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UNCLE TOM FROM PAGE TO STAGE: LIMITATIONS OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY DRAMA

David Grimsted

ONE of the literary puzzles of the early nineteenth century is why drama in English remained artistically moribund at a time when major work was done in novels, poetry, and essays.¹ Perhaps part of the explanation can be seen through a comparison of a single work in two forms, one of them the great publishing sensation of its era, the other the most popular play of all time. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in print and on stage, suggests the differences in media and some of the reasons for the weaknesses of drama in this period.

Though Mrs. Stowe's book was a publishing sensation, George L. Aiken's play was even more epoch-making in the annals of the theater. About six months after Mrs. Stowe's book appeared, Aiken wrote for the theater in Troy, New York where he was acting, a play that concluded with the death of Little Eva; when this proved successful he wrote a sequel ending in Tom's death, and the two parts were later joined in

one long play.² In the wake of the novel's unprecedented popularity, it was not surprising that a stage adaptation followed; since the 1830s leading theaters had regularly employed dramatists to "compile" plays from almost any successful novel. What was surprising was that Aiken handled the book so honestly and did so little to hide under melodramatic conventionalities the social issue the novel explores.

Almost nothing is known about Aiken's personal life and opinions. He had already been on the stage as an actor for four years when, as a young man of 22, he adapted Mrs. Stowe's novel. He had also written a few plays including one "prize" tragedy dealing with slavery in Sparta, *Helos the Helot*.³ In 1870, six years before Aiken's death, the stage chronicler, T. Allston Brown, called him "one of the youngest and most successful dramatists in this country," apparently on the basis of plays like *The Doom of Deville* and *Josie; or Was He a Woman?* and stories such as *The Household*

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¹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York, 1961), pp. 106-150, considers interestingly the problem.

² Edgar W. Ames, "The First Presentation of Uncle Tom's Cabin," *Americana*, VI (November 1911), 1045-52.

³ George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1931), VI, 146.

Skeleton and A New York Boy Among the Indians.⁴ What his views on slavery were is not known, though he reputedly dramatized Mrs. Stowe's *Dred* and even her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁵ What is known is that Aiken was true for the most part to both the words and the spirit of Mrs. Stowe.⁶ Judging from the printed acting version at least there is little doubt of a "certain note of sincerity" and of real respect for the novel in Aiken's handling.⁷ The specific limitations of the play vis-a-vis the novel tend to be ones endemic to the stage rather than those of gross distortion.

The novel was a sprawling affair and Aiken's most obvious problem was to condense it into manageable dramatic form. An earlier stage version had done this by paring the novel down to the "romantic" story of George and Eliza. Aiken took no such easy way out, and his play necessarily became episodic; in its printed form it includes six acts and thirty scenes. Aiken's method was simple; he selected the major incidents in the novel and transcribed Mrs. Stowe's dialogue often intact, but more frequently with some condensation. The condensation was usually well-handled; Aiken pared away much of the novel's repetition and some of Mrs. Stowe's overly "literary" usages. For instance, in the first scene Aiken incorporated George's powerful and bitter speech about the purposelessness of a slave's trying to do or know or be anything, but removed

⁴ *History of the American Stage* (New York, 1870), p. 6. See also Arthur Hobson Quinn, "George L. Aiken," *Dictionary of American Biography*, I, 127-128.

⁵ H. P. Phelps, *Players of a Century* (Albany, 1880), pp. 296-297.

⁶ Other popular, but much more distorted, dramatizations of the story were made by H. J. Conway, Charles Taylor, Mark Lemon and Tom Taylor, and John Wilkins. See Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1947), pp. 84-91, 101-103, and 147-148.

⁷ Montrose J. Moses, *Representative Plays by American Dramatists, 1815-1858* (New York, 1925), II, 613.

the unnecessary literary tag line "My life is as bitter as wormwood" (Act I, Scene i).

Of course the main segment of the novel missing in the play was the narration. Literary gains as well as losses grew from this. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the novel was Mrs. Stowe's interrupting her story to underscore the points that had been well made already through her characters and conflicts. Mrs. Stowe's hand in the sentimental or ironic editorial passages of her book was often as heavy as that of Simon Legree. As Edmund Wilson has pointed out, Mrs. Stowe's characters "express themselves a great deal better than the author expresses herself."⁸ Aiken's work clearly benefitted from one of the things that most accounts for the book's success and continued reputation: Mrs. Stowe's argument is thoroughly grounded in her characters, dialogue, and incidents.

When Aiken needed to supply missing narration, he did so simply. He couldn't tell us, as Mrs. Stowe did, that the Ohio was impassable, so he had Eliza say upon arrival, "Gracious powers! The river is choked with cakes of ice" (I, iv). And just before Eliza's escape, Aiken invented a long speech to explain her feelings: "Powers of mercy, protect me! How shall I escape these human bloodhounds? . . . The dark stream lies between me and liberty! Surely the ice will bear my trifling weight. It is my only chance of escape—better sink beneath the cold waters, with my child locked in my arms, than have him torn from me and sold into bondage. . . . Heaven, I put my trust in thee" (I, v). The speech is true to the character and emotions that Mrs. Stowe suggests, but its verbalization, especially

⁸ "No! No! No! My Soul An't Yours, Mas'r!" *New Yorker*, XXIV (November 27, 1948), 134.

in such trite phrases, pact of the event.

This passage illustrates central weaknesses of drama: its tendency to expressions of feeling. The sincerity of Eliza, partially conveyed by a detailed statement when the circumstances of the character would suggest at least a less fully explicit. The dramatic soliloquy in the nineteenth century increase the intellectual complexity of a situation, thing obvious to the characters little their feelings or motives often blasted both honest emotion.

Two of Mrs. Stowe's passages, turned verbatim by Aiken, illustrate first, Mrs. Stowe's character, is spoken there ever been a child but their names are stones, and their heavenly eyes, their ways are among the yearning hearts. It is an especial band of it is to sojourn for a The passage, while twentieth-century novel. It underlines the notion of Eva as sacr keeping with St. when he realizes not with his unse

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in such trite phrases, cheapens the impact of the event.

This passage illustrates one of the central weaknesses of nineteenth-century drama: its tendency to substitute for expressions of feeling explanations of it. The sincerity of Eliza's emotion is only partially conveyed because she gives such a detailed statement of her position, when the circumstances and her character would suggest intimation, or at least a less fully expository statement. The dramatic soliloquy came to be used in the nineteenth century not to increase the intellectual and emotive complexity of a situation, but to make everything obvious to the audience. Especially in characters little likely to verbalize their feelings or motivations, the device often blasted both verisimilitude and honest emotion.

Two of Mrs. Stowe's narrative passages, turned verbatim into soliloquy by Aiken, illustrate the problem. The first, Mrs. Stowe's reflections on Eva's character, is spoken by St. Clare: "Has there ever been a child like Eva? Yes . . . , but their names are always on grave stones, and their sweet smiles, their heavenly eyes, their singular words and ways are among the buried treasures of yearning hearts. It is as if heaven had an especial band of angels, whose office it is to sojourn for a while here" (III, ii). The passage, while hardly appealing to twentieth-century tastes, is true to the novel. It underlines Mrs. Stowe's depiction of Eva as sacrificial lamb and is in keeping with St. Clare's sensibilities when he realizes Eva is dying, though not with his unsentimental vocabulary.

Aiken had more problems when he wanted to tell the audience about Legree's history. The intention here was again honorable: He wished to give a bit of psychological and religious complexity to a man who is otherwise a complete monster. Yet the spoken nar-

rative is unconvincing for a man who neither could nor would verbalize his feelings. Aiken has Legree speak in Mrs. Stowe's elevated prose: "Hard and reprobate as I now seem, there has been a time when I have rocked on the bosom of a mother, cradled with prayers and pious hymns, my now seared brow bedewed with the waters of holy baptism" (VI, iii). The overtiness of this statement, Aiken's impatience with the "technical trammels" of drama,⁹ undercuts Legree's characterization. The novelist might properly narrate the historical background of his characters, but the capable dramatist has to be more indirect, more crafty in giving the audience the desired impression, unless both the character and the circumstances justify overt statement. Mrs. Stowe could legitimately tell her readers that Legree felt a cold sweat and that his heart beat fast; Aiken travestied dramatic form when Legree announces: "Large drops of sweat stand on my forehead, and my heart beats heavy and thick with fear" (VI, iii).

Only once did Aiken invent dialogue that cleverly furthered the impression Mrs. Stowe suggested through her narration. Mrs. Stowe showed Eva putting a garland of roses around Tom's neck; when the adults notice the scene, Tom looks up with "a self-deprecating and apologetic air." Aiken made Tom's apologetic air verbal: "I begs pardon, mas'r, but the young missis would do it. Look yer, I'm like the ox mentioned in the good book, dressed for the sacrifice" (II, ii). The remark is in character, and the imagery anticipates the sacrificial significance given to Tom's eventual death. And the juxtaposition of the happy scene with the ritual of atonement through death that the system demands subtly conjures up the story's theme.

⁹ Robert Dale Owen, "Introduction," *Pocahontas* (New York, 1837), p. 15.

Aiken's inability elsewhere to be complexly suggestive in the way drama demands does its part to keep his competent dramatization from being a wholly satisfactory play.

The need for action perhaps impairs Aiken's dramaturgy more than the difficulty of finding convincing equivalents in dialogue for narrative exposition. Not that he, as some critics have charged, blew up the chase, or the sadism, or the death-bed sentimentality. For example, Aiken used restraint in his handling of both the sex and sadism of the Legree story: While Mrs. Stowe showed the villain looking at the young quadroon girl's teeth and feeling her "neck and bust" with his "heavy, dirty hand," Aiken's stage directions say Legree simply "grasps her arm" (V, i.) The "shower of blows" that Legree gives Tom at first and the prolonged beating that ends his life in the novel became in the play three blows of the whip and, in the death scene, one blow with its butt end (V, iii; VI, v).

What Aiken retained is fully justified, but what he omitted is often regrettable. Aiken adhered to the dictum that drama is essentially "action," and often failed to see that the effectiveness of action grows from the interplay of incident and idea. He kept the play eventful, but many of the events lost some of their power by being stripped of their intellectual counterpoint. The dramatist neglected particularly Mrs. Stowe's exposé of self-righteousness and her more abstract discussions of slavery. The selling of Tom and little Harry suggests well the horrors of slavery even under the kindest of masters, but the slave-trader Haley's self-righteous portrayal of his procedures for separating families with "humanity" underscores the vileness of the situation. Eliza's escape on the ice is exciting but is made even more powerful by the sickening argument over slave-

handling among the three men who go after her. Legree's systematic dehumanization of his slaves is shocking, but its meaning is underlined in Cassie's narration of her history which repeats the meaning of Tom's pilgrimage: that slavery as system makes hapless victims of even moral paragons and victimizers of the best-intentioned of masters. Eva's death is crucial to the novel's structure but is less important to its themes than St. Clare's perceptive discussion of slavery, industrialism, and northern hypocrisy. Aiken included action-packed scenes showing thematically insignificant incidents like the battle between the Harris party and the slave traders but shied away from these major passages where the action consists in the interplay of ideas. Of the major characters in the novel, the one most slighted is St. Clare, the book's most interesting spokesman for ideas.

Aiken also omitted many of the characters in the novel. The reasons for this are obvious; even with these cuts much doubling up of parts was necessary in the original production of Aiken's play. But the condensation of Mrs. Stowe's panorama of types and attitudes diminishes the complexity of her discussion of slavery. Except for Topsy, the Negroes fully developed in the play are all Mrs. Stowe's more elevated characters. Hence the play lacks the balance Mrs. Stowe achieved by variety: the simple good sense of Aunt Chloe, the cunningness of Andy and Sam, the degraded despair and ghastly death of old Prue, the pretentiousness of St. Clare's mulatto house servants, the chaotic culinary genius of Dinah, the brutalized character of Legree's victims—all are missing. Similarly Mrs. Stowe's chiding of the North through Senator Bird is omitted. No mention is made of this intellectual Huck Finn on the racial question who votes for and defends the fugitive slave

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¹⁰ Later in its Ne was expanded to sev included Dinah and characters. Odell, V

law but whose humanity forbids him from enforcing it when Eliza asks his help.¹⁰ Mrs. Stowe's form allowed her to build her theme through such miscellaneous characters. Aiken sometimes compensated by, for instance, having Topsy give Dinah's racial reflections (II, iv), and he certainly could have done more of this. But both the requirements of dramatic form, and the number of actors available, militated against such random inclusiveness.

Aiken's sins of omission would be forgivable on the grounds of needed condensation had he not added some scenes of his own, most of them intended for comic effect. Particularly unfortunate is Aiken's travesty of Mrs. Stowe's representative of Northern conscientiousness, Miss Ophelia. Through this character Mrs. Stowe explored the besetting problem of the Northern liberal: the undercutting of an abstract desire for justice by both personal repugnance to the Negro and unwillingness to take on the demanding task of counteracting the ignorance and irresponsibility that slavery had bred. Eventually Ophelia learns, through Eva's example, that duty without real affection cannot change Topsy and overcomes her personal repugnance. Aiken included the essential elements of this relationship, but much of their meaning is lost in the comic metamorphosis that Miss Ophelia's character undergoes.

In the novel Ophelia has some comic qualities. Her New England activity and fastidiousness are partially laughed at as she frets about waste, tries to bring some order to Dinah's kitchen, or struggles with Topsy. Yet she is also a figure of real integrity and intelligence, one who can listen and learn and grow in

¹⁰ Later in its New York run, Aiken's play was expanded to seven acts and 34 scenes and included Dinah and Senator Bird in its cast of characters. Odell, VI, 310.

sensitivity. Though he included her most important scenes, Aiken largely removed attention from her positive traits by making her stage reality pretty much a matter of one epithet which she endlessly repeats, "shiftless." Mrs. Stowe had explained that Ophelia's "finale and ultimatum of contempt" was expressed in this "common and important word in her vocabulary," but had her use the word only a few times in appropriate places. In the play, however, Miss Ophelia uses it at the end of almost every sentence in places; it becomes a comic tag that epitomizes her Vermont rigorousness and that hides her other traits. Stage old maids were always the butt of rather brutal fun in early nineteenth-century plays, and Aiken followed the tradition by doing much to reduce Mrs. Stowe's relatively complex and important character to a one-word joke.

Miss Ophelia is the center of two long scenes invented by Aiken for the fifth act of his play. Perhaps because of the stage prejudice against old maids, Aiken defied probability by having Ophelia courted by a Deacon Perry, a character who doesn't appear in the novel. The way plays in the period grew is suggested, especially well by a part of one of these scenes, seemingly added during the long run in New York City, but which was incorporated in the printed version of the play. After the original cast in Aiken's play did so well in New York, other theaters in the city offered their versions of *Uncle Tom*. The strongest of these rivals was P. T. Barnum, who advertised that his version did not "foolishly and unjustly elevate the negro above the white man in intellect or morals," but rather presented "a true picture of negro life in the South."¹¹ To mock the Barnum version someone, perhaps Aiken, added a brief interlude

¹¹ Quoted in Birdoff, pp. 88-89.

between Topsy and the Yankee Gumption Cute:

CUTE: I'm a man of genius. Did you ever hear of Barnum?

TOPSY: Barnum! Barnum! Does he live out South?

CUTE: No, he lives in New York . . . Well, as I was saying, Barnum made his money by exhibiting a woolly horse; now wouldn't it be an all-fixed speculation to show you as the woolly gal?

TOPSY: You want to make a sight of me?

CUTE: I'll give you half the receipts, by chowder!

TOPSY: Den you hab to get a woolly gal somewhere else, Mas'r Cute. *Runs off.*

CUTE: There's another speculation gone to smash, by chowder! (V, ii)

Barnum's wish to turn Topsy simply into a "woolly gal" at least suggests one of the story's themes, white America's tendency to dehumanize blacks in order to use them. Most of Aiken's Vermont scenes lack even this much point. Their dramatic purpose is obvious: they alternate with the Legree scenes and are meant to make bearable, and perhaps by contrast more moving, the deepening pathos leading to Tom's death. Aiken might have been both amusing and pertinent in his exploration of Northern reactions to Topsy, but instead he settled for pointless farce and crude, though probably effective, humor like the Deacon's misunderstanding when Ophelia calls Topsy her daughter (V, ii).

Besides the Vermont scenes, Aiken's additions included two low-comedy stereotypes: a frontiersman in the first half of the play and a Yankee in the second. To a large extent, stage conventions explain these additions; such characters were a staple of the popular plays of the period, and the company had an actor, Charles Fox, who played this type of role. The first of these characters is more justifiable; Mrs. Stowe's novel had included Phineus Fletcher, a backwoodsman turned Friend when he fell in love

with a pretty Quakeress. Aiken simply blew up Mrs. Stowe's character, emphasizing his "frontier" characteristics and condensing in him the roles that Mrs. Stowe distributed among several characters. Like Miss Ophelia his characterization is tied to his repeated use of one word, in this case "tee-total," and is coarsened for comic effect. And he's given lengthy bits of humorous talk and action not found in the novel.

In the second half of the play a Yankee, for whom Mrs. Stowe bears no responsibility, replaces the frontiersman as comic stereotype. Gumption Cute, who shows up in half of the scenes in the second half of the play, has his verbal tag—"by chowder"—and little purpose other than to arouse random chuckles. He is cunning and concerned about money but, unlike most Yankee stereotypes, he is unsuccessful and essentially vicious. Typical is his response to Ophelia's hope that his family is well: "Well, yes, they're pretty comfortably disposed of. Father and mother's dead, and Uncle Josh has gone to California" (V, ii). An early reviewer of the many dramatic versions said that no dramatist could claim much credit because they had all succeeded only in the degree they had borrowed from Mrs. Stowe and failed in as much as they added. The comment applies to Aiken's play as well as its less competent competitors.

Along with humor, Aiken added poetic justice. His restraint can be seen in comparison with the other popular dramatization, this one by H. J. Conway, in which "instead of turning away the audience in tears, the author has wisely consulted dramatic taste by having Virtue triumphant at last." No one need worry too much about slavery when Uncle Tom "is restored to his freedom and his family."¹² Tom is killed in the

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

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Aiken version, but, in deference to the period's unstated production code, villainy does not go unpunished. At the end of the play Legree is shot by the lawyer-slaver Rowley Marks, who has come with Cute to blackmail Legree, and the villain's body is carried off by his joyous slaves, which certainly obscures Mrs. Stowe's point about their moral awakening. To further emphasize Legree's nastiness, Aiken made him the murderer of St. Clare. The scenes that include the killing of St. Clare, the blackmail sequence, and the shooting of Legree are Aiken's least defensible contributions: not in the novel, not funny, and wholly impertinent (IV, iii; VI, iv and v). They simply promote nineteenth-century drama's notions of poetic justice, and secondarily bolster the roles of Cute and Marks. Though Tom's death remains moving in the play, these scenes detract from it.

They also detract from the meaning of the book by deflecting attention from the evils of slavery as system to mere personal villainy. Perhaps the major intellectual contribution of Mrs. Stowe's book to the nineteenth-century tradition of the popular novel, and of Aiken's play to that of the melodrama, was to see the terrifying or tragic aspects of existence as the result not of personal villainy but of social organization. Most popular writers, unwilling to indict either man's nature, providence, or society for life's ills, had deposited all depravity and danger in black-clad villains. Despite Legree, Mrs. Stowe's villain remains environmental rather than personal. Aiken compromised much more, especially in the concluding sections of his play, but retained enough of Mrs. Stowe's social vision to put his play in that category of dramas, exemplified by Tom Taylor's *Ticket-of-Leave Man*, transitional between melodrama and realism, between a wholly moralistic

and a primarily environmental explanation of man's plight.

The play's success was immediate. The *Troy Daily Times* remarked after its first performance that the story was "a good rebuke to those ranting abolitionists who are continually talking about slavery, yet who do not do anything to either free the slave or better his condition"; Mrs. Stowe had intended this. Yet abolitionists were quick to see that the drama, like the novel, was a potent weapon on their side. Theodore Parker told an enthusiastic abolition audience that because the theater had begun to preach antislavery doctrine there was perhaps hope that "humanity will get even to the churches." And an abolitionist in Philadelphia was thrilled that "one may infer a hopeful change in public sentiment, when they see three thousand persons unconsciously accepting anti-slavery truth; hundreds of boys—incipient rowdies, growing up to become the mobocracy of another generation, but preparing unwittingly to 'mob on the right side.'" ¹³ One of the strongest tributes to the play came from William Lloyd Garrison, who wrote in the *Liberator* of September 9, 1853:

If the shrewdest abolitionist amongst us had prepared the drama with a view to make the strongest anti-slavery impression, he could scarcely have done the work better. O, it was a sight worth seeing, those ragged, coatless men and boys in the pit (the very material of which mobs are made) cheering the strongest and the sublimest anti-slavery sentiments: The whole audience was at times melted to tears, and I own that I was no exception. It was noticeable that the people, after witnessing the death of Uncle Tom, went out of the house as gravely and as seriously as people retire from a religious meeting! I wish every abolitionist in the land could see this play as I saw it, and exult as I did that, when haughty pharisees will not testify against slavery, the very stones are crying out!

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 109-111.

When she finally went to see the play, Mrs. Stowe reportedly wept at its movingness, perhaps the best testimony that the story retained its essential effectiveness on stage.¹⁴

Beginning with Edmund Wilson's appreciation in 1948, the literary reputation of Mrs. Stowe's novel has been rising. In response to attacks on the work by civil rights' advocates, defenders of the novel have often blamed the "cheap melodrama of the kind we get in the play" for the "misconceptions" about the novel.¹⁵ Seeing in the original little of what J. C. Furnas called "racist propaganda" or what James Baldwin labelled a spirit "not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob,"¹⁶ Mrs. Stowe's defenders have concluded that these elements entered through the dramatization, sometimes without reading the play. Edmund Wilson initially said that the play made Legree an overseer rather than plantation owner; and Charles H. Foster suggested that Aiken was almost justified in adding bloodhounds in his stage version.¹⁷

Recent critics who have read the play more closely have come to defend its virtues. Most eloquent is Barnard Hewitt's analysis suggesting that the play provides a prototype for the kind of vitality and

¹⁴ For Mrs. Stowe's attitudes toward drama, see Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York, 1965), pp. 129-132.

¹⁵ Charles H. Foster, *The Rungless Ladder* (Durham, N. C., 1954), pp. vii-viii; Philip Van Doren Stern, *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1964), pp. 26-28; and John R. Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1963), p. 7.

¹⁶ J. C. Furnas, *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York, 1956), pp. 49-50 and James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, 1955), p. 18.

¹⁷ Wilson, pp. 136-138 and Foster, p. 34. Wilson perhaps read the play later on. His *New Yorker* article of 1948 is largely reprinted as the opening section of *Patriotic Gore* (New York, 1962), but this mistaken reference to Legree is omitted. And Wilson's attack on the "cheap melodrama" is changed to an assault on the melodrama in its "decadent phase."

searing honesty that is needed to dramatize the contemporary civil rights movement, an analysis largely accepted by Richard Moody in his recent dramatic anthology.¹⁸ This renewed appreciation of the play is a welcome antidote to the condescension of earlier dramatic historians. In their respective categories, the nineteenth-century romantic novel and the nineteenth-century melodrama, they are perhaps roughly equal works: both seriously flawed but in comparison to their competitors unusually powerful. Their differences in quality reflect general variations between the drama and the novel in the nineteenth century.

The physical and human limitations of the theater contributed little to Aiken's problem. None of the drama's weaknesses derived from the technical deficiencies of the nineteenth-century stage. Quite small companies were capable of meeting, or ignoring Aiken's scenic demands, and even embroidering on them with extra effects of their own creation. Much of this may have been done badly much of the time, but its being done at all delighted audiences. Playwrights were seemingly impeded less by what physically couldn't be done on the nineteenth-century stage than by the need to give ample vent to the insatiable inventiveness of stage managers. Aiken had Eliza simply ask, with reference to her pursuers, "How shall I escape these human bloodhounds?" (I, iv); by the end of the century the status of an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* production was measured by the size and number of its bloodhounds yapping after her.

The intellectual limitations of the nineteenth-century theater were more serious, in large part because it was the

¹⁸ Barnard Hewitt, "Uncle Sam and Uncle Tom: New Light from an Old Play," *QJS*, XXXVII (February 1951), 63-70 and Richard Moody, *Dramas From the American Theatre, 1762-1909* (Cleveland, 1966), p. 359.

most democratic Tocqueville's "tyrant" was particularly effective alone of literary forms. Segments of the conventional appeal instantaneous in any significant political plays "had to be achieved immediately" and "ardent sympathy" might win its way, convincing a few. A play was either depending on the first night's audience contain complexities that proved convincing or on second a play had to be able. A book might please only the public; a play had as well as the few. A rare drama tended to person or the content of a moral shortcoming good eventually simply evil.

Topics of so broad a scope broached on stage that could be resolute. Some dramatic attacks on the evils such as distant settings—far-away Algiers—became simple the good guys

¹⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1954), II, 84.

²⁰ *Arcturus*, II (

²¹ *North America* 385.

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most democratic of art forms where Tocqueville's "tyranny of the majority" was particularly evident.¹⁹ The drama alone of literary forms had to attract all segments of the community and to appeal instantaneously without alienating any significant portion of its audience; plays "had to be addressed to the people immediately" and arouse in them "an ardent sympathy."²⁰ An unusual novel might win its way slowly by gradually convincing a few people of its value; a play was either success or failure depending on the immediate response of the first night's audience. A book might contain complex or controversial ideas that proved convincing on second reading or on second thought; the ideas in a play had to be instantaneously agreeable. A book might succeed fairly well by pleasing only a small portion of the public; a play had to "please the many as well as the few."²¹ Hence contemporary drama tended to avoid the complex person or the controversial issue in favor of a moral shorthand where the simply good eventually triumphed over the simply evil.

Topics of social concern, when broached on stage, were put in a form that could be resolved by a moral platitude. Some dramatists had written plays attacking the most moralistic of social evils such as drinking and gambling, and a few even had suggested their attitudes toward slavery in successful plays, but these attitudes were camouflaged by distant setting—say, ancient Rome or far-away Algiers—where the moral question became simply one of preferring the good guys and liberty to the bad

guys and despotism.²² Robert Montgomery Bird feared that his *The Gladiator* might not be performed in the South because of its sympathy with rebellious Roman slaves, but he worried needlessly. All white Americans preferred liberty to slavery in a general way, and Spartacus was not of a color to draw attention to the exception many Americans made to the platitude.²³ In 1835 Judge Robert Conrad of Philadelphia saw no contradiction in both writing a play, *Jack Cade*, which attacked serfdom on the basis of democratic principle, and authoring resolutions condemning those who agitated against slavery and arguing that legal means should be found to keep abolitionists out of Philadelphia.²⁴ A leading comic actor well sketched the intellectual boundaries of the nineteenth-century stage when he asked a dramatist to turn out a play "spiced with some pungent glances at the present state of affairs without going deep enough to offend any party."²⁵

The power of print in the nineteenth century also worked against the serious use of drama. The written word came to be the kind of communication people carefully listened to, weighed, and respected. Marshall McLuhan's recital of how linear and typographical concepts

²² See the unpubl. diss. (State U. of Iowa, 1963), by John D. Collins, "American Drama in Anti-Slavery Agitation," pp. 193-228, for an account of the most significant of these plays, including some unperformed plays attacking American slavery such as Sophia Little's *The Branded Hand* (1845) and Daniel Whitney's *Warren* (1850).

²³ "A Young Dramatist's Diary: *The Secret Records* of Robert Montgomery Bird," ed. Richard Harris, *Library Chronicle of the Friends of the University of Pennsylvania Library*, XXV (Winter 1959), 10. Collins, "American Drama in Anti-Slavery Agitation," describes several similar plays.

²⁴ His resolutions, adopted by a large group of Philadelphians, are reprinted in the *Washington Sun*, August 29, 1835.

²⁵ James Hackett to John Neal (March 10, 1834), copied in the unpubl. diss. (Harvard, 1933) by Irving Richards, "The Life and Work of John Neal."

¹⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville discusses the qualities of democratic drama interestingly in *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York, 1954), II, 84-89.

²⁰ *Arcturus*, II (October 1841), 281.

²¹ *North American Review*, XI (October 1820), 385.

replaced literate western man's other sense responses in shaping his environment is suggestive of why drama was increasingly relegated to the periphery of life, to a role of vacuous entertainer. Because of the actor and audience's intervention in the theater, the serious author had little protection for his personal vision. In print the author could make his point fully and order with much exactness the response of his audience; in theater the author provided a sketch that others filled in—actors, managers, and the audience itself. In George Steiner's words "Drama is the most social of literary forms," and "therein lies its fascination and its servitude."²⁶ The nineteenth-century stage especially was what McLuhan calls a "cool" medium because an open, communal definition of the work to some degree replaced a controlled individual one.²⁷

The stage history of *Uncle Tom* emphasized how plays could be transformed from an author's intent by communal pressures. Aiken himself began the process of intellectual disintegration. In his first effort, which later became the first section of the play, Aiken followed Mrs. Stowe in incident and theme closely; in the sequel, and second half of the final play, he compromised much more for "theatrical effect," to fulfill the preconceptions of his actors and audiences. Here the extent of the low comedy additions and the emphasis on personal villainy impeded the aesthetic and moral thrust of the play most seriously. And even the extraordinary popularity and honesty of Aiken's adaptation were insufficient to keep the play intact on the

nineteenth-century stage. Parts were contracted or expanded as audiences' responses encouraged or actor's egotism demanded: One Yankee character actor blew up the part of Gumption Cute from sixteen to eight hundred lines. Elements of novelty—new songs or scenes or stage effects—were worked in to renew interest in the play as it became increasingly familiar to audiences. The changes all tended to substitute spectacle or action for subtlety and idea so that an effective play was coarsened toward a Tom show.²⁸

The strength of Aiken's dramatization grew from his compromising the story on stage enough to insure its popularity without relinquishing entirely its moral and aesthetic strength. Yet Aiken lost much of the sweep of the novel because of the exigencies of the stage. Aiken's stress on poetic justice, on personal villainy, and on comic types and interludes were all alterations that changed the cut of his topic to fit his audience's expectations. Though the play was true enough to Mrs. Stowe's vision to retain much power, its various compromises and failings, much accentuated in later versions, suggest why the novel—or the more personal form of poetry and the essay—proved more appealing to the nineteenth-century writer with something significant to say. This impression is much enhanced by the fact that the play of *Uncle Tom*, produced only after the novel had readied an audience for it, was the principal American play staged for over a half century that dealt seriously with a controversial issue without smothering it under melodramatic conventions.

²⁶ Steiner, p. 113.

²⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York, 1966), pp. 36-45 and 250-254.

²⁸ Birdoff thoroughly and amusingly chronicles these developments in the play's stage history.

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