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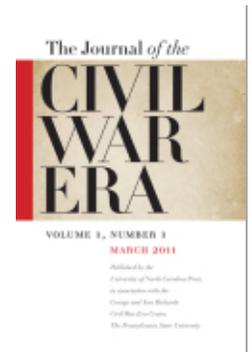
Imagining Slavery: Representations of the Peculiar
Institution on the Northern Stage, 1776–1860

Melinda Lawson

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Imagining Slavery Representations of the Peculiar Institution on the Northern Stage, 1776–1860

In October 1855, the first installment of a remarkable story about slavery appeared in *Putnam's Monthly* magazine. Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* told the tale of an American sea captain who, while sailing along the coast of Chile, stumbled on a strange ship flying no colors, its figure-head shrouded in torn muslin, drifting dangerously near land. Though harsh gales and scurvy had nearly destroyed the *San Dominick* and its occupants, as Captain Delano soon discovered, its sickened captain, Benito Cereno, was being well cared for by the African slaves the ship carried as cargo. Delano watched as "elderly, grizzled negroes . . . with a sort of stoical self-content" labored, accompanying their task "with a continuous low, monotonous chant; droning and drooling away." Six hatchet polishers appeared "stupidly intent on their work, unmindful of everything . . . except at intervals, when, with the peculiar love of Negroes of uniting industry with pastime . . . they sideways clashed their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a raw, barbarous din." And a "slumbering Negress" lay on the deck "like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her breasts was her wide awake fawn . . . rooting to get at the mark, giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the Negress." Impressed by the God-given work habits and natural good humor of the slaves, Delano was particularly struck by Captain Cereno's personal slave, Babo, whose solicitous devotion to his master gave truth to the supposition that the "negro [made] the most pleasing body servant in the world." So taken was Delano with Babo's solicitude that he offered to buy him. Babo himself spurned the offer, "with the strange vanity of a faithful slave appreciated by his master."¹

Delano's observations of slavery aboard the *San Dominick* painted a picture of simplicity and satisfaction. But as readers learned in subsequent installments, Melville's story had a twist. Even as Delano celebrated the natural servantlike qualities in the slaves he observed, something profoundly unsettling was going on aboard the stranded ship. Whispered

exchanges between slaves, furtive glances between sailors, and the increasingly inexplicable, cringing behavior of Capt. Benito Cereno created an air of unease. Perhaps, Delano mused, Benito Cereno was an imposter—a pirating adventurer with plans to attack Delano’s own ship. Maybe Cereno was crazy. Certainly the blacks on board were not involved: they, Delano noted, “were too stupid.”²

As Delano soon discovered, the truth aboard the *San Dominick* was far more sinister than anything he had imagined. Though the ship had left Valparaiso headed for Peru with 160 Africans as its cargo, the men and women found laboring and lounging about the boat were no longer cargo; they were slaves turned revolutionaries. The American captain had stumbled upon the site of a bloody slave rebellion, where nothing was as it appeared. When the muslin blew off the shrouded figurehead, it revealed the skeleton of the slaughtered slave trader; the chants and moans of the laborers—sounds Delano had attributed to the Africans’ natural tendency to rhythm—were codes enabling communication among the rebels, now masquerading as slaves. And Babo was not the trusted servant of Capt. Benito Cereno. The small, obsequious figure who hovered over the captain, attentive to his every word, was the leader of the rebellion—a leader who had outwitted the white man through a deep understanding of the stereotypes he carried.

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we cannot know how deeply Melville’s stereotypes resonated with his northern readers. Certainly Melville appears to have assumed they would. And the picture he painted of the slaves’ “unaspiring contentment,” their “limited minds” and “blind attachment” to their masters was by no means his alone. Only five years earlier, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had become a publishing sensation. In Stowe’s novel, it was the biracial characters who truly longed for freedom: Uncle Tom himself was too dutiful and devoted to leave slavery behind. Tom’s undying loyalty to his master, rooted in Christianity, had informed a comforting image of slaves well contained by the institution of slavery. In fact, in recent years, critics have argued that Melville was responding directly to Stowe’s depiction of these images. Melville’s story, they assert, was a warning to America. Its simple and comforting notions of slaves were flawed and even dangerous. This was not what slavery looked like: slavery did not so handily contain the slave.³

Was Melville right? Was this the dominant notion of slavery? What did northerners believe slavery looked like? And how might that have changed over time? We know surprisingly little about these questions. Historians have written about slavery in political culture, about the role of slavery in the history of racism, and about abolitionist campaigns to change

Americans' thinking on slavery, but in the absence of such devices as public opinion polls, little has been done to systematically explore nineteenth-century popular conceptions of slavery.⁴

Yet there is another approach to this question. After all, for the vast majority of northerners in the antebellum era, slavery as an institution could only be imagined. The men and women who opposed slavery's extension, who rushed in the early days of Civil War to support the Union or enlist in its armies, and whose thoughts constituted the public opinion that Lincoln assiduously weighed, had for the most part never been south of the Mason-Dixon line and never observed slavery. Their understandings and judgments of slavery were based on the images and stories—verbal and visual—they encountered in the North. What were the images of slavery available to northerners—images that both shaped and reflected northern public opinion?

This article is part of a larger project that addresses the question of northern popular conceptions of slavery through the examination of popular cultural productions. While the larger project explores numerous verbal and visual genres, this article focuses on images of slavery presented on the stage, in traditional theater and in minstrelsy. Nineteenth-century theater is a particularly suitable subject for the study of popular thought: theater-going did not require literacy; for much of the century, prices were low; and men and women from all walks of life—rich and poor, black and white—attended. Moreover, the interactive nature of the nineteenth-century theater experience ensured that staged dramas reflected at least some level of audience approval.

The image of slavery against which Melville railed was in full bloom during the 1850s. But as this examination reveals, the theatrical representation of slavery over time was far more complex. The “natural” slave devoted to his or her master or mistress was by no means the dominant image informing northern conceptions of slavery for much of this time; nor was it the only image governing the stage in the decade leading up to the war. More than Melville or scholars in years since have recognized, Babo had forerunners.

■ Theater got off to a slow start in America. Banned in many locales through the Revolution, it had a minor presence until the 1790s. As republican restrictions on entertainment faded, theater grew. By 1832, the *New York Courier and Enquirer* estimated that there were between thirty and forty theaters in the United States.⁵ Theaters became a microcosm of American urban society, with elites stationed in the boxes, artisans and business classes seated in the pit, and the working class—sailors, free

blacks, laborers, and even prostitutes—watching raucously from the gallery. As scholar Lawrence Levine explains, a “rich shared public culture” marked the theater of the early to mid-nineteenth century. With men and women from all walks of life filling the theaters, plays were under pressure to address all classes. Disorderly crowds shouted down actors they found inadequate or whose lines they disapproved. They threw eggs; they clamored for performers to repeat sentences. In 1832, the New York theater weekly the *Spirit of the Times* complained about the “overbearing, unreasonable disposition manifested by the gentlemen dictators of public opinion in the pit.” The participatory nature of theater meant that the public governed the stage: more than we might expect today, audiences informed content.⁶ So too did theatrical and cultural conventions. The comic servant, melodramatic heroines and villains, masking, and frontier bravado would each contribute to the staged depictions of slavery presented to northerners.

What, then, were these depictions, and how did they change over time? Between 1776 and 1865, at least thirty-nine plays and hundreds of minstrel songs depicting slavery were staged in the United States. With few exceptions, these productions used white actors in blackface to represent the enslaved. These representations spoke to numerous dimensions of slavery, among them the geography of slavery: at least for the first half of this time span, slavery was presented as an international affair. Slaves on stage labored in Africa, North Africa, Surinam, Jamaica, the Spanish West Indies, Rome, the Isle of France, and the American South. The plays speak to the work of slavery: slaves served as household servants; they chopped wood, picked cotton, hoed rice fields, and cut sugar cane. They even speak to the moral implications of slavery: almost all of the traditional stage plays depicting slavery implied—some more subtly than others—that slavery was wrong. Roughly half of the minstrel songs and skits did the same.⁷

But theater has its own exigencies. It requires an intensity of human interaction. Thus, for our purposes, the most fecund dimension of the slave experience as presented on stage is the master-slave relationship. This article focuses on that relationship, examining it in its social, political, and cultural context in two time periods: from 1776 to the early 1840s and from the mid-1840s to 1860. As we will discover, the master-slave relationship was significantly more contentious than has been previously suggested in the earlier period, which features representations of slaves as tricksters, dissenters, and even violent rebels. Slavery in these theatrical productions was presented as an arena of struggle between the master and the slave.

The 1840s witnessed both the rise of the minstrel show and the arrival of abolitionism on the national stage. In very different ways, these two phenomena, informed by developments on the national political scene, changes in racial ideology, and cultural or theatrical conventions, undermined the depiction of slaves as dangerous rebels, replacing it with an image of slaves as foolish imbeciles, on the one hand, and innocent helpless victims in need of rescue, on the other. Together, these two very different images worked to undermine the representation of slaves as duplicitous schemers or violent rebels. As Americans debated the future of their peculiar institution, their views of slavery were nurtured in their culture.

Theatrical depictions of slavery appeared as early as did American theater. In fact, the first published appearance of slavery in American drama was in 1776, when the *Fall of British Tyranny*, a propaganda piece by John Leacock, was published as a pamphlet play. While it is not known whether this play was ever performed on stage, it was widely published, with printings in Philadelphia, Boston, and Providence.⁸ The play is based on the story of Lord Dunmore's proposal to free the American slaves and employ them in the service of the British. The slaves are all too ready to comply: "Would you shoot your old master, the Colonel, if you could see him?" the British officer inquires of his new charges. "Eas, massa" replies Cudjo, one of hundreds of slaves who have run away and stand ready to wage war against their owners, "me shoot him down dead."⁹

The Fall of British Tyranny was a political play with overt propaganda motives, which was not the case for most of the plays that followed. The play was notable in another respect: it was not addressing an audience for whom slavery had to be imagined. To some extent, this was true for plays performed through the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Though the majority of northern states freed their slaves following the Revolution, Pennsylvania and New York—both homes to major centers of theater—retained the institution as the eighteenth century drew to a close. In Philadelphia, slavery died fairly quickly, but in New York City it would take much longer: while in 1790, Philadelphia counted only three hundred remaining enslaved African Americans, there were over two thousand slaves still living in New York City. In 1799, the New York legislature passed a Gradual Manumission Act, which did not end slavery until 1827 but did lead to declining numbers: by 1820 there were five hundred slaves in New York City. During these years, slavery moved from the center to the periphery of New York economic life. Slaves who had worked for artisans, retailers, and ship captains were now more likely to work as house servants to the professional and mercantile upper class, often indistinguishable to the outside world from non-enslaved servants.¹⁰

It would not have been surprising to audiences, then, to see that the majority of slaves on stage in the early era were house slaves. This phenomenon owed much to a longstanding European theatrical convention, the comic servant, a device designed to speak more to a class relationship than it did to race-based slavery. The tradition has a number of variations, one of which involves a loyal if foolish attendant, almost invariably male, whose humor lies in his confusion; another entails a witty, wisecracking servant (also a man) who shows respect to his master's face but complains of his treatment in asides to the audience.¹¹ Both images appear in early slave drama, a phenomenon that has informed scholars' assessment of stage slaves as simpletons or buffoons. One of the most oft-noted examples can be found in a popular play with a long stage life, *The Padlock*.

Written by Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaffe in 1790, *The Padlock* was performed in the United States though 1840.¹² The plot concerns a controlling old man, Diego, who locks Lenora, his much younger fiancée, inside his castle in his absence to ensure her fidelity. He orders his slave, Mungo, to keep an eye on her; but Mungo has his own agenda. He is deeply resentful of the treatment he has received at his master's hands. Standing in front of the barred windows and iron gate that hold Lenora captive, he shares his anger with the audience:

Mungo: Curse my old Massa, sending me here and dere for one something to make me tire like a mule—curse him . . . and damn him . . .

The master returns unexpectedly as Mungo is speaking, having overheard a piece of the soliloquy:

Diego: How Now?

[And Mungo dissembles:] Ah, Massa! bless your heart.

Diego: what's that you are muttering, . . . ?

Mungo: Noting, Massa; only me say you very good Massa. . . .

Concerned about the behavior of his fiancée, Diego presses Mungo for information:

Diego: . . . Now tell me, do you know of any ill going on in my house?

Mungo: Ah, Massa! a damn deal. . . . you lick me every day with your rattan . . . La, Massa, how could you have a heart to lick poor neger man, as you lick me last Thursday?

Diego: If you have not a mind I should chastise you now, hold your tongue.

Mungo: Yes, Massa, if you no lick me again.
Diego: Listen to me, I say.
Mungo: You know, Massa, me very good servant
Diego: Then you will go on?
Mungo: And ought to be use kine—
Diego: And if you utter another syllable—
Mungo: And I'm sure, Massa, you can't deny but I worky worky—I
dress a victuals, and run a errands, and wash a house, and make a
beds, and scrub a shoes, and wait a table.
Take that!—[says Diego, striking Mungo]—now will you listen to me?

Mungo is instructed to stand outside in the cold guarding a door to make certain Lenora does not sneak out. He laments his treatment to the audience, expressing both anger and awareness of his exploitation as a worker:

Dear Heart, what a terrible life I am led!
A dog has a better, that's sheltered and fed.
Night and day 'tis the same,
My pain is dere gain.
Me wish to de Lord me was dead.
Whatever's to be done,
Poor black must run:
Mungo here, Mungo dere,
Mungo everywhere.

Diego departs the castle, and Mungo, defying orders, admits a young man who is Diego's competitor for Lenora's affections into the castle. Celebrating his master's absence, he sings:

We dance and we sing,
'till we make a house ring,
And, tied to the rafters, old Massa may swing.¹³

The treatment by scholars of this play has been curious. With few exceptions, they have dismissed Mungo as a comic servant who set the tone for generations of minstrel-like portrayals of African Americans. There is some truth to this assertion: Mungo clearly has roots in the theatrical conventional comic servant, who complains of his treatment in asides to the audience. Moreover, Mungo's song, particularly the lines "Mungo Here, Mungo there, Mungo everywhere" entered the popular lexicon, over time accompanied by a frenzied, loose-limbed dance.¹⁴

But there is more going on here. Mungo has a clear sense of the ill treatment he receives at Diego's hands. He is frustrated, he is angry. He

bargains with his master for power. He is duplicitous. Mungo is a trickster engaged in a power struggle with his master, a reminder to audiences that slave owners did not really know their slaves. It would appear that audiences of the time understood this: the name “Mungo” became a term meaning “a rude black,” applied, as we will see below, to insolent and even threatening African Americans.¹⁵

A more dramatic example of duplicity and dissent is found in *Foulahts! or A Slaves Revenge*, written in 1823 by William Barrymore and produced on the stage at the Park Theatre in 1829. For audiences of *Foulahts!*, slavery was more an abstraction than it had been for early viewers of *The Padlock*. Still, even as slavery receded in northerners’ lived experience, the institution as presented on stage continued to suggest that slavery—even in the best of hands—could not contain the slave. A developing theatrical convention strengthened that presentation: *Foulahts!* was a classic expression of melodrama, which featured honorable heroines and vicious villains waging battles between good and evil. Throughout the antebellum era, melodrama would help shape plotlines and character definitions that informed depictions of slavery. It would also offer a template for the theatrical female slave, who would be found first as a model of sentimental devotion, then as a subject of the white man’s sexual predation.¹⁶

Foulahts! takes place on a “tranquil” plantation by the shore in the British West Indies. It features Ora, a devoted house servant who, when first introduced to the audience, enters carrying a basket on her head and one on her arm, then kneels at her kind master’s side to kiss his hand. It also features her brother, Cato, a field slave on the same plantation. Cato is sullen, “of gigantic stature,” and he does not share his sister’s contentment under slavery. He conspires with his fellow field hands and begins to foment a revolt. His conspiracy is discovered, and he is sold to a “fierce French planter” who chastises him for being an “unruly slave,” calls him “Mungo,” and then beats him mercilessly.¹⁷

Cato plots his revenge. Faking forbearance, he submits, throwing himself at his new master’s feet. The new master remains suspicious: “I like not this too sudden humbling.” His suspicions are quickly confirmed: within days he is slain at Cato’s hand. Cato then returns to the old plantation, where, as he informs the audience, “I with dissimulation will pursue my work of vengeance.” He beseeches Ora to betray her beloved master and mistress and conceal him in her closet. Ora consents, and her lies facilitate both the kidnapping of the family’s six-year-old son and Cato’s subsequent escape. As the play concludes, Cato is captured, but he is never subdued, calling for vengeance to the end. In *Foulahts!* slavery, even in its kindest form, has produced an angry villain committed to revenge and a heroine

torn between her love for her brother and her devotion to her master. For Ora, blood runs thickest: white masters and mistresses cannot ever truly know their slaves.¹⁸

This message was driven home in another 1829 production, Thomas Didbin's *On the Banks of the Hudson; or, the Congress Trooper*, a Revolutionary tale about a Tory family and its seemingly loyal slave, Pompey. In a bid for his freedom, Pompey reports his Loyalist family to the American Revolutionary military. He feigns fidelity to his master and mistress even as he betrays them, approaching the family in "apparent terror" to alert them as the troops he himself summoned arrive to arrest his owners. Moved by Pompey's disingenuous attempts to forewarn him, the master cries out "oh faithful Pompey! Someone has betrayed us!" He is soon disabused of his belief in the constancy of his slave, however, as Pompey testifies against him. Pompey is then set free by the British, only to be shot to death by his master's son.¹⁹

Then there were the insurrectionaries—stage slaves who illustrated vividly that slavery involved a constant battle of wits and wills between master and slave, and that slaves retained spirit enough to render that battle violent. The earliest, most prominent, and thoroughly analyzed of these plays was Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*, based on the novel by Aphra Behn. First staged in 1696, it was revived sporadically through 1830s.²⁰ It is the story of an African prince sentenced to slavery for his clandestine marriage to the King's love interest, Imoinda. Oroonoko and Imoinda, now pregnant with his child and also condemned to slavery, are sent to Surinam. There Oroonoko exhibits the honor and dignity incumbent on a royal slave: swearing loyalty to his master, he is granted a sword and saves the plantation from attacking Indians.

But then Oroonoko meets Aboan, a nascent slave mutineer. Aboan prevails upon Oroonoko to rouse the slaves to battle:

Aboan: We want but you to head our enterprise, and bid us strike.

Oroonoko: What would you do?

Aboan: Cut our oppressors' throats . . . 'tis justified by self defense and natural liberty . . . since the first moment they put on my chains, I've thought of nothing but the weight of 'em, and how to throw 'em off. . . . You do not know the heavy grievances, the toils, the labors, weary drudgeries that they impose; burdens more fit for beasts to bear, than thinking men.²¹

Oroonoko resists Aboan's entreaty until he realizes his unborn child will be raised a slave. He agrees to lead the rebellion, which fails, but not before he has killed both the Governor and the captain of the slave ship.

The play ends with the suicides of Imoinda and Oroonoko, resolved to die rather than be parted to face retribution and re-enslavement.

Oroonoko is generally read as an archetypal noble savage. A powerful prince in Africa, he cannot survive when stripped of his dignity and placed in slavery. He is too weak and too honorable to live in this world. Oroonoko believes that violent rebellion is wrong. He first resists then ultimately regrets the rebellion, which fails in part because the masses of slaves too readily surrender.²²

Yet *Oroonoko* is also a story of anger, deception, and revolution. Aboan and his co-conspirators are righteously planning to revolt against their masters before Oroonoko sets foot on the island. Having earned his owner's trust, Oroonoko betrays that trust to lead the rebellion. While the rebellion fails, surely audiences received messages not just about the tragic nobility of a former prince, but about the slaves' deep resentments, their longings for freedom, and their capacity for betrayal and violence.

In 1816, Thomas Morton's *The Slave* took up similar themes. Based on Oroonoko, *The Slave* has its protagonist, Gambia, arrive in Surinam to find a full scale slave rebellion already under way. Gambia refuses to join the rebels, but he warns his oppressors: "Europe's cold sons may sink into nerveless apathy; but Afric's fiery children know no sleep of passion—Liberty lost; love unrequited, hope extinguished!—what remains to fill this bosom but revenge, precious sweet revenge! Let your proud son of freedom tremble at the vengeance of a slave!"²³

Thus far we have examined white staged portrayals of black slavery; but not all theater owners were white. In 1821, an African American seaman, William Alexander Brown, converted the rooms above his home into a small dramatic establishment, and The African Theatre was founded.²⁴ Forced to close in 1823, during its short life it staged three plays that represented slavery. *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London* was a popular comedy about two friends whose travels through London present them with plentiful opportunities for raucous antics. It carries no mention of slavery in its script. According to the playbills and reviews of the time, however, Brown added a slave auction in Charleston, featuring the company as slaves and the sole white member of the troupe as the auctioneer. The scene was titled "Life in Limbo, Life in Love, Vango Range in Charleston, on the Slave Market." With such a title, it is hard to imagine that the play's depiction of slavery was couched in quite the same spirit of hilarity as was the rest of the play. Minimally, it is likely that at least some of the travails of separation by sale were presented to the audience of black and—seated separately in the gallery—white men and women.²⁵

A second Brown production offered audiences a by then familiar image: the slave as rebel. In 1823 the African Theatre staged John Fawcett's *Obi, or Three-Finger'd Jack*, a play that had earlier in the century enjoyed a healthy run in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.²⁶ Based on a true story, the play told the tale of an escaped Jamaican slave who lived in a cave in the mountains and terrorized the area's inhabitants with the aid of Obi, an African magic. In Fawcett's version of this event, the majority of the slaves in the Jamaican community are loyal, docile laborers, many of whom are found early in the play tilling an extensive sugar plantation and working in sugar houses. They fear Jack and look to their master for protection. But any comfort that might have offered audiences was undermined by the ferocity of Jack, played by an actor a contemporary publication described as "a terrible big ugly looking black man." Brandishing a gun and making "horrid" noises, Jack kidnaps the planter's daughter and carries her to his cave. The planter and his loyal slaves, who have been promised freedom in exchange for their assistance, stage a rescue, killing Jack in the process. While there is no record of audience reaction to Brown's production, with Denmark Vesey's conspiracy a still recent memory—the alleged plot to free the slaves and slay whites had been covered widely and at length in the New York press—it is likely that *Obi* was particularly intriguing to its audience.²⁷

Resistance and rebellion were also the focus of the African Theatre's third play concerning slavery. Brown's original production, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, was based on the 1795 Black Carib revolt. The play is not extant, so scholars can only surmise its content. But Brown advertised the play as being based on "firsthand experience" of the insurrection, in which Black Caribs joined forces with the French to throw off British control of St. Vincent. Minimally this would have been seen as an anticolonialist play, a celebration of the spirit and strength of oppressed peoples.²⁸

Nor were all stage slaves black. Robert Bird's *The Gladiator* told the legendary tale of Spartacus, the gladiator who led over a hundred thousand rural slaves in a two-year insurrection against the Roman government. *The Gladiator* focused on Roman slavery, and historians can only speculate about connections audiences may have made to their own peculiar institution. Certainly the timing was suggestive: the play opened at the Park Theatre in New York on September 26, 1831, nine months following the launching of William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist paper *The Liberator* and one month after Nat Turner and his coconspirators slaughtered fifty-eight whites in a real-life quest for freedom. (Indeed, at the time of the play's opening, Turner was still a fugitive.) Openings followed

in Philadelphia in October and in Boston that November. “We are slaves,” cried Spartacus, as he recruited men to join him in his uprising, “All of us are slaves, contesting for our own freedom . . . We do not fight for conquest, but for our liberties.” As the insurgent slaves sack Rome, Spartacus rallies them on: “Death to the Roman fiends that make their mirth out of the groans of bleeding misery! Ho, slaves, arise! It is your hour to kill! Kill, and spare not—for wrath and liberty!—Freedom for bondman—freedom and revenge!” Bird himself indicated that he saw a relationship between his characters’ cries for freedom and America’s peculiar institution: “If *The Gladiator* were produced in a slave state,” he wrote, “the managers, players, and perhaps myself in the bargain, would be rewarded with the penitentiary.” In 1846, Walt Whitman reviewed a revival, proclaiming the play “as full of abolitionism as an egg is of meat . . . running o’er with sentiments of liberty.”²⁹

What, then, are we to make of these early stage depictions of slaves as rebels? Certainly they are not the only image offered on stage. There were obsequious servants who catered contentedly to their master’s every whim; there were simpleton slaves whose antics generated hilarity. These are the characters who have led scholars to conclude that stage slaves were comics and simpletons. But those characters capture only one face of slavery on the antebellum stage. In fact, of the twenty-three traditional plays I have located that represent slavery and were produced in the United States between 1776 and 1842, sixteen present an assertive slave bargaining on some level with the master for power. Of these, thirteen raise the specter of violence on the part of the slave; of those thirteen, eleven depict slaves engaged in violent acts, five of which are slave insurrections.³⁰

What of the men who owned these slaves? Stage slave masters were rarely admirable characters. Generally speaking, the assertive slaves we have seen thus far were owned by men whose arrogance, debauchery, and lechery dramatically warranted the slaves’ resistance. This was not always the case: Oroonoko’s master recognized his royal status and entrusted him with a weapon, and the kindnesses bestowed upon the slaves in *Foulahs!* could not stem Cato’s rage. But more often than not, even plays whose casts of characters included kind masters offered unkind or abusive ones as well, a clear reminder to their nineteenth-century audiences of the arbitrary nature of the peculiar institution.³¹

This image of the stage slave in constant, potentially violent conflict with the exploitative and often abusive master—the slave whose intentions the master could never fully know—found support from contemporary scientific thinking about race. George Frederickson has argued that through the 1820s and into the 1830s racial science maintained that the differences

whites perceived in blacks were environmentally, not physiologically, rooted. Slaves were rational: they had every reason to avenge their wrongs. As Thomas Jefferson famously held, it was this expectation that prevented Americans from releasing the ears of their proverbial wolf.³²

From 1776 to 1831, as slavery died a “long death” in the North and plans to colonize the slaves to Africa or Central America reached their peak, Americans’ conceptions of slavery were informed by their cultural experiences. In cities across the North, in working-class and elite theaters, young and old, male and female, literate and illiterate audiences sat in boxes, in the pit, and in the galleries and saw an imagined master-slave relationship characterized in significant part by power struggles, deception, and an ever-present sense that things could all too quickly turn to violence.³³

In the 1830s traditional plays were joined by a new kind of theater, brought to the stage in its earliest form by Thomas Dartmouth Rice. A carpenter turned actor turned playwright, in 1830 Rice debuted as Jim Crow, a blackface character who sang witty songs and performed “a peculiar hopping, unjointed” dance. By 1832, he had performed as Jim Crow in Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. He arrived in New York late that year and performed to great acclaim. By 1838, his popularity had skyrocketed. As the *Boston Globe* averred, “The two most popular characters in the world at the present time are (Queen) Victoria and Jim Crow.”³⁴ Performing to largely working class audiences in theaters just beginning to segregate by class, Rice’s Jim Crow performances inspired a trend that would ultimately find its way to middle and upper-class theaters, in the process changing the way staged slavery was presented to Americans.³⁵

For many years, accurately noting the racial ridicule and insult that marked the minstrel shows, historians argued that minstrelsy expressed the working class’s deep-seated racism and functioned as justification for the enslavement of African Americans. More recently, a closer examination of this material has challenged these assumptions. Scholars like Eric Lott, Dale Cockrell, and W. T. Lhamon argue that when placed in its broader social and cultural context, minstrelsy is far more complex. Cockrell locates blackface minstrelsy’s roots in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cultural traditions like charivari, masking, and inversion. He argues that early minstrelsy can thus best be understood as a mocking of hierarchy and negotiation of the other in a world defined more by its class structure than by its racial lines. Lott asserts that with its audiences of working-class rowdies and themes of anomie and displacement, minstrelsy spoke as much to Jacksonian working-class struggles and anxieties as it did to racial assumptions. Lhamon places Rice’s Jim

Crow figure squarely in the tradition of the frontier, where the literary convention of “tall tales” informed a world inhabited by characters of mythic abilities.³⁶

If nineteenth-century social, cultural, and literary traditions provide a thick description of minstrelsy itself, these same conventions helped shape a minstrel stage slave who, while not a Cato or a Spartacus, nonetheless made it clear that he was a force to reckon with. Rice’s early “Jim Crow” was an escaped slave who traveled around the country, to Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore, landing in New Orleans on a flatboat. This Jim Crow whipped wildcats, wrestled with alligators, and battled hornets. He fought men too, and when he did, he turned them into “grease spots.” His pugnacity was manifest. “Get out the way you dam black nigger,” he proclaimed in an 1836 play, “There’s not a fellow in New York can beat Jim Crow.”³⁷

Crow’s dancing reflected this energy. There are few contemporary descriptions of the dance that is considered to have been the primary force behind Rice’s meteoric rise to fame. In 1881, *The New York Times* described what it claimed were the origins of the dance: Rice’s observations of a disabled stable slave with crooked knees, a “laughable limp,” and drawn up shoulders. The slave danced and sang, and, the story said, “at the end of every verse would give a little jump, and when he came down, he set his ‘heel a-rockin!’” Rice is said to have picked up the pace of the dance and found himself an instant hit. While the story may be apocryphal—Lhamon notes that Rice advertised a “comic dance” prior to the alleged encounter, and argues that “figuring out Jim Crow was a process, a practice, evolving for years over considerable territory”—the description has been useful to scholars trying to piece together the dance. It fits, they argue, with other independent observations: “a twitching up of the arm and shoulder” and “throwing . . . weight alternately upon the (heel) of one foot and the toes of the other.” Jazz authorities have described Jim Crow’s dance as a “jig and shuffle, with the jump coming from a jig, and the arm and shoulder movements from a shuffle.”³⁸

Rice’s Jim Crow was not only full of energy, he was also a trickster of the first order. In *Flight to America*, a play William Rede wrote for Rice in 1836, Crow’s old master travels North to track down his errant slave and winds up wooing Crow’s black female friend Sally. To protect Sally from his master’s unwanted attentions, Crow disguises himself as a flirtatious black heiress. The ruse is successful. “Remarkable tall,” the master muses while admiring Crow’s camouflaged figure, “but a particular fair woman, nevertheless.”³⁹ Having duped his old master, Crow and Sally escape to England.

Crow does not hide his hostility toward his master, speaking not infrequently and with glee about his death:

My ole Massa dead and gone,
A dose ob poison help him on,
De debil sang him funeral song.

And again:

Now old Massa die on de 'lebenteenth of April,
I put him in de troff what cotch de sugar maple,
I dig a deep hole fit out upon de level,
An' I do believe sure enough he's gone to de debil,
For when he live you know he light upon me so,
But now he's gone to tote de firewood way down below.

He even called on his fellow blacks to rise up against their masters. In 1832, in one of many instances where he revealed both his radical tendencies and a surprising egalitarian instinct, Crow sang:

Should dey get to fighting,
Perhaps de blacks will rise,
For deir wish for freedom,
Is shining in deir eyes . . .
And I shall concider [*sic*] it,
A bold stroke for de niggarr
. . . I'm for freedom,
An for Union altogether,
Aldough I'm a black man,
De white is call'd my broder.⁴⁰

Audiences watching Rice's characters no doubt understood that Rice did not intend to accurately reproduce an escaped slave or delineate the master-slave relationship. And as Lott points out, the "darky dialogue" that characterized such performances may have qualified the "potentially subversive" message. Rice's comic gesticulations and blackface masking may have worked to that end as well. Although it is difficult to know what audiences actually saw on stage, contemporary images suggest exaggerated features, contorted bodies, and ragged clothing were the norm.⁴¹ But the important point for our purposes is that audiences watching Crow's depiction of slaves and slavery saw nothing to suggest that the relationship between master and slave was an easy one. This was a consistent theme in the four stage plays written for Rice as Crow, and in numerous versions of the Jim Crow song. Informed by cultural conventions

of masking and the frontier, speaking to working-class audiences who shared his contempt for authority, Rice crafted a powerful image of a slave whose spirit had not been crushed by the institution he continued to rail against. Rice's stage slave, Jim Crow, was energetic, he was feisty, and he was a rebel.⁴²

Rice was not the only blackface performer of the era. Such performances proliferated during the late 1830s and early 1840s, many of them offering the same raucous images of bluster and pluck.⁴³ But sometime in the 1840s all this began to change. Three developments laid the groundwork for a new image of slavery. First, the age of the theater as microcosm came to an end, as the class segregation of entertainment that had begun earlier in the century accelerated. Increasingly theaters shaped the content of their fare to fit class-specific audiences.⁴⁴ Second, Theodore Weld's *American Slavery as It Is*, published in 1839, sold more than a hundred thousand copies, becoming the largest selling antislavery text until *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Weld's book vividly chronicled the physical and sexual abuses of slavery and marked a turning point in the way most white abolitionists approached their campaign against slavery. Henceforth, these abolitionists would place more emphasis on suffering and the martyrdom of the slaves.⁴⁵ Finally, a scientific discourse arguing separate origins emerged. The belief that the environment explained perceived racial differences—a belief that informed the notion of slaves as rational—was replaced by a school of ethnology arguing that races were distinct species. Together, these factors would inform a new generation of representations of slavery, first in the minstrel “shows” and then in the abolitionist dramas performed in traditional theaters.

In 1843, the minstrel show debuted, offering not just a handful of blackface characters singing and dancing but a full-fledged variety show including comic repartee, skits, songs, dances, and a rousing finale. If early minstrel performances had found their audiences largely among the working class, the new expanded minstrel show was designed to appeal to the better-paying audiences who patronized the middle- and upper-class theaters. As Dale Cockrell explains, minstrel singers stripped their performances of their bawdy language, tightened the content of their musical presentation, and advertised “Chaste, Pleasing, and Elegant” material to their new respectable patrons. The predominantly comic content of musical presentation gave way to increasingly sentimental performances. But the most critical aspect of this transformation occurred as the minstrels' expressions of class discontent were supplanted with increasingly racist lampooning of slaves and free blacks. By the late 1840s and early 1850s,

the depiction of slavery in the minstrel shows was strikingly different from that which Rice's Jim Crow had delivered. Slavery in these later shows had many faces, but the assertive slave sparring with his master for power with weapons or with words was rarely among them.⁴⁶

Numerous scholars have written about the tensions in depictions of slaves in minstrel shows of the 1840s and '50s. On the one hand, slaves were slapstick jokers whose enslavement appeared justified by their buffoonery. This representation appeared both in visual images of the minstrel slaves and in the jokes, songs and "stump speeches" (or addresses filled with malapropisms) they delivered.⁴⁷ Many of the minstrel slaves who did not present as simpletons were nonetheless content with their enslavement. Their songs spoke to their attachment to the land they worked and the love they felt for one another. Often, these loves grew together:

Come go with me, my lubly Diana,
To de warm climes of South Carlina;
De verdant hills and murmering rills,
To hear de owl hoot and de whippoorwill. . . .
And when I get to South Carlina,
Dar I'll see my loveley Diana
Out in de fields a hoeing corn.⁴⁸

In a marked change from early minstrelsy, minstrel show slaves loved their masters and viewed the plantation as family, so much so that when freed, they found they could not bear to leave:

Ole massa kept his word,
De time is now at hand
When we must cry, an say "Goodbye!"
An leabe Virginia's land!
Shaw! what's de use ob going
'mong strangers in de West?
We'd best stay here, whar we are near,
Wid ole massa an de rest!⁴⁹

Thus minstrel songs celebrated the warm relationships that audiences imagined slavery might nurture.

By the 1840s, however, abolitionists had succeeded in bringing the violence and suffering of slavery to northerners' attention. Stories of the travails of slavery were widespread, and, as minstrel players discovered, these stories made good theater. Thus for every slave who found good fortune in his enslavement, another found sadness. Many minstrel songs

were about separation, by death or by sale. Often, that separation spoke to the heartbreak of the slave trade:

My poor massa dead and gone—He left me wid my child alone!
Oh! What will our fate be tomorrow
At de selling mart?
. . . Oh I was sent to old Virginny
Parted from my picaninny;
Oh! What dreadful thoughts do
Sometimes flash across my brain!
I fear when sick dey'll ill treat him.
Something tells me in my heart,
Dat we'll neber meet agin.⁵⁰

Songs like this led historian Robert Toll to emphasize the antislavery nature of a significant portion of antebellum minstrelsy. Indeed, it is clear that in minstrel depictions, the master-slave relationship in the 1840s and 1850s was not entirely smooth. Minstrel slaves complained at length about the role their masters played in their misery.⁵¹

But what separates these slaves' grievances from those that came before them is the lack of retaliation, aggression, or even real assertion. In the early period, a minstrel slave could sing, "White man come to take my wife; I up and stick 'em with a big Jack knife."⁵² By the late 1840s, the master-slave relationship was far less often the site of a power struggle. There were many unhappy stage slaves in the later minstrel shows, but they were resigned to their sadness and to their slavery.

As minstrel slaves calling for resistance and revolution gave way to those who accepted their poignant fate, images in the traditional theater evolved as well. Around mid-century, a new generation of plays calling for an end to slavery emerged. Since the early 1830s, the abolitionists had been agitating against slavery, telling their audiences that slavery was a sin against God. In the 1840s, with Weld's work as a template, increasingly abolitionist tracts sought to cultivate sympathy and a sense of charitable responsibility for physically, sexually, and emotionally abused slaves. And both the recognition of sin and a sympathetic responsibility were more readily elicited if slavery produced suffering victims whose status as such was not clouded by belligerence or bloodshed. As melodramas continued to rule the stage, abolitionist dramas replaced images of struggles for power with portraits of pathos, changing the way slavery was represented in the nation's theaters.⁵³

In 1845, the first of these plays, Sophia Little's *The Branded Hand* was published, introducing the themes that would come to define the

abolitionist drama. It was based on the true story of Jonathan Walker, a sea captain who in 1844 was approached by seven men entreating him to assist in their escape from slavery. Walker consented, but in the course of the journey to Barbados the ship was overtaken, the slaves recaptured, and Walker arrested. He was sentenced to an unusual form of punishment: his right hand was branded with the letters “S.S.,” for “slave stealer.”⁵⁴

Less than a year later, Little published a dramatic account of this event. Numerous abolitionist themes suffuse Little’s fictionalized version. Planters “loll” on sofas in a “richly furnished” parlor while they arrange to sell children from their mothers. Churches are complicit in slavery; the North reaps the profits. These themes—the debauchery of the South, the tearing apart of families, religious hypocrisy, and economic profit—would increasingly appear in theatrical productions depicting slavery.⁵⁵

It was Little’s depiction of the master-slave relationship, however, that unveiled the new abolitionist stage slave persona: the slave as passive, suffering victim in need of rescue. The play opens with two hired slaves bemoaning their bondage but sharing their hope of liberty at the hands of Philander, their current employer. To Philander they owe much:

’Twas this Philander taught my heart the way,
When in the midst of sin and guilt I lay;
’Twas near this very grove with me he knelt,
Until the bursting of my bonds I felt,
And the dear blood of Christ came flowing in.

Having taught them Christianity, now Philander seeks to free the slaves, “who look to me for freedom.” The play’s focus is on Philander’s conversations with God as he reconciles himself to his fate should he fail. Once in prison, he sees visions of a crown offered to him by God; following his branding, he receives the crown.⁵⁶

The disparity between the real and the fictionalized accounts of this interaction is revealing. Walker’s own memoir states that the slaves approached him for assistance in their escape. Forced to contemplate his antislavery feeling, Walker concluded (though not for the first time) that slavery was evil and that assisting the slaves would be consistent with God’s law. In Little’s play, the slaves live in darkness and sin until the captain converts them to Christianity, and it is the captain who then initiates and engineers the escape. The slaves have no agency in their fate.⁵⁷

A second disparity is also revealing of this new powerless slave persona. Little introduced a storyline concerning the relationship between a master and his female slave. Here in the role of virtuous heroine is Ellenore, who is whipped for resisting her master’s predatory advances.

As Ellenore's mother labors in the field, she hears her daughter's shrieks and rushes to the house to plead with the master on her daughter's behalf: "For God's dear love, kill not my poor child! Remember how I nursed you on this breast." Failing to subdue the master, she advises her daughter that death is preferable to surrendering her virtue. "Never yield," she implores, "Death is the most they can inflict upon thee. Remember, Oh remember . . . Never to sin." "Just God," Ellenore cries, "Why am I thus all bruised and mangled? Only because I love my God and virtue."⁵⁸ In abolitionist dramas, depictions of resistance in the master-slave relationship assumed a new form. No longer did resentful or angry men bargain for power or fight back; it was the women who struggled to protect their virtue and/or their families. That Ellenore must choose between rape and death speaks to the limits of her power within that struggle.

Little's image of slaves as victims in need of rescuing by white activists received an enormous boost in 1852, when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* burst on the theater scene. Inspired by the Fugitive Slave Act, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was brought to the stage even as the story was in serialization. Of the numerous versions produced, George Aiken's and Henry J. Conway's were by far the most successful. Aiken's adaptation debuted in September 1852 in Troy, New York, and ran one hundred nights before opening in New York City the following year. Conway's version opened in November 1852 and was also quite popular. This version was widely recognized as having a proslavery bent; Aiken's remained truer to Stowe's abolitionist intent. Aiken's is the only fully extant version.⁵⁹

Like the book, Aiken's play contrasted the black characters' Christian faith and loyalty or minstrel-like simplicity with the biracial characters' questioning intellect and penchant for freedom. Carefully crafted characters in both novel and play offered white Americans reassuring images of blacks as devout and devoted servants or harmless simpletons, both suffering the abuses of the peculiar institution.

But theater is visual; it is aural; it is social. It compresses messages and emotions and presents them to the audience with immediacy. Although both novel and play rely heavily on scenes of abuse (Stowe claims she drew on Weld's *American Slavery as It Is* to write her book), in the play the violence of slavery and the suffering of its victims became spectacle. Tom was whipped on stage until he died, prompting a viewer to write years later about the scene that sent audience members out of the theater in tears: "the poor old Negro, his shirt stained with blood from his lacerated back, crawling across the stage and dying in slow torture." As melodrama, the play lent itself to dramatic tableaux: a production at the Bowery Theatre advertised nine such tableaux, among them "Eliza's Peril on Ice" and "The

Realm of the Bliss.” The latter featured Eva in heaven, “amid clouds and a halo of glory, welcomed by angelic choirs, and accompanied by Uncle Tom and St. Clare.” Both Aiken’s version and Conway’s adaptation included large musical numbers, many of which arrived direct from the minstrel stage. Stephen Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home” and “The Old Folks at Home,” both of which are sentimental songs about attachment to and longing for southern plantation life, were among the songs featured in the productions. In both productions, Topsy, Harry, and a number of other characters sang and danced on command.⁶⁰

In the staged *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the abolitionist drama met the minstrel show. Here, the rebel slaves of an earlier era were nowhere to be found. The play offered depictions of slaves separated from their families, suffering under the lash, dancing breakdowns, and singing plantation melodies. The play—and the images of hapless, passive slaves it so crisply defined—dominated the stage for the next decade.

The themes presented in Little’s and Aiken’s plays informed subsequent dramatic productions. In May 1857, *Neighbor Jackwood* opened in New York at Barnum’s American Museum and became, as the *New York Daily Tribune* testified, “one of the most successful dramas ever produced at this theatre.” It was equally popular in Boston, where it enjoyed an eight-year run. Much like Little’s play, it featured a biracial female slave who resists the advances of her master in terms that speak to the power of the convention of melodrama: “Come a thousand evils, come slavery; come death! I can die, but I cannot sin!”⁶¹

Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* debuted in New York at the Winter Garden on December 5, 1859, three days after the execution of John Brown. The show, which the *New York Times* called “the great dramatic sensation of the season,” went on to play in cities across the North. While it carries many of the themes of the classic abolitionist drama, it has a twist that excited intrigue and controversy among northerners. The play tells the story of Zoe, an octoroon whose father is master of a large, romanticized plantation peopled by doting whites and obsequious slaves. Zoe is in love with the master’s nephew George, who returns her love and hopes to marry her. But the plantation falls on hard times, and soon it appears that a scheming visiting Yankee will buy Zoe and have his way with her. In a replay of Ellenore’s dilemma in *The Branded Hand*, Zoe overhears a distraught George saying that he’d rather she die than lose her virtue to the Yankee. As the play ends, Zoe drinks poison and dies, her love for George on her lips.⁶²

The villainous representation of the Yankee in *The Octoroon* surprised northerners, who were unsure how to interpret the play. Northerners with

southern loyalties read its generous portrayal of slavery as a celebration of the southern lifestyle and a warning against northern Yankee lechery. Antislavery northerners embraced its clear message about the precarious nature of the slave economy and the failure of slavery to protect female virtue. But proslavery or antislavery, the play's depiction of slaves and the master-slave relationship was clear. There were no angry male slaves pushing back against incursions on their freedoms; there were no slave rebellions. The *New York Times* emphasized this point in its review of the play: "Its negroes are negroes and nothing more—with the least imaginable likeness to Toussaint L'Overture or Dominick [*sic*] Vesey." If slavery posed a threat, it was not because it failed to contain the energies of those it held captive but because it could not protect female virtue and family integrity. With the sole exception of Zoe, who dies rather than face abuse at the hands of the man who will be her master, slaves in *The Octoroon* are passive; and all, including Zoe, are victims in need of rescue.⁶³

Among the twelve plays depicting slavery that were published in 1843 or later, only two harkened back to the earlier stage depiction of a slave rebel. One was *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, a play based on Stowe's second antislavery novel and adapted for the stage by Henry J. Conway. Inspired by Nat Turner, *Dred* is the story of an escaped slave who hides out advocating violent retribution for the abuse he has received at the hands of his drunken owner. He could, according to a character in the play, "find you half a dozen warrants in Scripture for cutting the same number of white people's throats." *Dred* was a dismal failure on the stage, lasting only weeks and criticized in the press before it closed.⁶⁴

The other exception was the first known play ever written and published by a black man. In 1858, William Wells Brown published *The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom*. Brown was a Kentucky slave who ran away to Boston and became a prolific writer. *The Escape* was designed not to be staged by actors, but rather for platform reading by Brown himself, who toured the North performing the drama. *The Escape* contains almost every abolitionist theme available at the time, including the abuse and victimization of defenseless slaves. But its protagonist, Glen, harks back to an earlier generation of stage slaves. Having escaped only to be faced with U.S. Marshals intent on kidnapping him back into slavery, Glen cries, "Let them come; I am ready for them. He that lays hands on me or my wife shall feel the weight of this club." Glen violently attacks his captor and escapes with his bride.⁶⁵ Brown was at one point asked to stop performing the play, as his powerful voice and dramatic style led some viewers to complain the reading frightened them. He continued his performances.⁶⁶

The transformation of the stage slave from rebel to victim was remarkable. Even *Ossawatamie Brown*, which told the tale of John Brown at Harpers Ferry, afforded no agency to the slaves. Though the short-lived 1859 play had as its real life inspiration a violent, bloody rebellion, the play itself focused on discussions within Brown's white household and the sacrifices made by Brown and his sons, who lament their failed commitment to nonviolence.⁶⁷

By 1855, when *Benito Cereno* revealed Melville's alarm at northern impressions of slavery, Delano's image of Babo the "natural" slave was dominant on the American stage. But we should not read that image back in time. Prior to the 1840s, northern impressions of slavery were more complex. Shaped by dramatic conventions and the demands of an interactive theater culture, staged depictions of slavery presented a slave who struggled for power within the institution and fought violently at times to escape it. Periodic slave conspiracies or revolts—Gabriel's in 1800, Denmark Vesey's in 1822, and Nat Turner's in 1831—no doubt bolstered this image. In turn, it is likely that the notion of angry, resentful slaves worked to sustain a conviction that colonization was the cure for the nation's racial woes.

In the 1840s and 1850s, slavery moved squarely onto the nation's political agenda, and northerners were forced to confront the future of the slaves themselves. During these same years, as minstrel shows responded to the shifting demands of their newly middle-class audience and abolitionist dramas tapped Weld's chronicles of abuse, images of pathos replaced those of power in staged depictions of slavery. Northerners imagining emancipation found fewer staged depictions of angry or even resentful blacks to shape those imaginings.

The shifting image of the slave and the implications for northern conceptions of slavery and emancipation are aptly illustrated in two versions of *Paul and Virginia*, a play originally written in 1801 by James Cobb. In this play, a slave who has witnessed the abuse of his sister by the overseer physically attacks the overseer and then flees the plantation. In the end he is returned to slavery, but has struck a bargain with his owner, who agrees to fire the overseer. In 1864, *Paul and Virginia* was revived. But this version, written by Jessie Ringwalt, told a slightly different story. The runaway slave leaves the plantation because he has been sold away from his family. "Alas! let me die!" he moans. "My children, I must lose you! pardon me master, pardon poor Zabi. If you have sold me with my children, I will obey—but alone! Without them, Zabi's heart will break." In the end, this slave, a benign, unthreatening version of the 1802 runaway, is set free.⁶⁸

NOTES

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1. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *Selected Tales and Poems by Herman Melville*, ed. Richard Chase (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 7–8, 19, 10, 33.

2. *Ibid.*, 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 49. For many years, critics interpreted the story as being about themes having nothing to do with American slavery or race. One critic wrote that Captain Cereno represented Melville, and Babo represented a critic who had savaged Melville's novel *Pierre*. Richard Chase, a prominent literary critic of the 1950s, argued that the story was about evil. Most scholars now agree that Melville was grappling with slavery, the institution that defined his era. See Chase, introduction to *Selected Tales*, v–vii; John Schaar, "The Uses of Literature for the Study of Politics," in *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1981); Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983); Ezra Tawil, *The Making of Racial Sentiment: Slavery and the Birth of the Frontier Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John D. Cloy, "Fatal Underestimation: Sue's Atar Gull and Melville's 'Benito Cereno,'" *Studies in Short Fiction* (Summer 1998): 241–49; and Katherine Adams, "Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Lee Hertz, Herman Melville, and American Racial Exceptionalism," in *A Companion to American Fiction 1780–1865*, ed. Shirley Samuels (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 365–77.

4. See, for example, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) and *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Norton, 1978); George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionism and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: New Press, 2006). William Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) is a broad survey of the subject, covering 1619 to 1980, and thus its focus on the period under review is limited. Van Deburg reaches very different conclusions concerning images of slavery in theater.

5. Bruce McConachie, "American Theatre in Context: From the Beginnings to 1870," in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, vol. 1, ed. by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126–33; Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.

6. Lawrence Levine, *High Brow/Low Brow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 1–29; Bruce A. McConachie, “Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History,” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, ed. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 35–58; McConachie, “American Theatre in Context,” 126–33; *Spirit of the Times*, February 18, 1832.

7. The figure of thirty-nine plays is not intended to be exhaustive. These are the plays I have located using secondary sources, databases, edited collections of plays, and theater annals. While many more plays depict African Americans on stage, this study is limited to productions that depict slaves. Minstrel songs were located in edited collections and archives. For a discussion of the antislavery nature of minstrel songs, see Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 65–103.

8. Norman Philbrick, *Trumpets Sounding: Propaganda Plays of the American Revolution* (New York: Arno, 1972), 41–42. As Philbrick explains, we do not know who John Leacock was. It is difficult to determine with certainty when and where plays were produced. Limited theater annals exist for two major northern centers of theater: George C. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 7 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927–49); and Arthur Herman Wilson, *A History of the Philadelphia Theatre, 1835–1855* (New York: Glenwood, 1968).

9. John Leacock, *The Fall of British Tyranny*, in Philbrick, *Trumpets Sounding*, 112. As the colonists were wont to do, the play freely juxtaposes images of white liberty and black slavery without irony. “Oh Liberty! Thou sunshine of the heart!” a patriot general proclaims, “Without thy aid, no human hope could grow!” 131.

10. Gary Nash and Jean Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Nash and Soderland write: “Of the states south of New England, slavery died first in Pennsylvania and it died there the fastest,” xv. Patrick Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery,” in *Slavery in New York*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie M. Harris (New York: New Press, 2005), 111–46, esp. 126; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 26–46.

11. Martin Banham, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 737; Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, *A History of Russian Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77; Alison Scott Prelorentzos, *The Servant in German Enlightenment Comedy* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1982), xi–xv, 1, 28, 38.

12. Odell, *Annals*, 4:507.

13. Isaac Bickerstaffe, *The Padlock*, in *A Collection of Farces and Other Afterpieces*, ed. Mrs. Inchbald (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), 183–84, 192.

14. See, for example, Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1790–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University

Press, 1955), 63; Van Deburg, *Slavery and Race*, 18; Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 19–20; W. T. Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 34–35. Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representations of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29, situates Mungo primarily as a comic servant but recognizes that in comparison with his comic successors, he “portrays a vigor in the way he protests his lot.” For alternative views of Mungo, see Julie A. Carlson, “New Lows in Eighteenth-Century Theater: The Rise of Mungo,” *European Romantic Review* 18. (April 2007): 139–47 and Heather S. Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

15. Carlson, “New Lows,” 139–47.

16. William Barrymore, *Foulahs! Or a Slave’s Revenge*, 1823, in *Frank Pettingell Collection of Plays in the Library of the University of Kent at Canterbury* (Sussex, England: Harvester, 1985), no page numbers; Martha Vicinus, “Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama,” in *When They Weren’t Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre*, ed. Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 174–86.

17. Barrymore, *Foulahs!*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Thomas Dibdin, *The Banks of the Hudson; or, the Congress Trooper; a Transatlantic Romance in Three Acts* (London: John Cumberland, 1829.) For the U.S. performance of this play, see Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage*, 222. Nathans’s interest in Pompey lies in his use of alcohol, as she discusses this play in the context of the role of the temperance movement in depictions of African Americans.

20. Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko. A Tragedy* (London: Chiswick Press, 1815) Southerne’s work was originally published in 1696, but whenever possible, I obtained editions dated closer to the period under study. *Oroonoko* ran in New York through 1832. (See Odell, *Annals*, 4: 633.) See also Thomas Morton, *The Slave* (1816) in Jeffrey Cox, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period Drama*, vol. 5 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999); Elizabeth Stryker Ricord, *Zamba, or the Insurrection* (Cambridge, Mass: John Owen, 1842); Robert Montgomery Bird, *The Gladiator*, in *Dramas from the American Theatre*, ed. Richard Moody (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969).

21. Southerne, *Oroonoko*, 39–41.

22. Moody, *America Takes the Stage*, 62; Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart, introduction to Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko*, ed. Novak and Stuart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), xxxvi.

23. Morton, *The Slave*, 326. *The Slave* was reviewed favorably in the *Spirit of the Times* on February 18, 1832. In 1839, another play featuring a slave revolt debuted: *The Black Schooner* opened at the Bowery Theatre in New York. The play told the story of the Amistad revolt and is reported to have raised \$5,000 for the defense.

See James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 245.

24. Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24. There were ten thousand free blacks in New York City in 1820.

25. Odell, *Annals*, 3:70; Marvin McAllister, *White People Do Not Know How to Behave at Entertainments Designed for Ladies and Gentlemen of Colour: William Brown's African and American Theater* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 118–22; Playbill, Theatre in Mercer Street, in the Harvard Theatre Collection, reproduced in George A. Thompson Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 131.

26. *Obi* opened at the Park Theatre in New York on May 27, 1801, and was subsequently staged in Philadelphia and Boston. For an account of these early performances of Fawcett's play, see Peter P. Reed, *Rogue Performances: Staging the Underclass in Early American Theatre Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 101–26.

27. John Fawcett, *Obi; or Three-Finger'd Jack*, in Cox, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Emancipation*, 5:203–19. McAllister, *White People*, 122–28; Odell, *Annals*, 3:70. It is difficult to determine audience reaction to the content of plays, as many reviews focus more on evaluations of actors.

28. Hill and Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre*, 32–36; Odell, *Annals*, 3:70–71; McAllister, *White People*, 95–101.

29. Richard Moody, ed., *Dramas from the American Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 229–40; *Spirit of the Times*, April 14, 1832; Robert Bird Montgomery, *The Gladiator*, in Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre*, 256, 254; Bird, cited in Curtis Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: Twayne, 1963), 59; Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Eagle*, Dec 26, 1846, in *The American Theatre as Seen by Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1934), 69–70. Bird was not an abolitionist; at the time he was writing *The Gladiator*, he observed that some “six to eight hundred rebelling slaves under Nat Turner are murdering, ravishing, and burning in Virginia. . . . If they had a Spartacus among them to organize the half million of Virginia, the hundred of thousand of the other states, and lead them in the Crusade of Massacre, what a blessed example they might not give to the world of the excellence of slavery!” Bird, cited in Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre*, 239–40. For discussions of *The Gladiator* in the context of African American slavery, see Moody, *Dramas from the American Theatre*, 239–40; Jeffrey H. Richards, *Early American Drama* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 167–69; Tice L. Miller, *Entertaining the Nation: American Drama in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 70–72; and Reed, *Rogue Performances*, 152–53.

30. In fact, many of the plays featuring slaves who themselves modeled obedience and counseled submission featured other slaves failing to learn that lesson.

31. See, for example, Susanna Haswell Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), in *Major Voices: The Drama of Slavery*, ed. Eric Gardner (New Milford, Conn.: Toby

Press, 2005), 15–64; James Cobb, *Paul and Virginia: A Musical Drama in Two Acts* (Dublin: Thomas Bunsie, 1801); Morton, *Slave*; and Anonymous, *The Kidnapped Clergyman: or, Experience, the Best Teacher* (1839), in Gardner, *Major Voices*, 75–107. Some plays featuring accommodating slaves also showed masters who were deeply flawed: see for example, Frederick Reynolds, *Laugh When You Can: A Comedy in Five Acts* (Boston: Oliver C. Greenleaf, 1809) and A. B. Lindsley, *Love and Friendship; or Yankee Notions: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: D. Longworth, 1809).

32. Frederickson, *White Image*, 1–70.

33. Rael, “The Long Death of Slavery.”

34. Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 62–66; *Boston Post*, July 26, 1838, cited in Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 66. The South was far less fond of Jim Crow: a Richmond newspaper complained at length about him, as described in New York’s theater paper, the *Spirit of the Times*, December 2, 1837.

35. For the process of the separation of class in theaters in New York City, see Mary C. Henderson, *The City and the Theatre: A History of New York Playhouses* (New York: Backstage, 2004), 36–78. For further discussions of the class makeup of theater audiences and the nature and extent of the changes in theater culture, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 144–46, and Rosemarie Bank, *Theater Culture in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48–50, 111–19.

36. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*; Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*. Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931), 90–95, places minstrelsy in the tradition of tall tales as well.

37. William Leman Rede, *Flight to America*, in Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 233.

38. *New York Times*, June 5, 1881, cited in Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Schirmer, 1968), 40–42; W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 195.

39. Rede, *Flight to America*, 257.

40. “Settin on a Rail, or Racoon Hunt”; “Gumbo Chaff,” and “The Original Jim Crow,” all in Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*, 145, 140, 101.

41. Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, ed. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 12. For contemporary images, see, for example, the sheet music covers for “The Coal Black Rose” (1827) and “Jim Crow” (1834) in the same volume, 114, and the sheet music cover for “Jim Along Josey” (1840) in Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 5.

42. These plays and songs have been collected in Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow*.

43. For early minstrelsy, see Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*.

44. Levine, *High Brow / Low Brow*, 56–60; Henderson, *City and the Theatre*, 49–77; 91–104. McConachie, “American Theatre in Context,” 111–75, contains a

nanced discussion of changes in the class makeup of theatrical audiences, as do Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 144–46 and Bank, *Theater Culture in America*, 48–50, 111–19.

45. On the influence of Weld's tract, see Robert H. Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 210–13; Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in Memory: England and America, 1780–1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 84–85; Michael Bennett, *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement and Antebellum American Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005) 122; Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100 (April 1995): 303–34 and Elizabeth Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History*, 82 (September 1995): 463–93. Clark points also to the influence of Lydia Marie Child's *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, published in 1833. For another example of the use of suffering prior to Weld's book, see Dickson D. Bruce, "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community: The Poetry of Abolitionism, 1831–1860," in McCarthy and Stauffer, *Prophets of Protest*, 230.

46. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 27–38; Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 146–55, quote from *Worcester National Aegis*, March 22, 1843, cited in Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 152. For a study of the way minstrel music itself changed along similar lines during this period, see Robert B. Winans, "Early Minstrel Show Music, 1843–1852," in Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 41–162.

47. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 67–69.

48. M. Campbell, ed., *Woods Minstrel Songs* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1855), Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 20. See also "Virginia's Lovely Ground" and "Gum Tree Canoe," both in Charles White, *White's New Illustrated Melodeon Song Book* (New York: H. Long and Brother, 1848) Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 64, 34; "Emma Snow," in Campbell, *Woods Minstrel Songs*, 39; "Car'lina," in *Christy's Panorama Songster*, ed. Edwin Pearce Christy (New York: William H Murphy, 1850) 86.

49. "Ole Massa Is Going to Town," Charles White, *White's New Book of Plantation Melodies* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1849), 22. See also "Black Sam," "We Lib on de Banks ob de Ohio," and "Under de Shade ob de Old Gum Tree," all in Christy, *Christy's Panorama Songster*, 133, 79, 112; "Where Is the Spot Where We Were Born On," and "The Young Folks at Home," both in Campbell, *Woods Minstrel Songs*, 12, 7; "Old Folks at Home" (1851), and "Massa's in de Cold Ground" (1851), both in Stephen Foster, *Minstrel Songs, Old and New* (Boston: Oliver Ditson and Company, 1882), 3, 15.

50. "Female Slave's Lament," in Campbell, *Woods Minstrel Songs*, 40. See also "Nancy Blair," Christy, *Christy's Panorama Songster*, 129; "Jane Munroe," "Cynthia Sue," and "Colored Orphan Boy," all in Campbell, *Woods Minstrel Songs*, 18, 46, 64; "Listen to the Mocking Bird," (1855), Foster, *Minstrel Songs*, 36.

51. Toll, *Blacking Up*, 65–104.

52. "Such a Dancing of the Niggers," *Lucy Neale's Nigga Warbler* (Philadelphia: n.p., n.d.), cited in Toll, *Blacking Up*, 83.

53. During the 1850s, plays concerning moral reform became popular. See Walter J. Meserve, "Social Awareness on Stage: Tensions Mounting, 1850–1858," in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 81–100.

54. Jonathan Walker, *The Branded Hand: Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker* (Boston: Dow and Jackson's Power Press, 1845).

55. Sophia Little, *The Branded Hand: A Dramatic Sketch Commemorative of the Tragedies at the South in the Winter of 1844–5* (Pawtucket, R.I.: R. W. Potter, 1845).

56. *Ibid.*, 6, 17, 43.

57. Walker, *Branded Hand*, 10–12.

58. Little, *Branded Hand*, 11–15.

59. George Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in Gardner, *Major Voices*, 171–256; Gary A. Richardson, "Plays and Playwrights: 1800–1865," in Wilmeth and Bigsby, *Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 290–93.

60. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: Jewett, 1854); *New York Times*, December 5, 1861; *National Era*, November 3, 1853. Bowery Theatre Broadside, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University; *New York Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1853; Lott, *Love and Theft*, 218; Aiken, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

61. John Townsend Trowbridge, *Neighbor Jackwood*, in *Fateful Lightning: America's Civil War Plays*, ed. Walter J. Meserve and Mollie Ann Meserve (New York: Feedback Theatre Books and Prospero Press, 2000), 73–150. *New York Daily Tribune*, May 11, 1857. For a positive review of the Boston staging, see "From Boston, An Occasional Correspondent," *New York Daily Tribune*, April 13, 1857. For quote, see Trowbridge, *Neighbor Jackwood*, 140.

62. Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon*, in *Best Plays of the Early American Theatre: From the Beginning to 1916*, ed. John Gassner and Molly Gassner (New York: Crown, 1967), 183–215.

63. *New York Times*, December 15, 1859. See also *New York Times*, February 9, 1860; *New York Daily Tribune*, March 2, 1860, December 5, 1861. In *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, a young male slave meets a similar fate. In this play, a free black man is kidnapped into slavery. He refuses to agree verbally that he is a slave; but he never resists with anger or physical force and is in no way a threatening force. As he is whipped to death, he asks God to forgive his enslavers. Daniel S. Whitney, *Warren: A Tragedy in Five Acts, Designed to Illustrate the Protection with the Federal Union Extends to the Citizens of Massachusetts* (Boston: M. A. Bela Marsh, 1850).

64. H. J. Conway, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp. A Drama, in Four Acts* (New York: John W. Amerman, 1856); Walter J. Meserve, "Social Awareness on the Stage: 1850–1859," in Engle and Miller, *American Stage*, 92–93.

65. William Wells Brown, *The Escape, or a Leap for Freedom*, in Meserve and Meserve, *Fateful Lightning*, 155–93; Hill and Hatch, *History of African American Theatre*, 51–52.

66. Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 138.

67. Mrs. J. C. Swayze, *Ossawatimie Brown; or, The Insurrection at Harper's Ferry*, in Meserve and Meserve, *Fateful Lightning*, 200–225. The play opened December 16, 1859, at Bowery Theatre in New York, two weeks after Brown was executed.

68. James Cobb, *Paul and Virginia: A Musical Drama in Two Acts* (Dublin: Thomas Bunsie, 1801); Jessie Ringwalt, *Paul and Virginia: Or, the Runaway Slave, A Play in Three Acts* (Philadelphia: Ringwalt and Brown, 1864).