The Future of the Literary Past

MEREDITH L. McGILL AND ANDREW PARKER

[B]y carrying us beyond paper, the adventures of technology grant us a sort of future anterior: they liberate our reading for a retrospective exploration of the past resources of paper, for its previously *multimedia vectors.*
—Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*

MEREDITH L. McGILL, associate professor of English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, and director of the Center for Cultural Analysis, is the series editor of the English Institute's new, born-digital volumes of essays, published as part of the humanities e-book collection of the American Council of Learned Societies. The first volume in this series, *On Periodization*, edited by Virginia Jackson, will be launched in fall 2010. She is completing a book on the circulation of poetry in the antebellum United States.

ANDREW PARKER is professor of English at Amherst College and in 2009–11 visiting professor of French and comparative literature at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. His new book, to be titled *The Theorist's Mother: Maternities from Marx to Derrida*, is near completion, and *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* that he edited with Janet Halley, is forthcoming in book form (Duke UP, 2011).

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES SOME OF THE WAYS THAT THE CONTEMPORARY mediascape has begun to transform the questions we can ask of our students and ourselves. Our subject derives from an undergraduate English course, Literary History and/as Media History, that we designed to address the lack of critical attention paid in the curriculum to the media of literary works. The course, whose catalog description follows, was intended to cover a lot of historical ground while highlighting theoretical questions that generally remain unasked in *Norton Anthology*–style surveys:

> Living in an era of rapid technological innovation, we tend to forget that print itself was once a new medium. The history of English and American literature since the Renaissance has been as much a response to the development of new material formats (scribal copying, printed playtexts, newspaper and serial publication, "little magazines," radio, film, television, the internet) as it has been a succession of ideal literary forms (poems, plays, and novels). This course will survey literary works from the sixteenth to the twentieth century in relation to the history of media. What can these histories say to each other? Are they, indeed, one history?

We didn't have answers to these questions when we started to plan the course. We began only with the intuition that we seem to know what we're asking and why when we have students attend, say, to the genre of a literary work but that we have much less confidence in

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

asking about its medium (or media) or how or even whether a work's medium should matter in literary terms. Having taught the course several times at Amherst College and once at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, we found that a focus on media history can affect how we think about the nature of literature and, in so doing, change our relation to the literary past, often in startling ways. We describe here some of what we've learned from teaching undergraduates Philip Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella" (1590), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1922–62) as landmark texts in the distinct though intertwining histories of literature and media.

PMLA's call for papers for this special issue, on Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century, asks potential contributors to consider whether this century, in its presumed difference from what went before, requires "changed paradigms and fresh imaginings of how we study and write about literature. . . ." It would be especially churlish to answer no, since the century itself appears to be doing the asking: "Does the twenty-first century call for changed paradigms and fresh imaginings of how we study and write about literature?" The twenty-first century, however, is not the only abstraction endowed therein with the power of speech. The new century's new media, conceived as the motor and measure of historical difference, seem even more emphatically vocal: "Do new media demand the creation of innovative literary-critical forms?" ("*PMLA* Special Topic").

The recent history of media has been awash with such imaginings of rupture and succession. Kevin Kelly is far from alone in suggesting that "we are now in the middle of a second Gutenberg shift. . . . A new distribution-and-display technology is nudging the book aside and catapulting images, and especially moving images, to the center of the culture. We are becoming people of the screen. The fluid and fleeting symbols on a screen pull us away from the classical notions of monumental authors and authority."[1] For some in literary studies, the supposed end of the dominance of print could mean that, as J. Hillis Miller declared, "the end of literature is at hand. Literature's time is almost up. It is about time. It is about, that is, *the different epochs of different media*" (1; our emphasis). Others, more optimistic, suggest that a new digital epoch will produce a literature of its own. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, understands technological and literary change to go hand in hand: "Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we are poised to extend the interrogations of the literary into the digital domain" (5). Although she is quick to claim that "[n]othing is riskier than prediction; when the future arrives, we can be sure only that it will be different than we anticipated," she is nonetheless willing to "risk a prognostication: digital literature will be a significant component of the twenty-first-century canon" (159). Unlike Miller and Hayles, we're less interested in predicting the future of literature (and its criticism) than in forecasting a changed relation to the literary past. In making legible the historical constitution of authorship and literature, the new media, we suggest, will have made literary history "different than we anticipated" by challenging, among many of our received ideas, the assumption that every medium has its own epoch and every epoch its own medium.

Take, for example, one of the texts we teach toward the beginning of our course, Sidney's sonnet sequence "Astrophil and Stella." The database *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*) makes it possible to introduce undergraduates to early modern literature through digital images of early modern books rather than solely through approved scholarly editions and anthologies. In moving beyond the textbook, however, we find that our subject is transformed. Rather than study Sidney's sonnet sequence as it has been reconstructed by scholars—carefully "restored" so that it can pass as an accurate, printed version of the lost

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

manuscript original—students using *EEBO* can explore the synergy between this elite courtier's genre and the new medium of print.

As Arthur Marotti and H. R. Woudhuysen have demonstrated, "Astrophil and Stella" circulated during Sidney's lifetime in manuscript form among only a small group of fellow courtiers, presumably because of the poems' charged political and sexual resonances. In sonnet 34, a dialogue between Astrophil and his "wit," Astrophil suggests that controlling the circulation of these poems was a means both of reputation building and of damage control:

> "Art not ashamed to publish thy disease?"
> Nay, that may breed my fame, it is so rare.
> "But will not wise men think thy words
> fond ware?"
> Then be they close, and so none shall
> displease. ("Astrophil," lines 5–8)

So long as the poems were held "close," they might safely explore the courtier's desire and ambition, conferring "fame" within a coterie that would know how to read them (as "rare" and not as "ware").

After Sidney's heroic death on the battlefield, however, the printer Thomas Newman acquired a copy of the manuscript and published the sequence as the lead text in a miscellany of what the title calls "Sundry . . . Rare Sonnets of Diuers Noble Men and Gentlemen" (Sidney, *Syr P. S.*). Because he did so without obtaining authorization from the powerful Sidney family, this edition was suppressed, and Newman was forced to issue a corrected edition, this time without the "sundry" sonnets (*Sir P. S.*). An authorized version of "Astrophil and Stella" would wait, however, until Sidney's sister, the countess of Pembroke, sponsored the publication of a revised edition of Sidney's collected writing in 1598 ("Astrophel"). Within the decade, pirated quartos had been displaced by an elaborate folio, a literary "work"—the now familiar, numbered sequence of poems—was extracted from the context of popular print and manuscript miscellanies, and "Sir Philip Sidney Knight" emerged from the field of fellow courtier poets to be heralded as an "Author."

From a scholarly perspective, there is nothing particularly new about this story; what is new, however, is how easily and vividly this sonnet sequence's fateful transition from manuscript to print can be brought into the undergraduate classroom. The digital mediation of early modern books enables us to question with our students cherished ideas about print and to help them perceive the role of literature in legitimizing this once new medium. Examining how Sidney's sonnet sequence moved from coterie to public circulation undoes assumptions about handwriting's supposed singularity and print's iterability. The textual history of "Astrophil and Stella" shows that the sonnet sequence circulated in multiple manuscript copies;[2] indeed, none of the surviving manuscripts is in Sidney's hand. If the manuscript circulation of "Astrophil and Stella" helps to reinforce that handwriting is itself a medium, the struggle over the publication of early printed copies demonstrates that print doesn't remedy the problem of multiple versions so much as proliferate variations of the text. In this example, media do not succeed one another, one medium per epoch; rather, handwriting and print are overlapping systems of publication, bound up in a complex tug-of-war over the cultural significance of Sidney's text. The "authored" sonnet sequence with which we are familiar emerges from a contest between the press and the court over Sidney's legacy. If Newman leverages Sidney's nobility and status as a Protestant martyr to justify the circulation of these poems in print, the countess of Pembroke reclaims the sequence as part of Sidney's corpus, the works of an author. The sonnet sequence's very status as literature is inseparable from the shifting cultural status of handwriting and print.

Teaching "Astrophil and Stella" through digital images of early modern books enables

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

us to show and not simply to tell students how what counts as literature is constantly undergoing redefinition, in part because of the challenges and opportunities afforded by new media. We are excited by the ready availability to undergraduates of rare materials in digital form; we are even more excited by the ways in which this "distribution-and-display technology" heightens our consciousness of the mediation of all literature, including the recirculation of early modern books as PDF images. The questions of format, scarcity, access, and value that were hotly contested at the nexus of manuscript and print are also pertinent to the digital environment, in which printed books of radically different sizes, circulations, and cultural weight are made equally available to readers, delivered to our computers through interfaces that render these texts not only similarly sized but also eerily rescalable. If digitization gives students access to materials that had previously been restricted to specialists, they also discover that many of the problems that plague their digital lives were anticipated by early modern writers and publishers who worried about whether publication should be restricted, about unauthorized copying, and about the intervention by powerful stakeholders who sought to control the conditions of publication. Teaching literary history as media history turns the classroom into a nonsequential, multimedia space in which projected digital images take their place among books and loose papers on which students continue to take notes by hand.

We're suggesting with Derrida that new media can provoke retrospective reflection on the roles played by media throughout the history of literature and on literary texts' negotiation of a shifting mediascape. Although wary of the homogenizing effects of digital archives, we have found that digital images of printed texts can help students think about the cultural significance of different print formats and about how these formats shape our perception of literary genres. Consider, for example, a minor episode in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel that was published in book form at the tail end of its successful serialization in the antislavery weekly the *National Era*. Shortly after Tom has been sold to the unscrupulous slave trader Haley, Stowe depicts the two men sitting side by side in a wagon headed south, "each, for a time, absorbed in his own reflections" in a scene designed to accentuate the moral difference between the slave trader and the slave. Taking care to note their common humanity—Haley and Tom are "seated on the same seat, having the same eyes, ears, hands and organs of all sorts, and having pass before their eyes the same objects" (100)—Stowe contrasts Tom's silent recitation of reassuring Bible verses with Haley's greedy financial speculations and his concern with preserving Tom's market value. Haley's ignorance of and indifference to Tom's inner world is dramatized for the reader as Haley draws Tom into conversation about the slave gang Haley hopes to assemble, reading aloud a newspaper advertisement that describes a group of slaves to be sold as part of the liquidation of an estate. In the book, the quoted newspaper advertisement serves primarily as moral example and plot device (it persuades Haley to stop at the auction and purchase three of these slaves). Privy to Tom's consciousness and reminded by Stowe of his formal equality with Haley, readers of the novel can only wonder at Haley's cruelty in addressing Tom as a coconspirator in his own enslavement and enlisting his consent to the enslavement of others.

And yet, reading this chapter as an installment in the *National Era* (newly available in digital form through *American Periodical Series Online*) dramatically alters the reader's experience of the text, affecting how we think about the novel's relation to its sources. While readers of the *National Era* would have been surprised to see such an advertisement on the front page of the paper, Stowe's fictional advertisement, "Executor's Sale—Negroes!" (137), bears

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a jarring similarity to the advertisements for books, clothing, drugs, and the services of lawyers, physicians, and grocers that appeared in profusion on the third and fourth pages of this folio sheet. Read in the columns of the newspaper, the advertisement that Haley brings to Tom's and the reader's attention breaks the diegesis with a reminder of the newspaper's materiality. Although Stowe constructs the scene to produce sympathy with Tom, reading this episode in the *National Era* aligns the reader—who in the nineteenth century might well have been leafing through the newspaper while traveling—with the slave trader Haley, countering novelistic absorption with the reminder that, in the newspaper at least, news and fiction are both underwritten by commerce.

Access to digital images of nineteenth-century newspapers allows students to take in at a glance some of the formal and cultural differences between a discursively heterogeneous, multiauthor, multipurpose periodical and a two-volume illustrated work of fiction designed to bring moving accounts of the suffering of slaves into the drawing room.[3] Better still, it defamiliarizes the medium of print, bringing into focus Stowe's struggle to reconcile the reality effects of the newspaper with the interiority effects of the novel. Interpolating an announcement of a slave auction into her novel, Stowe reprises a strategy popular among abolitionists, who frequently relied on newspaper advertisements to turn the testimony of southern slaveholders against themselves. For instance, in his remarkably successful tract *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) Theodore Weld collected and arranged advertisements from southern newspapers so as to produce an indictment of slavery that appeared to come from within the slave system.[4] A year after the publication of her novel in book form, Stowe felt compelled to provide exhaustive supplementary evidence of her narrative's authenticity, dissolving her fictional characters back into the newspaper accounts and firsthand reports on which they were based. The lengthy subtitle of Stowe's *A Key to* Uncle Tom's Cabin*—Presenting the Original Facts and Documents upon Which the Story Is Founded: Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (1853)—suggests how anxious she was to authenticate her fiction. Reflecting in *A Key* on her account of the slave auction Haley attends, Stowe goes so far as to disavow her authorship altogether: "The writer is sorry to say that not the slightest credit for invention is due to her in this incident. She found it, almost exactly as it stands, in the published journal of a young Southerner, related as a scene to which he was eye-witness" (47). And yet, in marking the moment of transition from serial to book form, Stowe's preface to the first edition of the novel argues forcefully that "the allurements of fiction . . . breathe a humanizing and subduing influence" into otherwise unremarkable subjects drawn from everyday life.

When the novel is read as a freestanding work of fiction, its reliance on the news seems successfully subordinated to the "humanizing" embellishments of fiction. Read as part of an eclectic weekly newspaper, however, Stowe's novel looks less sure of itself generically; the interpolated advertisement is an arresting reminder of what the novel is thought to have left behind. The digital remediation of the text in a variety of print formats makes it possible for students to explore Stowe's attempts to manage her novel's relation to the news. In asking our students to shuttle back and forth between formats—to compare the look and feel of the periodical with that of the book version of Stowe's text—we're after something more than (and different from) attending to textual variation or reading Stowe's text in the context of the aesthetic and political discourses that compete for attention on the pages of the *National Era*.[5] Instead of taking for granted the success and stability of the novel form (reinforced by the seemingly infinite series of classic texts published as

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cheap college paperbacks), students are able to experience the work of genre as a historical process, to watch Stowe struggle to distinguish her narrative from the newspaper on which it relies for its circulation and for the truth-value of its account of slavery.

It's not always simple, however, to identify the medium of a literary work—as if a work could have only one and as if a medium must be contemporary with a work's origination. What, we ask, in moving to our final example, would be the medium of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*? Canto 1 famously begins with Pound's translation of a Renaissance Latin translation (by one Andreas Divus) of an excerpt from a book of the *Odyssey* known as "Nekuia" (Νέκυια), which recounts Odysseus's descent to the underworld. Pound renders the lines in the poetic diction and rhythms of Anglo-Saxon verse:

> And then went down to the ship,
> Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea,
> and
> We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
> Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
> Heavy with weeping, so winds from
> sternward
> Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
> Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.
> Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the
> tiller,
> Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till
> day's end. (*Draft of XXX Cantos* 1.1–9)

Many lines later Pound informs us that this passage is a translation nested in a chain of translations: "Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus. / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer" (68–69). *The Cantos* stages literary history and/as media history at its outset, where blood sacrifice gives voice to the dead, and in its entirety, since the poem overall can be considered an epic meditation on its own medium. That medium, obviously, is print, but Pound is always anxious about print's relation to surrogate or competing media. *A Draft of XVI Cantos* was published in 1925 in a sumptuous, large-format, limited edition by the American William Bird at his Paris-based Three Mountain Press. The large initials were designed by Henry Strater "under Pound's careful instructions" (McGann 79). Believing himself neglected by the commercial market for poetry, Pound was inspired by William Morris's Kelmscott Press to produce *A Draft of XVI Cantos* as an artist's book, to design an object more gift than commodity that would "short-circuit the anonymous and amorphous process of mass-circulation, and instead emphasize a direct relationship with an exiguous group of readers" (Kyburz 134). "Morris's books," notes Jerome McGann, "were consciously designed to recall the revolutionary bookwork of the fifteenth century—and especially those early printed books that stood closest to richly decorated medieval manuscript books scripted in closely written Gothic bookhands" (77). Reversing the Renaissance movement from manuscript to print, from coterie circulation to an anonymous public, Pound took the decorative capitals and the medievalizing use of different-colored inks from Morris but sought to improve on Morris's model by bringing its typography up to date:

> The Three Mts. is following this prose series by a dee looks edtn of my Cantos (about 16 of 'em, I think) of UNRIVALED magnificence. Price 25 dollars per copy, and 50 and 100 bones for Vellum and illuminateds. It is to be one of the real bits of printing; modern book to be jacked up to somewhere near level of medieaval mss. No Kelmscott mess of illegibility. Large clear type, but also large pages, and specially made capitals. Marse Henry [Strater] doeing these; and the sketches already done are A-1. Not for the Vulgus. There'll only be about 60 copies for sale; and about 15 more for the producers.
> ("To Kate Buss"; 12 May 1923; letter 195 of Pound, *Selected Letters* 187)

McGann suggests that the design of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* perfectly mirrors its sub-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ject, reflecting on the graphic level "the epochal (bibliographical) events of the fifteenth century and the late nineteenth century" that Pound took as his thematic materials (80). Pound tried repeating this process for the second and third groups of cantos, but he soon became preoccupied, indeed obsessed, with the possibilities of print after radio. Already by 1918 he would write that the West had entered "the radio phase" (*Guide* 258), which means that "Man" had become "a mechanism, for the purpose of our further discussion a mechanism rather like an electric appliance, switches, wires, etc." (*Spirit* 92). Pound proposed radio as a privileged analog for *The Cantos*'s idiosyncratic method of citation, the poem's "distribution-and-display technology" of voices from unidentified sources: "As to Cantos 18–19, there ain't no key," he wrote to his father. "Simplest parallel I can give is radio where you can tell whose [*sic*] talking by the noise they make" (qtd. in Campbell 116; interpolation in orig.). In its supposed immediacy and ability to circumvent commodification, radio offered Pound a fantasy of paperless writing—a fantasy, he soon discovered, because radio, too, leaves traces.

Pound took credit for having "anticipated the damn thing [radio] in first third of Cantos" ("To Ronald Duncan"; 31 Mar. 1940; letter 370 of Pound, *Selected Letters* 343). Can we also say that *The Cantos* anticipated the digital age? Not quite, but it's useful for students to imagine Pound anachronistically playing "the scissors and paste man" (Joyce) in plundering passages from countless literary traditions often without identifying his sources. We encourage our students to use *Wikipedia* to track Pound's citational practices, but what they mostly learn from this exercise is that *The Cantos* is itself structured something like a wiki. This suggestion flies in the face of the historian Roger Chartier's insistence on hypertext's complete break from the conventions of print. In the digital age, Chartier writes, for the first time

> the same apparatus, in this case the computer screen, enables different types of texts to appear in front of the reader, texts that, in the world of the scribal and a fortieri print cultures, were distributed among distinct objects. In the digital world, all texts, whatever their genre, are produced or received through the same medium and in very similar forms. . . . Thus a textual continuity is created that no longer differentiates discourses on the basis of their materiality. Hence the anxiety or confusion of readers who must confront or overcome the disappearance of the most strongly internalized criteria that enabled them to distinguish, to classify, and to categorize different types of discourse. (142)

This is, we think, unsurpassed as a description of reading *The Cantos*, which unites different types of texts in front of the reader and presents them, whatever their origin, through the same medium. But we no longer can say what the "same medium" would mean in this context. For if Chartier's description of the anxiety or confusion of hypertext readers recalls our students' perplexity in reading *The Cantos*, we have not simply put into question the difference between printed and digitized writing but have also begun to reimagine print after hypertext, where "after" can be understood above all in its mimetic sense. Indeed, this would be, in Derrida's terms, a way of acknowledging *The Cantos*'s "*previously* multimedia vectors."

"Astrophil and Stella," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Cantos* are three texts we've found useful in exploring the interpenetration of literary history and media history. Our course also examines the puppet show in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) as a meditation on differences in the author's control over representation in the theater and in print, the *Spectator Papers* (1711–12) as an attempt to summon and to manage a group of discriminating readers of newspapers, and the dialogic structure of Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* tales (1887–99) as an experiment in

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pushing the boundaries of racial representation in the mass-market magazine. Our aim throughout is to understand an author's rhetorical, formal, and generic choices as interventions in a historically specific set of publishing conditions—conditions that literary texts help to elucidate and have some power to transform. Although we concentrate in this course on particularly dynamic intersections in the intertwining histories of literature and media, we have discovered that placing these disciplines in dialogue doesn't inevitably produce rich sites for exploration. Indeed, one of the major challenges of bringing literary history and media history into sustained relation is these disciplines' often incommensurate periodizations and striking differences of scale in their address to their objects. From the perspective of media history, the concerns of literary criticism—modes of address, experiments in form or genre, differences between early and late style, the ebb and flow of literary movements—can seem small, even trifling. Moreover, literary critics' reliance on exceptional works raises troubling, persistent questions about historical representativeness. From the perspective of literary criticism, the concerns of media history—the life cycle of a medium, from novelty to viability and widespread adoption, and the tension between innovation and standardization, dissemination and centralized control—can seem too broad and too remote from what matters about works of art that matter. The micromeasures of literary time—the duration of print runs, the efflorescence of styles or isms, even the spans of authors' lives—can feel out of sync and out of scale with the slow time and transnational consequences of media shift.

But even though—or especially because—literary history and media history are continuously intersecting but not identical, the long and nonlinear *durée* of their relation can offer us new ways to appreciate that print, like other media, is not self-identical and that there is always more than one medium. In giving up the idea of media as the motor and measure of cultural change, we've found that we can no longer use media history to keep time for literature. In which case it makes less sense to ask whether new media demand new forms of literature and literary criticism than to ask how new media make possible apprehensions of a literary past that is different from what we had anticipated and that has yet to arrive.

Notes

1. Striphas gives a more balanced account of the state of print in the era of the e-book.

2. See Woudhuysen; Ringler, Commentary and Bibliography. Woudhuysen constructs a useful diagram, or "stemma," based on Ringler's research, showing the derivation of the extant print copies from different manuscript originals (365).

3. Stephen Railton's Web archive Uncle Tom's Cabin *and American Culture* provides digital images of the covers of a dozen American editions of the novel along with a chapter-by-chapter gallery of six hundred illustrations from eighteen nineteenth-century American editions. PDF files of Harvard University's and the New York Public Library's copies of volume 1 of the first edition and of Stanford University's copy of volume 2 are available through *Google Books*.

4. For the publishing history of Weld's tract, including his reliance on his wife, Angelina Grimké, and her sister, Sarah Grimké, for culling items from thousands of southern newspapers, see Loughran 354–59.

5. Railton's Web site includes a feature that permits readers to compare the nine extant leaves of Stowe's manuscript with the corresponding text that was published in the newspaper serial and the first edition. Although the site includes images of Stowe's manuscripts and of pages from the *National Era*, its juxtaposition of digital text in parallel columns reduces the range of differences one might note among manuscript and print formats to textual differences. Hochman carefully weighs Stowe's fictional strategies in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* against the discursive norms of the *National Era*.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.4.959 Published online by Cambridge University Press