Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s

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Review

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Meer, Sarah *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*. University of Georgia Press, $54.95 hardcover, $24.95 softcover ISBN 0820327360 hardcover; 0820327379 softcover

Pop Culture Icon

Interpretations of the Effect of Stowe's Novel

When Harriet Beecher Stowe visited the White House in the 1860s, President Lincoln is said to have greeted her with the words: So you are the little lady who started the great war. Today, while historians debate about exactly how much influence Stowe's 1852 novel had on the Civil War, all agree on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s huge impact on American culture from the 1850s to the present. The book sold like no other piece of fiction before it, kept printing presses running day and night, caused important people like Congressman Horace Greeley to weep so copiously that he had to disembark from a railway car, and generated heated controversy in the black community from the outset.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* also spawned a veritable Tom industry. Theatrical shows, imitative novels, oppositional novels, performance pieces, consumer goods, songs, sermons, and abiding cultural stereotypes rapidly emerged. All of this Sarah Meer aptly dubs Tom Mania, which she analyses in its various manifestations during the 1850s. Focusing in particular on the role of blackface minstrelsy in Tom Mania, Meer moves back and forth across the Atlantic to examine similarities and differences in the book's reception and effects. She explains, for example, that while Tom Shows quickly became popular in both countries, in the U.S. they usually followed Stowe's lead by denouncing both slavery and slave revolts, whereas in Britain they expressed more radical views, advocating slave revolts as well as white anti-slavery violence.

Well-conceived and highly readable, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* is superb. Meer avoids
academic jargon, her research includes many primary materials not examined before in relation to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and her transatlantic concentration yields valuable insights. Also, her decision to limit her project to the 1850s allows for unusual depth, and her discussion of minstrelsy is excellent. Many scholars have observed how 19th and early 20th century blackface minstrelsy, either directly or channeled through popular melodramas, absorbed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and delivered for popular consumption a set of racist stereotypes that distort Stowe's novel. Representations of Tom as a cringing sycophant, Topsy as a witless clown, Eliza as a juicy harlot: these have entered western culture not from the novel, many scholars argue, but from minstrel shows and 19th century melodrama renditions of it. To be sure, elements in the novel allow these exaggerations which clearly point to the serious issue of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s racism. However, the usual critical view maintains that minstrelsy and the popular stage used and abused Stowe's text.

Meer revises this critical commonplace to argue that, while minstrelsy did use and abuse the novel, Stowe also used minstrelsy--and frequently to very smart ends. *Uncle Tom Mania* lays out how Stowe adapted and manipulated blackface minstrelsy's central set-piece of comic dialogues between the end-man and the interlocutor to allow seemingly simple black characters such as Topsy to expose and critique the dominant-culture values of powerful whites such as Augustine St. Clare or Aunt Ophelia. In her close readings of exchanges between Topsy and Aunt Ophelia, for instance, Meer offers very persuasive analyses of how such scenes call into question the sanctity of 19th century white domestic ideology, long celebrated in 20th century white feminist criticism on Stowe.

Written by a University Lecturer in English at the University of Cambridge, who is also a Fellow of Selwyn College, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* introduces into the well-established and rich critical field of Stowe scholarship a fresh, important voice. Anyone interested in Stowe or in cultural and political issues leading up to and enduring well after the Civil War will find Sarah Meer's book fascinating and highly worthwhile.

*Elizabeth Ammons is Harriet H. Fay Professor of Literature at Tufts University. She is the author of books and essays on American literary realists and the editor the Norton Critical Edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin (1994), Critical Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin (1980), Approaches to Teaching Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (with Susan Belasco, 2000), and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle*
Tom's Cabin: A Casebook (*forthcoming*).