



*The Politics of the Page:  
Black Disfranchisement and the  
Image of the Savage Slave*

IN RECENT YEARS, historians have characterized the 1820s and 1830s as a period in which an important transformation occurred in the racial culture of the antebellum North. During these two decades, scholars have suggested, white northerners began to discard older, more paternalistic attitudes toward African Americans in favor of a newer, increasingly intolerant hostility. According to James Brewer Stewart, northern whites began condemning all African Americans specifically because of their race rather than judging each person based on variable criteria such as class status or individual comportment. This cultural shift, in conjunction with the monumental economic and social changes taking place in the North that helped to cause it, contributed to a movement within many northern states that sought to deny African American men the franchise at the very moment when voting rights were being extended to virtually all white men. Seen as irretrievably dependent and servile, black men came to represent for many whites the antithesis of the ideal citizen and, as historians have long noted, were thus deliberately excluded from the democratizing trend sweeping through the United States during the “Age of Jackson.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See especially James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790–1840” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18 (1998): 181–217; Christopher Malone, *Between Freedom and Bondage: Race, Party, and Voting Rights in the Antebellum North* (New

As historians also recognize, white Americans' association of black Americans with slavery played an important role in justifying their disfranchisement in the North. In offering explanations for how white northerners came to classify African Americans as beyond the pale of citizenship, however, most historians acknowledge only one representation of the slave in northern culture—that of the incompetent, childlike dependent.<sup>2</sup> An exploration of the propagandistic fiction that abolitionists and their antiabolitionist and proslavery opponents created during the 1830s reveals a different but equally important image of black men available to white northerners in the era of black disfranchisement. In many respects the polar opposite of the cringing, servile male slave, the image of the black man as savage aggressor played just as critical a role in helping to rationalize efforts in many states to remove African Americans legally from the body politic. The predominance of the figure of the “savage slave” in this literature promoted among white northerners the idea that African American men were not only unfit to exercise the franchise, but that they actually were, as David Roediger has put it, “anticitizens,” or, as James Flint described them, “enemies rather than . . . members of the social compact.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast to black caricatures like the simple-minded, happy-go-lucky slave or even the fun-loving trickster of minstrel fame, the ominous black aggressor encouraged whites to classify black men as a dangerous threat to the security of white society and to the preservation of the American republic.

The appearance of novels in the mid-1830s that promoted the image of the savage slave coincided most closely with the legal disfranchisement

---

York, 2008); and David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (London, 2007), 56–59.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Melish writes that “by the 1820s and 1830s . . . most northern whites had allowed the middle member in the progression ‘negro > slave > servile’ to wither along with the institution of slavery itself, fixing permanent inferiority upon people of color as a group.” Joanne Pope Melish, “The ‘Condition’ Debate and Racial Discourse in the Antebellum North,” in *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic*, eds. Michael Morrison and James Brewer Stewart (Lanham, MD, 2002), 84. David Roediger quotes Rowland Berthoff, who summed up the rhetoric the New York constitutional convention of 1821 used to justify disfranchisement: “Many Negroes had been born in slavery [and] they were filled with a spirit of dependence and consequently would vote according to the wishes of their employers . . . which would foster an aristocracy.” Rowland Berthoff, “Conventional Mentality: Free Blacks, Women and Corporations as Unequal Persons,” *Journal of American History* 76 (1989): 771, quoted in Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 57; James Flint, *Letters from America, 1818–1820* (London, 1822), 218, quoted in Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 57.

of black voters in Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> Partly in response to the massive abolitionist propaganda campaign that had begun in 1835, proslavery and antiabolitionist authors published novels in 1835 and 1836 that were popular throughout the Northeast and that featured male slaves in prominent roles.<sup>5</sup> These writers included the nationally renowned South Carolina author William Gilmore Simms, the prolific southern transplant Joseph Holt Ingraham, and Philadelphia's own Robert Montgomery Bird.<sup>6</sup> The printing of these novels coincided with the 1836 publication of the first American-penned antislavery novel, Richard Hildreth's *The Slave*, and the first book-length autobiographical slave narrative of the antebellum abolitionist movement, Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States*. These texts featured threatening black men who committed violent acts that would have likely alarmed white readers. The next year, delegates to the state constitutional convention in Pennsylvania began debating the exclusion of African Americans from the state's electorate. In January 1838, the convention voted to restrict suffrage to white males, and, in October, Pennsylvania's voters ratified the constitution that would bar black men from exercising the franchise until the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution went into effect in 1870.

Throughout the period of debate over the measure, state lawmakers and newspaper editors who favored black disfranchisement alluded to the savagery of people of African descent and the physical dangers they posed to whites. On November 17, for instance, the *Bedford Gazette* alarmed its white readers by concocting the story that black men had tried to participate in the recent election by bringing guns with them to the polling

<sup>4</sup> North Carolina prohibited black voting in 1835, Arkansas in 1836, Michigan in 1837, and Pennsylvania in 1838. New Jersey (1807), Connecticut (1818), and New York (1822), as well as various states in the Old Northwest and the South, had placed restrictions on African American suffrage well before 1835.

<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1830s, presses across the northern states churned out various antislavery periodicals, including the *Liberator* in Boston, the *Emancipator* in New York City, the *Philanthropist* in Cincinnati, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*, the *Slave's Friend*, and *Human Rights*. In May 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society enlisted the U.S. mail system to begin distributing abolitionist pamphlets and newspapers to religious and political leaders throughout the North and the South. "By the end of 1837," James Brewer Stewart notes, "the American Anti-Slavery Society had posted over a million pieces of antislavery literature." In 1835, abolitionists also launched a campaign that sent some 415,000 petitions to Congress within three years, urging an end to slavery in the District of Columbia and the passage of a law to prevent the admission of new slave states into the Union. Both of these efforts led to widespread antiabolitionist violence in the North. James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1997), 69, 70, 81–83.

<sup>6</sup> Ingraham was born in Maine but had married the daughter of a wealthy Natchez planter and settled in Mississippi during the early 1830s.

place and threatening to shoot anyone who stood in their way.<sup>7</sup> Although convention delegates did not explicitly evoke the figure of the black savage in official debates over black suffrage, they employed a type of coded rhetoric that white Pennsylvanians would undoubtedly have been able to decipher. In particular, they repeatedly expressed fears that the “public safety” in the commonwealth would be put in jeopardy if African Americans and whites were granted equal political rights. Some lawmakers undoubtedly used this term to suggest a potential backlash by white Pennsylvanians against African Americans if the new constitution expressly granted black men the right to vote. “The prejudice of the white is sufficiently strong against him now,” a delegate from Luzerne County pointed out in January 1838. “[B]eware how you increase that prejudice. Injury, annihilation to the black, sir, would be the result of making him the equal at the ballot box, with the white.” Some delegates seemed to fear violence by men of both races. Benjamin Martin, a representative from Philadelphia County, warned that enfranchising African Americans “would, in all probability, bring about a war between the races.” Similarly, John Sterigiere of Montgomery County predicted that the “antipathies” between blacks and whites would “produce conflicts and bloodshed at our elections, where all must meet, and on the same day.”<sup>8</sup>

In other instances, however, lawmakers expressed fears for the safety of whites in particular. Many indicated the racial specificity of their concerns by the use of the pronoun “our,” combined strategically with the term “own,” to reinforce the sense that white Pennsylvanians, represented by white lawmakers, were the ones put at risk by the legalization of black voting. “Our own safety . . . imperatively demand[s] a positive and express prohibition of negro suffrage,” John Sterigiere declared on January 18, 1838, two days before disfranchisement passed the convention. Two months earlier, on the same day the *Bedford Gazette* reported black men with weapons strong-arming their way to the ballot box, Charles Brown of Philadelphia County had argued that black suffrage was not “compatible with the interests and the safety of our own people.” At this point in the debate, disfranchisement became entangled with the issue of whether Pennsylvania should restrict migration into the state by race. Lawmakers like Brown expressed concern that if Pennsylvania’s “gates should be

<sup>7</sup> Malone, *Between Freedom and Bondage*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA, 1837–38), 5:456; 9:328, 321, 365, available on Pennsylvania Constitution Web site, [http://www.paconstitution.duq.edu/PAC\\_CC\\_1837.html](http://www.paconstitution.duq.edu/PAC_CC_1837.html) (accessed June 2008).

thrown open to all persons of colour who chose to enter them,” *and* if the new constitution affirmed the right of African Americans to vote, “the evil” of an increased black population “threatened to increase to an extent which no man could tell.”<sup>9</sup>

Though neither Sterigiere nor Brown elucidated the precise nature of the “evil” or the threat to the “public safety” that they feared would accompany black suffrage, they were clearly employing a type of cultural shorthand that other white Pennsylvanians would have immediately understood. Another lawmaker’s response to Charles Brown’s comments provides one clue to how his contemporaries would have interpreted his language. Thomas Earle—a resident of Philadelphia County, as Brown was—opposed the disfranchisement measure and stood to address his fellow delegates on the issue once Brown had yielded the floor. In championing the cause of black suffrage, Earle asked whether there had been “any member of this convention who ha[d] even suffered a particle of injury, in his person or his property, by the existence of the colored population among us.” A memorial written by black Philadelphians to the convention likewise stressed that “no where on the pages of history does it appear that insurrection, or similar violence, originated with us”—meaning, presumably, black Pennsylvanians. In these remarks, Earle and the petitioners were attempting to refute the notion that African Americans were likely to cause bodily harm to whites or to destroy their property. They must have believed, therefore, that when proponents of disfranchisement warned of “evil” and threats to “public safety,” they were drawing on the image of the dangerous, aggressive black man. Earle was asking convention delegates to consider their actual experiences with African Americans rather than to defer to popular stereotypes in deciding their position on black suffrage. These comments by Earle and the black petitioners suggest that the anxieties lawmakers like Brown and Sterigiere expressed about black voting drew on a well-known conception of African Americans as a violent and destructive race of people.<sup>10</sup>

Legislators employed other rhetoric during the constitutional convention of 1837–38 that marked African Americans as being irretrievably below the level of civilization that whites had attained; this was another critical element in the image of the black savage. “When I look at them, and then at myself, and at what the world is composed of,” Benjamin

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 9:358; 5:455.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 5:457.

Martin remarked, "I cannot but see a vast difference." The whites, Martin posited, "have been in advance, and have given a tone to civilization throughout the world"; in fact, he pointed out, "our sires were the 'masters of the civilized world.'" If the convention treated whites and blacks equally by giving African Americans voting rights, Martin emphasized, whites would be "retrograding and going down." Charles Brown wondered aloud "if these persons can ever rise to the elevation of civilized man." Brown even likened African-descended peoples to animals, cautioning that if the government decided to set the slaves free, they would simply be turning "them loose, like the wild horses, to prey upon and destroy one another."<sup>11</sup> White delegates to Pennsylvania's constitutional convention thus described African Americans both as hopelessly uncivilized and as violently destructive.

In doing so, Pennsylvania lawmakers drew on a long-standing literary tradition that classified African Americans as savages beyond the bounds of civilization. Earlier in the century, the texts—and, presumably, the people—that came out of the Haitian Revolution led to a proliferation of images of black savagery in Pennsylvania. Besides newspaper coverage of the slave revolts and military battles that had been a part of Haiti's thirteen-year attempt to gain its independence from European domination, Philadelphia presses also published numerous books focusing on the conflict. In part, Philadelphia became an important center for the publication of texts on Haiti because it was also the destination of some five thousand whites and blacks fleeing the violence in Saint-Domingue during the 1790s. Thus, both written and oral accounts of atrocities committed by black rebels during the revolution would have reached white Pennsylvanians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Books like Bryan Edwards's *Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo*, which was published in Philadelphia in 1805 and 1806, would have imprinted on the minds of white readers the notion that people of African descent were barbarians who would stop at nothing to satisfy their animalistic desires to torture and slaughter whites. Edwards, a Jamaican planter who had witnessed some of the conflict in Haiti firsthand, wrote in sensationalistic language that during the revolt in Saint-Domingue, "upwards of one hundred thousand savage people,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3:85, 697, 698.

<sup>12</sup> David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, SC, 2001), xiv.

habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail[ed] themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night, and [fell] on the peaceful and unsuspecting planters, like so many famished tigers thirsting for human blood.” Edwards noted that “all the shocking and shameful enormities, with which the fierce and unbridled passions of savage man have ever conducted a war, prevailed uncontrolled.” He went on for pages, describing specific acts of sickening cruelty that marked the rebels as being beyond the pale of civilization, or even humanity. The author detailed the nailing of a planter to one of the gates of his plantation, followed by the chopping off of his limbs while he was still alive. According to Edwards, one man, a carpenter, was sawn in half, and an impaled infant was used by the insurgents as a standard. Gang rape, the mutilation of pregnant women, and patricide rounded out the catalog of crimes Edwards charged the “savages,” as he deemed them, with having committed.<sup>13</sup>

In 1808, a Philadelphia publisher released Leonora Sansay’s book *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*. Sansay’s text was a romance novel that was partially autobiographical; it was set in Haiti in 1803 and 1804, when the nation was shoring up its independence from France. Though she stressed numerous instances in which slaves had helped save the lives of their former owners, Sansay depicted the majority of black Haitians who fought in the revolution as “monsters, thirsting after blood, and unsated with carnage.” She related two stories, in particular, that revealed the savagery of these men. In one, a powerful rebel offered to protect a white woman and her three daughters if the mother would allow him to marry the eldest of the daughters. When the mother refused, the rebel had her and the two younger girls hanged; when the oldest girl continued to rebuff him, Sansay reported that “the monster gave her to his guard, who hung her by the throat on an iron hook in the market place, where the lovely, innocent, unfortunate victim slowly expired.” In the second anecdote, a mulatto—an “unrelenting savage”—was inhuman enough to be able to resist the weeping of a beautiful young girl as she pleaded with him to spare the life of a French planter. Sansay reported that the man, whose hands were already “reeking with blood,” merely vowed “with bitter oaths to pursue all white men with unremitting fury.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bryan Edwards, *A Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo*, in *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia, 1806), 68–69, 79–80, 75, 98.

<sup>14</sup> [Leonora Sansay], *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo, in a Series of Letters, Written by a Lady at Cape François to Colonel Burr* (Philadelphia, 1808), 147, 153, 170.

Such scenes laid the foundation for white Pennsylvanians' view of African-descended men as inhuman "monsters" eager to kill whites in the most ruthless and brutal ways.

After the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, these images of brutish cruelty by black rebels abruptly disappeared from literature about slavery that was published in the United States. In the quarter century between 1810 and 1835, American authors and publishers seemed to go into denial about the potential for slaves to turn against their masters with shocking violence. Instead, most writers who included black slaves in their texts presented them as docile, simple-minded people whose perspective never reached beyond their almost obsessive loyalty to their masters. While literature released on the eve of the debates over disfranchisement in Pennsylvania continued to identify these more innocuous characteristics as part of African Americans' fundamental nature, it also revived notions of black savagery that had proliferated in texts published in the wake of the Haitian Revolution during the early part of the century. In these novels that emerged in 1835 and 1836, even the black slaves who showed profound devotion to their masters ended up glorying in the violent acts they committed. In doing so, they exhibited a savagery that would have been familiar to those who had read Sansay's novel or Edwards's text.<sup>15</sup>

Almost certainly, the widely publicized slave revolt that had occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831 played a central role in inspiring the violent male slave characters that suddenly reappeared in fictional literature four years later. When Nat Turner and his fellow bondsmen slaughtered nearly sixty slaveholding whites, many of them women and children, a new generation that was unfamiliar with the horrors of the Haitian Revolution became witness to the "savagery" that many white Americans had long suspected was characteristic of black men. As immediatism exploded on the national scene at mid-decade, quickly followed by antiabolitionist and proslavery denunciations of its claims, writers on

<sup>15</sup> See Sarah N. Roth, "The Mind of a Child: Images of African Americans in Early Juvenile Fiction," *Journal of the Early Republic* 25 (2005): 71–109. Other examples of this trend not noted in this article include John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn, or a Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (Philadelphia, 1832) and James Kirke Paulding's *Westward Ho! A Tale* (New York, 1832). Bruce Dain has noted that Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the Haitian leader who in 1804 ordered the expulsion of all whites from Haiti and the execution of those who would not leave, frightened white Americans to such an extent that they "turned to a form of denial," preferring to believe that "on their own, blacks could never launch or lead a slave rebellion." Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 90.



all sides of the slavery question appeared unavoidably drawn to the type of dangerous male slaves who had elicited such a powerful emotional response from whites and blacks in all parts of the United States. Antiabolitionist and proslavery authors incorporated violent black aggressors into their fiction chiefly as a warning to white Americans that only slavery had the power to contain the savage tendencies of African-descended peoples. Antiabolitionist authors also suggested that simple-minded slaves—contented as they were under their masters' care—would never, on their own initiative, organize and execute a slave rebellion. The danger lay in the possibility that antislavery advocates or their propaganda would mislead slaves into doing so. Abolitionist authors, for their part, reinforced the notion of black savagery in the 1830s, seizing on the violent black rebel as a symbol of the devastation that awaited white Americans if they continued to support the slave system. Since their objective was to alarm white Americans rather than gain respect for African Americans, these authors portrayed violent black men as frightening savages rather than as manly black revolutionaries. The fiction that emerged during the mid-1830s thus served as a medium through which activists supporting different positions in the battle over slavery could blame their enemies for slave insurrections like Nat Turner's rebellion.

If Pennsylvania lawmakers and their white constituents had read any of the slavery-related novels that had been published during the previous two years, they would have encountered vivid renderings of the kind of black violence white authors believed would accompany a "war between the races" in the United States. Even if, for some, recollections of Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion had begun to fade, antiabolitionist and proslavery authors writing in the mid-1830s provided graphic reminders of the horrors slave aggression entailed for whites. White northern men, in particular, were exposed to scenes of black violence in the pages of some of the most widely sold adventure novels of the day. Harper and Brothers of New York City, the most prolific and commercially successful publishing house of its day, published the most popular of these novels.<sup>16</sup> Several, including William Gilmore Simms's *The Yemassee* and John Holt Ingraham's *Lafitte*, were runaway commercial successes. Philadelphia newspapers noted most of these novels. The *Pennsylvania Inquirer* reviewed *The Yemassee*, declaring, despite the haste with which the critic

<sup>16</sup> See Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper: A Unique Publishing Partnership and Its Impact upon the Cultural Life of America from 1817 to 1853* (New York, 1965).

believed the novel must have been written, that “many of its passages are fraught with true genius, and the whole work bears the impress of power.” A critic from the *National Gazette* was less impressed with Simms’s *Mellichampe* than he had been with *The Yemassee*. But the reviewer singled out Simms’s treatment of Scipio, the central black character in *Mellichampe*, as “a portrait that wears all the aspect of genuineness and vitality.” Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee* was advertised in both the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* and the *Public Ledger*; *Lafitte*, by John Holt Ingraham, was noticed in the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, and the *Public Ledger* reported in July 1836 that a dramatic production of the novel was being staged at the Bowery Theatre in New York. Three months later, the *Ledger* announced that the drama would be presented at the American Theatre on Walnut Street. It ran in October and November 1836, precisely six months before the constitutional convention that disfranchised black men was to convene in Harrisburg. The American Theatre revived the play at least once, in February 1838, three weeks after the final vote had been taken at the convention to strike down black suffrage.<sup>17</sup> The types of savage black characters that consistently appeared in popular novels like *The Yemassee* or *Lafitte* would, therefore, likely have been familiar to many of the Pennsylvania lawmakers who debated the merits and dangers of African American suffrage during the 1837–38 convention.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, perhaps, proslavery and antiabolitionist novelists depicted African American bondsmen as anticitizens in every respect. The vengeful attacks by fictional black slaves that regularly occurred in these narratives helped to establish in the minds of white northerners that African Americans represented a threat to the safety and integrity of the republic. At the same time, most proslavery and antiabolitionist writers framed the vicious actions of their black male characters so as to express

<sup>17</sup> *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, Apr. 22, 1835; *National Gazette*, Nov. 29, 1836. According to the *Public Ledger*, the play *La Fitte; or, The Pirate’s Home* was performed at the American Theatre on Walnut Street on October 29 and on November 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7 in 1836. The constitutional convention opened on May 2, 1837. The play was again presented at the American Theatre on February 9, 10, and 11, 1838. The convention approved the disfranchisement provision on January 20, 1838.

<sup>18</sup> The first edition of *The Yemassee* sold out in hours, and the publisher issued three printings of the novel within nine months of its initial publication in the spring of 1835. (Generally, in the 1830s, 2,500 copies of a novel were issued in each printing.) See William Gilmore Simms, *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina*, ed. Joseph V. Ridgely (1835; repr., New York, 1964), 16; Mary C. Sims Oliphant et al., eds., *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms* (Columbia, SC, 1954), 3:222–23. *Lafitte*, published in June 1836, had sold out the first 2,500 copies by September and quickly earned for Ingraham the impressive sum of \$1,250. See Exman, *Brothers Harper*, 73.

the loyalty of the slave to his master. Happily servile as well as savagely brutal, black men in these narratives were thus neither independent nor civilized enough to be considered a legitimate (or even a safe) part of the American electorate.

The figure of the black savage was meant to evoke for white readers visions of dark-skinned tribes in remote parts of the world that civilization, as Americans understood it, had not effectively reached. On the scale of mental and moral development, nineteenth-century whites classified these men as being closer to animals than to humans.<sup>19</sup> The slave Cudjoe in Joseph Holt Ingraham's 1836 novel *Lafitte* provides an extreme example of the type of uncivilized, animalistic African character that argued against black men's inclusion in the electorate during the antebellum period. In a classic caricature of the dark-skinned savage, Ingraham fitted Cudjoe with a nose "of vast dimensions" and ears that "hung down in enormous lapels." Ingraham, a native of Maine who had taken up residence in Mississippi earlier in the 1830s, repeatedly described Cudjoe's physical form in explicitly animalistic terms. Cudjoe's "long arms," Ingraham noted, "hung down like those of the ourang-outant." In addition, the four-foot-tall slave possessed "glittering white teeth, two of which flanking his capacious jaws, projected outwards, with the dignity of the embryo tusks of a young elephant." Elsewhere in the novel, Ingraham likened his central black character to a tiger, an alligator, and a wild boar.<sup>20</sup>

Cudjoe's personality matched his bestial appearance. "When roused to revenge," Ingraham alerted his readers, Cudjoe was "more terrible than the uncaged hyena." The violence Cudjoe ultimately committed in the novel offered final confirmation of the danger black men posed to those around them. In the novel's final scenes, Cudjoe took his revenge against Oula, an African priestess who had betrayed him. Ingraham described the killing in simple but graphic language: "Before Oula could comprehend his motives, the reeking blade passed through her withered bosom." Cudjoe shouted, "Take dis, hag ob hell!" and then "drew forth the knife from her breast." To assuage his fury, Cudjoe also murdered Oula's son and a Spanish sailor who had been in league with Oula against the deformed slave. While Ingraham's white readers might have been either

<sup>19</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1968), 28.

<sup>20</sup> [Joseph Holt Ingraham], *Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1836), 2:32-33, 34.

amused or repulsed by Cudjoe's physical deformities alone, these brutal actions combined with his animal appearance to establish Cudjoe—and, by extension, black men in general—as a beast whose inclusion in the American electorate would have destabilized the republic.<sup>21</sup>

In other antiabolitionist literature of the 1830s, black characters revealed their savagery when they committed aggressive acts for no other purpose than the enjoyment they gained from tormenting helpless victims. In antebellum culture, civilized men might engage in violence, but they had a very specific purpose for doing so. Defending one's life or freedom, protecting one's family, or avenging a wrong perpetrated against oneself or a loved one justified violence or even murder as an honorable, righteous act. Antiabolitionist and proslavery authors alleged that once they had gotten a taste for blood, black men, on the other hand, would revel in killing for its own sake. The popular author William Gilmore Simms of South Carolina included several examples of this assumption in his 1835 novel *The Yemassee*. In one scene, Simms depicted a faceless mass of black slaves let loose by their white owners against a group of Indians the whites had already subdued in battle. Simms portrayed the slaves "scouring the field of battle with their huge clubs and hatchets, knocking upon the heads all of the Indians who yet exhibited any signs of life." They clearly enjoyed what they were doing, as Simms described them "inflicting the most unnecessary blows, even upon the dying and the dead." In fact, Simms reported that the slaves "luxuriated in a pursuit to them so very novel." This ruthless disregard for human life clearly identified the slaves in *The Yemassee*—men who, according to Simms, were "as wild almost as the savages"—as unfit for the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship, or even for civilized life.<sup>22</sup>

Significantly, Simms emphasized that the slaves in *The Yemassee* were not allowed to participate in the honorable fighting of formal warfare, but only took action against the Indians once "there was no longer the form of a battle array among them." While manly warfare in the early nineteenth century demanded that combat take place between two equally matched foes, Simms presented these slaves as bloodthirsty cowards who struck down a force of noble Yemassee wholly unable to defend themselves. "The negroes cleared the woods with their clubs," Simms reported, "beating out the brains of those whom they overtook, almost without hav-

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2:188–89.

<sup>22</sup> Simms, *Yemassee*, 414.

ing any resistance offered them.” Thus, black men in the novel served not as admirable soldiers but more as a brutal clean-up crew that swept in once the official fighting had ended. In addition, these scenes demonstrated that black men lacked feeling for other human beings, a vital humanizing quality in northern antebellum culture. Unmoved by other people’s suffering, the black brutes in Simms’s narrative showed no mercy or compassion once they began their work of extermination. As Simms recounted, the slaves who attacked the Yemassee “spar[ed] none, whether they fought or pleaded.” Thus, by portraying African Americans as lacking courage, sympathy, and any regard for human life, Simms called into question not only the manhood of black men but also their humanity.<sup>23</sup>

Antiabolitionist and proslavery authors of the 1830s also suggested that while black men might experience a savage glee in committing murder in general, they might take particular joy in killing white men. In *Lafitte*, Cudjoe’s perpetual bitterness against the whites who made fun of him suggests that Ingraham feared black men might harbor a hatred for whites and a desire to avenge the wrongs they had suffered as a result of slaveholders’ cruelty. As with Simms’s anonymous gang of black executioners, the violent deeds Cudjoe actually committed did not harm any white Americans. Nevertheless, all of the resentment the unsightly slave had accumulated over the years was directed specifically at white men. When asked at one point in the narrative who had harmed him, Cudjoe replied, “more buckras [whites] dan de fingers on dese two han!” When a white man poked fun at his deformities, Cudjoe’s private reaction revealed his intense abhorrence of whites (with the important exception of his beloved master) and the chilling potential for black men to unleash a primal form of violence against them. In one instance, after a white captain had laughed at Cudjoe, Ingraham reported that “the eye of the slave gleamed with rage, and a demoniac smile fearfully displayed the hideous features of his mouth.” What the man could not see, Ingraham noted, was that “deep and bitter was the hatred rankling in his dark bosom.” While the slave might smile or laugh on the outside, Ingraham warned that whites’ offensive treatment of Cudjoe was “sowing, unconsciously, seeds of revenge in the heart of the deformed negro, of which they were . . . destined to reap the bitter fruits.” Figures like Cudjoe symbolized for white Americans the unseen potential for black violence that was always lurk-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 383–84, 414.

ing below the surface of seemingly innocuous interactions between the races.<sup>24</sup>

Proslavery authors like William Gilmore Simms suggested that even slaves who were devoted to their masters might glory in killing whites. In Simms's *Mellichampe*, published in 1836, the unlikely demonstrator of this notion was the stoutly loyal, seemingly simple-minded slave Scipio. The action in *Mellichampe* took place in South Carolina during the American Revolution. At a critical moment in Simms's story, Scipio's master was overpowered by a British soldier, and Scipio was the only person available to help him. Although the slave at first proved highly reluctant to strike a white man, once he had done so, and had killed the soldier, Scipio reacted in an oddly exuberant manner. Tellingly, the slave's giddiness did not arise from the fact that he had saved his master. Instead, it was the "new-born experience" of killing a white man, Simms related, that had an "intoxicating effect" on the black man. As the slave himself put it, "in tones like those of a maniac"—and with an unmistakable note of triumph in his voice—"T's a nigger, I kill buckrah!" Even though a male slave like Scipio might be a loyal, contented dependent, he, like all black men, Simms implied, was at his core still a savage who gloried in killing—and particularly in taking a white life. Twice, Scipio told white characters the story of how he had killed the Englishman, seeming to delight in recounting the gory details. "I take light-wood knot, I hammer um on he head tell you sees noting but de blood and de brain, and de white ob he eye. He dead—'tis Scip mash um," the slave reported proudly. "I knock him fur true!" he insisted. "I hit um on he head wid de pine-knot. De head mash flat like pancake. I no see um 'gen." Scipio's graphic narrative was supposed to be unsettling for Simms's white readers, as it was for his white characters. Simms concluded the chapter by detailing in a single-sentence paragraph the reaction of two young women who had listened to the tale: "The maidens," he wrote, "shuddered at the narration."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, although black men might seem in all respects harmlessly servile and affectionately loyal, authors like Simms insinuated that whites could never entirely trust that they would be safe around a race of people that was but one step removed from the wilds of uncivilized Africa. A misunderstanding between Scipio and his master's fiancée pointed to unspoken

<sup>24</sup> Ingraham, *Lafitte*, 2:182, 54.

<sup>25</sup> William Gilmore Simms, *Mellichampe: A Legend of the Santee* (New York, 1836), 2:225, 226.

fears of black treachery and violence harbored by Simms's slaveholding characters. When Scipio returned alone from the skirmish with the British soldier, his master's fiancée pressed the slave for news about the man she loved. "Where is he?—tell me he is safe," she implored. In response, the still-distracted Scipio answered, thinking of the Englishman, "He dead!—I kill um!" Simms wrote that immediately upon hearing Scipio's words the young woman "shrieked and fell." Significantly, she did not think to question this bizarre and incongruous statement from a personal servant who had repeatedly professed his undying love for his master throughout the novel. Instead, the woman accepted at once the idea that the black man had taken the life of the white man who had owned him. Although, in this instance, white fears of mutinous black violence proved unfounded, Simms nevertheless had raised the possibility that a black man's fidelity might be a ruse and that even a seemingly devoted slave like Scipio might lash out against his beloved master. Whites, then, must be on their guard, lest they, rather than some foreign invader, become the enemy that black men delighted in killing.<sup>26</sup>

The ease with which slaves' loyalty to their masters was destroyed in Robert Montgomery Bird's antiabolitionist novel *Sheppard Lee* provided even more alarming confirmation for white readers that black men were, at their core, untrustworthy, dangerous savages bent on white destruction. In Bird's initial description of the Virginia plantation where part of his narrative was set, he emphasized the deep love and devotion the slaves there felt for their master and the kindness with which they were treated. But an abolitionist pamphlet called "The Fate of the Slave" fell into the hands of these bondsmen, transforming their attitude overnight. "A week before," Bird's narrator reported, "there was not one of them who would not have risked his life to save his master's," but "the scene was now changed," as the slaves "began to talk of violence and dream of blood." Bird implied that the weak minds of these black men had enabled this sinister antislavery propaganda to have such a profound influence on them. One "little book," the narrator lamented, "had the effect to make a hundred men, who were previously content with their lot in life . . . the victims of dissatisfaction and rage, the enemies of those they had once loved, and, in fine, the contrivers and authors of their own destruction." While Bird's readers might have been impressed with the senseless

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2:225.

destruction an abolitionist tract had created, this scenario also cast doubt on the depth of the slaves' allegiance to their master in the first place. The haste with which they adopted the plan to "exterminate all the white men in Virginia, beginning with [their] master and his family," also indicated the zeal with which black men supposedly embraced violence against whites.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Simms and Ingraham, Bird—a resident not of the Deep South but of Pennsylvania—forced his readers to confront directly the terrible prospect of slave insurrection and race war. The narrator in *Sheppard Lee* described the slaves' firing at their master and the overseer with "six or seven guns" and then attacking them with spears. By noting the "savage yells of triumph" with which the insurgents chased down the master's children, Bird clearly stressed the uncivilized nature of the attackers. The innocence and youth of the victims as much as the designation "savage" signified the base nature of these black men.<sup>28</sup> The slaves' intention to violate sexually their master's oldest daughters, however, most conspicuously marked them as inhuman barbarians. As Winthrop Jordan pointed out in *White Over Black*, "Lecherousness . . . was what one expected of savages."<sup>29</sup> In anticipation of success in their rebellion, the slaves in *Sheppard Lee* "apportioned among themselves, in prospective, the wives and daughters of their intended victims." During the revolt itself, "ruffians maddened by rage and carnage" pursued seventeen-year-old Isabella and twelve-year-old Edith onto the roof of their house. As one "ferocious" slave tried "to lay an impure touch" on Isabella, the young woman escaped from his grasp by throwing her sister to her death and then jumping off the roof herself. Bird's white readers would likely have sympathized with the narrator, who was "seized with terror" at "the idea of seeing those innocent, helpless maidens made the prey of brutal murderers." Seen as a threat to the purity of white womanhood as well as to the integrity of the republic, whites would hardly have welcomed into the political community—particularly in states like Bird's Pennsylvania—the race that such "ruffians" represented.<sup>30</sup>

On one level, antiabolitionist writers like Bird were expressing their own fears about black violence when they included in their novels such

<sup>27</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee. Written by Himself* (New York, 1836), 2:192, 199, 200, 196.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:204.

<sup>29</sup> Jordan, *White Over Black*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 2:206–7, 200, 199.



harrowing scenes as those found in *Sheppard Lee*. During Nat Turner's rebellion, Bird had recorded his personal anxieties about slave revolt in his diary: "Some day we shall have it," he mused darkly, "and future generations will perhaps remember the horrors of Haiti as a farce compared with the tragedies of our own happy land!" On another level, however, fictional portrayals of black male violence can also be read as metaphors for white fears that African Americans would gain power of any type in American society. In *Sheppard Lee*, the ultimate goal of the black insurgents was global political dominance over whites. The slaves, according to Bird, desired for their race to become "the masters of all the white men in the world." Bird described the leader of the rebels as "tyrannical" and, significantly, dubbed him "Governor," or "King Governor." In doing so, Bird implied that African Americans were by nature autocrats rather than democrats and that, as a result, they would leave the republic in tatters were they ever to gain political sway. The year after Bird's novel was published, one of the delegates to the Pennsylvania constitutional convention expressed a similar concern that if African Americans were given the vote, they might ultimately attain political domination over whites. Extending the suffrage to black men, William Meredith warned, might "enable them, at some future day, to wrest the government from the hands of the descendants of those who founded it." Another lawmaker maintained simply that "the elevation of the black" would mean "the degradation of the white man." Such rhetoric underscored the idea that political power must be kept out of the hands of African Americans, or white Americans would be forever subjugated to the morally bereft black race.<sup>31</sup>

While proslavery and antiabolitionist authors of the 1830s intentionally used the figure of the black savage to encourage white northerners' rejection of both emancipation and racial equality, abolitionist writers inadvertently contributed to these efforts with the fictional narratives they produced during the same period. Historians of abolitionism tend to identify the 1850s as the decade when the threatening black rebel burst onto the scene in antislavery literature. The repeated appearance of the savage slave in abolitionist literature during the 1830s, however, complicates the picture historians generally paint of early white immediatists as peaceful evangelizers determined to change the hearts of white

<sup>31</sup> Robert Montgomery Bird diary, Aug. 27, 1831, quoted in, "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records of R. M. Bird*," ed. Richard Harris, *Library Chronicle* 25 (1959): 16, 17; Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 2:196, 198; *Proceedings and Debates*, 9:349, 321.

Americans by evoking sympathy for the poor, downtrodden slave. Although white abolitionists did employ such tactics, scholars' emphasis on "moral suasion" as antislavery activists' primary rhetorical strategy in the 1830s has led them to miss the equally important use of scare tactics designed to turn white Americans against the slave system. Nor did the slave rebels depicted in early abolitionist literature always seem worthy of the privileges and the responsibilities of citizenship.<sup>32</sup> More often than not, the purpose of the "savage slave" in antislavery texts was not to influence white readers to admire the black freedom fighter, but to alarm whites at the horrific prospect of white destruction effected at the hands of a menacing black aggressor. Thus, despite their commitment to equal legal and political rights for African Americans, with these narratives white abolitionists reinforced cultural images of black men that undermined their claims to civilization. Consequently, they unintentionally helped to justify white northerners' denial of the franchise to them.

Depictions of either slave violence or the threat of such violence in antislavery narratives emerged, in part, out of the frustration and righteous anger abolitionists felt in the face of the deplorable conditions African Americans experienced in the United States during the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>33</sup> David Walker, perhaps the most aggressive spokesperson for black rights in his day, provided an especially clear example of how such sentiments might translate into advocacy for black violence. Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which went into three editions after its initial publication in 1829, expressed plainly the anger and resentment of a free black man who during his lifetime had lived among free and enslaved African Americans in the South as well as free blacks in the North. In his pamphlet, Walker railed against the hypocrisy of nominally "enlightened and Christian" Americans who tortured and

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY, 2002), 186–89; James Brewer Stewart, "From Moral Suasion to Political Confrontation: American Abolitionists and the Problem of Resistance, 1831–1861," in *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*, ed. David W. Blight (Washington, DC, 2004), 68–71. The work of Stanley Harrold has proven an important exception to this tendency. Harrold has suggested that even in the 1830s, abolitionists admired black rebels and "warned that, unless masters freed their chattels, the slaves would attempt to liberate themselves violently." Stanley Harrold, *American Abolitionists* (Harlow, Eng., 2001), 75.

<sup>33</sup> For details of this discrimination, see Stewart, "Emergence of Racial Modernity." Earlier studies of the treatment of African Americans in the antebellum North include Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago, 1965) and Leonard L. Richards, "Gentlemen of Property and Standing": *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970).

murdered their slaves, kept them in ignorance, and prevented them from practicing the Christian religion. "God will deliver us from under you," he assured white Americans. "And wo, wo, will be to you if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting."<sup>34</sup> Like the white abolitionists who would follow him in the coming decade, Walker discussed the possibility of black violence not solely as a means of venting his own frustrations with the racial situation in the United States, but also as a deliberate strategy for frightening white Americans into opposing slavery. In doing so, Walker appealed to whites' concerns for their own safety rather than to any possible sympathy they might have felt for their fellow human beings in bondage.

To instill the greatest amount of fear possible in his white readers, Walker employed the most harrowing image of black men available to him at the time—that of the murderous savage. "The blacks, once you get them started, they glory in death," he forewarned his white readers. "Get the blacks started, and if you do not have a gang of tigers and lions to deal with, I am a deceiver of the blacks and of the whites."<sup>35</sup> Walker reinforced the notion that black men were, at heart, unfeeling, bloodthirsty animals. White northerners, therefore, could not easily accept them as the "coloured *citizens*" that were identified in Walker's title, implying, as that term did, that they deserved to be granted all the political and legal rights that state governments were beginning to extend to white men in the early antebellum period.

The following year, in September 1830, the white author Lydia Maria Child published "The St. Domingo Orphans," a story that depicted the horrors of the Haitian revolution from the point of view of two young white girls, the Jameson sisters. As Walker had in his *Appeal*, Child used dark threats of slave violence in her story as a means of turning white readers against the slave system. "The St. Domingo Orphans," which appeared in Child's popular periodical *Juvenile Miscellany*, was a story meant explicitly for children. Nevertheless, Child did not shy away from recounting either the Haitian rebels' terrifying pursuit of the Jameson girls or the harrowing details involved in the slaughter of white slaveholders and their families. As a result, she encountered the same dilemma David Walker had faced in constructing his *Appeal*. The more frightening her depiction of slave rebels in "The St. Domingo Orphans," the more

<sup>34</sup> *David Walker's Appeal . . .*, ed. Sean Wilentz (New York, 1995), 3, 73.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

effective Child would be in convincing her readers of the dangers the slave system held for whites. But by making those rebels as terrifying as possible, Child endowed the majority of the black soldiers that appeared in her narrative with the qualities of the savage slave. These “unfeeling wretches” showed no sympathy for their victims, even when those victims were innocent children. Referring to the Jamesons’ former coachman, Child stressed that “the sobs and shrieks of the wretched widow and her children did not excite the least pity in his hardened heart.” The same rebel leader, in fact, possessed so little compassion that this “savage creature,” as Child described him, felt no compunction about threatening his own daughter with death when she refused to reveal to him where the Jameson girls were hiding. The soldiers “butchered” their victims, a term that suggested these men had no more regard for the people they killed than they would for an animal. Like their “blood-thirsty” leader Dessalines, they killed whites indiscriminately and even took “real pleasure” in committing these murderous acts. These characteristics revealed Child’s Haitian revolutionaries to be classic examples of uncivilized brutes of the type that would have made her white readers cringe with fear and, Child hoped, reject the system that had given rise to such barbarity. This representation of black men, however, more likely would have emphasized to northern white children and their parents that African Americans could never be considered trustworthy members of the polity.<sup>36</sup>

Even after Garrisonian pacifism became popular within the antislavery movement during the early 1830s, the image of the dangerous black man continued to lurk in some of the most prominent abolitionist narratives of the decade. Richard Hildreth’s 1836 novel, *The Slave, or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*, introduced a male slave who exemplified a black masculinity intended to be both admirable and terrifying for whites. Archy Moore’s close friend Thomas, though originally a devout Christian and an obedient slave, underwent a profound transformation after an overseer beat his wife to death. At that point, distinct traces of the savage began to emerge in Thomas’s character, as he renounced Methodism and “secretly returned to the practice of certain wild rites” he had learned from his African mother. In addition, Thomas “suffered under occasional fits of partial insanity,” experiencing visions of his dead wife and even holding conversations with her. Mentally unstable and deeply connected with heathen practices that white Americans would have seen as darkly mys-

<sup>36</sup> Lydia Maria Child, “The St. Domingo Orphans,” *Juvenile Miscellany* (1830): 82, 81, 89.

terious, even sinister, Thomas began committing subversive acts and plotting revenge against the overseer. "Blood for blood; is it not so, Archy?" he inquired ominously of Hildreth's narrator.<sup>37</sup>

The scene in which Thomas successfully avenged his wife's death made the powerful statement that black men might easily embrace violence as a means of gaining retribution for the injustices they and their loved ones had suffered in slavery. When Archy and Thomas took the overseer captive, Archy looked to Thomas to determine what they should do with him. After brief consideration, Thomas declared, "Archy, that man dies to-night." From this point on in the scene, Thomas and the gun he had taken from the overseer were inseparable; Hildreth continually mentioned this symbol of power and violence whenever he described Thomas's actions. As the overseer cried and pleaded for his life, Thomas "stood by, with his arms folded and resting on the gun." He then "stepped back a few paces, and raised the gun." The shot, Hildreth related, "penetrated [the overseer's] brain, and he fell dead without a struggle." At the end of the novel, the light-skinned Archy made his way to the North, but Hildreth chose to leave Thomas "traversing the woods of that neighborhood, and lurking about the plantations." In the end, Hildreth made sure this wronged black man with physical strength and savage impulses would always be ready to strike when white slaveholders least expected it.<sup>38</sup>

The same year *The Slave* was published, a character that proved uncannily similar to Hildreth's Thomas appeared in Charles Ball's autobiographical narrative *Slavery in the United States*. Like Thomas, who Hildreth reported had become "morose and sullen" after his wife's death, Ball's father experienced a permanent separation from his wife and children. As a result, he became "gloomy and morose in his temper." As Hildreth had with Thomas, Ball associated his father with darker elements of his African heritage, reporting that his father began spending "nearly all his leisure time with my grandfather, who . . . had been a great warrior in his native country." Though Ball stopped short of suggesting his father had contemplated revenge against the master who had destroyed his family, he made clear that this descendant of an African

<sup>37</sup> Richard Hildreth, *Archie Moore, The White Slave; Or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* (1856; repr., New York, 1971), 189, 182. Published in 1836 as *The Slave, or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*; in 1852 it was republished with the title *The White Slave; Or, Memoirs of a Fugitive*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 202, 234.

warrior carried with him the promise of violence if the necessity for it arose. "It was deemed unsafe . . . to attempt to seize him, even with the aid of others," Ball explained, "as it was known he carried upon his person a large knife." Ball's father ultimately escaped to the North rather than remain a perpetual threat to whites in the South, as Thomas had. But the inclusion in Ball's narrative of a black man with the capacity for violence and a distinctly African identity nevertheless proffered a warning to whites that black men would not always be easily subdued.<sup>39</sup>

The constitutional debates over whether Pennsylvania should formally disfranchise African American men were initiated in 1837, the year after Ball's narrative, *The Slave, Lafitte, Mellichampe, and Sheppard Lee* first reached American booksellers. As deliberations began in Harrisburg on the question of black suffrage, prominent newspapers in the state began publishing articles that worked to reinforce an image of black men as menacing aggressors unfit for citizenship.<sup>40</sup> Besides printing articles early in the year about armed black men in Philadelphia who incited riots or engaged in violent crimes against whites, the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* employed a sketch entitled "The Negro Queen" as a veiled account of the types of horrors that might ensue if African-descended people gained political power. The lengthy piece, which centered on the legendary seventeenth-century Angolan queen Nzingha, appeared on the newspaper's first page the day after the convention's summer session ended in July 1837. It graphically depicted cannibalistic acts that Nzingha and her father had allegedly committed during their respective reigns. The article detailed ceremonies held by Nzingha's father in which he "surrounded [himself] with the dead bodies of new-born babes" and "drank the warm blood of the human victim[s]." When the king died, the unnamed author noted, "two hundred innocent beings were put to death and eaten at the funeral banquet." On this occasion, "the glory of the deceased monarch was celebrated . . . by the songs of the slayers, mingled with the cries and screams of the women, children, and old men serving as victims, many of whom fell by the hand of [N]Zingha herself, who would sing praises to

<sup>39</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man . . .* (1836; repr., New York, 1837), 19. The 1836 edition was published in Lewiston, Pennsylvania.

<sup>40</sup> Although scholars have deemed black disfranchisement in Pennsylvania to have been a partisan Democratic measure to weaken their political opposition, the affiliation of the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* with the Whig Party during the presidential election of 1836 suggests that support for the measure went beyond just the Democratic Party. See Malone, *Between Freedom and Bondage*, 63, 72–82.

her gods as she pierced the bosom of a young girl and drank her blood.” Once she became queen, the *Inquirer* reported, Nzingha showed herself to be as “cruel and vindictive as the most savage of her nation.” In one of her most horrifying acts, the queen stabbed her infant nephew in the heart and threw him in a river to ensure that he would not get her crown. Without referencing the issue of black participation in the governance of Pennsylvania, this article subtly gave white readers an example of the kind of inhuman barbarity and egregious abuse of power that had resulted in the past when African-descended peoples rose to positions of political authority.<sup>41</sup>

A few weeks before delegates reconvened for the convention’s fall session, the *Inquirer* printed another historical vignette, this one emphasizing the volatility of black men who might, at the slightest pretext, become enraged and resort to violence. “Scenes in Havana, in 1822,” published in September 1837, outlined the problems Cuban officials had had with theft on ships docked in Havana during the summer of 1822. The central focus of the article, however, was a “big, surly athletic negro.” This intimidating man of African descent “armed himself with a carving knife” and killed one of the Spanish pirates trying to board the ship on which the black man served as cook. Like Cudjoe in J. H. Ingraham’s *Lafitte*, this physically intimidating slave was motivated less by courage or by loyalty to his masters than by a selfish and unjustified “grudge” he held against the Spaniards for “what he conceived to be ill-treatment” during an unspecified incident that had occurred on shore the preceding weekend. Black men, the unnamed author implied, could not be trusted to act in a reasonable manner, and when they lost control of themselves, as they had the tendency to do, they put the safety of the more rational whites around them in grave danger. Such qualities were not befitting of a virtuous citizen. In fact, the *Inquirer* hinted that if black men were allowed to participate in governing, the American republic would be doomed.<sup>42</sup>

The years immediately preceding the debate over black suffrage in Pennsylvania represented a distinctive moment in the on-going discussion of slavery that took place within popular antebellum literature. At no other point did abolitionist, antiabolitionist, and proslavery authors all make the violent black savage a centerpiece of their narratives in the way

<sup>41</sup> “The Negro Queen,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, July 15, 1837.

<sup>42</sup> “Attempted Assassination,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, Jan. 10, 1837; “Riot,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, Mar. 14, 1837; “Scenes in Havana, in 1822,” *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, Sept. 11, 1837.

they had in the texts they published in 1835 and 1836. After 1836, supporters of slavery banished dangerous black men from their fictional narratives, crowding them out with characters less disturbing for white readers, like the musical plantation slave or the faithful old servant. Likewise, many abolitionist authors opted after 1836 to represent African American men as objects of pity rather than objects of fear in an attempt to appeal to a white readership squeamish about black violence. The staggering popularity of Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery As It Is*, published in 1839, helped confirm the wisdom of that decision. The tract portrayed slaves strictly as victims of inhumane treatment by cruel slaveholders and sold over one hundred thousand copies in a single year.<sup>43</sup> When abolitionists writing after 1836 did depict black men who had committed violent acts, they stressed the nobility of these men and focused on the legitimacy of their cause. As a result, they portrayed men like Joseph Cinqué—the leader of the *Amistad* revolt in 1839—as manly revolutionaries fighting, as American patriots had, for the cause of freedom. Not until the 1850s, however, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act had led more abolitionists to embrace violent self-defense as an acceptable strategy, did admirable black rebels become common figures within abolitionist literature. These characters appeared in novels and novellas like Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" (1854), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred* (1856), and Martin Delany's *Blake* (serialized 1859–61), and their noble manliness made them fundamentally different from the inhuman savages that had populated abolitionist, antiabolitionist, and proslavery texts in the 1830s.<sup>44</sup>

The disfranchisement of black voters in Pennsylvania constituted one of the most tragic watersheds in African American political history. In the 1830s, the population of free blacks in Pennsylvania exceeded that of every other state in the Northeast except New York, which, in 1822, had already excluded from the electorate all but the wealthiest of its black residents. After Pennsylvania, New Jersey had the next highest number of free people of color, with less than half of Pennsylvania's numbers, and its legislature had taken the vote away from African Americans in 1807. The

<sup>43</sup> Robert H. Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York, 1982), 213.

<sup>44</sup> See Frederick Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths (Cleveland, OH, 1853), 174–239; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, (Boston, 1856); and Martin R. Delany, *Blake; or, The Huts of America*, ed. Floyd J. Miller (Boston, 1970).



stripping away of black political power in Pennsylvania, then, effectively eliminated from the political process in the United States all but a few African Americans in Massachusetts and other states with very small black populations. Although both abolitionists and their opponents quickly abandoned the figure of the black savage after 1838, its damaging effects had already been wrought. It helped white northerners chip away even further at the freedoms that had previously separated African Americans in the nominally free states from their southern brothers in bondage.

*Widener University*

SARAH N. ROTH