

Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature

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Recommended Citation

Brokaw, David (2015) "Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.23

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/22>

Review

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Spring 2015

Pelletier, Kevin *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature*. University of Georgia Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780820339481

Rousing Compassion through the Sword

Kevin Pelletier's *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* argues that nineteenth century sentimentalists did not come to bring peace, but a sword. Pelletier posits that antebellum Americans used rhetorical threats of vengeance and drew upon apocalyptic fears in the hopes they could rouse an apathetic populace to compassionate, sentimental love. Although his insights speak broadly antebellum literature, including the works of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, his book focuses almost exclusively on American abolitionism from the late 1820s to the Civil War. Pelletier's scholarship challenges the prevailing interpretations of nineteenth century sentimentalism, particularly the notion that sentimentality served as a reaction against Calvinist theology. For instance, Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977) argued that "masculine" Calvinism, with its grim view of human beings' sinful nature and the predestined consequences, became outmoded with the rise of nineteenth century "feminine" sentimentality, which emphasized compassion for suffering victims (pp. 7-8). Pelletier's book pays particular attention to religious rhetoric and concludes that for nineteenth century American reformers, sentimental love did not necessarily cast out fear; rather, apocalyptic fear made compassionate love all the more possible (p. 19).

In a similar manner, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* does not necessarily cast aside altogether the interpretations of Ann Douglas or Elizabeth Barnes among many others scholars on the subject, but it does provide considerable nuance and depth to the rhetoric of reform and the language pervading the pages of antebellum print culture. Pelletier identifies David Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) as one of the earliest representations of apocalyptic sentimentality, with his vengeful and wrathful tone ultimately setting

up an eventual discussion of racial integration, reconciliation, and hope for equality. Walker, in this way, sets a kind of rhetorical precedent in Pelletier's mind, as his calls for violent wrath go hand-in-hand with his desire for eventual peaceful coexistence between the races in America (pp. 38-40). Moreover, Walker, along with Nat Turner's *Confessions*, positions insurrectionary violence as an anthropomorphic representation of the Almighty's wrath. Here, most clearly of all, in Turner's rhetoric and 1831 revolt, Pelletier's readers witness a divine dictum historically reimagined and personified: "Vengeance is mine, I shall repay."

From there, Pelletier offers perceptive readings of Maria Stewart, Catherine Beecher, Lydia Maria Child, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose work, according to Pelletier, represents most clearly the covalent bond of apocalyptic vengeance and sentimentality. Pelletier argues that Stowe's use of terror and love in the very fabric of her narrative structure and the fact that her work represents the "antislavery sentimental aesthetic" in its most fully realized form, makes her the clearest and most prominent representative of apocalyptic sentimentality (p. 119). Pelletier's treatment of Maria Stewart emerges as the most satisfying and effective at challenging existing scholarship on the subject. As a black woman, Stewart deftly employed apocalyptic rhetoric to challenge free black men and women who lacked sufficient compassion and courage to actively fight for the rights of their enslaved brothers and sisters. Through her public admonitions and choice of language, she challenged dominant gender roles as well as the gendered interpretation of sentimentality – hers was both wrathful and threatening in the hopes of inspiring proactive love (pp. 60-63). The last major character in Pelletier's apocalyptic cast is John Brown who serves as both the cover image of *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* as well as its culminating figure and martyr following the raid at Harper's Ferry. Brown represents the irony, contradiction, and tragedy that lies at the heart of apocalyptic sentimentality, as he proves that loving vengeance was not "the cohering agent that many hoped" but rather served to have "a profoundly destabilizing effect" (p. 157).

Among the many strengths of Pelletier's work is the keen attention he pays to the subtleties of language and labels. One of the careful distinctions he makes is between "religious" and "revolutionary" rhetoric (pp. 20-21, 38, 47). For Pelletier, all too often scholars have misapplied the term "revolutionary" to activists such as David Walker and Nat Turner, who were not so much seeking to take part in liberal political discourse, but were shunning it in favor of religious demonstrations of eternal wrath and love. While this distinction is

important, it also begs the question can language be both religious and revolutionary at the same time? Walker in particular appears to embody both strains as his desire for equality and national brotherhood seems to indicate. And while for Pelletier, the works of Walker and Turner represented an “embryonic” form of apocalyptic sentimentalism, he fails to consider how Nat Turner’s status as a slave shaped his worldview and limited his ability to express his grievances in print form. While he gives careful consideration to Stewart’s role as a woman of color, it seems further attention should be granted to Turner’s slave status and the severe limitations this imposed on his writing when compared with every other figure dealt with here. Finally, in his “Coda” at the end, Pelletier discusses the likes of Glenn Beck, James Hensen, and Cormac McCarthy as contemporary purveyors of apocalyptic sentimentality. And while this serves as a well-intentioned attempt to make his ideas more relevant to present-day readers, it seems out of place both thematically and chronologically. These minor criticisms notwithstanding, Pelletier’s study is an astute, enjoyable, and accessible addition to the vast body of scholarship on abolition and antebellum print culture, reminding us that nineteenth century sentimentalism was by no means soft.

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