Introduction

In New York City in 1839, refined, alabaster women glided across crowded dance floors in the arms of apelike, jet-black men. Or soon would, according to artist Edward W. Clay's alarmist predictions about the end results of the growing abolitionist movement. Dancing was not the worst that Clay envisioned in the series of prints he entitled *Practical Amalgamation* (Figure I.1). In the new society brought on by abolitionism, Clay warned, white women and black men would openly court, marry, and produce interracial children. The mixing of the races that resulted would inevitably lead to the end of white female purity and white male supremacy in the United States. Such was the future that Clay and others portended as they sought to discredit abolitionists, whose calls for immediate emancipation and racial equality were growing louder and more insistent by the late 1830s.

In visual and written texts, antebellum artists and authors on all sides of the slavery issue, from abolitionists to proslavery advocates, regularly placed white women alongside enslaved men, occupying the same physical space. Yet unlike Clay's prints, which unambiguously represented this proximity as romantic intimacy, most antebellum texts eschewed any overtly sexual element when they portrayed white girls and women in the company of African American men. The creators of these texts also eliminated the negative connotations that Clay had invoked in his engravings. Rather than depicting associations between black men and white women as taboo and scandalous, most antebellum authors portrayed them as nonthreatening, or even desirable. The frequency with which antebellum authors and artists juxtaposed dark-skinned males with light-skinned females, and the positive tone of these scenes, indicate a popular
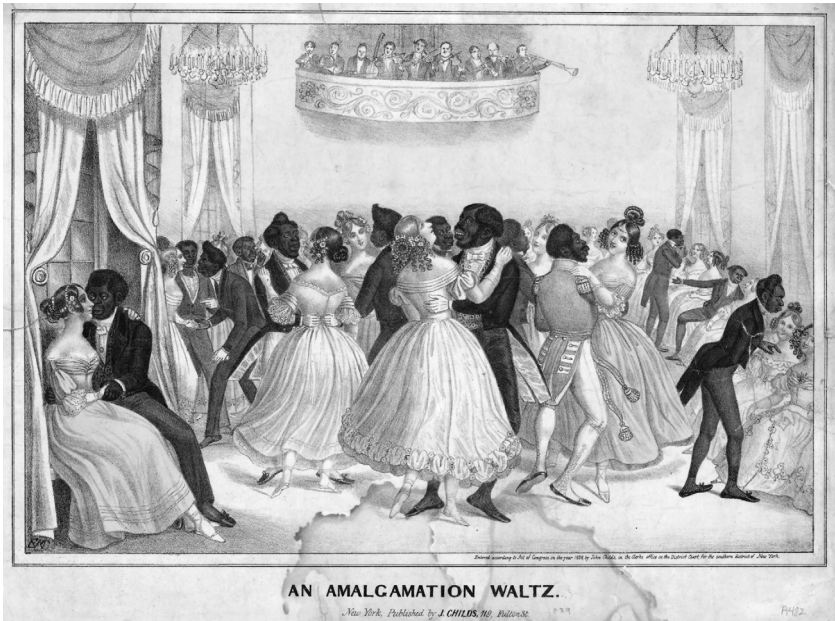
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FIGURE 1.1. Edward W. Clay, "An Amalgamation Waltz." John Childs, 1839. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Graphic Arts, Polit. Car. A482.

fascination with this particular pairing of figures on the part of white northerners in the decades prior to the Civil War.[1]

A momentous shift in cultural conceptions of gender and race occurred in the United States between 1831 and 1865. The figure of the black male rebel that had dominated narratives focusing on slavery in the 1830s was replaced by the black martyr as the principal depiction of African American masculinity in the 1850s. At the same time, portrayals of white women in slavery-related narratives also shifted, becoming stronger as images of black men became weaker. White female figures in narratives had been transformed from helpless victims in the 1830s to assertive heroines by the eve of the Civil War.

[1] Edward W. Clay's complete *Practical Amalgamation* series of 1839 included "An Amalgamation Waltz"; "Practical Amalgamation (Musical Soiree)"; "Practical Amalgamation (The Wedding)"; and "The Fruits of Amalgamation" (New York: John Childs, 1839). Clay was born in Philadelphia in 1799. He worked in the city as an artist and engraver beginning in about 1819. Clay studied art in Europe for about three years in the 1820s, then returned to Philadelphia until the mid-1830s, when he moved to New York City. Elise Lemire, *"Miscegenation": Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 62.

These changes in the ways black men and white women were presented occurred because of a fundamental shift in both the audience and the authorship of antebellum narratives between the 1830s and the 1850s. At the start of the antebellum period, popular novels were written almost exclusively by men, and their focus on themes like war and adventure was designed to appeal primarily to a male readership. By the 1850s, however, novels had become largely the purview of women. The popular "domestic" novel centered on the home and on the family, romance, and religion supposed to be contained therein. Writers of slavery-related novels and narratives, in company with authors of other types of fiction and autobiography, began catering to a readership that was assumed to be predominantly female.[2] In doing so, these writers, an increasing number of whom were white women, began to enhance the status and authority of their white female characters. Increasingly, they did so by demasculinizing black men.

Rebels and Martyrs tells the story of the ways that white women depicted black men in the antebellum and Civil War eras – sometimes as wild beasts, sometimes as docile martyrs, always with the dual purpose of defining who black men were and, by contrast, who white women were. This is the story of how white women and black men appeared together in that fiction. As they defined themselves and black men in their fiction, white female authors tried to improve their own political and social positions.

A comparison of two prints, published slightly more than thirty years apart, exemplifies the transformation of racial imagery during the antebellum period, from rebel to martyr for African American men and from victim to heroine for white women. The first image was the woodcut "Horrid Massacre in Virginia," which appeared in an antislavery pamphlet published in the immediate aftermath of Nat Turner's revolt in 1831 (Figure I.2).[3] This print showed four strong, young-looking black men taking up axes and knives against whites. The first scene depicted

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[2] As Ann Douglas put it, "[M]iddle-class Protestant women … were becoming the prime consumers of American culture" by the 1850s, and "as such they exerted an enormous influence on the chief male purveyors of that culture." Douglas argued that "in very real ways, authors and clergymen were on the market; they could hardly afford to ignore their feminine customers and competitors." Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998; orig. pub. 1977), 8.

[3] From Samuel Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene Which Was Witnessed in Southampton County (Virginia) on Monday the 22d of August Last, When Fifty-Five of Its Inhabitants (Mostly Women and Children) Were Inhumanly Massacred by the Blacks!* ([New York]: Warner & West, 1831), 1.
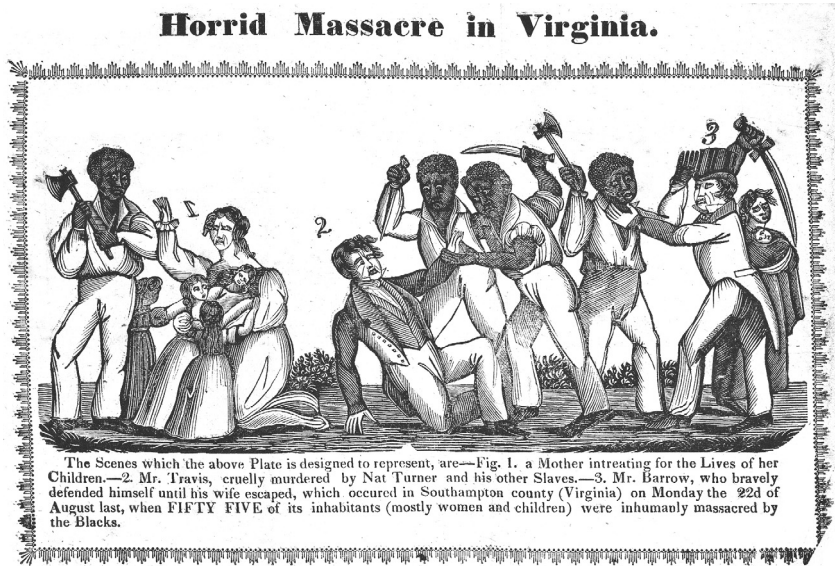
FIGURE I.2. "Horrid Massacre in Virginia," 1831. Courtesy of Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, JWJ Zan T856 831Cb.

one of these black men raising an ax against a white woman and her four small daughters. On her knees and pleading for the lives of her children, the woman was utterly helpless to prevent the violent attack of the merciless black man who held her life entirely in his hands. The seemingly dispassionate attitude of the slave rebel and the feminine helplessness of his victims identified this man, in the eyes of antebellum Americans, as a heartless savage. In the scene, white women's lack of power underscored black men's savagery, while black men's savagery likewise accentuated white women's powerlessness.

The second print appeared in 1863, at the height of the Civil War, as the last of a set of trading cards depicting the life and death of a young slave-turned-soldier (Figure I.3). Entitled "He Died for Me," the card inverted the power relations found in the 1831 image. The black man lay prostrate in the most impotent state, death, while the white female figure of Liberty, or perhaps the American nation, exuded supremacy. The superiority of this white female symbol over the African American soldier was unmistakably demonstrated by a number of visual cues: the woman's upright posture, her red headdress, the musculature of her arm, her gaze directed downward onto the lifeless body of the black soldier, and

FIGURE 1.3. Henry Louis Stephens, "He Died for Me!" *Album Varieties No. 3*, *The Slave in 1863*, Philadelphia, 1863. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-28495.

her lofty bestowal of honors upon him. The bright colors of the woman's dress and her active stance made the motionless form of the dead soldier, with his nearly colorless uniform, seem to fade insignificantly into the background.

Besides appearing more authoritative and more imposing than the white woman from the 1831 print, the female figure in the later image embraced values and concerns that lay outside the domestic sphere. Whereas the pitiable female victim in the "Horrid Massacre" wood-cut had been dwarfed by the skirts and children surrounding her, the white woman in the trading card stood alone, completely enveloped not in billowing skirts, but in the flag of her country. The concerns of the latter woman were not with private, domestic space, but with the pub-lic, typically masculine arenas of war and nationhood. This woman's authority, her independence, and her success, however, derived from the

circumstance of a black man being rendered prostrate and deprived of his life. Viewing the scene from this perspective, the white woman's assertion, "He Died for Me!" seems a declaration of her own importance rather than an expression of her awed gratitude.[4]

While contemporary scholarship has opened up valuable new avenues for studying the ways nineteenth-century Americans thought about and utilized concepts of blackness and whiteness, the literature on this subject has heretofore focused on male perspectives. Numerous historians in recent decades have employed gender analysis to uncover the role that race played in the formation of white masculinity in antebellum decades.[5] White women, however, have not been viewed as a factor in the development of nineteenth-century views on race. By the same token, almost none of the extensive scholarly work that has centered on antebellum women has engaged questions of race, particularly when northern white women are the subject of inquiry. To judge by current historiography, it seems that race never entered into the consciousness of white women living beyond the South and played no role in shaping who these women were or how they saw themselves.

Yet slavery-related narratives published in the 1850s reveal that by the end of the antebellum period, white women in the free states were beginning to forge a powerful new identity for themselves that was based on their race as much as their gender. Narratives – defined simply as texts that tell a story – served as white women's version of the polemical tracts, newspaper editorials, minstrel shows, and political speeches through which white men collectively developed their views on race and slavery. The narratives white women most often created and consumed included fiction – short stories, novels, stage dramas, and even visual images that follow a plotline – as well as more factual writings like autobiographies and collective biographies. Such texts increasingly began to stress the supposed superiority of white women over black men – and on much rarer occasions, over black women. These narratives encouraged white women to expand their roles in society by claiming the power and status

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[4] Henry Louis Stephens, artist, "He Died for Me!" from *Album Varieties No. 3* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1863).

[5] See Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Thomas W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997).

that antebellum culture afforded to those classified as white. When white female characters stood up for themselves, took charge in dangerous situations, and threatened violence against male villains, they provided an alternative to the antebellum ideal of docile, demure white womanhood. And when black men worshipfully deferred to white women in this literature, revering their goodness and their strength, white female readers gained a greater sense of the importance they should perhaps hold within the hierarchy of American culture and society.[6]

White women's drive to elevate their own cultural status helped deal a devastating blow to black masculinity in popular white racial thought. Because of the feminization of fiction in the late antebellum period, the figure of the aggressive or the assertive black man who had routinely appeared in literature during the 1830s and 1840s disappeared from commercial fiction in the 1850s. In its stead emerged the far less threatening image of the humble black martyr who paid homage to admirable, authoritative white females.

Narratives crafted during the Civil War reveal the persistence of this emasculating representation of African American manhood.[7] Even when

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[6] In her highly influential work *Sentimental Designs*, literary scholar Jane Tompkins proposed that women in the mid-nineteenth century used fiction to gain power for themselves in a society where they "could neither own property, nor vote, nor speak at a public meeting if both sexes were present." In such a restrictive environment, Tompkins argued, "women had to have a way of defining themselves which gave them power and status nevertheless, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world." They did so, Tompkins, suggested, through domestic fiction. Tompkins, however, did not address the important function that race often played in these endeavors. Jane Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 160–161.

[7] Though scholars have identified a number of definitions of manliness in nineteenth-century America, James and Lois Horton have pointed out that "aggression, and sometimes sanctioned violence, was a common thread in American ideals of manhood" during that period. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, "Violence, Protest, and Identify: Black Manhood in Antebellum America," in Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 382. Many antebellum schools of thought on masculinity agree with this assessment. Violent episodes also appeared frequently in slavery-related literature. Therefore, much of my assessment of different characters' manliness centers on the relationship those characters had to violence. If a man did not fight back when his life, his freedom, or his family was in jeopardy, his failure to act signified a deficiency in manliness in antebellum terms. At the same time, vengeful acts of violence, or aggression against women or children, would be read as unmanly. Real men in the antebellum period took up arms openly and confidently, and only for noble causes, like protecting white womanhood, preserving one's liberty, or defending one's country. For discussions of the various nineteenth-century conceptions of "true manhood," see also E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from*

black military participation created space in American fiction for black
male characters who fought on the battlefield, authors ultimately ren-
dered these men impotent by killing them off at the end of their nar-
ratives. By martyring all potentially militant black male protagonists,
wartime writers allayed any fears whites might have had that African
American soldiers would claim equal rights as men after the war. Even
when Congress granted black men the vote later in the 1860s, it was
not because most white Americans had come to view them as worthy
men. The passage of the Fifteenth Amendment had much more to do
with Republicans' desire to hold onto political power through the votes
they received from African American men in the South. The continued
appeal of the Uncle Tom figure for whites well into the postwar period –
reinforced by the introduction of Joel Chandler Harris's beloved "Uncle
Remus" in the 1880s – demonstrates the enduring impact that the defer-
ential black male slave had on the white imagination.

   The white female authors who created and published popular nar-
ratives about slavery thus shaped white Americans' views about race
and gender profoundly during the nineteenth century. In doing so, these
women did more than work to enhance their own cultural authority.
They also exerted an influence on the most significant political issue of
the nineteenth century. Narratives about slavery did not simply function
as a vehicle for white women to work out their own place in American
society, as, for example, the minstrel show did for working-class white
men. Nor were texts that focused on slaves and slavery, even those that
were fictional, written principally to entertain or to teach a moral les-
son about private behavior. Instead, most authors who wrote narratives
about slavery were deliberately forwarding a particular political agenda
regarding one of the most hotly debated topics of their day.[8] At a time
when the very definition of womanhood was apolitical, slavery-related

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the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Alice Fahs, *The
Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women:
Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); and Charles
E. Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *American
Quarterly* 25 (May 1973): 131–153.

[8] Jeannine Marie DeLombard has noted that print culture in the antebellum period served
as "an alternative tribunal," a medium through which the American reading public passed
judgment on the slave system. This "typographical tribunal," DeLombard suggests, was
in many ways at least as powerful as the official court system in shaping public opinion
on the slavery issue, and perhaps more so. Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial:
Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill, NY: University of North Carolina
Press, 2007), 48, 35.

fiction and autobiography provided a vital foray into the political system for white women. Through their production of literary works about slavery, white female authors stretched the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior and contributed in meaningful ways to the direction the republic would take in the nineteenth century.

It has fallen out of fashion among current-day historians to use fiction or other types of narrative literature as vehicles to delve into the mindsets of past societies. But literature mattered to antebellum women, and, as a result, it should matter to the historians who study them. Published narratives were the main venue that white, middle-class women used for articulating their political beliefs and their views on race. The analysis of slavery-focused narratives thus affords a unique opportunity to determine how race functioned within the imaginations of the white women who read and wrote such narratives in the antebellum and Civil War periods.

It is also important to note that narrative texts differ in important respects from more traditional sources of political discourse dealing with the slavery question. Unlike speeches, pamphlets, or editorial commentary, narratives generally do not offer a straightforward articulation of a logically constructed system of racial thought. Because of their greater subtlety, the stories left behind by a past culture can sometimes more profoundly reveal the deepest anxieties, the loftiest hopes, and the most sacred values of the people who lived within that culture, in a way that other types of sources cannot. They can suggest to us how a group of people, like antebellum women, viewed the world and how the various components of those worldviews fit together and interacted with each other.[9]

In this case, though, literature did not merely reflect the racial attitudes and beliefs of antebellum authors and readers. It also played a central role in actually creating the status of African American men and white women in the minds of white readers and in making sure that status was upheld. Whether based in fact or entirely imaginative, storytelling tends to work on readers in a less conscious manner than polemical

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[9] Historical studies that have used fictional narratives as a source base include William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961); Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot* (New York: New York University Press, 1972); Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (New York: Belknap Press, 1993); and Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War*.

arguments do. The emotional impact is often greater; in the antebellum period, this proved especially true, as readers of slavery-related narratives were introduced to individual slaves in more personal ways. As a result, the characters and plots that antebellum readers came across in slavery-related narratives would have had a subtler and possibly a more indelible effect on the way those readers understood what it meant to be a black man or a white woman. As they tugged at readers' heartstrings or shocked their sensibilities with the horrors of slavery or of emancipation, authors of slavery-centered narratives etched into the minds of white Americans powerful visions of how black manhood interacted with white femininity.

The shift in representations of black manhood and white womanhood in antebellum culture occurred as a result of a multi-sided conversation within American literature among authors from widely divergent backgrounds. Americans black and white, male and female, southern, northern, and even western participated in the dialogue that brought the transformation of racial and gendered images in the three decades before the Civil War. Politically, they were a diverse group. Abolitionist authors who despised slavery for moral reasons engaged in heated literary dialogue with proslavery advocates who deemed slavery a positive good for all concerned. More moderate than abolitionists was an antislavery contingent who disliked slavery but likewise disdained African Americans and thus opposed racial equality. Less extreme than proslavery authors, anti-abolitionist writers felt no great attachment to the slave system. But they feared that emancipation would bring economic and social chaos for white northerners suddenly facing freed slaves as competitors for their jobs and suitors for their daughters.

Between 1831 and 1865, authors with differing views on the slave system read, responded to, argued with, and borrowed elements of each other's narratives to make their own statements about the slave experience. Of these groups, antislavery authors played the most active role in the transformation of dominant images of black men and white women by the 1850s. Two decades earlier, it had been proslavery authors and abolitionists who popularized the conceptualization of black men as dangerous savages, bent on the destruction of whites. Proslavery novelists had suggested that men of African descent were inherently vicious and untrustworthy. Enslavement, they argued, constituted the safest way of containing that naturally violent potential. Abolitionist writers, by contrast, concluded that slavery itself provoked brutal behavior in black men. Only the termination of the slave system, they reasoned, could prevent