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## The Power of Playing the Fool: Subversive Use of Minstrelsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby Dick*

BY CHRISTINA FINETTI

Like today's reality television craze, the minstrel show phenomenon captured the nation during the mid-1840s and remained one of the most popular forms of entertainment throughout the nineteenth century. Although these song and dance shows were perceived by the audiences as comical, black-face minstrelsy was undoubtedly racist and perpetuated the stereotypical view of blacks as inferior to whites. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby Dick* both included minstrelsy, not simply as comic relief and certainly not to hold blacks down, but rather to elevate blacks to the respectable position that they deserved. Thus, Stowe and Melville used one of the system's tools to chisel away at the system itself. But was this daring move a successful way for the authors to present their anti-slavery views to a nineteenth century audience, the very people who considered minstrelsy entertainment? Or does the modern audience, now aware of the derogatory nature of the minstrel show, only fully understand the authors' true motives? The minstrel show was so popular during the 1800s that use of minstrelsy in anti-slavery literature was probably seen as comedy or even mistaken for support of prejudicial treatment of blacks, not the brilliant subversion that it was meant to be.

Minstrel shows were structured like variety shows. There were individual skits, dances, jokes, or musical performances with no overriding plot. White actors wore black-face makeup "which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths" (Toll 36) and spoke in heavy Southern black dialect to depict blacks as unintelligent. Groups like the Virginia Minstrels offered raucous, folksy entertainment: "Whether singing, dancing, or joking, whether in a featured role, accompanying a comrade, or just listening, their wild hollering and their bobbing, seemingly compulsive movements charged their entire performance with excitement" (Toll 36). The early minstrel shows were often ambivalent about slavery, showcasing both happy slaves and instances of cruelty. However, as tensions mounted during the 1850s, minstrel shows focused solely on positive portrayals of slavery, which "helped the Northern public to overlook the brutal aspects of slavery and to rationalize racial caste rather than face the prospect of fundamental social and political change" (Toll 66-67). Blacks were not only shown to be inferior to whites in physical appearance and mental capacity, but

were also portrayed as carefree, childish slaves who *desired* their bondage and enjoyed entertaining whites (Toll 67-73).

Minstrel shows featuring black performers instead of black-faced whites came on the scene during the mid-1850s and appealed to audiences due to their “authenticity” and focus on plantation themes (Toll 198). It would seem that free blacks could have used this opportunity to further themselves through engagement in a lucrative business and exposure of talents. However, “because many whites perceived black minstrels as simply being themselves on stage, without artifice, cultivation, or control, black minstrels’ performances greatly enhanced the credibility of minstrel images of Negroes” (Toll 202). The black performers included some anti-slavery material, but the shows mostly consisted of the same stereotypical images from the white shows, further reinforcing the view that blacks were the inferior race.

Nevertheless, black performers not only earned money and got to travel throughout the country, but they “were able to parodically reconfigure racist representations and challenge the oppressive logic on which they [the minstrel shows] were based...by distancing themselves from damaging representations through exaggeration” (Tuhkanen 18). Even though the white audiences did not see the subversion, black performers challenged the game by playing the game. Tuhkanen applies Lacan’s concept of mimicry during human development to exemplify black performance in minstrelsy. During the “mirror stage,” an infant recognizes its reflection in a mirror as an image that is separate from its own body. The subject becomes paranoid, due to the presence of a double identity, but this paranoia is necessary for entrance into the symbolic order. After this identification of the ego as “other,” the subject becomes the “social I” (Tuhkanen 21). Lacan also likens this developmental stage to a game of even and odd, where a player identifies a correspondence between himself and his opponent, alienates himself by realizing that he could make himself into the other player, then ultimately plays like an “idiot”—subversively reverting back to a clean slate. Tuhkanen believes that black minstrel show performers “put on the masks created for and by the white gaze” to “fool their audience by playing like an idiot” (23).

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Shelby’s slave Sam assumes this idiotic role. When Sam first hears about Eliza’s departure, he swears that he will find her: “It’s Sam dat’s called for in dese yer times. He’s de nigger. See if I don’t cotch her, now Mas’r’ll see what Sam can do” (Stowe 38). He is described as being concerned only for his own well-being. Andy warns Sam that Mrs. Shelby wants Eliza to escape and stresses that “it’s allers best to stand Missis’ side the fence” (Stowe 38). Stowe shows Sam contemplating this warning in a demeaning way by making him appear unintelligent and stubborn. She depicts Sam “scratch[ing] his wooly pate, which, if it did not contain very profound wisdom, still contained a great deal of a particular species much in demand among politicians” (Stowe 38). To adhere to the minstrel show’s portrayal of blacks as tricksters, Sam eventually changes his tune and engages in a mischievous plot to spook Haley’s horse. Sam lets Andy in on the fun by stating, “Yer see, Andy, if any such things should happen as that Mas’r Haley’s horse *should* begin to act contrary, and cut up, you and I jist lets

go of our’n to help him, and *we’ll help him*—Oh yes!’ And Sam and Andy laid their heads back on their shoulders, and broke into a low, immoderate laugh, snapping their fingers and flourishing their heels with exquisite delight” (Stowe 40). In appreciation of their plot, Sam and Andy burst into spontaneous dance. When Haley sits atop his horse, the perfectly placed nutshell underneath the saddle irritates the animal into a frenzy, but Sam and Andy and other black onlookers cause commotion in an effort to delay the chase: “And now ensued a miscellaneous scene of confusion. Sam and Andy ran and shouted—dogs barked here and there—and Mike, Mose, Mandy, Fanny and all the smaller specimens on the place, both male and female, raced, clapped hands, whooped, and shouted” (Stowe 41). This scene is typical of the loud, raucous dancing and singing of the minstrel shows.

Sam speaks in black Southern dialect, carries on mischievous plots, laughs and dances, and seems contented with life on the plantation (though he wants to move up to Tom’s status). These are all elements of the minstrel show, whether with black-faced whites or black performers. Superficially, this depiction of Sam would seem derogatory. However, “the abusiveness of minstrel images can under certain circumstances be turned around and mobilized for self-affirmative purposes by African Americans” (Tuhkanen 12). Sam’s manipulation of Haley’s horse and his confusing directions are much more than silly tricks. He successfully prevents Mr. Haley, a powerful white male, from gaining ground on Eliza and symbolically throws a wrench into the system of slavery as a whole. Blacks were supposed to be unintelligent and subservient, and even though Sam seems to possess these characteristics, he is really only *playing* the part of the fool, while using his true wisdom to thwart Haley’s plans. Sam is a “providential agent, self-taught orator, community protector, bragging humorist, and homespun philosopher” who creates “significant humor at the expense of white male authority” (Bense 195). The audience laughs at Sam until they realize they are actually laughing *with* Sam.

Stowe uses Sam’s self-serving antics and piety to make a case for reform. After manipulating Haley, Sam presents his exaggerated story to Aunt Chloe. He states, “And any one o’ these yer drivers that comes smelling round arter any our people, why, he’s got me in his way; I’m the feller he’s got to set in with—I’m the feller for yer all to come to, bredren—I’ll stand up for yer rights—I’ll fend ‘em to the last breath!” (Stowe 65). Andy rightly remarks that Sam had originally wanted to capture Eliza so that he could work his way up to a higher position. But Sam retorts that he always adheres to his principles: “I’d walk right up to de stake, I would, and say here I comes to shed my blood fur my principles, fur my country, fur de gen’l interests of s’ciety” (Stowe 66). Sam desires to fulfill his own interests and he legitimizes his practices through a show of piety. This is similar to the way in which slaveholders justified their possession of human property—they kept slaves to fulfill their own needs and often used religion or economic principles to uphold their practices. Sam “represents an idealized figure of slave ‘property’ who ironically represents the pseudo-values that the master culture most esteemed in itself” (Bense 203). Thus, Sam’s comically contradictory ways are

not so much a testament to the lives of slaves but to the lives of the white masters. He exposes the ugliness of slavery by assuming the characteristics of the slaveholder. Ultimately,

Stowe worked subversively within the rhetoric and culturally invented myths that held sway over slavery propaganda to convert the most egregious kind of slave stereotyping among her contemporaries into a shape-shifting, encompassing figure who would, through his words and enactments, deflate major tenets of American ideology that had made his 'creation' possible. (Bense 189)

Although *Moby Dick* was primarily considered an adventure story, Melville included much social commentary in his masterpiece. Reynolds notes “temperance, anti-slavery, socialism, anti-Catholicism, antiwar—these and other popular reforms provide a wealth of images to Melville in *Moby Dick*” (529). The reformist imagery is not obvious, because the novel is “largely devoid of political or didactic content” (Reynolds 529). Since Melville did not intend to preach his views on issues of the day, he found subtle ways to offer social criticism. He wrote much of his commentary on race relations under the guise of minstrelsy.

Scenes involving the black characters Fleece and Pip are structured like skits in a minstrel show. Fleece, the cook, is called before Stubb, who digs into the steak of a whale he had killed. Fleece comically enters the scene “shuffling and limping along...[and] with both hands folded before him, and resting his two-legged cane...[and] with both hands folded before him, and resting his two-legged cane, he bowed his arched back still further over, at the same time sideways inclining his head, so as to bring his best ear into play” (Melville 425). Stubb makes Fleece try to quiet down the voracious sharks that follow the Pequod, hungry for whale scraps. He addresses the sharks in his heavy black dialect: “Fellow-critters: I’se ordered here to say dat you must stop dat dam noise dare. You here? Stop dat dam smakcin’ ob de lip!” (Melville 426). Fleece is portrayed as a fool for speaking with sharks. Stubb prods him along and gullible Fleece continues to preach to the animals: “Your woraciousness, fellow-critters, I don’t blame ye so much for; dat is nature, and can’t be helped; but to gobern dat wicked nature, dat is de pint. You is sharks, sartin; but if you gobern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not’ing more dan de shark well goberned” (Melville 426). Fleece’s comments seem silly and juvenile, and this perception reinforces the stereotype that blacks were less intelligent than whites.

Although Melville has Fleece act like the typical minstrel performer, some of his statements, when considered on a deeper level, are quite meaningful. For example, Stubb teases him about his faith and the afterlife. Fleece looks silly pointing his metal canes toward heaven, but he is certain about his beliefs: “When dis old brack man dies...he hisself won’t go nowhere; but some bressed angel will come and fetch him” (Melville 429). Eventually, Fleece has the last word. Stubb thinks he is the dominant figure because he is white and powerful (after killing a whale and eating its male genitalia). But Fleece states “Wish, by Gor! whale eat him, ‘stead of him eat whale.

I’m bressed if he ain’t more of shark dan Massa Shark hisself” (Melville 430), which shows his contempt for Stubb. Although Fleece was made to be the fool throughout their comical exchange, he ultimately exposes Stubb’s pompous attitude and gains the upper hand.

Melville also uses elements of minstrelsy when dealing with Pip, a young black ship-hand who is branded as inferior by the other crew members. When Pip dove off Stubb’s whale-boat, he was abandoned for his cowardly action and almost drowned. Pip actually experienced the mysteries of the sea and gained true wisdom of God’s works—something that no one else could comprehend. Despite this grand knowledge, Pip is portrayed as a melodramatic fool who follows Ahab, a white, powerful male, around like a puppy. Pip grabs Ahab’s hand lovingly and states “Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this, perhaps he had ne’er been lost!” (Melville 747). Superficially, the captain is portrayed as the protector that the young black boy clings to. The minstrel shows featured “romantic and sentimentalized images of happy, contented slaves and nostalgic old Negroes looking back to the good old days on the plantation” (Toll 88). This cheery view of race relations depicted in the minstrel shows is utilized by Melville, but only subversively. Ahab does not latch onto Pip to show his superiority, but because he wants to know the mysterious things that Pip has experienced. Pip, like Fleece, has the upper hand since he possesses knowledge that Ahab desires. Thus, both black characters that are superficially portrayed as minstrel performers actually prove to be wiser than many (if not all) of the white characters. Hidden meaning lies beneath the minstrelsy: “Melville has Ahab describe all visible objects as ‘pasteboard masks’ and declare that man’s highest goal is to ‘strike through the mask.’ In this sense, the object of Ahab’s quest is the ultimate dark-reform mythic image” (Reynolds 531). Just as Ahab tries to find the true meaning behind everything, Melville sets up the minstrel show structure as a “pasteboard mask” for readers to see through.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe wanted to “light up the darkness by humorous and grotesque episodes, and the presentation of the milder and more amusing phases of slavery” (Bense 187). Similarly, in *Moby Dick*, Melville utilizes a “literary realm in which subversive reform energy and rhetoric, rather than reform message, become the literary artist’s central concern” (Reynolds 531). In bold attempts to challenge slavery, both authors strive to portray blacks as intelligent, sensible, and complex human beings, rather than childish buffoons, needy for the “comforts” of plantation life, and they used minstrelsy subversively. However, most nineteenth century readers (or even just those exposed to the novels through popular discourse) probably would not have comprehended the use of minstrelsy as a force for elevating blacks. Minstrel shows were so popular during the 1850s, when both novels were published, that one could not help but either be familiar with the content of minstrelsy or obsessed with its entertaining aspects. Some minstrel shows, especially those including songs written by Stephen Foster, were more “refined” than others, focusing on emotional or romantic scenes (Toll 37). These shows were considered too cultured, as indicated by a newspaper entitled *Spirit of the Times*: “They were too elegant and sedate in their

formal wear and their musical manner to compete with the humor of the Christys who ‘accomplish what is the legitimate object of their costume and colored faces, namely the personation of the witty Negro’” (Toll 38). Audiences enjoyed the raucous skits, dialect, and buffoonery that ordinarily characterized the minstrel show. Since people looked to the shows for a good laugh, use of the minstrel show structure in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Moby Dick* would have been perceived as comic relief.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was revered by Abolitionists and controversial to supporters of slavery. The novel was also popular among minstrel show producers searching for melodramatic material, but the story was not reproduced accurately. George L. Aiken wrote a stage version of the novel that maintained Stowe’s anti-slavery commentary, but the majority of the productions drastically altered characters, plot, and the reformist message to create pro-Southern versions (Toll 91). In many of these shows, Uncle Tom is depicted as content with his life as a slave, like in Frank Brower’s show, entitled “Happy Uncle Tom,” which portrayed Tom as “a decrepit, near-deaf old man who understood little about the world, but who was invigorated by the sound of banjo music to which he compulsively danced” (Toll 94). The other serious characters, such as George, Eliza, and Eva, were also portrayed in a lighthearted manner. If the most vehemently anti-slavery characters were depicted comically, then it is unlikely that Sam, a less fundamental character, would have been considered in a serious light. These pro-southern productions were more popular than the Aiken production (which was discontinued in 1854):

The watered-down, pro-Southern versions of the play proved more in touch with the general public’s tastes as the decade continued and opposition to slavery threatened to destroy the Union. To be sure, anti-slavery versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* ran in Boston and Philadelphia, but what happened when the play opened in Baltimore was more representative of late antebellum versions. To make production acceptable to the audience, John E. Owens, a comedian who managed the theater, adapted and softened the Aiken version. Owens ordered the parts of Legree and George and Liza Harris toned down, and he himself played Uncle Tom as a low-comedy type. ‘I’ve raked up all sorts of situations from old farces, and so on—anything to cover up the real drift of the play.’ (Toll 92)

Furthermore, many minstrel shows attacked Stowe herself for encouraging slaves to run away from plantations—“misleading” them into more difficult lives (Toll 96). These popular shows turned Stowe and her powerful novel into a comedic act.

Minstrel show producers did not seek out *Moby Dick* for material, so the novel was not as obviously publicly degraded as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. But despite Melville’s efforts at subversive reform, *Moby Dick* was largely viewed as just an adventure story:

In its most basic sense, *Moby Dick* falls in the category of Romantic Adventure, by far the most popular type of fiction published in America during the two decades immediately prior to the publication of the novel....Despite the twentieth century reputation of *Moby Dick* as a pre-modern metaphysical fiction unusual for its day, it should be noted that contemporary reviews of the novel, which were predominantly favorable, emphasized its divertingly adventurous aspects. (Reynolds 524)

Since the nineteenth century audience did not see the novel as much more than an exciting plot, they would not have viewed scenes involving Fleece or Pip as serious reflections on race relations, but simply comic relief.

It is only recently that more complex readings of the use of minstrelsy to elevate blacks have been accepted. Tuhkanen notes that minstrel theory evolved over the twentieth century, from “uncritical” views on “cultural borrowing,” to more critical views of minstrel shows as reflections of white audiences’ demands, to the most critical views of minstrelsy as highly damaging to blacks (17). Even in the twentieth century, examination of minstrelsy did not fully expose the negative aspects of the shows, nor did it show the subversive nature of black performance until quite recently. Nineteenth century audiences obviously were not exposed to these criticisms; they were primarily influenced by the racial tension of the times and the entertainment of minstrel shows.

Stowe and Melville were not wrong to use minstrelsy in their novels as a means to change the public perception of blacks. In fact, it was an effective way to reach pro-slavery audiences, since blatant criticism of the system would have been shunned. Entertainment sells—this is why Stowe and Melville incorporated the humor of minstrelsy into their serious arguments. Given the pressing circumstances of the period, it was better to access a wide audience through the use of a popular, though damaging, technique rather than to reach only a few vigorous reformists. Although their use of minstrelsy may not have been very successful at working toward their intended goals, the authors should be lauded for their bold efforts to discredit predominant stereotypes of blacks and challenge the entire system of slavery.

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