

Forum

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Contextualizing Stowe's Dandy

TO THE EDITOR:

I enjoyed Michael Borgstrom's thoughts on the difficulty of coming to grips with the character of Adolph in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ("Passing Over: Setting the Record Straight in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," 118 [2003]: 1290–304). There is, however, another kind of intersectional analysis that merits attention here: the earlier black manservant characters against which Stowe reacted as she crafted this dandyish valet. Crucial to this collection, I propose, was the protagonist of Legh Richmond's *The Negro Servant*, an evangelical tract first printed around 1816 that circulated as late as the 1860s under various titles and in a variety of languages, including English, Welsh, German, and the syllabic characters of Cherokee. Though Stowe's knowledge of this tract is conjectural, Borgstrom might want to investigate John Saillant's brilliant probe of the relationship between kidnapped-then-converted William and the white man who tells his story.

Still, William was just one of many manservant characters that could have influenced Stowe. Exactly how white and Irish manservant characters may have affected her portrait of Adolph is a topic worth exploring. More immediately relevant, though, is the "free" black manservant Agrippa in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Clarence* (1830)—especially as he differs from black male slave characters such as Agamemnon in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* (1823) and Jim Jumble in R. M. Bird's *Sheppard Lee* (1836) but also from the clownish wage earner in Anna Cora Mowatt's hit play, *Fashion* (1845), since Zeke is a purposeful reworking of the fops in blackface minstrel shows. Attention to antebellum representations of black male servitude does much to illuminate Stowe's authorial choices and refusals. Equally important, such attention provides powerful contextualization for the ambiguous heroism of Sandy

Campbell, the freed servant character jailed for a white man's crime in Charles W. Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901).

Barbara Ryan
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Reply:

I thank Barbara Ryan for her response to my essay. Her attention to the dandified figures (black and white) that appeared before the publication of Stowe's novel serves as an important reminder of some of the gaps that still exist in our historical and cultural knowledge. The texts and authors Ryan mentions may indeed have influenced Stowe (known for her voracious reading) and may help to contextualize her characterization of Adolph. I am grateful, then, for Ryan's overview of other antebellum representations of the dandy figure that anticipate Stowe's depictions.

Ryan's comments also helpfully underscore one of my essay's primary arguments: namely, that modern-day definitions of identity categories may prevent us from coming to terms with characters like Adolph. Race, sexuality, and gender were in flux

during the period in which Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, yet the ways in which we read nineteenth-century texts often blinds us to some of the unconventional intersections among such categories. Ryan's examples thus usefully remind us that authors and texts need not serve as inevitable representatives of particular social positions.

Because texts, like bodies, often have specific identities routinely attached to them, we would do well to consider how such literary and social categorizations continue to shape contemporary scholarship. By linking "what we see" to texts as well as to bodies, we might begin to appreciate more fully how "what we know" is historically specific and constituted by changing strategies of representation—a fact highlighted by the texts and authors Ryan mentions. Critical study would thus benefit from methodologies that consider how identity categories may be constructed but that nevertheless acknowledge their real social repercussions. Otherwise, as my essay suggests, we risk ignoring figures like Adolph altogether.

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