

Situating Cassy Within Stowe's Feminist Ideology

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* features a rich mosaic of female characters of varying races, social classes, and perceived virtue. Amidst this variation, the female characters cast as "heroines," such as Eliza, Rachel Halliday, and Eva, share the characteristics associated with Stowe's image of the ideal woman: "pious, pure, unselfish, emotional, and domestic" (Ammons 164). Cassy, the fierce and defiant mistress of Legree's plantation, stands out as an anomaly. Far from possessing these stereotypical feminine attributes, she verges on the masculine and supernatural. Although this portrayal may seem to put Cassy at odds with Stowe's perception of womanhood, Stowe reconciles Cassy's discrepancies by showing that they arise from, are resolved through, and conclude in motherly, womanly instincts. As the radical embodiment of these instincts, Cassy also functions as a medium through which Stowe explores an active, tangible manifestation of moral and spiritual feminine influence.

In the early- and mid- nineteenth-century, feminism was closely tied with the abolitionist movement and assumed varying forms. One faction, led by the likes of Angelina Grimke, proposed that women should "use their considerable energy to end chattel slavery and white racism not only in the private sphere but also in the public" (Yellin 53). The other faction, led by the likes of Catharine Beecher, Harriet's sister, proposed a separate spheres ideology based on women assuming moral and spiritual influence in the private sphere and men assuming physical and political influence in the public sphere. Harriet, who was raised in a traditional Protestant household, educated in Catharine's Hartford Female Seminary, and otherwise "immersed in a women's culture defined largely by rituals of nurturance and motherhood" (Hedrick 308), embraced the separate spheres ideology. Stowe's endorsement of separate spheres is evident throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Mrs. Byrd, who proclaims not to "give a fip for all [Mr. Byrd's]

politics,” becomes passionately enraged at “anything in the shape of cruelty” (Stowe 72), a passion that she “pushes to her advantage” (Stowe 73) in convincing Mr. Byrd to assist Eliza and her child. Similarly, although Eva is frail and feeble in sickness, her death represents spiritual empowerment of the highest order, the influence of which is manifested in Topsy’s conversion.

Although there is consensus on Stowe’s support of separate spheres ideology, critics vary in their interpretations of its implications, and accordingly, in their reception of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Critics pointing to limitations of confining female influence to the moral and spiritual realms suggest that by simply urging her readers “to feel right” (Stowe 404), Stowe succumbs to “acquiescence, which, by its very passivity, would prolong the existence of slavery” (Lant 48). Other critics attribute greater power to separate spheres ideology, suggesting that Stowe urges radical female empowerment *through* control of the private, domestic arena. In a strongly feminist reading, Tompkins argues that “by pushing those [conservative] beliefs to an extreme and by insisting that they be applied universally, Stowe means to effect a radical transformation of her society” (Tompkins 560). It is through this latter interpretation that Cassy can be fully appreciated and understood. Stowe positions Cassy at the very outskirts of women’s traditional spheres of influence, staying within its boundaries by appealing to the sanctity of motherhood and womanhood, but simultaneously pushing those boundaries by proposing an immediate, active embodiment of moral and spiritual values in realization of social reform.

In many ways, Cassy is the antithesis of Stowe’s ideal woman. In contrast to the “general softness” (Stowe 72) of characters like Mrs. Byrd, she is depicted as “hardened” (Stowe 366), both physically and spiritually. Her facial features consist of “lines” rather than curves, and her expression is one of “fierce pride and defiance” (Stowe 320). Even Cassy’s physical strength seems to have hardened like that of man, for she works the fields more efficiently than Tom, having long

ago filled her basket and “several times put largely into Tom’s” (Stowe 323). Furthermore, Cassy exerts an intriguing hold over the men of the plantation. Sambo and Quimbo “evidently cow” (Stowe 322) at her mere appearance, and Legree himself acknowledges that Cassy possesses “an influence over him from which he could not free himself” (Stowe 337). In addition to assuming an aura of power and masculinity, Cassy adamantly rejects God and notions of hope. In response to Tom’s insistence on prayer, she bitterly retorts, “There’s no law here, of God or man, that can do you [Tom], or any one of us, the least good” – a response that reduces Tom to silence with its “darkness and horror” (Stowe 327).

Stowe justifies Cassy’s alarming transformation by emphasizing that it has been brought about by debasement of her once noble womanhood. In particular, Stowe relies on two common narratives of the time – that of the tragic southern mulatto woman and the sorrow wrought by separation from children – in order to dramatize Cassie’s violation. Mulatto women assumed a singular position in feminist and abolitionist rhetoric, as their presence “reminded all parties in the debate that miscegenation was a reality in southern life and that most white-black sexual unions developed out of master-slave relationships” (Toplin 188). In line with this sexual narrative, Cassy’s misfortunes are instigated by infidelity on part of her white husband. Afterwards, her purity is tainted time and again as she is “passed from hand to hand,” finally ending up in the “wretched” grips of Legree (Stowe 335). In addition to framing Cassy as the disgraced mulatto woman, Stowe imbues her with the burdens of a mother separated from her children. Initially, Cassy is able to endure enslavement by virtue of her children, but once they are sold away, she spirals into despair: “all grew dark, and I didn’t know any more” (Stowe 334). It is this debilitating grief that drives Cassy to kill her later born, Henry, with laudanum, to spare him the same fate.

While this act would have seemed heinous in any other circumstance, in the context of Cassy's past, it is depicted as akin to sacrifice.

By detailing this "wild, painful, and romantic history" (Stowe 320), Stowe evokes empathy for Cassy's fierce bitterness. Yet Cassy's subsequent scheme still remains disturbing in its implications, as it clearly extends beyond a means of escape to impose calculated retribution on Legree. This intentionality threatens the separate spheres notion that women should reform evil through a higher moral, spiritual influence. Once again, Stowe reconciles the discrepancy by showing that Cassy's revenge is crucially enabled through the powerful forces of motherhood and womanhood. Although Cassy had seemingly abandoned thoughts of escape and resigned herself to her fate in Legree's "hell" (Stowe 343), the arrival of Emmeline rouses her maternal instincts, finally propelling her into action. The manner in which Cassy carries out her plan is also significant. Rather than running away from the plantation, Cassy chooses to hide out in the garret, directly above Legree's chambers. In assuming this physical higher ground in Legree's own home, Cassy metaphorically asserts her control over him through the domestic, spiritual realm.

In ultimately conquering Legree, Cassy assumes the ghost of Legree's mother in turning his own vices against him. Tormented by guilt and fear from having spurned the "dying prayers" and "forgiving love" of his mother (Stowe 339), Stowe foreshadows that Legree, and other "godless and cruel men" (Stowe 338) like him, are condemned to a "damning sentence... a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation" (Stowe 339). Cassy fulfills this prophecy by leveraging Legree's superstition to its fullest. Spiritually empowered as the ghost of Legree's mother, Cassy holds his mother's shroud (a distinctly maternal garment) over Legree as he sleeps, a vision that haunts Legree into a spiral of hard drinking. In her description, Stowe retains ambiguity on the extent of Cassy's involvement, implying that the plan is realized through a

combination of her actions and Legree's "confused," "half awake" state (Stowe 385). This ambiguity downplays the potentially troubling dimension of Cassy's revenge, and instead, emphasizes her feminine control as being enabled through Legree's own moral and spiritual vulnerability. The Gothic overtones of the scheme further strengthen Stowe's feminist message, as the genre is "commonly concerned with guilt, oppression, and female victimization" (Liu 1).

Although Stowe establishes the maternal, spiritual realm as the driving force of Cassy's scheme, there remain questions regarding its consistency with separate spheres ideology. Notably, it is emphasized that Cassy enacts her revenge as a white ghost, suggesting that it may only be through transcending feminine reality and her mulatto status – "gliding" (Stowe 385) beyond the limitations of the sphere – that Cassy is able to realize her plans. However, Stowe takes equal care to portray Cassy as a distinctly *feminine* ghost, exhibiting motherly attention towards Emmeline during their hide-out in the garret, and critically, embodying the spirit of Legree's mother in her moment of heroism. Rather than suggesting an abrupt departure from separate spheres, then, the "gothicization of the sentimental" (Brown 522) as embodied by Cassy may simply propose a more immediate and active engagement of feminine spiritual influence. Stowe could have concluded *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with Eva's death, the spiritual apex of the novel, yet she deliberately devotes the latter third to Cassy's story. In doing so, she explores a radical and exhilarating expression of female empowerment grounded in the present.

If there remains doubt as to Cassy's moral and spiritual status, it is resolved in the novel's conclusion, as Stowe restores her through "dying prayers" and "love" (Stowe 339), the very ideals spurned by Legree. Moved by Tom's martyrdom, "the long winter of despair, the ice of years" (Stowe 380) finally give way in Cassy, reducing her to tears and restoring her spiritually. Similarly, once reunited with her daughter Eliza in Canada, the firm expression of her face softens to "one of

gentle trust” and she “seemed to sink, at once, in the bosom of the family, and take the little ones into her heart, as something for which it long had waited” (Stowe 392). That Cassy is described as “long having waited” for this affection suggests that her womanhood had merely been repressed by circumstance, rather than destroyed. Furthermore, the fact that Cassy’s hardened bitterness is transformed through feminine influences reaffirms their potential as agents of salvation, a notion central to Stowe’s “revolutionary vision” of an America grounded in “the saving power of Christian love and on the sanctity of motherhood and the family” (Tompkins 560).

In these ways, Stowe presents Cassy as a complex character who challenges the boundaries of separate spheres ideology. Although Cassy may simply be interpreted as an anomalous figure, Stowe reconciles Cassy’s discrepancies by emphasizing her plight and revenge as arising from, being effected through, and ending in maternal, spiritual instincts. Through Cassy, the reader is exposed to an agency that is distinctly feminine, yet radical and exhilarating in its implications – an agency that is further highlighted when juxtaposed against Stowe’s more conventional female characters, Tom’s passivity, and Eva’s spiritual death. Cassy serves as the heroine of the final part of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for a reason. Through her, Stowe delivers her message of female empowerment – one centered in the garret, grounded in the moral, spiritual realm, and seemingly supernatural in magnitude but ultimately attainable.

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