Not until the nation had fought many long months in a bitter, fratricidal conflict would opponents of the slave system be able to agree on a more uniform image of African Americans in the popular fiction they produced and consumed. In wartime literature, Northerners finally fulfilled the desires of the radical abolitionists by accepting black violence against whites as a viable means of defeating the Slave Power. But the view of black men that white

readers would ultimately approve during the Civil War nevertheless remained a far cry from the radical vision that men like Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass had endorsed in the fiction they published in the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though they permitted black men to fight for their freedom, mainstream writers in the throes of the Civil War still could not bring themselves to applaud strong men and noble warriors like Henry Blake and Madison Washington. Even after black men took up arms against the white South, the black martyr remained the clear favorite among white Northerners who still could not embrace the black rebel as an acceptable alternative. Though antislavery writers of all persuasions had tried to shove the Uncle Tom figure aside in the late 1850s, a slightly revised version of Stowe's beloved martyr persisted into the Civil War period and beyond.

Chapter 6 Soldiers But Not Men: Northern Fiction of the Civil War Period

The Civil War was a period of considerable literary activity in the realm of popular culture. At the height of the conflict, however, only a limited number of texts emerged that featured slaves as central characters. By far, the most popular fictional sources that directly confronted the issue of the role black men should take on in the Union war effort saw publication at the most intense point in this violent contest over the future of the United States. In these years, a relatively small cluster of short stories and novels appeared that gave mainstream Northern readers literary guidance in their attempts to wrestle with this critical question.

Published in 1863 and 1864, these popular texts did not act as a driving force behind emancipation and the arming of black soldiers, but rather as a means for Northerners to deal with the policy once it had gone into effect. Cultural forms produced in the North in the years 1863 and 1864, in fact, provide important insights into the means by which ordinary people worked through their fears and doubts about the induction of African-American soldiers into the Union army, and about the place they would occupy in postwar society. For the first time in American history, abolitionist ideas began to establish a clear presence in mainstream popular fiction, songs, and visual images, as Northerners came to accept that black men could fight for their country in an effective and honorable manner. Yet these sources also reveal that while whites in the North began to accept free blacks and former slaves as capable soldiers, they still resisted thinking of them as true men, and as citizens entitled to equal rights.

In the majority of wartime fiction, the abolitionist convictions that the purveyors of popular culture advanced during the Civil War remained restricted to the belief that African Americans deserved their freedom and were willing and able to fight for it. Universal emancipation of Southern slaves emerged in these texts as a commendable act on the part of the federal government and represented a triumph for African Americans as well as for the Union cause. In the most prominent fiction of the war years, black men spoke up for their right to liberty and did not shrink from using violence against the white men who had held their race in bondage, in order to achieve that freedom.

While they depicted former slaves who excelled in battle, though, authors of popular texts during the early 1860s also used a number of different tactics to assure their white readers that these noble black soldiers posed no real danger to the racial status quo. Their strategy most often involved emphasizing the repulsive or ludicrous nature of the black men they portrayed, either by representing them as afflicted with a physical deformity or by citing the comical actions in which they engaged. Such visible deficiencies in appearance or character effectively prevented most black protagonists from rivaling the manliness of white characters who displayed strength and bravery on the field of battle. At the end of these narratives, moreover, black soldiers often died, leaving them unable to press for equal rights with whites in postwar American society. Wartime fiction thus encouraged Northern white audiences to support the enlistment of black troops into the Union army without feeling uneasy that these men would challenge their firmly held belief in the superiority of the white race.

On rare occasions, the authors of popular texts published during 1863 and 1864 allowed African-American characters to survive the war with both their exceptional manhood and their lives intact. The fictional black heroes who emerged in these narratives represented an unprecedented phenomenon in nineteenth-century popular culture. Books that featured such eloquent, strong black men willing to stand up to oppression had never before achieved popular success in the United States. Yet two of the most popular novels in the North during the war era boasted admirable black characters who had only a few years earlier doomed an author's work to obscurity.

Even when African Americans in Civil War fiction possessed manly traits and survived the battles they fought, however, more commonly accepted racial conventions generally balanced out this radical picture in the overall narrative. The most imposing former slave in wartime fiction shared the text equally with a deformed, vindictive black man who reinforced stereotypes of African Americans as savage barbarians. In other instances, authors located manly black characters within a main plot line that focused on the plight of the octoroon slave woman. That progressive authors felt the need to implement such strategies to neutralize the effect of assertive, respectable black men suggests that the Northern public was unprepared, even at the height of the Civil War, to accept a novel or story that unequivocally affirmed racial equality.

In the first year of the war, fictional portrayals of black violence served strictly as a means of intimidating Confederate slaveholders and of expressing Northern hostility toward the enemies they despised. In the immensely popular *Maum Guinea and Her*

Children, for instance, author Metta Victor depicted slaves wielding menacing weapons against Southern masters and their representatives. To prevent herself and two other runaway slaves from being captured, the "powerful and self-possessed" Maum Guinea attacked the bloodhound her master had relied on to find the group of fugitives. The aging slave woman "seized the dog's head, and drew the sharp meat-knife which she carried, firmly across his throat," brutally ending the life of this symbol of slaveholding oppression. Later, the runaways prepared to visit upon their master the same fate when they believed their hiding place had been discovered. With one hand, the black slave Hyperion "drew out the revolver from his pocket." At the same time, "Maum Guinea pulled from her belt the keen knife which glittered there." This scene effectively demonstrated the danger that slaves who had been pushed to the breaking point by heartless masters could present to their tormentors. "Motionless, desperate, threatening,--resolve and despair pictured upon the sickly yellow of their faces, their black eyes flashing," Victor intoned, "the miserable fugitives awaited the attack." It was only their rescue by a benevolent Northern gentlemen that prevented this stalwart band of runaways from defending themselves with deadly weapons against their cruel white enemies.[1]

Although no fictional African American actually inflicted physical injury on a slaveholding character during 1861, the depiction of black slaves poised to attack their masters served as a ominous warning to rebel slaveholders that their enemies resided within their own households as well as in the Northern states. An oil painting by

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[1] Mrs. Metta V. Victor, *Maum Guinea, and Her Plantation "Children;" or, Holiday-Week on a Louisiana Estate* (New York: Beadle and Company, 1861), 135, 210.

Englishman Richard Ansdell, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1861, depicted a scene in which a black man wielding an axe desperately tried to defend himself and the slave woman who crouched behind him against a pack of salivating bloodhounds as they fled through a swamp. In *Hunted Slaves*, Ansdell depicted in the dogs and the slaves a clash of two formidable and determined forces. One of the dogs lay dead, his throat cut open by the black man's weapon. The axe that the slave's muscular arm raised above his head occupied a position of triumphal supremacy over the remaining dogs, which seemed to hesitate instead of springing on their prey. A less sympathetic, more sinister suggestion of violence against Southern masters appeared in a cartoon printed in the widely read *Harper's Weekly* magazine in December of 1861. In the sketch, two burly slaves with dark skin and savage expressions greeted the viewer. The vicious pair wielded two large steel knives in a menacing stance that indicated they possessed no qualms about putting such barbarous weapons to use. The caption below read, "Massa say de Bobolitionists comin', and gib us dese Knives." "WHO DEY FOR?" the slaves inquired ominously.[2]

Even though artists and authors in 1861 depicted strong, courageous slaves in the act of standing up for themselves against their oppressors, the manly independence of their black characters proved of little concern for them. The rage that Northerners felt led fiction writers and artists to present black violence as a chilling, yet well-deserved menace to slaveholding Southerners. But taking on their master's dogs in combat did not place the fugitives in either *Maum Guinea* or *The Hunted Slaves* on a level with the white

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[2] *Hunted Slaves* is reproduced in Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 96; *Harper's Weekly*, December 21,

men whom those dogs represented. In the *Harper's* cartoon, the slaves themselves appeared more as savage animals than as men. Finally, none of these texts depicted slaves achieving their freedom through their own efforts, whether violent or not. Instead, Ansdell showed the *Hunted Slaves* at their most vulnerable moment, when recapture seemed as likely as escape. In Mrs. Victor's novel, only Maum Guinea gained her freedom, and the old woman owed her redemption from bondage not to herself or a fellow African American, but to a white man from the North. For their part, the beautiful quadroon Rose and her black lover, Hyperion, happily returned to slavery when Hyperion's master offered to buy Rose so that the two could be together. Such a resolution to the plot hardly constituted a triumph on the side of true abolitionist sentiment.

Only after the Emancipation Proclamation authorized the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army in January of 1863 did literary and visual texts in the North begin to explore the issue of manly black violence in earnest. In her recent monograph, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865*, Alice Fahs has argued that following the brave showing by the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts regiment at Fort Wagner in 1863, "popular images of black soldiers began to shift dramatically toward a forthright celebration of black courage and especially black manhood." According to Fahs, many of the novels and stories that emerged in the North during late 1863 and 1864 "explored the idea that war transformed black male identity."

1861.

The result, she contends, was a general acceptance in popular fiction of African Americans who displayed as much manliness in fighting for their country as the most heroic white characters of the period.[3]

While the exemplary conduct that black soldiers demonstrated on the battlefield did force the creators of Northern culture to reconfigure standard representations of African Americans, it did not effect as revolutionary a transformation as Fahs has suggested. The fact that these texts promoted certain abolitionist tenets without alienating the reading public marked a significant transformation in the attitudes of white Northerners. The portrayal of worthy black soldiers, however, did not necessarily reflect a newfound acceptance of African Americans as men. Whenever wartime authors introduced black men who fought bravely in war or eloquently defended their rights to their own manhood, the same writers promptly countered these ground-breaking racial images with more stereotypical portrayals of African Americans. By depicting a brave black soldier in a ludicrous or a savage light when off the battlefield, writers promoted their agenda while ensuring that the characters they depicted would not pose a threat to the established racial order.

Popular culture during the war failed to stress a more radical picture of black men partly because traditional abolitionists no longer exerted much control over the antislavery texts that were being generated for public consumption. The kind of authors who had moved to the fore in the production of antislavery literature during the latter half

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[3] Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 169.

of the 1850s continued to dominate the genre in the 1860s. The need to boost Northerners' support for the war effort moved patriotic writers who cared little for racial justice to produce texts that demonized Southern slaveholders without fundamentally challenging traditional stereotypes of African Americans. Particularly in their representations of black soldiers, most authors of the period took care to adhere to popular conventions whereby black men appeared as buffoonish tricksters, grotesque animals, or servile victims. Though these authors promoted white support for black enlistment by emphasizing that African Americans fought well in battle, the novels also ensured their white audience would remain confident in their own racial superiority by refusing to grant black men the dignity and the personal strength they typically bestowed on white heroes.

The Civil War era marked an important transformation in Northern popular culture when authors began demonstrating an unqualified acceptance of emancipation for African-American slaves. Authors, even entire genres, that had served as defenders of slavery during the 1850s embraced emancipation by the midpoint of the war. James Gilmore, for instance, a Northerner who considered himself an "anti-Abolitionist and Southern sympathizer," argued in 1862 that "what the black wants is freedom," and that the federal government should "give him that." Primarily in the interest of achieving a military victory for the North, Gilmore endorsed "emancipation for *all*." Such bold declarations did not hurt the sales of Gilmore's novel. After six months on the shelves, *Among the Pines* had sold a highly respectable 34,000 copies in the Northern states.

Moreover, even popular minstrel songs supported Lincoln's decision to set the slaves at liberty. In "Away Goes Cuffee, or Hooray for 63," for instance, J. B. Starkweather celebrated "the Darkeys no more as de sheep and de cattle, For Freedom's watchman has sprung his rattle."[4]

In most popular fiction of the period, authors applauded the commitment of their black characters to achieving freedom from slavery. In "Tippoo Saib," a story that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* during April 1864, a humble slave experienced his first chance at liberation from bondage. "Tip raised his head and looked steadfastly Northward," the author related, "until his dull eyes began to glow with a fire, a manhood they never knew before." In "Little Starlight," a short piece that ran in *Harper's* later the same year, a white man testified of a young African American that "there was one thing alone which almost redeemed him in my eyes; and that was his passionate desire for freedom." The soldiers in "My Contraband," a Louisa May Alcott story that saw wide circulation in her collection of *Hospital Sketches* during 1863, were propelled by their love of liberty to give their all to the Union cause. "If our people's free," one of them declared to the white nurse who served as the story's narrator, "we can afford to die."[5]

By 1863, even minstrel songs commemorated the pluck and determination of black soldiers on the field of battle as they fought for their freedom. The women authors

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[4] [James R. Gilmore], *Among the Pines: or, South in Secession-Time* (New York: J. R. Gilmore, 1862), 57, 92; Fahs, *Imagined Civil War*, 159-60; J. B. Starkweather, "Away Goes Cuffee, or Hooray for 63" (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1863).

[5] "Tippoo Saib," *Harper's Weekly*, April 2, 1864, 214; "Little Starlight," *Harper's Weekly*, October 29, 1864, 702; Louisa May Alcott, "My Contraband" in *Alternative Alcott*, Elaine Showalter, ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988, 90.

of "Dey Said We Wouldn't Fight" denied that black troops were "lazy from de cranum to de toes." Instead, the soldiers in whose voice the song was to be sung vowed that they would "neber leabe de field till we make de rebels yield, and we's dreffful sure to do it bye and bye." If the government would only "put de powder in de gun, and dese darkies in de foremost ob de din," the song promised, "we'll put de foe to rout, for we'll smoke de rebels out." In "Cuffee's War Song," L. B. Starkweather had his singer proclaim that "mighty things hab come to pass, since Pompey went to war." The Union army, suggested the narrator, "could not whip de spunky Souf, widout de darkey aid." So, the main verse concluded, "gedder round ye brudders black and cheer de Black Brigade."[6]

In wartime fiction, African-American men fought with all the enthusiasm and courage of the white soldiers whom popular literature glorified. "We'll never give it up, Ma'am, till the last Reb's dead," a member of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts assured Nurse Dane in "My Contraband." A fellow soldier reported to Dane that "when we pitched into Old Wagner," the black protagonist of the story, Robert, "fought like the devil." Upon sighting his former master, the soldier related, Robert "went at that feller as if he was Jeff, Beauregard, an' Lee, all in one." Tippoo Saib also distinguished himself in the famous contest at Fort Wagner. "Foremost in that wild charge, dauntless in the front of that dauntless band," the anonymous writer opined, "rushed Tippoo Saib upon the enemy, and fighting as he fights who feels that freedom or slavery for him and his hangs upon the contest." Not one of "the hundreds of thousands of brave men who have fought

[6] Mrs. M. A. Kidder and Mrs. Parkhurst, "Dey Said We Wouldn't Fight" (New York: Horace Waters, 1864); L. B. Starkweather, "Cuffee's War Song" (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1863).

beneath the Federal banners in this great war," the author avowed, "black or white," had "given himself to the contest more ardently, more purely, more entirely than" had the former slave Tippoo Saib. As a result, the "uniform courage and good conduct" that Tip exhibited on the battlefield "slowly won him such advancement as is at present possible to a man of his color." The white chaplain in "Little Starlight" admitted his admiration for the young black man, based on his steadiness in combat. "I never saw him flinch when under fire," the narrator declared, "and I have seen him under the hottest." White men of all stations, in fact, shared the chaplain's respect for the courage this former slave boy had displayed. "Through all those terrible battles," the chaplain recalled, "Little Starlight conducted himself with sterling credit, winning golden opinions from all, and, upon one occasion, a hearty hand-shake from the General of our division."[7]

Authors of Civil War fiction, however, generally undercut the manhood that these black soldiers displayed on the battlefield by endowing them with debilitating physical and mental deficiencies. In "Tippoo Saib," for example, *Harper's Weekly* employed the proslavery image of a slow-witted slave with exaggerated physical features to curtail the manliness of the story's black hero. The author described his protagonist not only as "a man to be admired and revered," but also as "a middle-aged negro of Congo descent" who had been "formed after the ultra type of his race." Tippoo's "misshapen skull, immense lips, close-curled wool, and skin nearly as black as human skin was ever tinted" suggested the typical physical attributes of a slave character found on a minstrel stage or

[7] Alcott, "My Contraband," 90, 92; "Tippoo Saib," 215; "Little Starlight," 702.

depicted in an anti-black cartoon. Tippoo's personality, in addition, indicated an inferiority that matched his appearance. "He was heavy both of motion and intellect," the author remarked, "and entirely ignorant of almost every thing a man should know." The writer of the story endowed him with some mental aptitude, but Tippoo, or "Uncle Tip," nevertheless engaged in the crude dialect and mannerisms of an ignorant slave, as when he "stood pondering and scratching his wooly head." Although an admirable character, Tippoo would not pose a serious threat to the doctrine of white supremacy.[8]

Both the youth and the absurd physical characteristics of Little Starlight prevented this minstrel show prototype from intimidating white readers of *Harper's Weekly*. "*Our* Little Starlight was a negro urchin, extremely small for his age--which might have been fifteen," the chaplain narrating the story reported. The minister stressed repeatedly the humor that he and the rest of the company derived from Starlight's personality and appearance, which the chaplain found "comical in the extreme." When the young runaway first entered the camp, the chaplain admitted that he had "almost exploded with laughter at seeing the individual in question." Likewise, the Major of the unit had to resort to "knitting his brows furiously to conceal the laughter which almost choked him." Starlight's "whimsical characteristics" included his constant refrain of "Yah! Yah I'se a awful cuss, I is!" as well as his tendency to "execute with gusto a dozen breakdowns, Jim Crows, and Bob Ridleys for the diversion of the weary regiment." Even when engaged in more solemn behavior, Starlight remained "a standing joke with the regiment." In one

[8] "Tippoo Saib," 214.

scene, the chaplain related that the young boy "commenced stroking his mat of a head in a serious manner," and that this action seemed to the white narrator "more comical than his mirth." None of the white characters in the tale took seriously this freedom-loving young black man who was said to have braved enemy fire admirably and even to have earned commendation from a general. White readers, too, were encouraged to think of this "little fellow" and "monkey" principally as a comic figure intended for their amusement and gentle ridicule.[9]

On the rare occasions that authors with abolitionist sympathies engaged in the popular culture debate during the war, they often evoked the more tragic image of the victimized slave, rather than comic stereotypes, to diminish the manhood of the black soldiers they portrayed. Louisa May Alcott, whose family had ardently supported John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859, published stories in 1863 and 1864 portraying brave black men effectively emasculated as a result of their owners' cruel torments. In "An Hour," Alcott introduced Prince, "a gigantic man, with a fine, dark face, a noble head, and the limbs of an ebony Hercules." This manly slave, Alcott noted, possessed "a native dignity, which nothing could destroy," and surpassed all the other slaves on the plantation "in intelligence, as well as strength and courage." Yet Alcott prohibited Prince's manhood from having its full effect on her readers by fitting the slave with an instrument of torture prominently displayed around his neck. An iron collar with four curved spikes interrupted the "unmarred smoothness of the muscular body" and served as

[9] "Little Starlight," 702.

"a shameful badge of serfdom" from which Prince could never escape. The collar "galled him with its ceaseless chafing," Alcott explained, and prevented him from fully exercising the masculinity that might otherwise have intimidated and alarmed white readers.[10]

Robert, the central character in Alcott's earlier story "My Contraband," similarly embodied the conflicted image of the manly slave emasculated by slavery. As she later would with Prince in "An Hour," Alcott used this paradoxical figure simultaneously to inflame and comfort her white readers. When Alcott's narrator first laid eyes on Robert, the light-complected African American struck the young white nurse as "attractive," "strong-limbed," and "manly." Yet at precisely the moment when this white woman began admiring the former slave as a man, Nurse Dane glimpsed the other side of the young contraband's face, and her impression changed dramatically. "Not only did the manhood seem to die out of him," reported Miss Dane, "but the comeliness that first attracted me; for, as he turned, I saw the ghastly wound that had laid open cheek and forehead." His master's cruelty had caused the scar, it turned out, as well as the "furrows deeply ploughed" on Robert's back from a whipping. Later in the story, Alcott again used the physical deficiencies brought on by the oppression that Robert had suffered to retreat abruptly from her portrayal of the former slave as a true man. The "dauntless" soldier who had "fought like the devil" at Fort Wagner appeared before Nurse Dane a mere shadow of his formerly virile self. The suicide of Robert's wife, brought on by the

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[10] Louisa May Alcott, "An Hour" in *Louisa May Alcott on Race, Sex, and Slavery*, Sarah Elbert, ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 63.

sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of their master, had convinced Robert that life was no longer worth living. As a result he had gone into battle with the intention of being killed and had, in fact, received a fatal wound. "So old, so worn, so deathly weak and wan," Nurse Dane recalled of Robert's appearance the last time she saw him, "I never should have known him but for the deep scar on his cheek." All the manly characteristics he had possessed, then, had vanished by the end of the story, and all that remained of Robert's earlier appearance was the feature that had caused the narrator to reconsider his manliness in the first place.[11]

In several popular novels written during the Civil War, authors defied this common formula by endowing their black characters with both flawless physical appearances and admirable natures. Three fictional black heroes, in particular, signaled a watershed in American popular culture, displaying a manliness equal to or surpassing that of the most worthy white protagonists in contemporary literature. William Wells Brown's *Clotelle*, Epes Sargent's *Peculiar*, and *Cudjo's Cave* by J. T. Trowbridge featured black men who lacked any sign of physical, mental, or moral weakness. For the first time in American history, these formidable black characters did not seriously impair the sales of the books in which they were featured. James Redpath published *Clotelle* as part of the series "Books for the Camp Fires," whose selections were widely distributed among Union troops as well as among readers on the homefront. Sales of *Peculiar*, for its part, demanded that eleven editions be produced in less than a year. Trowbridge's publisher

[11] Alcott, "My Contraband," 75, 76, 85, 92, 90.

disposed of some 13,000 copies of *Cudjo's Cave* in the first week of publication, and the novel continued to sell briskly for months after its release. While a greater willingness among the Northern public to accept strong-willed black characters may partly account for the commercial success of these novels, their popularity also stemmed from the authors' attempts to balance out images of bold black men with the portrayal of more stereotypical plots and characters.

In the 1864 version of *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States*, William Wells Brown offered a black character who proved as admirable and manly as any white man in all respects. The physical description Brown gave of Jerome stressed the young man's blackness as well as his combination of outward qualities that rivaled those of any white fictional leading man of the time. This "hero of many adventures," as a chapter title represented him, was "of pure African origin" and "perfectly black," but also "very fine-looking, tall, slim, and erect as any one could possibly be." As far as his character, Brown noted that Jerome "was brave and daring, strong in person, fiery in spirit, yet kind and true in his affections, earnest in his doctrines." Like Pomp, Jerome refused to be whipped, and when his master tried to choke him, he knocked the white man down and then escaped to the woods. This dark-skinned slave asserted his rights as eloquently as George Harris had in *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* "My liberty is of as much consequence to me as Mr. Wilson's is to him," he declared.[12]

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[12] William Wells Brown, *Clotelle: Or, the Colored Heroine. A Tale of the Southern States* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1867), 66, 57, 58, 65.

Jerome maintained that African Americans should stand up for their freedom, and achieve it by any means necessary. A white man, Brown's hero contended, would do the same if he found himself in the same situation as a black slave. "If I mistake not," Jerome warned the slaveholding South, "the day will come when the negro will learn that he can get his freedom by fighting for it; and should that time arrive, the whites will be sorry that they have hated us so shamefully." This noble black man wished he might take part in such a worthy endeavor. "Could I live my life over again," he concluded, "I would use all the energies which God has given me to get up an insurrection." Finally, Brown completed the picture of Jerome as a true man by having him wed Clotelle, an octoroon who easily passed for white, at the close of the novel. Clotelle defended her choice of husbands to her white father, a former slaveholder. "I married him," she explained, "because I loved him. Why should the white man be esteemed as better than the black?" With his marriage to a nearly white woman and eventual acceptance by her white father as his son-in-law, Jerome gained the ultimate acceptance as a worthy Victorian man, despite his skin color.[13]

Peek, the slave for whom Epes Sargent titled his novel *Peculiar* in 1864, served as another rare model of black manliness in Civil War fiction. Peek, whose full name was Peculiar Institution, was clearly of "unmixed African descent." But, as with Jerome in *Clotelle*, the physical appearance of this enterprising runaway otherwise suggested the kind of virile hero on whom nineteenth-century readers looked with particular favor. "He

[13] M. Guilia Fabi, "The 'Unguarded Expressions of the Feelings of the Negroes': Gender, Slave Resistance, and William Wells Brown's Revisions of *Clotel*" *African American Review* 27 (Winter 1993),

was of medium height," Sargent related, "square built, with the shoulders and carriage of an athlete." Although Peek's physical features could be classified as being "of the genuine Ethiopian type," the author insisted that they "were a refinement upon" this type "rather than an exaggeration."[14]

Sargent stressed Peculiar's superiority over common Northern stereotypes of African Americans not only in his physical traits, but also in his manner of speaking. "There was nothing in the negro's language to indicate the traditional slave of the stage and novel," Sargent explained, "who always says 'Massa,' and speaks a gibberish indicated to the eye by a cheap misspelling of words." The author even directly equated Peek with the class of men who served as a more conventional type of main character. "A listener who had not seen him would have supposed it was an educated white gentleman who was speaking," Sargent remarked. An upper-class white character who shared the racial preconceptions of many who read Sargent's book later observed upon meeting Peek that "for the first time in his life he felt that a negro could be a gentleman and his equal."[15]

Like Jerome, Peek believed that African Americans should fight for their freedom. Once he had escaped slavery, Peek traveled throughout the South in order to "establish secret societies in the cause of freedom." Although he doubted that slaves would "rise unarmed in useless insurrection," Sargent's noble protagonist urged the North to "give the slaves arms, treat them like men, and they will fight." Finally, when Peek

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639-54; Brown, *Clotelle*, 66, 57, 58.

[14] Epes Sargent, *Peculiar: A Tale of the Great Transition* (New York: Carleton, 1864), 19.

himself donned the uniform of the Union army, Sargent reported that he had been "conspicuous for intrepid conduct" in the engagements on the Mississippi River in June of 1863. "His words and his example had inspired the men of his company," Sargent explained, "with an almost superhuman courage."[16]

Strong, gracious, and self-assured, Pomp of *Cudjo's Cave* met and even exceeded the requirements for a worthy wartime hero. White characters in the novel admired him, considering him "a lion of a man" whose "grace was no less than his vigor." Penn Hapgood called Pomp "a superb man" and, in fact, "thought him the most perfect specimen of a gentleman he had ever seen." Virginia Villars, the virtuous young object of Penn's affections, acknowledged to Pomp that his "manly traits have inspired me with an admiration that was almost hero-worship." The white men of the community, moreover, called on this former slave to help lead their unionist forces through the mountains of east Tennessee, which he knew better than any white man. A fugitive slave who displayed a "powerful manner, superb physical manhood, and superior intelligence," Pomp proved more than capable of taking on the task. "I knew the woods," he explained, "and while they had been running to and fro in disorder, I had been carefully observing the ground, and forming my plans." Cool under fire, wise in his use of military strategy, and firm in his commands, Pomp succeeded in preserving the lives of nearly all the

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[15] Sargent, *Peculiar*, 21, 339.
[16] Sargent, *Peculiar*, 205, 490.

unionist soldiers and in leading them in several successful maneuvers against the enemy.[17]

More extraordinary still than Pomp's accomplishments in battle was the intensity with which he asserted his own rights as a man. Standing before a group of slaveholding unionists, this eloquent former slave railed against the injustice of the double standard whereby "a white man may take up arms to defend a bit of property; but a black man has no right to rise up and defend either his wife, or his child, or his liberty, or even his own life, against his master!" Pomp refused to plead humbly to these white men that they accept him as a human being and an equal. "I did not come here to argue my right to my own manhood," he informed the unionists who objected to his abolitionist notions. "I take it without arguing." Pomp had first claimed this right for himself when he used force against his master, Augustus Bythewood, to escape the bonds of slavery. After Bythewood had attempted to kill him, Pomp told Penn Hapgood, "I beat him down, I trampled him with rage." Though he resisted the temptation to put an end to the cruel tyrant's life, Pomp vowed that he would never again be the slave of any man. With Bythewood's rifle ever at his side, Pomp roamed the woods, daring anyone to claim him as their property and pronouncing "woe to the man that lays a finger on me, be he master or be he slave!" His calm self-assurance, along with his haughty insistence that he was

[17] John Townsend Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Company, n.d.), 77, 314, 143, 184.

"neither slave nor inferior," set Pomp squarely apart from most other black characters that graced the popular literature of the Civil War period.[18]

Pomp also differed from the slaves who had graced the pages of popular fiction in the 1850s in that he did not hesitate to use violence against white men when necessary. When Pomp first appeared, the noble runaway "carried a gun in his hand," and in succeeding pages, he proved thoroughly capable of using the rifle that had once belonged to his master to injure or kill those of his master's race. When a Confederate soldier charged at Penn with his bayonet, for instance, Pomp shot the man dead from his hiding place in the woods. Later, the former slave calmly shot another rebel in the leg to save the Unionists from a surprise attack. Near the end of the novel, only ardent pleas from a white woman persuaded him to spare the life of a deserter, against his pledge to put to death any soldier who betrayed the Unionist cause. Had she not intervened, Pomp would have carried out his duty by summarily executing a slaveholder who had defected to the secessionist camp. In these episodes, Pomp engaged in violence against whites using the same unwavering composure and judicious restraint that any white hero in nineteenth-century fiction would have employed.[19]

To win the acceptance of ordinary Northern readers, Brown and Sargent located their portrayals of strong black men within a larger narrative that followed the conventional formula of the tragic octoroon literature that had emerged in the 1850s. During the Civil War, the octoroon character had been primarily relegated to the fringes

[18] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 143, 146, 82.
[19] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 74, 132.

of popular culture by the harsh realities involved in fighting a brutal, fratricidal war. The most common use of this theme occurred, significantly, in the reproduction by antislavery advocates of daguerreotypes depicting former slave children who exhibited a strikingly white appearance. In such sober times, the photographs of light-skinned children who had been redeemed from slavery, some of which appeared in *Harper's Weekly* near the close of the war, provided a more damning charge against the slaveholding enemy than merely hypothetical octoroon girls who appeared in fictional narratives could. Yet Brown and Sargent resurrected this figure in their attempts to detract readers' attention from the more unsettling figure of the bold black warrior.

The octoroon theme in both *Clotelle* and *Peculiar* wholly eclipsed the trials and triumphs that the laudable black protagonists experienced. In Brown's novel, the sufferings endured by the beautiful, refined Clotelle as a victim of the Southern slave system dominated the first half of the book, while Jerome did not even appear until the eighteenth of thirty-five chapters. As they had in earlier octoroon novels, the other male slaves in the novel besides Jerome, moreover, took on an absurd, minstrel-like quality, in keeping with the racial assumptions of most Northern whites. Likewise, in Sargent's text the bulk of the novel's 500 pages focused on the plight of a white girl captured by slave traders when she was a young child. For this entire segment of the story, Peek's role remained restricted to the efforts he made to help rescue this white female from bondage. The manly respect that the daring and capable Peculiar commanded in the earlier part of the novel and his quest to find his own family thus promptly became lost within a

narrative that centered around a conventional octoroon story. In both *Clotelle* and *Peculiar*, the focus on an octoroon theme prevented Brown's and Sargent's strong black protagonists from posing the serious challenge to conventional Northern views of African Americans that they would have had they dominated their respective stories.

In *Cudjo's Cave*, Trowbridge offset the admirable character of Pomp with the demonic Cudjo, a former slave whose time in bondage had crippled him physically and turned his thoughts to revenge against all white people. Penn Hapgood, the central white character of the novel, first encountered the two black men while he suffered under the hallucinatory effects of a fever. Pomp and Cudjo seemed to make up two halves of a "double individual," Penn thought in his stupor, "one good and the other evil." Though Penn assured white readers that Cudjo "was completely under the control of his noble companion," the former slave's hideous physical form and vindictive personality called attention to the supposedly darker, more savage side of African-American nature. Even if white readers respected the manly black Pomp, the conspicuous presence of a grotesque, vengeful black character that affirmed negative racial conventions of the time prevented readers from coming away from Trowbridge's novel with an unqualified admiration for African Americans in general.[20]

Though the presence of Pomp in *Cudjo's Cave* qualified Trowbridge's novel as a revolutionary text in American popular culture, the pairing of Pomp with the intractable savage Cudjo significantly undermined the notion that black men did not differ

[20] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 77.

significantly from white men. While a white character could have easily taken on the attributes of Pomp, no white man in nineteenth-century American fiction could have ever resembled the animal-like Cudjo. Trowbridge described Cudjo as "a wild beast" and a "grotesque, half-savage creature." He seemed to Penn Hapgood "far more like a demon of the cave than a human being." Whereas Pomp appeared "dignified, erect, of noble features," Penn reported, "before him cringed and grimaced . . . Cudjo, ugly, deformed, with immensely long arms, short bow legs resembling a parenthesis, a body like a frog's, and the countenance of an ape." These dehumanizing descriptions of a principal black character allowed Trowbridge's readers to retain widely held beliefs in the inferiority and even the subhuman nature of a large segment of the African-American population. Trowbridge's representation of Pomp as an exception to the general character of black men helped to confirm this notion. When Pomp identified himself with the men bought and sold every day in the South, the white unionists protested that these slaves were "not men like you--there are few like you anywhere." Though Pomp challenged white Northerners' belief that former slaves could not possess a worthy manhood, his exceptional nature allowed Trowbridge's audience to retain their comforting belief in the general rule of white superiority.[21]

The deformities of body and of character that Cudjo displayed stemmed largely from the abuse he had suffered at the hands of a merciless overseer, Silas Ropes. As Cudjo unveiled to Penn Hapgood the scars this cruelty had created, he also revealed

[21] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 73, 132, 76, 74, 142.

further the distorted nature of his personality. "Taking Penn's hand," Trowbridge related, Cudjo "seemed to experience a vindictive joy in passing it over his lash-furrowed flesh." Cudjo intensified Penn's horrified reaction with his macabre comments. "Not much skin dark, hey?" he prompted, "Rough streaks along dar, hey?" As Pomp put it sardonically, these "lessons in Christian love have not made a saint" of Cudjo. In consequence of the maltreatment he had received, Cudjo emerged as an "unfeeling, ungrateful fellow" who reveled in the suffering of whites.[22]

Fiction writers in 1863 and 1864 designed characters like Cudjo not to elicit pity for them, but to emphasize the danger that such slaves posed to the masters who were themselves responsible for producing deformities and vindictiveness in these men. "Him gi' me lickin's; him got my gal," Cudjo raged about Silas Ropes. "Me owe him for dat!" With the desire for vengeance against all whites constantly in his mind, the "malicious" Cudjo reveled in weaponry that gave him the capacity to accomplish his retribution in the most savage of manners. When a white unionist presented him with a sword taken from the body of a dead secessionist, Trowbridge reported, "Cudjo received the weapon with unbounded delight." Later, during the heat of an attack, the slave sounded the barbaric command to the other union troops of "Kill! kill! kill!" before slashing a secessionist "hideously across the face with the sword." In his final scene in the novel, Cudjo tried with the same weapon to kill the overseer who had wronged him, "slashing the end of the branch" on which they both stood "as if it had been his victim's flesh." In his attempt to

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[22] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 86.

kill the overseer, Cudjo reminded the man, "'Member de lickins? 'Member my gal ye got away? Now ye git yer pay!"[23]

The animal traits that wronged black characters exhibited in wartime texts like *Cudjo's Cave* made them a serious menace to the slaveholders against whom Northerners had come to harbor unprecedented levels of resentment and anger by 1863. These slaves vindicated the grievances of whites who espoused the Union cause by serving as the instruments of slaveholders' destruction. Cudjo ultimately accomplished his revenge against Silas Ropes, causing him to fall from a cliff to his death. In Alcott's "An Hour," the slaves in revolt also succeeded in murdering the overseer who had tormented them. One of the conspirators in Alcott's tale resembled Cudjo in being "as near an animal as a human creature could become." This "burly, brutal-looking negro, maimed and distorted by every cruelty that could be invented or inflicted," Alcott observed, "was a sight to daunt the stoutest heart." This frightful "creature," furthermore, shared Cudjo's penchant for weaponry. In a chilling scene, the deformed slave rebel "sat sharpening the knife which had often threatened him in the overseer's hand, and was still red with the overseer's blood." Like Silas Ropes, the overseer in "An Hour" paid with his life for his cruelty toward a savage African-descended slave.[24]

"Little Starlight" presented another harrowing picture of the vengeful male slave when he told the chaplain that, because of the transgressions the slaveholder had perpetrated against him and his family, he would happily kill his master if he encountered

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[23] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 73, 132, 76, 77, 246, 287, 292.
[24] Alcott, "An Hour," 62-3.

him on the battlefield. "I seed him lick my ole mudder till de blood flew," Starlight explained to the narrator. "Ji's lemme on to him, mass'r, and you'll see de blood fly yourse'f." When the chaplain expressed disbelief that this young boy would actually carry out his macabre threat, Little Starlight responded, "'Wouldn't I? Yah! Yah!' And thereat," the chaplain recalled, "Starlight began to fumble among the various knives and pistols which adorned his person in a manner that was any thing but conciliatory." The chaplain had earlier explained that Starlight "had a *penchant* for obtaining trophies on the field of battle; and carried so many knives and pistols on his person that he was quite a walking arsenal." Despite the otherwise humorous function that Starlight served in the narrative, as Cudjo did in Trowbridge's text, the author of the *Harper's* story emphasized the serious nature of this threat to Starlight's master. Although "upon a briefer acquaintance with Starlight I should have smiled at the serio-comic manner in which these sentiments were enunciated," the chaplain related, "as it was, I shuddered at the intensity of passion which lurked in his tones."[25]

While copiously armed male slaves, bent on revenge against white masters, helped Northern readers to work out the hostility that they felt toward Southern slaveholders during the war, such beastly figures also could not help but cause Northern whites some uneasiness. To counter the discomfort that these ruthless savages would inevitably produce in their readers, authors of wartime fictional texts almost always made sure that the slave's achievement of vindication against his master occurred in

[25] "Little Starlight," 702.

conjunction with the death of the slave himself. As a result, vengeful black slaves did not survive to threaten white Northerners either with sinister violence or with demands for equal rights. Little Starlight, for instance, accomplished his revenge against his master in a gruesome, yet conclusive manner. "The rushing bayonet gored the breast of the officer," the chaplain recalled, "and he rolled to the plain. Twice--thrice I saw the flashing bayonet leap into the air, and flash down again upon the prostrate man." Yet Starlight did not live an hour past the close of the battle. After receiving a fatal wound to the head, the young boy expressed his satisfaction to the chaplain that by killing his master he had attained his freedom, and then he died.[26]

In Trowbridge's narrative, Cudjo met his end at almost the same moment as did his slaveholding nemesis. Cudjo had cornered Silas Ropes in a tree, but as Cudjo tried vainly to reach his enemy with his sword, a secessionist comrade of Ropes's shot Cudjo in the chest from his hiding place in the cliffs above. Though mortally injured, the determined black man leaped onto Ropes from the branch where he stood, declaring as he did, "Cudjo shot! Cudjo die! But you go too, Sile Ropes." With Cudjo's hands around the soldier's throat, the two rolled off a ledge and into a stream below. Penn Hapgood looked over the edge "just in time to see the two bodies disappear together; the dying Cudjo and the drowning Silas sinking as one, and drifting away into the cavernous darkness of the subterranean river." Cudjo had achieved his revenge, but, as with Little Starlight, Cudjo's demise would spare white readers the quandary of figuring out how to

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[26] "Little Starlight," 702.

integrate this "malicious," "half-savage creature" into American society after the fighting had ended.[27]

In other stories, the death of the black protagonist likewise helped reduce the virile appearance of African Americans whom authors had portrayed as brave, admirable soldiers. In *Peculiar*, for instance, Sargent noted Peek's "intrepid conduct" in two battles on the Mississippi River in June of 1863. The former slave had distinguished himself by his own valor as well as his leadership abilities. "His words and his example," wrote Sargent, "had inspired the men of his company with an almost superhuman courage. Bravely they stood their ground, and nowhere else on the field did so many of the enemy's dead attest the valor of these undrilled Africans." Yet in saving the life of one of his men, Peek himself became wounded and died on the battlefield. As in many of these dramatic incidents of martyrdom that occurred in fiction during this period, there was a decidedly spiritual dimension to Peculiar's death. The brave soldier "stood up erect, lifted his clasped hands above his head, looked beyond them as if watching some beatific vision, then dropped his mortal body upon the earth."[28]

Often, in other texts, a former slave died in battle as a direct result of his decision not to kill the white man who had been his master when he had the opportunity. This turn in the plot added a particular poignancy to the story without enhancing the manly aspect of the black character's personality. Black men like Robert or Tippoo Saib embraced the voluntary martyrdom that had earned fictional slaves like Uncle Tom a certain amount of

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[27] "Little Starlight," 702; Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 292-3.
[28] Sargent, *Peculiar*, 490, 492.

admiration and compassion from white readers. But in doing so, they associated themselves with the type of self-sacrifice that was considered more womanly than masculine in the Victorian era. Refusing to engage in violence against another man in defense of one's life, or family, or freedom, or country did not distinguish an individual as a true man in the cultural understanding of nineteenth-century Americans. Thus, when Robert in "My Contraband" gave in to the pleas of Nurse Dane not to kill the rebel officer who had raped his wife and driven her to her death, he failed to fulfill his duty both as a husband and as a loyal citizen of the United States. When the two men later met in battle, Alcott further neutralized the manly threat that the half-handsome, once-strong Robert might have posed to white Americans. Once again, Robert failed to kill his former master and, instead, suffered death at the hands of the man whose life he had, months earlier, consciously spared.

In a similar plot line, Tippoo Saib chose not to slay the man who had been his owner when they met on the battlefield, and was himself killed as a consequence. After "dropping his arm with its deadly weapon" and telling the Confederate soldier to "Go 'long, Mas'r," Tippoo was, in turn, gunned down by the vindictive rebel officer. "The white man with an oath drew the revolver from his belt," the author related, "and with deliberate aim discharged its contents full into the generous heart" of the man who had just saved his life. Tippoo Saib's decision not to defend his own life against this rebel villain prevented him, like Alcott's Robert, from fulfilling the expected role of the manly hero in nineteenth-century fiction. As they laid down their lives, Robert and Tippoo Saib

failed to achieve the same disquieting effect on white readers' peace of mind that Cudjo and Little Starlight had accomplished before they died. Though the four characters ultimately met the same fatal end, Cudjo and Starlight successfully brought down the white men who had inflicted such heartless cruelty on them, demonstrating, in doing so, the danger that black men presented to their white foes. "My Contraband" and "Tippoo Saib," in contrast, depicted African-American characters principally as generous and self-sacrificial. Although these were characteristics "to be admired and revered," as the author of "Tippoo Saib" suggested, these same traits also minimized the threat that black men posed to whites. In contrast to the ominous characters of Cudjo and Little Starlight, with their preoccupation with deadly weapons and their determination for revenge against whites, the African Americans in "My Contraband" and "Tippoo Saib" gave white readers far less grounds for uneasiness about black brutality. By the same token, however, Robert and Tippoo gave whites no more reason than Cudjo and Starlight did to think of African Americans as men.[29]

The authors of "Tippoo Saib" and "My Contraband" further comforted their audiences by tying the motivations of their black protagonists in battle to their concern for white females to whom they had become emotionally attached. Robert in Alcott's story, for instance, had no desire to live, much less to fight to protect his freedom, after learning that his wife had been driven to suicide. He joined the Union forces, Alcott implied, merely as a gesture of gratitude to the white nurse who had persuaded him not to

[29] "Tippoo Saib," 215, 214.

murder the white man responsible for his wife's death. After learning that his wife had indeed killed herself, Robert wrote to Nurse Dane, "If they let us, I'll fight for yer till I'm killed." As in the proslavery anti-Uncle Tom novels, Robert Dane vowed to lay down his life not for his own freedom, but for a white woman whom he had served and for whom he had developed a sense of gratitude and selfless devotion. This scenario, a familiar one for readers of plantation novels, reminded white Northerners of the allegedly sentimental side of Southern slavery, and suggested to them the existence of a warm, but deferential relationship between devoted, servile African Americans and worthy, but unattainable white women.[30]

Similarly, the self-effacing love that Tippoo Saib bore his "lilly Missy," the three-year-old daughter of his heartless master, was designed to appeal to white readers by weakening the brave soldier's masculine claim to an identity separate from that of whites. Tippoo Saib's feelings about young Alice closely mimicked those that Uncle Tom had displayed toward both Eva and her father, Augustine St. Clare, in Stowe's novel of the previous decade. A vision that Tippoo had of Alice on the battlefield expressed the same kind of sentiment that Tom held for Little Eva. Uncle Tom, Stowe related, loved Eva "as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine." While Tippoo Saib readied himself to kill Alice's father, this replica of Eva entered his thoughts. In an idealized vision, Tippoo pictured "a little maid, all aglow with loving energy, with golden curls flowing back as she ran, with white arms uplifted to his

[30] Alcott, "My Contraband," 89.

embrace, with rosy lips that asked no better than to press themselves upon his swarthy cheek." As Tom had with St. Clare, Tippoo early in the story declared his willingness to die for this cherished white person. Whereas Tom had declared himself "willin' to lay down my life, this blessed day" for his master, Tip swore to young Alice that he "would "ha' ben glad to lay down his life, ef so be 'twould ha' done lilly Missy any good." In the end, Tippoo sacrificed first his freedom, and then his life, for the sake of Alice, precisely as Tom had done for St. Clare. In determining whether or not to kill his master, Tippoo thought of the young white child whom the author referred to as "the one love that had illumined his gloomy life"--despite the existence of a wife and child who had been sold away from him earlier in the story. "I won't kill lilly Missy's fader," he finally decided. For this decision, which grew out of his love for a beautiful white girl, Tippoo Saib suffered the terrible fate of being shot in the back. The touching devotion that this fighting slave harbored for a white girl, even at the cost of his life, would have struck a sentimental chord in readers of *Harper's Weekly*, and allowed them to rest easy in the trite belief that a lingering affection for whites might prevent freedmen from doing harm even to the cruelest of white slaveholders.[31]

The theme of the former slave who devoted himself unselfishly to a white female proliferated in all forms of popular culture during the Civil War. The minstrel song "Raw Recruits," for instance, presented a black regiment that fought not for their own freedom, but for "Abraham's daughter." The lyrics went on at length about this symbolic figure

[31] Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly*, Elizabeth Ammons, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 224, 262; "Tippoo Saib," 215.

for whom Union soldiers, both white and black, were putting their lives on the line: "Oh! should you ask me who she am Columbia is her name, sir. She is the child of Abraham, or Uncle Sam, the same, sir." In a series of collectible cards by H. L. Stephens that was released in 1864, a former slave who had gained his own freedom after knocking down his abusive master and fleeing to the North sacrificed his life for a similar figure. While fighting with the Union forces, this illustrated figure was struck by a bullet in the chest. As the body of the soldier lay in the field, still clutching his sword, his lifeless form smiled wanly up at the standing figure of a beautiful white woman who was meant to represent Lady Liberty. This personification of freedom stood holding out a wreath of flowers to the dead soldier and pronounced the simple statement that served as the title to the final card of the set: "He died for me!" Although viewers might infer from this scene that the soldier had died for his own liberty, those familiar with popular culture of the time would have clearly recognized the prescribed formula by which the black man gave up his life for a superior white woman to whom he had developed a steadfast devotion. The triumph, in the end, was not the former slave's attainment of his own liberty, or the manhood he displayed in battle. Instead, it was his noble sacrifice of his own life, not so that other slaves might be free, but so that "Lady Liberty" might endure.[32]

By 1864, authors of popular fiction began stressing not only the devotion that African Americans felt toward white females, but also their willingness to reconcile with white slaveholders. As the war wore on, and an end seemed within reach, white

[32] H. L. Stephens, *Stephens' Album Varieties, No. 3: The Slave in 1863* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1863).

advocates of emancipation sought to reassure their readers that former slaves could live peaceably alongside their former masters. The apprehension that Thomas Jefferson had expressed in the 1780s that "ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained" would result in race war if slavery came to an end had remained a concern for many white Americans through the 1850s. Northern whites also feared that the alternative to race war would be a mass migration of African Americans into their region of the country, because of the irreconcilable antagonisms between blacks and whites in the South. In the fiction they produced during 1864, in particular, antislavery authors tried to allay such anxieties by putting forward black characters who remonstrated against the idea of committing retributive violence against former slaveholders. In doing so, these writers generally relied on the antebellum notion articulated by Metta Victor in *Maum Guinea*, that it was "w'ite blood" that was "proud and 'vengeful," while "brack blood," in contrast, was "warm and kind."[33]

In *Peculiar*, Sargent highlighted the different instincts with which Peek and the equally admirable white antislavery activist Vance responded when the slaveholder who had wronged both men fell within their power. Without hesitating, Vance declared that "the scourger shall be scourged," took up a cowhide, and "brought down the blows, sharp, quick, vigorous, on face, back shoulders, till a shriek of 'murder' was wrung from the proud lips of the humbled adversary." In the midst of this flogging, however, "Vance felt his arm arrested by a firm grasp," as Peek interceded on behalf of the despicable

[33] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 138; Victor, *Maum Guinea*, 151.

slaveholding victim. The black man urged Vance "not to wreak a poor revenge on flesh and blood," but instead to "forgive." Later, Peculiar advised his son, who had enlisted in the Union army, "Don't strike for revenge," but "fight on for freedom and the right," and "slay because 't is God's cause on earth you defend."[34]

Similarly, the slaves in Louisa May Alcott's "An Hour" ultimately rejected the option of committing violent revenge against their master in favor of reconciliation with him when he promised to grant them their freedom. At first, the octoroon house slave Milly took pleasure in announcing to her master and his family that the rebellion had begun on the plantation, and that the slaves intended to kill all the whites in the household. Soon after she had made this disclosure, however, Milly began to learn, according to Alcott, "that the bitter far exceeds the sweet in human vengeance." Revenge did not give slaves the satisfaction they sought, Alcott suggested, as when Milly discovered that although she "had changed places with her mistress," the young woman "found that power did not bring her peace" and that instead "she was baffled and defeated by her own conscience."[35]

Acting more explicitly on religious principles, an old slave woman named Cassandra implored the male insurrectionists not to carry out their plan to murder their master. If they did so, Cassandra warned, they would "fro 'way yer souls dis night." The slaves were persuaded not to revolt when the young man who had the same day inherited the estate from his father resolved to emancipate them. "My people!" Gabriel entreated

[34] Sargent, *Peculiar*, 422, 421, 492.
[35] Alcott, "An Hour," 54.

them, "break up your league, lay down your arms, dry your tears, and forgive as you are forgiven." In a gratifying moment for white readers nervous about the outcome of emancipation, the would-be revolutionaries joyfully accepted their master's offer. Not only did they forgive Gabriel, but they treated him as they may have responded to the biblical messenger who shared Gabriel's name. A "wave of gratitude and love rolled up and broke at Gabriel's feet," Alcott reported, and, in turn, "tears from the deepest fountains of a man's repentant spirit fitly baptized the freedmen" who were "clinging to his garments, kissing his feet and pouring blessings on his head."[36]

William Wells Brown, also writing in 1864, depicted a similarly optimistic resolution of the animosity between slaveholders and freedmen. Rather than addressing whites' fears that former slaves harbored a violent hatred toward Southern masters, however, Brown took up the other cause of race war that Jefferson had identified--the "deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites." Sometime after the black-skinned Jerome had married the octoroon Clotelle in Brown's novel, the couple encountered Clotelle's white slaveholding father, Mr. Linwood, in Europe. At first, Brown noted, Linwood "very much regretted that his daughter . . . should have married a black man, and he did not fail to express to her his dislike of her husband's complexion." Gradually, however, Clotelle's father began to "become more and more familiar with Jerome," and he realized "that what is called prejudice against color is the offspring of the institution of slavery." Instead of harboring a fierce hostility to his son-in-law on account of that

[36] Alcott, "An Hour," 63, 67, 68.

prejudice, Mr. Linwood "resolved to dedicate the remainder of his life to the eradication of this unrepublican and unchristian feeling from the land of his birth." By having Jerome and Mr. Linwood make their peace, Brown expressed the Garrisonian hope that racial prejudice against African Americans might be eliminated in the United States. But white Northerners could also read into this ending that whites and blacks might resolve their differences in the South, making an influx of former slaves into the North unnecessary and even unlikely.[37]

Other literature from this period also presented a hopeful view of the future of American race relations after the war ended. Not all strong, admirable black men died at the close of the stories and novels produced in late 1863 and 1864. At the conclusion of *Cudjo's Cave*, for example, Pomp, after announcing his belief that "tyranny was made to defeat itself," retreated carrying his gun and his lantern, symbols of violence and truth, into "the dark recesses of the cave." According to Trowbridge, Pomp eventually chose knowledge as his weapon in the fight against tyranny, as he emerged from the cave to become a valuable scout for the Union army. In *Peculiar*, even though Peek himself died a martyr to the cause, his "heroic" sixteen-year-old son Sterling survived, presumably to fulfill Peek's charge to fight for an end to slavery. At the end of the novel, the unflagging white reformer Vance reported that Sterling was with him, and that this "bright, brave little fellow" had proved himself "already a great comfort and help." Like Pomp, Sterling

[37] Brown, *Clotelle*, 102, 103, 104.

offered the vague prospect of a bright future for an American society that might include at least exemplary African Americans as an integral part of it.[38]

As the Civil War raged on, authors, songwriters, and artists thus incorporated into the popular culture they produced certain abolitionist views that in the past had doomed similar works to commercial failure. No longer was the notion of immediate emancipation for all slaves, without the possibility of colonization abroad, a controversial subject to broach in popular fiction or song. Even more ground-breaking was the widespread tolerance of black characters who wielded deadly weapons in manly, and often mortal, combat against white men. Some authors went farther still, suggesting that the men who did so might equal or even surpass in manliness the white men against whom they fought. The unprecedented popularity of these groundbreaking texts indicates that the Civil War opened the minds of white Northerners to entertain more progressive ideas about the place that African Americans might occupy in American society.

When these texts are taken as a whole, however, the grave reservations that authors felt about placing African Americans on an equal plane with whites become readily apparent. The physical deformities or laughable appearances of the bravest black soldiers gave these characters a repulsive or a comic air that prevented them from commanding the respect that a white hero would have garnered. In crafting such images, writers of the early 1860s drew on the rich tradition of racial stereotypes that had

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[38] Trowbridge, *Cudjo's Cave*, 321; Sargent, *Peculiar*, 494.

appeared in popular culture since black characters had first gained a substantial place in American fiction during the 1830s.

In addition, more often than not, these brave, yet disfigured, heroes ended their careers by dying martyrs, sometimes to the cause of black freedom and sometimes for the white female icons they worshipped. Although their deaths usually signaled a kind of religious victory as they passed on to the life beyond this one, these incidents of martyrdom also provided a convenient cessation of any threat that a black man who had served as a soldier might have posed to white American society after the war ended. These death scenes also harked back to the image of black slaves as pitiable victims of cruel white Southerners that had proliferated in antislavery literature penned by white authors for three decades. As had been the case throughout the antebellum period, portrayals of black Americans as buffoons or as victims reinforced attitudes of contempt or pity toward men and women of African descent. These skewed perceptions helped whites justify both the institutionalized and the informal treatment of African Americans as a group of inferior, or even inhuman, beings.

The inroads that abolitionist ideas made into Civil War fiction in the North, then, were limited by the attempts that antislavery authors made to downplay the threat manly black soldiers would pose to white control over American society. Even if, for a brief moment in time, American culture celebrated the critical role that black men played in preserving the nation and achieving their own freedom, the racial prejudices of centuries would not be overcome by one event, no matter how cataclysmic. Though white

Northerners had reached the point where they could admire African Americans as soldiers, they could not bring themselves to honor those black soldiers as men. Frederick Douglass's expectation for his race that service in the Union army would prove "the speediest and best possible way open to us to manhood, equal rights and elevation" would, sadly, remain a hope unfulfilled.[39]

[39] Frederick Douglass, "Negroes and the National War Effort," address delivered in Philadelphia, July 6, 1863, reprinted in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, v. 3: 1855-63*, John Blassingame, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 592.

Conclusion

The majority of white Northerners began the antebellum period complicit in the slave system, either by their apathy toward the institution or by their positive support for it. By the early 1860s, however, many Northerners had turned against Southern slavery, advocating its prompt eradication from the United States. Nor did the Northern public come to oppose slavery exclusively because of the constraints slaveholders put on free labor in the North or the blatant disregard they showed for the rights of Northern whites, as political historians have often claimed. By the late 1850s, the image of slaveholders as tyrants bullying their fellow white Americans had become intertwined in the minds of Northerners with the picture of slaveholding tyrants terrorizing their helpless slaves. As a result, many white Northerners felt that slaves needed protection from the Slave Power as much as they did themselves.[1]

Instrumental in creating this shift in Northern consciousness was the unrelenting outpouring of popular culture materials produced by antislavery activists between 1831 and 1865. Historians have rarely examined such sources in their attempts to understand Northern attitudes about race or the movement toward Civil War. The adroitness with which many of these men and women crafted fictional, musical, and visual images of slaves and slaveholders in those years, however, encouraged the Northern masses by the 1850s to accept African Americans in admirable roles for the first time in American history. Nevertheless, far from sensing early on in the period the sort of plots and

[1] See Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970) and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978).

characters that would resonate with their white audience, promoters of the antislavery cause suffered through many years of obscurity before they were able to hit upon the perfect formula for attracting the Northern public. Only with Stowe's creation of Uncle Tom in 1852 were antislavery forces able to garner the kind of following they had been seeking for nearly two decades.

To gain the support of such a substantial audience as that drawn by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, antislavery writers and artists had to allow an antislavery sentiment much milder than Garrisonian abolitionism to prevail in their texts. As a result, the radical abolitionists whom historical scholarship has invariably highlighted as the leaders of the antislavery movement generally played a marginal role in the debate over slavery that occurred in antebellum popular culture. The different factions within the movement, however, gained expression in the widely varied messages that appeared in antislavery texts, particularly by the 1850s. Rather than hindering the ability of the antislavery cause to appeal to a sizable constituency in the North, the range of views represented by antislavery propaganda allowed the movement to attract Americans with divergent perspectives on slavery and race. As Lydia Maria Child pointed out in 1860, though, this broadening of the movement's popularity led Garrisonian abolitionism to become "diluted" to the point where authors and artists ignored, or even denounced, the original tenets of immediate abolition and black equality.[2]

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[2] See "Correspondence Between Lydia Maria Child, and Governor Wise, and Mrs. Mason, of Virginia" (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 10.

The success of an antislavery text depended to a large extent on the presentation of male slave characters as victims of, rather than rebels against, a cruel and brutal slave system. The way in which propagandists on all sides of the slavery issue dealt with the issue of violence committed by or against black slaves, in fact, chiefly determined the degree of popularity a narrative involving the topic of slavery would enjoy. By gradually eliminating threats of black violence against whites from their narratives and focusing instead on the figure of the black martyr, antislavery advocates minimized to their audience the manliness of the African Americans they portrayed. The more feminine a male or a female slave character could become, in fact, the more popular that character with Northern audiences. In the process, these activists reduced the threat that such characters posed to white readers and, consequently, were able to create texts that successfully encouraged white Northerners to sympathize with the plight of the slave.

Proslavery authors and artists, for their part, proved unable, and often unwilling, to offer the kinds of characters and storylines to which the Northern public could give their unqualified support. Defenders of slavery initially showed little interest in appealing to the masses and opposed centralized efforts to do so. Many of the novels and stories they produced for a commercial audience suffered from half-hearted or non-existent efforts at publicity and distribution. Those that successfully reached the public, moreover, turned off white readers because advocates for the proslavery cause, by and large, failed to appreciate the prevailing desires and concerns of both Northerners and Southerners.

Despite their undisputed victory over proslavery forces in the popular culture realm, antislavery propagandists never managed to convince the Northern public during the antebellum and Civil War periods that black males qualified as men in the same way that white males did. Many antislavery authors and artists, in fact, remained skeptical of this idea themselves. Most white Northerners, it seems, continued to believe in the clear superiority of their own race over the black race, even as they acknowledged that African Americans should be allowed freedom from legal control by white masters.

The fiction, music, and visual images that antislavery forces produced in these years nevertheless helped foster the desire among Northern whites to protect slaves from their brutal oppressors. After the Civil War, advocates for governmental intervention on behalf of African Americans were able to implement many of their policies for the reconstruction of the Southern states because their Northern constituencies continued to view freedmen as helpless victims at the mercy of domineering white Southerners. Without Northern assistance, many whites believed, freed slaves would once again be subjugated to the tyrannical power that had kept them in slavery for so long.

The notion that black males did not constitute true men, however, also allowed Northern whites, once Reconstruction revealed itself as a complicated and costly process, to let white Southerners dispense with the political and social rights that African Americans had enjoyed under Northern rule. Voting privileges, legal equality, and social status were regarded by Victorian Americans as the purview of all true men. Because white Northerners had never considered black males men, the disappearance of these

rights by the end of the nineteenth century did not have a very troubling effect on the Northern populace as a whole. Since the gains that the antislavery movement made during the Civil War and immediately thereafter had never extended to complete acceptance of African Americans as equals, it became relatively easy to abandon them to their fate once it became inconvenient to continue to support their cause.

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