2. The South Scorns Mrs. Stowe (1852)

Northern abolitionists naturally applauded Mrs. Stowe's powerful tale; the poet John Greenleaf Whittier now thanked God for the Fugitive Slave Act, which had inspired the book. The few northern journals that voiced criticism were drowned out by the clamor of the printing presses running off tens of thousands of new copies. Southern critics cried that this "wild and unreal picture" would merely arouse the "fanaticism" of the North while exciting the "indignation" of the South. They insisted that the slave beatings were libelously overemphasized; that the worst slave drivers were imported northerners (like Legree); that the southern black slave was better off than the northern wage slave; and that relatively few families were broken up—fewer, in fact, than among soldiers on duty, Irish immigrants coming to America, sailors going to sea, or pioneers venturing West. Why did the Southern Literary Messenger of Richmond find it important to refute Mrs. Stowe's "slanders" as follows?

There are some who will think we have taken upon ourselves an unnecessary trouble in exposing the inconsistencies and false assertions of Uncle Tom's Cabin. It is urged by such persons that in devoting so much attention to abolition attacks we give them an importance to which they are not entitled. This may be true in general. But let it be borne in mind that this slanderous work has found its way to every section of our country, and has crossed the water to Great Britain, filling the minds of all who know nothing of slavery with hatred for that institution and those who uphold it. Justice to ourselves would seem to demand that it should not be suffered to circulate longer without the brand of falsehood upon it.

Let it be recollected, too, that the importance Mrs. Stowe will derive from Southern criticism will be one of infamy. Indeed she is only entitled to criticism at all as the mouthpiece of a large and dangerous faction which, if we do not put down with the pen, we may be compelled one day (God grant that day may never come!) to repel with the bayonet.

There are questions that underlie the story of Uncle Tom's Cabin of far deeper significance than any mere false coloring of Southern society. . . . We beg to make a single suggestion to Mrs. Stowe—that, as she is fond of referring to the Bible, she will turn over, before writing her next work of fiction, to the twentieth chapter of Exodus and there read these words—"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." . . .

We have not had the heart to speak of an erring woman as she deserved, though her misconduct admitted of no excuse and provoked the keenest and most just reprobation. We have little inclination—and, if we had much, we have not the time—to proceed with our disgusting labor, to anamolize minutely volumes as full of poisonous vermin as of putrescence, and to speak in such language as the occasion would justify, though it might be forbidden by decorum and self-respect.

We dismiss Uncle Tom's Cabin with the conviction and declaration that every holier purpose of our nature is misguided, every charitable sympathy betrayed, every loftier sentiment polluted, every moral purpose wrenched to wrong, and every patriotic feeling outraged, by its criminal prostitution of the high functions of the imagination to the pernicious intrigues of sectional animosity, and to the petty calumnies of willful slander.

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1Southern Literary Messenger 18 (1852): 638, 731.