

David Grant. *Political Antislavery Discourse and American Literature of the 1850s* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012). Pp. 225. Chapter endnotes, index. Hardback, \$75.00.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from an Alabama jail cell that the “great stumbling block” to African American freedom was the “white moderate” who “prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension” over “a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”<sup>1</sup> David Grant reveals that antislavery authors wove a parallel argument into texts calculated to jolt northern readers out of demeaning compliance with proslavery compromises, and into the Republican Party. This is not a comprehensive study of political antislavery discourse. But Grant contributes to the growing scholarship on the popular, and arguably more effective, strands of antislavery activism that flourished in the 1850s. Historians such as Eric Foner, Richard H. Sewell, Michael D. Pierson, Jonathan Earle, and James Oakes have underscored the important contributions of nonabolitionist opponents of slavery. This book highlights the literary effort that helped transform the Republican Party into a vehicle for antislavery politics.

Grant, a member of the Department of English at Grant MacEwan University, offers detailed readings of fiction and poetry by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Nathaniel Parker Willis. Their task was to convince northerners that it was both possible and necessary to channel the latent energy of a vibrant free labor society into resistance to the backward but dominant southern “slave power.” At stake were northern liberties and the fate of the US republic itself. The challenge, especially after the Compromise of 1850, was that northern “Union-savers” equated conciliation with patriotism, defining acquiescence to the slave power as a duty, and habituating northerners to shameful subordination. In response, antislavery writers called upon northerners, as individuals and as members of a sectional collectivity, to free themselves from fear or apathy, and to sustain the Union by purging it of proslavery policy. These authors never doubted that the North could triumph, but they had to persuade northern readers that they possessed the agency and the duty to act. Victory over the slave power was a matter of willpower. Grant concludes that these literary efforts “fed the political call for a new Northern subject” (214), one that would not misidentify tranquility as justice. His source base and analysis suggest that this undertaking was necessarily literary. Hence his thesis develops out of the “assumption that the dominant rhetoric of compromise . . . would

not have yielded place to political antislavery practices if there had not been a massive cultural project dedicated to its overthrow" (6).

Through meticulous readings of selected texts, Grant surveys the vital role that literary works played in that project. Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856) traced the history of the slave power's rise to dominance, using the novel's narrative to explain why slavery threatened to overrun Kansas. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe sharply criticized northern conservatives' association of emotional suppression with political harmony. She maintained that carefully channeled passion would empower northerners to resist slavery's encroachments and rejected the notions of citizenship and selfhood that underlay conservative calls for northerners to sacrifice their hearts on the altar of the Union. Whittier, whose poetry braided elements of abolitionist and moderate antislavery ideals, dramatized how surrender to the slave power enslaved northerners. Compromise only emboldened slaveholders to make more outrageous demands, which required additional concessions that would lock northerners into a degrading cycle of appeasement. Northerners must rise in their collective sovereignty to preserve the West for freedom. Willis's *Paul Fane*, serialized between 1854 and 1856, warned against falling under the quasi-aristocratic spell of slaveholders, who posed an internal threat to republicanism even more insidious than European nobility. Self-respecting northerners knew to resist suave southern tyrants. The legions of poets who celebrated the marital and political partnership of John C. Frémont and Jessie Benton Frémont concluded that northern homes would instruct individualistic free-state inhabitants to combine forces against Dixie's would-be aristocrats. These messages melded in Whitman's poetry, which lambasted northern conservatives for defending a static, moribund proslavery Union rather than revitalizing a progressive Union by rescuing it from slavery. True preservation of the Union on antislavery principles required the political energy of self-assured northern subjects.

Grant has read widely in the relevant historical literature and acknowledges his debts to scholars such as Foner and Pierson. Building on their foundation, he develops interpretations that are as compelling as the texts he explores. Among the strengths of the book is Grant's willingness to take the slave power concept seriously. He perceptively characterizes opposition to the slave power as much more than a watered-down version of "real" antislavery activism. As Robert E. Bonner has demonstrated, slaveholders did strive to graft their peculiar social order onto American policies, institutions, ideals, and identity.<sup>2</sup> The cultural counterattack that Grant analyzes was, therefore,

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absolutely necessary if northerners were to free themselves, politically and intellectually, from this odious influence. Grant and Bonner's works could be read together with great profit.

Some aspects of this study might, however, narrow its scholarly influence. Grant appears to write with a highly specialized audience in mind and the absence of brief summaries of the novels would make it extremely difficult for readers unfamiliar with these texts to follow the analysis. Historians, moreover, might chafe at the tendency to remove these novels and poems from their economic, social, and political contexts. Grant's learned observations expose some of the limitations of a purely literary study. Readers encounter northern selves and subjects, but few northern people—people whose jobs, faiths, partisan affiliations, and ethnic identities certainly shaped how they read and responded to literature. Grant raises the right questions, but only within their richly layered contexts can the political influence of these texts be evaluated conclusively.

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## NOTES

1. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963)," in *American Political Rhetoric: A Reader*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Robert Martin Schaefer, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 269.
2. Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).