

An American Drama: The Debate of Slavery in Ante-bellum Theatre

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Abstract: In the 1850's the dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* initiated a decade of theatre that revolved around the question of slavery. As a result, the American theatre became another medium for the debate on slavery that was raging between Democrats and Republicans. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was used as abolitionist propaganda in the North. The success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* prompted a wave of pro-slavery plays in the South. None of these were very successful. In the North, anti-slavery drama became increasingly popular, and productions such as *Dred* and *The Octoroon* were able to thrive in the aftermath of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

“I used to see the picture of him, over the alter, when I was a girl...but *he isn't here!*
there's nothing here but sin, and long, long despair!

-Cassy, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Act V, Scene I

Since its birth in Ancient Greece, theatre has, at once, reflected society and shaped history; playwrights capture what they see around them on the page, and audiences react to often unpleasant truths before them on stage. From dramas as old as Euripides' *Trojan Women* to Tony Kushner's celebrated and controversial *Angels in America*, theatre has been used as a political tool, a cultural commentary, and a moral compass. The Greeks argued politics in the amphitheater. Medieval feast days saw the streets filled with traveling morality plays. Moliere's seventeenth-century comedies mocked the hypocrisy of the French church. The twentieth century too saw new dramas expressing doubts about humanity and the purpose of life in the aftermath of two devastating world wars. In comparison, the nineteenth century lacked the development of plays with a purpose, plays that were designed to critique an issue in society and, more importantly, to change it.

Rising tensions in the decade before the Civil War, however, led to an emergence of political and social subject material in the theatre, marking the arrival of plays with a purpose. Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, which was instantly influential in American society. It appealed to abolitionists due to its staunch anti-slavery message, but was scorned, and often banned, by southern states. It is difficult to overstate the success and effect of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American society in 1852 and the decades to follow. The staged rendition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remains the most produced play in the

history of the United States.¹ It was also the first drama to critique, so openly and clearly, the southern institution of slavery, and herein lies its true significance in American theatre.

Uncle Tom's Cabin gave rise to a decade of racially charged drama, where the American theatre became a medium for the debate on slavery. Many pro-slavery dramas reacted directly to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and attempted to contradict it or to disprove its claims about the nature of slavery, while others simply aimed to defend the peculiar institution. These plays, with either abolitionist or anti-abolitionist themes, contributed to a national conversation that split the northern and southern states. With the dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s, theatre yet again became an arena for political and social debate.

Many theatre historians have studied *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, analyzing it as both a novel and a play. John Frick's book *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen* is an excellent history of the theatrical production of Stowe's novel. Frick's work chronicles the evolution of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from its origins in Troy, New York, to its lasting success throughout the twentieth century. It does not, however, explore the effects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on antebellum theatre or politics before the outbreak of the Civil War. Sarah Meer's book *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* goes further than Frick's, analyzing the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American minstrel shows and anti-Tom literature in the south. Still, Meer's work fails to explore the many other abolitionist or anti-abolitionist plays that arose from the dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and their significance to American politics.²

¹ Monroe Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," *Southern Speech Journal* 28 (Spring 1963): 182.

² John W. Frick, *Uncle Tom's Cabin on the American Stage and Screen*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

Other scholars have examined politically charged plays which arose in the wake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In his article "Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays," Joseph Roppolo discusses three anti-abolitionist plays that were produced in New Orleans in answer to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In "How to End the Octoroon," John Degan analyzes the production of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* and its mixed reception in the United States due to its themes of slavery. Monroe Lippman's article, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," also discusses the many dramas that reacted to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These articles are valuable resources, but they fail to place the plays in historical context. Scholars present the plays as if in a theatrical vacuum and overlook their contribution to, and reflection of, American politics and culture. But the political and social developments in the 1850s, particularly the debate on slavery, heavily influenced these plays. Therefore, the plays are not simply forms of art, but reflections and shapers of the slavery debate in ante-bellum America.³

Stowe's novel opens in Kentucky, on the plantation of George Shelby, where the slaves Tom and Eliza have lived all their lives. Threatened with the seizure of his lands, Shelby decides to sell Tom and Eliza's son Harry to save his plantation and the rest of his slaves. At the news of the impending sale of her son, Eliza takes Harry and flees, while Tom remains. The two subplots diverge here; Eliza, Harry, and her husband George Harris head north toward freedom, while Tom is sold and taken south. Eliza flees across the frozen Ohio River with her son and finds refuge in a series of kind neighbors who aid them despite the danger of breaking the recently enacted Fugitive Slave Act. George Harris' outspoken, proactive personality contrasts with Eliza's submissive, well-mannered nature. He acts as the

³ Joseph P. Roppolo, "Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays," *The New England Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (June 1954): 213-226; John A. Degan, "How to End 'The Octoroon,'" *Educational Theatre Journal*, 27, no. 2, (May 1975): 170-178; Monroe Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," *Southern Speech Journal* 28 (Spring 1963): 183-197.

protector of the group, even wounding one of the pursuing slave-catchers. Employing their light skin to their advantage, Eliza and George use clever disguises and assistance from strangers to slip north, finally reaching Canada.

Tom heads south in shackles, but has the fortune to meet Augustine St. Clare, his cousin Ophelia, and his young daughter Eva on a river boat. After Tom saves Eva from drowning, the genteel St. Clare buys Tom and returns with him to New Orleans. St. Clare owns slaves but has no love for the institution, while his cousin Ophelia, a native of Vermont, despises slavery but holds strong racial prejudices. Little Eva learns about Christianity from Tom, and the two spend much of their time reading and discussing the Bible. Unlike her father or mother, Eva views slaves as her equals, and her blossoming relationship with Tom and Christianity compels her to love them as such. An illness takes Eva's life; however, she begs her father to free his slaves, especially Tom. St. Clare, shocked by the death of his daughter, is slow to act, and is killed in a bar fight before he can finalize any of the legal papers to free his slaves. St. Clare only has time to give Topsy, a young, boisterous slave, to Ophelia before he dies. St. Clare's wife Marie sells off all of the slaves, and Tom finds himself pitched from his kind owner St. Clare to the evil Simon Legree. Ophelia returns north with Topsy, while Tom travels to Legree's plantation.

Legree is not like St. Clare. He shares none of St. Clare's kindness or humor, and treats his slaves very badly by abusing his power through beatings or sexual abuse. Legree is also not a southerner by birth, having been born in New England and relocated to the south. Tom very quickly finds himself the target of Legree's fury after he attempts to help another slave on the plantation. As he is recovering from a beating, he meets Cassy, Legree's black mistress, whose experiences on the plantation have stripped her of any belief or faith in God.

Despite his hardships, Tom does not lose faith and he encourages Cassy to hold on to hope. When Cassy asks Tom to help her murder Legree, Tom refuses, instead suggesting that Cassy and another slave, Emmeline, escape. Even though the idea is his, Tom himself refuses to leave with them, claiming that it is not within his abilities as a Christian to leave his master, no matter how abusive he is. When Legree discovers Cassy and Emmeline missing, he demands that Tom reveal where they are. Tom refuses and suffers a fatal beating. Before he dies of his wounds, however, Tom forgives Legree and the slaves who beat him. Meanwhile, Cassy and Emmeline make it to Canada and are united with Eliza and George. While Tom faces drudgery, and ultimately death, in the south, Eliza, George, and Cassy revel in their newfound freedom, taking the opportunity to educate themselves, and eventually relocate to Liberia. Topsy also heads to Africa as a missionary.

In Stowe's time, slavery was an issue of massive debate in the United States. Her novel was published just two years after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which Stowe despised. In the novel, several characters broke the Fugitive Slave law to help Eliza and George Harris because they felt that it violated their sense of morality.⁴ As a result of Stowe's political and moral beliefs, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* argued that the institution of slavery was evil, corrupting not just the slaves who fell under its miserable conditions but also the white owners who succumbed to its negative effects. This theme was prevalent in all of the slave owners within the novel. St. Clare, though a kind, gentle master, was still a master, exercising control over his slaves and doling out punishments when necessary. St. Clare's wife Marie had been raised in a household with slaves and had always been waited on hand and foot. Her exposure to slavery left her unable to connect with people. Instead, she viewed people as objects. Marie's slaves were tools for her to use as she wished, and she even

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 100-105.

thought of her husband and daughter as objects to provide her with necessary goods and social standing. The most extreme example of the corrupting effect of slavery is Simon Legree. Where other slave owners in the novel had redeeming qualities, Legree did not. Legree reveled in his power over his slaves, handing out brutal punishments to exercise his authority. The fact that Legree was from the north only serves to emphasize Stowe's argument about slavery. Southerners are not inherently bad, but slavery corrupts all those involved in it.

Stowe also argued that slavery, by counting human life as material worth, stripped slaves of their natural humanity by separating them from their families. Tom left his wife and two sons behind in Kentucky when George Shelby sold him south to pay off his debts. Eliza, when faced with the reality of separation from her son, fled northward to keep her family intact. Marie sold off her husbands' slaves to an auction house, with no regard for their relationships or kinships to one another. The blatant disregard slave owners showed for the basic human rights of their slaves further emphasized the corrupting effect of slavery.

The second major theme in Stowe's novel is the power of Christianity. A staunch Christian herself, Stowe incorporated Christianity into the plot as a means of overcoming hardship. Little Eva was the epitome of Christian love; she loved all of those around her unconditionally, including her slaves, which her father and mother both thought was strange. Eva's death, which might have otherwise been a tragic moment, was uplifted by her faith in God, and her last words, "O! love, - joy, - peace," assured the reader that Eva had passed very peacefully and without pain.⁵ Christianity was the medium through which Eva faced her own impending death with a sense of calm, allowing her to not only be at peace with her fate but to also spread her faith to her family and slaves before she died.

⁵ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 329.

Tom was a Christ-like figure throughout the novel. When Eliza and George Harris resolved to flee north to freedom, Tom remained behind, unable to slight his master George Shelby. Tom passed on other opportunities to escape from slavery, choosing instead to remain and face his fate. When faced with torture at the hands of Legree, Tom used his faith to resist betraying the location of Cassy and Emmeline, and forgave Legree for his crime against him with his last breath.⁶ While Tom's triumph through Christianity was spiritual, Topsy's was more practical. After receiving a thorough education from her guardian Ophelia, Topsy ventured to Africa as a missionary to spread the word of God. Stowe's message about slavery was very clear: it is the duty of Christians to educate freed slaves and prepare them to return to their native Africa.

Stowe's book, initially published in serial form in the *National Era* in Washington, D.C. in 1851, was so beloved by northern readers that it quickly broke records for the most copies of a novel ever published. Publishers in Washington kept three paper mills and three power presses running full time just to keep up with demand for the book.⁷ William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper in Boston, *The Liberator*, described it as a "heart-melting and thrilling work."⁸ Despite its popularity, not all northerners agreed with Stowe's politics. Pro-slavery Democrats disliked it, and certain abolitionist factions even complained that the novel championed colonization, in which former slaves would return to Africa rather than live free in America.⁹

Southern audiences denounced the novel as abolitionist propaganda. The *Daily Missouri Republican* argued "the thrilling scenes of Uncle Tom's career...bear the impress of

⁶ Ibid., 456-457.

⁷ "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Farmer's Cabinet*, April 8, 1852.

⁸ "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *The Liberator*, June 11, 1852.

⁹ "Lawis Tappam," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, June 3, 1852.

impossibility and absurdity upon their face...it is all sheer nonsense.”¹⁰ Other southerners accepted the possibility of Stowe’s scenarios, but questioned the feasibility of, or need for, change. One southern newspaper editor stated that “government, society, law, civilization itself would fall in an hour if we were to listen to the stories of the wrong or ruin that incidentally or exceptionally attend them.”¹¹ In other words, even if such atrocities befell southern slaves, it was not worth questioning the natural order of slavery.

Stowe’s assertions of Christian duty were another source of controversy. In the decades before Stowe published her novel, the American Protestant churches had undergone immense change and division. The driving force behind this schism was disagreement over slavery. In 1837 the Presbyterian Church divided into separate factions after struggling with the introduction of modernist, evangelical theology from British pastors and writers, which “pitt[ed] abolitionist-minded evangelicals against more conservative non-evangelicals.”¹² In 1844 the Baptist church split for similar reasons, followed by the Methodist Church in 1845.¹³ As this schism grew and abolition sentiment became more prevalent in Protestant churches, southerners began to produce pro-slavery literature which supported slavery in a religious context. James Smylie, a Presbyterian minister in Mississippi, wrote a widely-published sermon which asserted that the social structure described in the Bible used, and in fact encouraged, slavery.¹⁴ These sorts of literary works reaffirmed to southerners that slavery and Christian duty were compatible and symbiotic. In the 1840s, as abolition became more prevalent in northern society, northern congregations issued declarations of secession

¹⁰ “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *Daily Missouri Republican*, July 5, 1852.

¹¹ “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 21, 1852.

¹² Chris Padgett, “Evangelicals Divided: Abolition and the Plan of Union’s Demise in Ohio’s Western Reserve,” *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, Ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchel Snay, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998): 249.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁴ Randy J. Sparks, “To Rend the Body of Christ,” *Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery*, Ed. John R. McKivigan and Mitchel Snay (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998): 282-283.

from Protestant denominations. In “The Grounds of Secession from the M.E. Church,” published in 1848, just four years before Stowe’s novel, Jotham Horton, Orange Scott, and Laroy Sunderland stated that their main reason for leaving the church was that “the M.E. Church is not only a slaveholding, but a slave-defending church.”¹⁵ Religious denomination had been an important bond that created a sense of community across the Mason-Dixon Line. But political differences forced a separation between northern and southern Christians, while reinforcing the cultural and political division between the states. When *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published, its Christian narrative was deeply controversial because it further aggravated the religious tension between north and south.

In recent years, scholars have characterized Stowe’s work not only as anti-slavery, but also as a pro-capitalist. Kenneth DiMaggio states that Stowe’s novel argues that slavery should be replaced with capitalism, which was emerging in both Britain and free northern states, by comparing the flaws of slave labor to the advantages of paid labor in the north.¹⁶ Stowe’s novel therefore attacked slavery on more than one plane. It was an immoral system that benefitted from the oppression of a race, but it was also an inferior system of economics which should be replaced by the superior free market capitalism. Stowe’s commentary on the political and religious issues in American society attracted fans and critics, creating a stir across the nation where debates on slavery broke out in the streets and splashed the front pages of newspapers. Her novel made a tremendous impact on American society, and the dramatization of the novel made an equally large splash in the ante-bellum theatre.

¹⁵ Orange Scott, *The Grounds for Secession From the M.E. Church* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), 4.

¹⁶ Kenneth DiMaggio, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Global Best Seller, Anti-slave Narrative, Imperialist Agenda,” *Global Studies Journal* 7 (May 2014): 16.

The melodrama was the dominant dramatic form of theatre in the nineteenth century. Melodrama, meaning literally “music drama,” mixed together “tragedy, comedy, and opera” with “innovative theatrical machinery, elaborate set designs and lighting, as well as...pantomime.”¹⁷ The emphasis on scenery lent itself to impressive spectacle in melodramatic theatre, producing heightened action and excitement for the audience. Extremely formulaic, melodramas entertained with action and danger, and were not muddled with multi-dimensional characters, complex plotlines, or serious critiques of society or culture. Playwrights kept the hero, heroine, villain, and comic characters static and simplified, so that the audience would know who to support. Melodramas and classics, such as Shakespeare, ruled the day, and were extremely popular throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁸

Antebellum theatres typically housed stock companies -- a group of actors of varying ages and genders who could organize themselves to put on virtually any play that the manager engaged for them. Hence, the majority of performers could find steady work at a single location. This was not the case for nineteenth century stars, such as the popular actress Maggie Mitchell, who made her living traveling the country to headline shows at different theatres. Theatres hired these celebrities for short-term engagements to attract crowds; they played the leads, and the stock, or repertory, company made up the rest of the ensemble, at a lower expense for the management.¹⁹ It was at such a stock theatre company that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* began its long, successful career.

¹⁷ Dana Van Kooy and Jeffrey N. Cox, “Melodramatic Slaves,” *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 459.

¹⁸ Meer, “Uncle Tom Mania,” 107-110.

¹⁹ Thomas Bogar, *Backstage at the Lincoln Assassination: The Untold Story of the Actors and Stagehands at Ford's Theatre* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2013), 29.

The first adaptation of Stowe's novel, written by C.W. Taylor, premiered in New York City, in August, 1852, to little success. Taylor's adaptation was so far from the novel that it was barely recognizable to the audience, making it rather unpopular.²⁰ George L. Aiken's version of the drama was much truer to the novel and opened at the Museum Theatre, in Troy, New York, on September 27, 1852. Scholars have praised Aiken for his adaptation, which "handled the book so honestly and did so little to hide under melodramatic conventionalities the social issue the novel explores."²¹ He replaced much of Stowe's prose with "dramatic soliloquys" to keep the audience informed, and never wavered from exploring the immorality of slavery.²² After a long, successful run of over three hundred performances, the play moved to the National Theatre on the Bowery in New York City.²³ The transition from Troy to New York City reflected the success of the show; it meant that the manager of the National thought that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could compete with the plethora of dramas produced in New York. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* still played on the Bowery in late 1858, six years after it moved to the city.²⁴ But the drama did not just remain in New York. Cities all over the north opened their own versions in local theatres, including the National Theatre in Philadelphia which aimed to mimic the success of the production in New York.²⁵ Stock theatre companies were not the only outlet for *Uncle Tom's* success; touring theatre troupes saw the financial gains to be made, and began traveling to cities and towns with their own

²⁰ Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," 185-186.

²¹ David Grimsted, "Uncle Tom From Page to Stage: Limitations of Nineteenth Century Drama," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 3 (October 1970): 235.

²² *Ibid.*, 235-237.

²³ Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," 186.

²⁴ "Music and the Drama," *New York Herald*, November 24, 1858.

²⁵ "Uncle Tom's Cabin in a Philadelphia Theatre," *Pennsylvania Freeman*, September 22, 1853.

renditions of Uncle Tom's tale. The Marsh Troupe, a family troupe, presented their rendition in towns with no theatres. They performed at a hall in Milwaukee to great acclaim.²⁶

Uncle Tom's Cabin enjoyed such immense popularity because of its compelling characters and its religious, moral tone. What it lacked in finesse or subtlety, it made up for in abolitionist sentiment. While Stowe made an argument for colonization rather than true abolition in her work, the drama had very clear anti-slavery ideas and staunchly condemned the peculiar institution. The success of the staged production was not necessarily an indication of its quality as a play. Several factors worked in its favor. Recent political developments paved the way for its success. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which compelled northern state governments to return fugitive slaves to their owners, upset many northerners. The popularity of the novel with northern Republicans, who largely opposed the act, created an immense fan-base. Theatres filled night after night with people who wanted to see the story acted out. At the National Theatre in Pennsylvania, the audience greeted a slave-hunter character with "derision and hissing" when he stated that "he had 'law on his side.'" Those same audience members had "mobbed the abolitionists for the last twenty years," but they had become more sympathetic to abolitionist doctrine since the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act.²⁷

The novel was also very well suited for a staged adaptation. Most of the action in the play is visual or auditory. Eliza crossed the partially frozen Ohio River with her son to escape the bounty hunters chasing her. This scene is full of danger and tension, and it is extremely effective when acted out on stage. It is one thing to read about Simon Legree laying his hands on a female slave, but it is much more effective, and cringe inducing, to watch it happen on

²⁶ "City Matters. Uncle Tom's Cabin." *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 14, 1854.

²⁷ "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Philadelphia," *The Liberator*, September 23, 1853.

stage. The setting of the slave quarters became much more visceral when the audience could hear the music of the slaves and the frightening crack of a whip. Topsy's song and dance was much more engaging when it was seen and heard. The drama of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was effective partly because its abolitionist message was wrapped inside an entertaining and action-packed melodrama.

Abolitionists were another major driving force behind the success of the drama. Like the novel before it, abolitionists praised the drama and used its success to further their political agendas. William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* fiercely defended the production when it was playing at the National Theatre in New York. When the New York *Observer*, a newspaper with southern sympathies, likened the National to a brothel and the drama a sin, the *Liberator* stated that "slavery forces its victims to become prostitutes...the drama of Uncle Tom reveals this...and is in itself a lesson of moral purity." Garrison added that the *Observer*, "which advocates villainy...has the cool effrontery to pretend to be shocked by the licentiousness of the theatre."²⁸ Such contentious open debate about the drama in newspaper and journals certainly helped to fill the theatres.

Though immensely popular, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did not receive unanimous support in the north. There were factions of Democrats and southern sympathizers living above the Mason-Dixon Line that supported the institution of slavery, or at least believed that southern states had the right to choose whether or not they wanted slavery. Many of these individuals were anti-abolitionist, and a staged version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offered a public opportunity to mock or discredit abolitionist sentiments. One critic, after seeing the play, wrote that he "expected a copious flow of abolition tears" during the slave auction scene, and when none appeared he "could not account for it, unless it was because the money was going

²⁸ "Satan Transformed," *Liberator*, November 4, 1853.

into somebody else's pocket."²⁹ The critic clearly held a low opinion of abolitionists, whom he viewed as greedy hypocrites. Abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike used the play to push the issue of slavery into open debate.

Uncle Tom's Cabin also attracted large religious audiences with its staunchly Christian values and themes. However, the Christian themes also exacerbated the present divide in Protestant denominations in the United States. Stowe's Christianity was abolitionist, and her novel supported the factions that condemned slavery as a sin. For many northerners who had remained in churches with pro-slavery beliefs, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* directly attacked their denomination, beliefs, and even their standing as moral Christians. Aiken's adaptation, like Stowe's novel before it, made a statement about the role of Christianity in slavery, arguing that it was the duty of Christians to educate and convert slaves to Christianity in preparation for their freedom. Stowe particularly attacked northern Christians who tolerated slavery, or those who did not actively seek to end slavery. The character of St. Clare is especially forthcoming with his opinion: "That's you Christians all over. You'll get up a society and get some poor missionary to spend all his days among just such heathen; but let me see one of you that would take one into your house with you, and take the labor of their conversion upon yourselves."³⁰ The play clearly attacked southern Christianity, but also critiqued northern Christians who were not members of the new, anti-slavery Christian denominations by using a southern character to accuse them of hypocrisy. The play drove a wedge even further between these pro-slavery and anti-slavery religious factions.

²⁹ "Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Newark Advocate*, September 17, 1856.

³⁰ George L. Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the lowly; a domestic drama in six acts* (New York: S. French, 1920), 17.

Some Christian factions rejected the drama, not because of its content, but because it was a play. Some conservative Christians never saw the play because they could not bring themselves to enter a theatre. In Hudson, Ohio, a conference of local Sunday school teachers resulted in a resolution: “the theatre, with all its association and influence, is evil and pernicious.”³¹ This lost the drama, and its encompassing political message, what might have been a strong faction of supporters. However, with so much abolitionist support, especially in New England, and the growing popularity of abolition in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act, the play was enormously successful in northern theatres.

Southern audiences were not nearly so welcoming. While Stowe’s novel had laid the groundwork for massive prosperity for the drama in the north, it had the opposite effect in the south, curbing interest in the play before it could even be produced. The overwhelming response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was negative, but reactions varied quite a bit. As historian Thomas Chase Hagood has argued, some rejected it vehemently in “defense of ‘slavery in the abstract’...the worldview that preserved Southern slavery and its social framework.”³² Others acknowledged the cruel reality of slavery, but did not think it was realistic, claiming that such a good, upstanding Christian like Uncle Tom “could not exist in or spring out of slavery.”³³ Some southerners accepted Stowe’s version of slavery as fairly realistic, but could not see why the slaves were the victims; surely it was the planter who had to sell his slaves to pay off his debt. Mary Boykin Chesnut of South Carolina wrote, in response to reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that the true victims of slavery were white women. They had the responsibility of running the household and overseeing all of the slaves and household productions, while

³¹ “The Moral Drama,” *Ohio Observer*, June 28, 1854.

³² Thomas Chase Hagood, “‘Oh, what a slanderous book’: Reading ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ in the Antebellum South,” *Southern Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (July 2012): 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

often having to endure infidelity from their husbands, who preyed on vulnerable female slaves.³⁴ A Missouri newspaper editor expressed disgust and disbelief that Stowe's novel had dared to suggest that Africans could ever be equal, legally or otherwise, to whites.³⁵ Stowe's Christian critique, which was controversial in the north, was even more contentious in the south. It attacked southern Christianity, stating that, if true Christians could not abide slavery, then southern Christians were not Christians at all. For southern readers, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* attacked not just their society and culture, but their faith as well.

When the drama began to be produced in the north, the southern reaction was typically very hostile. Many southerners believed that northerners were judging slavery, and the South, on what they viewed as Aiken's inaccurate portrayal. Therefore managers of theatres in the South hesitated to produce *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Many believed in slavery and therefore had no interest in producing a play which so firmly condemned it. Even had the odd theatre manager supported *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the financial risk in producing such a play in the south was too high. It lacked the fan base that had been established in the north to ensure high attendance. Financial loss was not all that stood at stake; hostility towards *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was very prevalent in much of the south. When Frederick Douglass expressed his support for the novel by stating that he "could hang upon the interest of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' for hours," a Baltimore newspaper suggested he could "hang upon something much more substantial" if he cared to visit a southern state.³⁶ Similar threats of violence in regards to Stowe's novel were not uncommon, though a few productions were managed in the upper south. A production at the Atheneum Theatre in Wheeling, Virginia, now West Virginia,

³⁴ Ibid., 76-78.

³⁵ "Remarks on Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Daily Missouri Republican*, May 1, 1853.

³⁶ "Fred Douglass; Uncle Tom's Cabin; Virginia," *The Sun*, April 2, 1860.

enjoyed a successful run. These appeared in areas with few economic ties to slavery and therefore faced less resistance from the local population.³⁷

Theatre revolving around black characters was common in the ante-bellum south. Southerners frequented minstrel shows, which featured white performers in black face who portrayed slave stereotypes in comedies about slave life. These plays featured “the ‘happy’ plantation negro, the carefree, faithful, and funny slave,” where slaves were clumsy and ignorant, but grateful to their white masters for a home.³⁸ This was an image to which many southerners clung fiercely. Such plays reaffirmed the institution of slavery. Until the dramatization of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, theatre had not been an arena for debate on the subject. Suddenly, however, southerners found their way of life under attack on the stage. It seemed only proper that they should launch their defense on that same stage.

Just as Harriet Beecher Stowe began her argument with a novel, so too did many of the southern reactionaries. 1852 witnessed an answer to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the form of pro-slavery novels, most of which mimicked Stowe’s work in some way. This bastardization of the Uncle Tom character would remain prevalent throughout the South for the rest of the decade. One of the first novels to challenge Stowe was *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters*, by J. Thornton Randolph. In the preface to his novel, Randolph attempted to discredit Stowe’s account of slavery in the south, claiming that such works of literature had to rely on “strict adherence to truth,” describing “things as they *generally* exist, and not *exceptional* instances, otherwise it is worthless.”³⁹ The novel was met with some acclaim

³⁷ “The drama of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” is being played at the Atheneum in Wheeling, Virginia with great success,” *Cleveland Daily Herald*, November 27, 1856.

³⁸ Roppolo, “Uncle Tom in New Orleans: Three Lost Plays,” 217.

³⁹ J. Thornton Randolph, *The Cabin and Parlor; or, Slaves and Masters* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson, 1852), 3.

because it specifically attacked northern capitalism, likening it to the slavery of lower class white workers, and it portrayed black slaves as children who were cared for by their southern masters. It also employed another popular theme of pro-slavery fiction, the debt ridden master who is forced to choose between selling his slaves and saving his land.⁴⁰

Southerners praised Randolph's novel as the champion of pro-slavery sentiment, "a Book to equal *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."⁴¹ The *Charleston Courier* characterized it as a "most truthful description of life on a plantation," and commended Randolph for his "straightforward narration of circumstances, which though clothed in the garb of fiction, are of every day occurrence."⁴² The novel failed to impress northern readers. In the *Liberator*, Garrison accused Randolph of being "one of that class of dodgers, who endeavor to justify or extenuate one class of social evils, by the prevalence of other classes."⁴³

For southerners, the book represented a chance to rebuke the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet, the book was not adapted for the stage until 1861, almost a decade after its release. John T. Ford, the manager of several different theatres, including Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C., staged the novel in his theatre in Richmond.⁴⁴ In early February, the play made quite an impression on Richmond audiences. The *Richmond Daily Dispatch* claimed that it "did nothing more than hold the mirror up to nature," asserting that it was high time that such a play, with its pro-slavery message, was offered to the public, noting that northern sentiments had for too long been unchallenged in the American theatre.⁴⁵ But the South had

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴¹ "Still they Come to George E. French's Book and Periodical Depot," *Alexandria Gazette*, October 16, 1852.

⁴² "New Publications," *Charleston Courier*, October 16, 1852.

⁴³ "From the Saco (Mc.) Union. The Cabin and The Parlor." *The Liberator*, January 7, 1853.

⁴⁴ Thomas Bogar, "Backstage at the Lincoln Assassination," 13.

⁴⁵ "Cabin and Parlor." *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, February 5, 1861.

waited too long; shortly after the play's debut the Civil War began, which diverted southern interests away from the theatre.

There was no shortage of 'anti-Tom' material to exploit. The South had its pick of many pro-slavery novels, all of which could have been adapted for the stage to combat the wild success of Aiken's adaptation in the north. *Aunt Phillis's Cabin*, by Mary Henderson Eastman, as well as *The Planter's Northern Bride* by Caroline Lee Hentz, were both very popular 'anti-Tom' novels written by southern, female authors. One Florida newspaper extolled *The Planter's Northern Bride* as the "powerful antidote to the poison of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's heinous novel."⁴⁶ All three of these novels might have been very successful on stage, had southern theatres been willing to dramatize them. It is difficult to ascertain why southern dramatists did not exploit this wealth of material; *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had already demonstrated that a popular novel could be extremely financially successful as a staged production, provided the adaptation was decent. Southern cities certainly contained the target audience as southerners devoured 'anti-Tom' novels with almost as much relish as northerners had consumed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But, there are virtually no records of staged productions of any of these 'anti-Tom' dramas. For whatever reason, the South did not rally behind a piece of literature the way that the North had. None of the 'anti-Tom' novels were widely dramatized, nor did any of the novels come close to the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Southern dramatists instead took a different approach. Rather than attempting to emulate the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they chose to directly attack it on the stage.

The Kunkel Troupe, a very popular traveling troupe of actors, musicians, and dancers who specialized in minstrel shows and burlesques, created their own version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to perform for southern audiences. The Troupe, also known by titles such as the

⁴⁶ "The Planter's Northern Bride." *The Floridian and Journal*, June 10, 1854.

Kunkel Serenaders, or the Kunkel Nightingale Opera Troupe, worked with theatre manager John T. Ford. They were also extremely sympathetic to the South. Their performance went by many different names, including *Uncle Tom's Cabin at the North*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Freedom at the North and Service at the South*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin for the Southern Market*. The comedy portrayed the “real history of a fugitive, who weary of living *free to starve* among abolition bigots, returns voluntarily to slavery.”⁴⁷ The all-white Kunkel troupe put on black face, which was done by rubbing burnt cork into the skin, and performed a minstrel-esque comedy. They utilized Stowe's characters, but bastardized them to portray the southern ideal of slavery; slaves who were typically very happy and content with their position in life. First produced on October 24, 1853, the parody was warmly received by its Charleston audience. It was undoubtedly a relief for southerners to witness what they believed was a correct representation of slavery after constant attack on the institution from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁴⁸ The Kunkels enjoyed quite a bit of success from their parody. In the fall of 1854, they were still successfully presenting their original version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* all over the South.⁴⁹ They attracted such consistently large crowds that the *Washington Sentinel* claimed that they would soon “render the ‘burnt cork’ a permanent art” and “cast a shade upon the success of the more legitimate drama!”⁵⁰

This performance, which featured elements of minstrel show music and dance, was popular with southern audiences, but its form limited it from seriously contesting Stowe's abolitionist message. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a very serious piece, and it required a serious response. A host of southern playwrights, many of them amateurs, sought to respond to it

⁴⁷ “Uncle Tom; South; Kunkel” *Charleston Courier*, October 25, 1853.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Kunkel Troupe Presenting Entertainments,” *Washington Sentinel*, August 31, 1854.

⁵⁰ “Opera Troupe,” *Washington Sentinel*, November 29, 1854.

directly from the stage, using the typical melodramatic form. The first of these rebuttals came from a man named Hewett, whose play *Uncle Tom's Cabin as It Is; or, The Southern Uncle Tom* failed miserably. This was likely due to the fact that the play premiered a full eight months before Stowe's novel became extremely popular. Hewett, who had been reading the story in serial form in his local newspaper before it was published as a book, attempted to curb the success of the novel before it could cause much of a stir. Unfortunately, his play failed to connect with either northerners, who typically disagreed with his stance on slavery, or southerners, who were not yet familiar with the threat that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would pose to southern society.⁵¹

Another attempt to seriously challenge Stowe's work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life in the South As It Is*, by Mr. Joseph M. Field, was the first of three original plays produced in New Orleans that attempted to respond directly to Stowe. A hotbed of theatre in the South, New Orleans had four different theatres to host companies and traveling groups. The original advertisement for the play described it as a "satirical, quizzical burlesque," and Mr. Field, at that time not revealing his own name, attributed the play to a "Mrs. Harriet Screecher Blow."⁵² Southern audiences surely expected to see a farce akin to the Kunkel Troupe's parody of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but were treated to a play with a bit more depth. The audience was brought to tears at one point as Uncle Tom, shivering and unprotected from a Canadian winter, began to weep and cry out that he wanted to return to his home in the South. The play ended happily, with Uncle Tom reunited with his fellow slaves, "dancing 'Juba' and singing 'Old Jawbone.'"⁵³ This familiar image of a fugitive slave realizing how fortunate he was to be a slave in the South and returning home to embrace slavery, was prevalent among

⁵¹ Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," 189.

⁵² Roppolo, "Uncle Tom in New Orleans," 219.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 220.

southerners, who of course wished to view themselves as kind, morally upright Christians. Field's play resonated with New Orleans audiences, and it enjoyed a six night run at the Dan Rice Amphitheater.⁵⁴

The second original work produced in February, 1854 in New Orleans was *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana*, by Dr. William T. Leonard, who also edited the *Southern Ladies Book*, a popular southern journal.⁵⁵ Opening just a month after Field's play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Louisiana* ran much longer in the Dan Rice Amphitheater, with a total of twenty-three performances. Leonard's play was less realistic than Field's, and a bit more abstract, featuring characters such as Mrs. Convention Sympathy and Mrs. Harriet Bleacher Straw. Clearly his play aimed not to tell a realistic story, but to undermine Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by misrepresenting and parodying its characters. Where Field focused on the homesick, miserable state of his Uncle Tom, Leonard focused on the hypocrisy of the North: "Several Southern Negro Slaves are transplanted to the North, where they are mistreated...and become disillusioned and homesick...at the end, they reject 'freedom,' and return to the joys of a life of slavery."⁵⁶ Without the script, which has been lost to history, one can only imagine what sorts of trials these slaves went through in the North in order to make them yearn for the comfort of slavery. The Uncle Tom character ends the play with a song, whose verses reflect Leonard's idea of freedom in the north: "I traveled round de country an' felt dat I was free, For I was cold and starvin' from de elbow to de knee, But Massa has forgib me, an' I know dat all am right."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 219.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 222.

The third original play produced in New Orleans, and by far the most successful, was George Jamieson's *The Old Plantation; or, Uncle Tom as He Is*. Jamieson, an actor working in New Orleans, not only wrote the piece but starred as Uncle Tom himself.⁵⁸ The play debuted at the St. Charles Theatre in April, 1854, as a farewell benefit of Mr. Jamieson, who was soon to leave New Orleans for his native Cleveland, Ohio.⁵⁹ Yet, a week later, he was still in the city performing his play to rapturous applause; his drama, and presumably his performance in it, was so well received that his engagement at the St. Charles was extended.⁶⁰ In December of 1855 Jamieson returned to New Orleans, this time presenting his drama, along with a host of other plays, at the Pelican Theatre, to the same warm New Orleans welcome.⁶¹

Jamieson also ventured north with his play. In March of 1860, Jamieson premiered *The Old Plantation* in the Bowery, in New York City.⁶² Although it had been enthusiastically received in the south, it did not enjoy similar success in New York. This was not because the city was overwhelmingly abolitionist; that same faction who had cringed at the arrival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the theatre in 1852 was there to support Jamieson's more 'truthful' portrayal of slavery. Indeed, in June the play moved to the Winter Garden, and received a positive review: "After depicting in vigorous colors the easy, jolly life led by the slaves under a good master, the author draws the attention of the audience to the reverse of the picture, the miserable condition of the runaway negro at the North."⁶³ The fact that the play moved from the Bowery to Winter Gardens reflects its brief popularity. However, eight years had passed,

⁵⁸ Lippman, "Uncle Tom and His Poor Relations," 190.

⁵⁹ "The Old Plantation," *The Daily Picayune*, April 6, 1854.

⁶⁰ "St. Charles Theatre," *The Daily Picayune*, April 11, 1854.

⁶¹ "Pelican Theatre," *The Times-Picayune*, December 5, 1855.

⁶² "Untitled," *The New York Herald*, March 2, 1860.

⁶³ "Dramatic and Musical Matters," *The New York Herald*, June 25, 1860.

and tensions had grown between the states. The same review that praised *The Old Plantation* also stated that the subject matter was no longer appropriate for the theatre; the drama had arrived too long after Stowe's work to properly challenge it. Northern audiences wanted "amusement rather than instruction" in regards to the question of slavery.⁶⁴ Jamieson's big break in New York had come too late; his challenge of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was no longer relevant.

Another 'anti-Tom' play, *True Southern Life; or, Uncle Tom as He Is*, premiered in Washington Hall in Alexandria, Virginia, on February 12, 1855. Written and produced by Mr. J. A. Keenan, there can be little doubt as to the purpose of his play; the advertisement urged "all who wish to see the falsehoods of Mrs. Stowe exposed, and the institutions of the south sustained, to go to Washington Hall."⁶⁵ Keenan's drama was remarkably similar to Aiken's in form, containing six acts and thirty scenes, just as Aiken's did. It also starred Little Louisa Parker, a child star of the time, as Eva; she had also performed as Eva in several productions of Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁶⁶ The next week, the play moved to Washington, D.C., where it was played at the National Theatre.⁶⁷ *True Southern Life* ran for five nights at the National, but this was the highlight of its success, as it was not widely produced again.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the catalyst for these southern, pro-slavery plays, political and literary developments also shaped their arguments. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed in May of 1854, posed a question of the future of slavery in western states and raised the stakes for southerners who wanted their institution to endure. The Kansas-Nebraska Act sparked a series of events, including the formation of the Republican Party and Bleeding

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ "No Title," *Alexandria Gazette*, February 13, 1855.

⁶⁶ "No Title," *Alexandria Gazette*, February 12, 1855.

⁶⁷ "No Title," *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 17, 1855.

Kansas, a violent struggle to decide whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free or slave state. These events further deteriorated relations between the North and South, with slavery at the heart of the contention. Pro-slavery plays served as propaganda tools to advertise slavery as a superior economic system and religious institution.

These plays were also influenced by popular pro-slavery literature. Pro-slavery Christian literature, in the form of sermons and pamphlets, had been popular since the schism in American Christianity. Social literature followed in the form of George Fitzhugh's book, *Sociology for the South*, which argued that slavery was a dominant and natural form of society: "Free society is a monstrous abortion, and slavery the healthy, beautiful, and natural being which they are trying unconsciously to adopt...the slaves are governed far better than the free laborers at the North are governed. Our negroes are not only better off as to physical comfort than free laborers, but their moral condition is better."⁶⁸ Fitzhugh's book *Cannibals All!*, published in 1857, echoed these same sentiments. Pro-slavery plays reinforced this doctrine by commonly portraying happy, content slaves in the South who became disgruntled and homesick once they reached freedom in the North.⁶⁹

Not one of these southern, pro-slavery plays challenged the dominance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the American stage. Try as they might, southern dramatists were unable to produce a play in the South that could match the popularity and sustainability of Stowe's abolitionist piece in the north. With the exception of the traveling Kunkel Troupe's parody of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Jamieson's *The Old Plantation*, these anti-Tom plays were all produced locally, meaning that they were not performed in multiple cities. In contrast, several versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were produced all over the northern states, both by

⁶⁸ "No Headline," *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 27, 1857.

⁶⁹ George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1960).

touring troupes who specialized in performing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and by stock companies who added the successful play their repertoire. Nor did any of these southern rebuttals match the longevity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which could draw audiences for several months before closing or moving to a different theatre. In comparison, the southern Uncle Tom plays had rather short runs, and only one, Jamieson's *The Old Plantation*, was revived for a second run. The plays were also never published; the South's contribution to the slavery debate on the American stage can only be found in bits and pieces of advertisements, journals, and newspapers from the time, leaving behind no legacy. They were one-hit wonders, produced for local audiences to make a local statement about slavery and abolition.

Even though productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were still running very successfully in the North, Stowe's release of another novel gave rise to the second great abolitionist drama of the decade. *Dred: The Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* appeared in print in the fall of 1856, and it was an instant bestseller. *Dred's* initial sales after its release surpassed that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, selling over 68,000 copies in the first twelve days. Advertisements for the book claimed that it was even better than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁷⁰ However, the sales declined over time, and it never sold as many copies as Stowe's first novel or reached the same level of success. The book was not widely advertised in the South, nor was it widely read, as the content, based on Nat Turner's violent slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831, upset many southerners. The *Richmond Whig* described it as a "Negro romance" in which the dismal swamp "figures largely as a resort of runaway slaves and haunt of the half-crazed black prophet and denouncer..."⁷¹ Indeed, the novel's abolitionist message was rather more

⁷⁰ "No Title," *Daily Atlas*, October 16, 1856.

⁷¹ "The Dismal Swamp," *Richmond Whig*, September 8, 1857.

aggressive than Stowe's previous work, featuring slaves who, unlike Uncle Tom, took an active approach to freedom. Dred, the title character reminds the reader very little of Uncle Tom, who patiently obeyed and hoped for liberation; Dred and his posse of fugitive slaves not only disobeyed and left their masters, but armed themselves in preparation for a slave revolt.⁷² *Dred* involved much more violence than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, undoubtedly influenced by the recent violence in Kansas, which had featured armed clashes between abolitionists and supporters of slavery.

With racial tensions running high, southerners had no wish to read about, let alone dramatize, the nightmarish event of an insurrection like Nat Turner's. But, in 1856, northern playwrights and actors, having witnessed the triumph of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on stage, scrambled to adapt *Dred*, in the hopes that it would be just as successful on stage. Within weeks of the release of the novel, three different versions of the play had opened in New York City. Two of these, opening at the National Theatre and the Bowery, respectively, had relatively short runs. One reviewer, in reaction to the adaptation written by C. W. Taylor, which opened at the National, complained that it "had none of the pathos which pervades *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."⁷³ *Dred*, unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, did not lend itself to the stage. While full of action, the "few incidents capable of dramatic effect" in the book were "scattered and connected by an irregular and very weak plot."⁷⁴

Dred, as a novel, also lacked the emotionally compelling characters and high religious and moral tone that had made *Uncle Tom* so accessible to nineteenth century audiences. The most successful version of *Dred* was dramatized by H.J. Conway, who took

⁷² H.J. Conway, *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, A Drama in Four Acts* (New York: John W. Amerman, 1856), 31-32.

⁷³ "'Dred,' At the National Theater," *New York Tribune*, September 24, 1856.

⁷⁴ Conway, *Dred*, vi.

quite a few liberties with the plot of the novel. He added, altered, and cut characters from the story, created his own events, and replaced the tragic ending of the book with a happy wedding; however, he did stay true to the abolitionist message of the novel, especially the threat of the slave uprising, and its encompassing violence.⁷⁵ The *New York Tribune*, scornful of the novel but appreciative of Conway's talent as a dramatist, wrote that he could have written a much better play had he not "been bound to follow, to some slight extent, the course of the story as laid down by Mrs. Stowe."⁷⁶ Conway also adapted the plot to fit the eminent form of the time, melodrama, by adding in several comic characters, including Cipher Cute, a Yankee character who "studied *law* but practiced *justice*."⁷⁷ Conway's adaptation of *Dred* premiered at Barnum's American Museum in New York City in October of 1856, and featured General Tom Thumb as the slave Tom Tit. Standing at twenty-five inches tall, Tom Thumb was a novelty of an actor who certainly helped to draw in large crowds.⁷⁸

The play was successful, enjoying a long run in New York at Barnum's American Museum. It played eight times a week for over a month to full houses at the Boston Museum in Boston.⁷⁹ The play also debuted in England; in the fall of 1856, and four different versions appeared in four different British theatres, all of which claimed the play to be a rampant success for British audiences.⁸⁰ But, despite these early successes, *Dred* did not reach the same heights as *Uncle Tom* on the stage, as many northern dramatists had hoped it would. It was not nearly produced as many times or as widely as *Uncle Tom*, nor did it have runs that

⁷⁵ "City Items German Opera at Niblo's," *New York Tribune*, October 18, 1856.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Conway, *Dred*, 2.

⁷⁸ "City Items German Opera at Niblo's," *New York Tribune*, October 18, 1856.

⁷⁹ "No Headline," *Daily Atlas*, March 2, 1857.

⁸⁰ Hazel Waters, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Other Novel – *Dred* on the London Stage," *Race and Class*, (October-December 2011): 79.

lasted as long. Eventually, it faded from popularity even though Conway's adaptation was arguably more entertaining and better written than Aiken's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It featured a wider range of tones and emotions, leaping from comic moments with CIPHER CUTE, to romantic moments of passion between Harry, the quadroon hero of the story, and his wife Lisette, to serious scenes in which the fugitive slaves gather to avenge one of the slain brethren.

The subject matter, however, while very compelling on stage, was difficult even for northern audiences to stomach. Despite recent political events that drew in large crowds initially, Stowe's approach to *Dred* was more intellectual than her approach to her first novel. Where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dealt with the moral evils of slavery, drawing an emotional reaction from the audience, *Dred* dealt with slavery in a more practical manner, pointing out the economic and social consequences of slavery, and offering a practical solution. In the last scene of the play, a presentation was given by Edward Clayton, a slaveholder intent on freeing his slaves, in which a large sign read: "Education Leads to Present Amelioration and Ultimate Liberty."⁸¹ Throughout the play Clayton had been educating his slaves to prepare them for freedom. For northern audiences who were not abolitionists, this was a daunting and often unwelcome notion; free blacks posed a threat to the poor, white, working class, who might have to compete with them for jobs. Even for abolitionists, the idea of competing with freed slaves as educated equals was not appealing.

Stowe also emphasized the danger of slavery, pointing to slave revolts as an inevitable result of an institution that oppressed human beings. This, too, was not a particularly palatable subject for northern audiences. In spite of the increased support of abolition, and anger at the South from Bleeding Kansas, few in the North relished the idea of

⁸¹ Conway, "Dred," 48.

an armed mob intent on targeting white people in the name of revenge. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made people feel that slavery was wrong, from a religious and moral point of view, and was ended without offering any sort of answer to the problem. *Dred* solved that problem, but it did so in a way that often left its audience feeling uneasy. Despite the abolition movement, racism was very prevalent in the North, and *Dred* was perhaps a bit ahead of its time. The audience could appreciate the humor, excitement, and well developed characters of the play, but they could not accept its politics. They wanted to be emotionally invested in a story, and the intellectual, instructional approach of *Dred* failed to connect to audiences as its predecessor had.

The only abolitionist play to approach the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*. The success of *The Octoroon* is fascinating. First, it was not an adaptation of an abolitionist text. Boucicault was a playwright by trade and had written many successful plays for both American and European audiences. Secondly, although hailed in the North as an abolitionist masterpiece, the play's politics are questionable at best. *The Octoroon*, which deals extensively with slavery, features Zoe, who is one-eighth black, a slave on a Louisiana plantation. Although she is a slave, she is also the daughter of the late Judge, the master of the plantation, and has been raised as carefully as a white daughter; she is educated and very beautiful, captivating nearly every man she meets, including George Peyton, a young nephew who has inherited the plantation. The plot revolves around the love story between Zoe and Peyton, and the villain in the story, Jacob M'closky, who has bought Zoe for pleasure at a foreclosure auction of the plantation. Zoe, unable to be with the man she

loves because of her “one part black blood to seven of white,” ultimately commits suicide, and the play ends in a tragic tableau as Zoe dies in Peyton’s arms.⁸²

Audiences generally interpreted this tragic ending as a critique of slavery, and as a result it made a splash in New York, when it opened at the Winter Gardens on December 6, 1859.⁸³ The reaction to the premiere of *The Octoroon* was mixed as tensions between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists had grown even higher since the release of Stowe’s first novel in 1852. The anti-slavery faction of the city embraced *The Octoroon*. The Republican *New York Tribune* gave it a glowing review, commenting particularly on its lofty morality, as well as its impressive visual spectacle and performances.⁸⁴ Its quality as a play was not the only guarantee of its success in the north. John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, had occurred two months earlier, and Brown had been hanged only days before the show opened. Many northerners, particularly New Englanders, praised Brown for his extreme measures. The Democratic *New York Herald* mocked Republican leaders, claiming that they expected to see “the likeness of Brown placed upon the platform of republicans...and nailed to every republican flag in the commonwealth.”⁸⁵ John Brown’s raid fired up abolitionist sentiments just as *The Octoroon* opened in New York, which ensured receptive audiences and packed theatres.

However, many New Yorkers were still very sympathetic towards the South and slavery, and had grown tired of abolitionist plays; to their minds, theatre was no place for politics. The Democratic *New York Herald*, less impressed with *The Octoroon*, stated that:

⁸² “City Items,” *New York Tribune*, December 5, 1859.

⁸³ “No Headline,” *New York Tribune*, December 1, 1859.

⁸⁴ “Winter Garden. The Five Act Drama – the Octoroon,” *New York Daily Tribune*, December 7, 1859.

⁸⁵ “The Union in a Crisis Views of the People on the Momentous Question,” *New York Herald*, January 11, 1860.

“for a brief period the exhibition of the almighty nigger on the stage may attract the attention of the curious theatre-goers; but the public will soon find some other sensation; and the Winter Garden theatre will go down...and that will be the fate of all the anti-slavery theatres, if we are not very much mistaken.”

Despite this protest of yet another anti-slavery play, *The Octoroon* spread through the North just as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had. Within a month, it had opened in Boston at Howard’s Atheneum to eager crowds.⁸⁶ It then moved west, opening in theatres across the North, including cities such as Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee.⁸⁷ By July of 1860, *The Octoroon* even appeared on stage in San Francisco.⁸⁸

The Octoroon continued to play successfully throughout the Civil War as well. When fighting between the states broke out, the issue of slavery only became more contested, and abolitionists pushed anti-slavery plays to spread their message. In October, 1861, the Winter Gardens revived *The Octoroon*. When it advertised the play, the *New York Tribune* also commented that “if the theatre ever deserved to be esteemed a great apostle, it is now when its talents plead the cause of justice.”⁸⁹ Boucicault’s drama even played successfully in theatres in slaveholding regions, such as the Holliday Street Theatre in Baltimore, and Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C.⁹⁰ Although it never reached the heights of “Uncle Tom Mania,” *The Octoroon* was incredibly popular throughout the North.

The South was less accommodating. When the drama was originally produced in December 1859, southern audiences were not pleased with what they viewed as yet another abolitionist play. The *Charleston Mercury* scorned the piece; a New York correspondent who had read a synopsis of the play in an article complained that Boucicault was “about to give

⁸⁶ “No Headline,” *Boston Courier*, January 19, 1860.

⁸⁷ “The Octoroon,” *Plain Dealer*, February 28, 1860; “City Items,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, March 2, 1860; “The Academy of Music,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 18, 1860.

⁸⁸ “New Dramatic Company,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, July 19, 1860.

⁸⁹ “The ‘Octoroon’ At the Winter Garden,” *New York Tribune*, October 24, 1861.

⁹⁰ “Ford’s New Theatre,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 1, 1864.

[them] a subdued ‘nigger’ drama” featuring the “eighth part of a darkey,” although he did concede that Boucicault was an excellent playwright.⁹¹ A New Orleans correspondent likewise rejected the drama, shaming Boucicault for “pandering to the prejudices of the time, at the expense of Southern character.”⁹² The same political incident which had bolstered the play in the north, ultimately crushed its chances for success in the South. The raid at Harpers Ferry had shaken many southerners, who feared that their own slaves might revolt against them. They became increasingly hostile to abolitionist propaganda. As soon as the North had praised the piece as the next great abolitionist drama, southern theatres fiercely rejected it. In fact, his play was not produced in a Confederate State until long after the war in 1869, when it was given a lukewarm welcome at a theatre in Mobile, Alabama.⁹³

Boucicault likely never intended for his play to be used as a weapon in the nation’s greatest political debate. For one, Boucicault was not an abolitionist. Born in Ireland, he had traveled extensively, and had spent a great deal of time in the American South, where he had accepted the institution of slavery as natural and generally kind.⁹⁴ As a dramatist, he chose a topic which he knew would be controversial, and therefore, successful on the stage. While writing the play he could not have foreseen John Brown’s raid. He could not have known that his play would become an object of national debate, entering the American theatre at a peak of tension between Republicans and Democrats, northerners and southerners, abolitionists and anti-abolitionists. Boucicault never directly criticized the institution of slavery in the play. Generally, all of the slaves are very happy, willing to die for their masters, as portrayed

⁹¹ “Correspondence of the Mercury New York, December 4,” *Charleston Mercury*, December 7, 1859.

⁹² “Our New Orleans Correspondence. Effect of the Northern Union Meetings – Combination of Southern Buyers,” *New York Herald*, December 27, 1859.

⁹³ “The Octoroon,” *Mobile Register*, February 24, 1869.

⁹⁴ Degan, “How to End ‘The Octoroon,’” 174.

in a touching scene placed at a slave auction.⁹⁵ Likewise, all of the masters, save the villain, M'closky, are very kind, willingly sacrificing their money and land to care for their slaves and ensure they are not separated.

The plight of Zoe, the octoroon, is more a legal one than racial. Essentially, Zoe is white; she has been raised and educated as a white woman and, more importantly, she is treated as white by her family and neighbors. In fact, in the original production of the play at Winter Gardens, the white actress who played Zoe, Boucicault's own wife, Agnes Robertson, did not apply black-face makeup for the role; many of the subsequent productions applied this same construct, effectively eliminating Zoe's "race...on the visual register."⁹⁶ The only connection Zoe has to the other slaves on the plantation is one great-grandparent who was a slave. Her sale to M'closky and subsequent suicide is tragic because it befalls a woman who is socially white, but legally a slave. Boucicault's critique of slavery, then, is of an exceptional, highly imagined scenario, and not of slavery as a whole. He wrote his play in a very balanced way, intending for it to appeal to both northern and southern audiences, who could find aspects within the drama to support their respective politics. In the heightened political atmosphere, Boucicault's intentions went unnoticed and ignored.

Boucicault, a shrewd businessman, noticed that he was missing an opportunity to make money in southern markets, and tried desperately to remedy the situation. He appealed to southern audiences through letters, which were published in many southern newspapers. In one of these letters, in which he claimed that he was a Southern Democrat, Boucicault wrote:

“A long residency of the Southern States of America has convinced me that the delineations in “Uncle Tom's Cabin” of the conditions of the slaves, their lives and

⁹⁵ W.B. Worthen, *The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*, 6th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 1153-1154.

⁹⁶ Kooy and Cox, “Melodramatic Slaves,” 470.

feelings, were not faithful. I found the slaves, as a race, a happy, gentle, kindly treated population, and the restraints upon their liberty so slight as to be rarely perceptible.”⁹⁷

This plea to southern audiences was ineffective. Boucicault had relocated back to London in 1860 to produce his play and while he was overseas, the civil war began. Despite his claims that the play was not meant as a critique of slavery, Southern audiences wanted to be distracted and entertained at the theatre, not reminded of the political debate which had embroiled them in war, particularly with a play entitled *The Octoroon*. Boucicault’s drama, which might have appealed to Southern audiences a decade earlier, simply hit the southern market at a time when tensions were too high for it to be successful.

The decade before the Civil War was fraught with political and social discord. The question of the future of slavery drove a wedge between political, economic, and religious factions in the United States. For the first time in decades, American theatre became a vehicle for bolstering or challenging political thought. This revolution was sparked by Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which provoked pro-slavery ire and abolitionist praise. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a product of its time, written in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act and recent Christian schisms, but it also helped to shape ante-bellum political theatre. Southern pro-slavery plays, outraged by the abolitionist message of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, attacked it on stage. Pro-slavery literature, both religious and social, as well as contemporary political events shaped these southern plays just as much as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Other abolitionist plays, including *Dred* and *The Octoroon*, built off of the success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but remained relevant because of the political and social upheaval that escalated throughout the 1850s.

⁹⁷ “John Bull’s Anti-Slavery Philanthropy – Octoroon,” *Macon Telegraph*, January 8, 1862, Macon (Georgia), 1.

These plays marked an important resurgence of politically and socially relevant drama in American theatre. As plays, their legacy in history has been determined by their success with contemporary audiences. All three of the popular northern plays were widely performed and published. As a result, their scripts can be read today, and they are still produced for modern audiences. In comparison, southern pro-slavery plays were produced only locally, and their scripts were not widely published, leaving behind very little legacy. Had the South won the war, they may have become as popular as their northern counterparts. But, the political atmosphere in the wake of the Civil War did not condone the presence of these plays in southern theatres. While these southern plays may have faded from society after the Civil War, they made an important contribution to resurgence of political subject matter in American theatre.

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