

Spring 2018

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Sam Volosky
samvolosky@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Volosky, Sam, "'I's Not So Wicked as I Use to Was:" The Interplay of Race and Dignity in Nineteenth-Century American Drama and Blackface Minstrelsy" (2018). *HON499 projects*. 16.
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“I’s Not So Wicked as I Use to Was:”

The Interplay of Race and Dignity in Nineteenth-Century American Drama and Blackface

Minstrelsy

By Sam Volosky

At the origin of theatrical performance, theatre was used by the ancient Greeks as an efficacious tool to enact social change within their communities. Playwrights used tragedy and comedy in order to sway their audiences so that they might vote in one direction or the other on matters such as war, government, and social structure. Theatre has evolved exponentially since the lives of the ancient Greeks but it has always largely sought to combine entertainment with social commentary. The United States of America is not an exception to countries in need of social commentary. Theatre was still an active part of American popular culture during its most socially tumultuous period: the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction era. Nineteenth century American theatre is not known for its lasting impact on theatrical history; however, it stands to reason that a medium oriented toward social commentary would have sought to interpret the era’s most divisive and controversial social issues: slavery and emancipation.

It is impossible to discuss nineteenth century American theatrical performance without considering the two most popular plays of the century: George L. Aiken’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*. There were several stage adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s popular abolitionist novel but Aiken’s 1852 version proved to be the most successful and widely produced. Part of the play’s renown stemmed from the divisive reception of the slave characters as authentic depictions of African-Americans (another version claimed to present a “true picture of Negro life” instead of Aiken’s black characters who “possessed all...the

refinement of the educated white); regardless, Aiken's depictions were true to Stowe's original novel (Robson 73). Boucicault's 1859 play was received positively for its sensational depiction of interracial love and the commentary on the institution of slavery. Interracial intimacy, then referred to as "amalgamation" was considered highly taboo. A female stage character who appeared white but was legally considered black proved to be a provocative agent for the discussion of slavery.

Integral to the period's theatrical performance is blackface minstrelsy, the most popular performative genre of the century. The study of blackface minstrelsy has largely credited the genre with perpetuating degrading stereotypes of the African-American population and institutionally limiting the opportunities of African-American entertainers in performance arts. As black entertainers did not start performing in proper theatres until the late 1860s, the two plays implemented blackface for the depiction of their slave characters and subsequently implemented conventions of the genre. When considering the influences of the minstrel tradition, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon* begin to lose some of their progressive varnish.

A black heroic character was almost unheard of on the nineteenth century stage. Blackness and dignity were characteristics that did not commonly coexist within dramatic characters. Essential to the dichotomy of blackness and dignity was the convention of blackface. In minstrelsy, blackface makeup allowed white actors to perform a stereotypical ethnic humor; similarly, blackface makeup also allowed a white actor to portray a black character in serious dramatic performance. A white audience could then ostensibly separate a black character's black identity from the white actor portraying them, therefore making a black heroic character more palatable to an audience unaccustomed to seeing the African-American depicted positively on stage. Furthermore, a white actor would be able to separate the black character's racial identity

from their own and endow the character with a dignity fitting to the narrative. Blackface was an extremely popular and pervasive performance type unique to nineteenth century American performance. For years, the black characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon* were played by white actors in blackface makeup whereas mixed-raced characters were presented as white. These two plays, each having played a role in affecting public opinion toward slavery, do not stand out from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy and, subsequently, take part in subjugating black entertainers in the realm of theatre as well as society. The playwrights borrowed conventions of contemporary theatrical performance in order to cater to the tastes of their white audiences. Each writer created a narrative that balanced depictions of dignified and undignified African-American characters with the general public consciousness of white superiority. The lack of dignity in the secondary black characters serves to perpetuate an idea of authentic blackness and offset the dignified characteristics of the protagonists as anomalies. Theatre was still a place of entertainment; white theatre-going audiences did not want to be forced to think that their place in society, regardless of class, would be challenged by a race they still deemed inferior and threatening. If Boucicault and Aiken aimed to make their narrative agents black characters endowed with the dignity essential to a protagonist, they needed to create a balance with less-dignified, secondary black characters, characters that resembled the unintelligent and comedic stereotypes audiences were accustomed to seeing at minstrel shows. Comparing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with *The Octoroon* against the backdrop of blackface minstrelsy will reveal how the tradition of white actors portraying black characters has influenced the dignity with which black characters are presented in regard to their identities as black individuals.

Lisa Merrill, in her essay “May She Read Liberty in Your Eyes?,” examines the performativity of Henry Ward Beecher, reverend and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Beecher would regularly hold “mock slave auctions” in his church during which he would assume the identities of several characters, such as slave trader and auctioneer, in order to raise money for freeing young enslaved girls. On more than one occasion, Beecher used actual, young, and often biracial female slaves in his mock auctions. According to Merrill, the presence of the girls “attempted to foster an empathetic response wherein white parishioners could recognize themselves or their own daughters in the position” (129). Merrill uses Beecher as an example to convey that the presence of “racially indeterminate bodies” on a stage had the ability to incite an affective response from white audiences that would provoke their involvement in the abolition movement because the audience could empathize with the subject’s whiteness. The representation of color on stage was an important part of an audience’s experience during theatrical performance. The way that colored characters were presented in theatre conceivably affected an audience’s general opinion of race.

The two plays draw an immediate connection through their mixed-race characters. Eliza Harris of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a “quadroon,” a person with one-quarter African ancestry, while Zoe is the titular “octoroon” of Boucicault’s play, meaning she has one-eighth African ancestry. Both characters are intended to illicit audience sympathy and, as mixed-race characters, were played by white actresses often without blackface make-up; however, within each narrative, they are both considered obtainable property due to their African ancestry. Uncle Tom and Topsy are slave characters in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that, along with the cast of slaves on the Terrebonne Plantation in *The Octoroon*, represent stereotypes and theatrical conventions of the nineteenth century that portray African-Americans as generally unintelligent and accepting of their social

circumstances. These portrayals serve to balance out the threat of black characters that possess dignity, intelligence, and a desire to be free citizens—in other words, the characters that challenge white superiority. Uncle Tom stands out as a character who, though possessing a number of the degrading characteristics typical of black characters, maintains a moral and personal dignity throughout the entirety of the play; however, Tom's dignity remains tied to his identity as a servant to his white masters. Tom eventually dies as a slave. Though he maintains this dignity, it is devoid of personal independence like that of Eliza and her husband who escape to freedom.

Context: Blackface and the Conventions of the Minstrel Genre

The genre of blackface minstrelsy had a damaging effect on black entertainment and the black entertainer. It was a performance type that featured characters who, regardless of nationality or class, were depicted as black. Despite the specific satire that the play may have been aiming to achieve, it presented its message through black caricatures that represented African-Americans and reinforced white audiences' opinions of how African-Americans acted in society and on stage. Journalist Allan Morrison documents the struggle of the black entertainer in the context of the lasting impression that blackface minstrelsy has had on American entertainment in his article titled "One Hundred Years of Negro Entertainment." For Morrison, blackface minstrelsy damaged the character of black entertainers by how "it caricatured Negro life and pictured the Negro as an irresponsible, grinning, banjo-playing, and dancing type devoid of dignity and depth" (Morrison 3). Largely, blackface characters in minstrelsy fit into the general category of a one-dimensional, comedic stereotype that served to entertain white audiences at the price of generalizing the life of black Americans and subjugating them as a race of intellectually and socially inferior humans. By the time of the Emancipation Proclamation in

1863, minstrelsy had already set the standard for black representation on stage. As one of the most popular American performative genres of the century, this effect was so pervasive that black entertainers struggled to find work in anything but portraying these stereotypes. Morrison writes that “by the time Negro Minstrels entered show business on a substantial scale in the 1860s, the pattern of minstrelsy had been set by the white minstrels” (Morrison 4). It was a slow and uphill struggle for black entertainers. For black performers to advance in the entertainment industry at all, they needed to embrace the terms of minstrelsy that white performers had solidified for decades prior and act as these caricatures. Black actors were not cast in white productions until 1877 and Topsy in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was not played by a black actress until 1879. Yet, according to a certain scholar, the subjugation of the black race was not the express intention of minstrelsy.

William Mahar offers a unique reading of minstrel plays in his essay “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts.” Mahar argues that most scholarly work done on blackface minstrel plays presents the entire category of work as only intent on presenting the African-American as a stereotype that was inherently lesser than the white race; however, to write off the genre as simply racist propaganda ignores the contemporary cultural significance that the performances attempted to achieve. He writes that “blackface comedy was a species of ethnic humor with specific and unfortunate social consequences for African-Americans yet, because of the often self-disparaging nature of its contents, minstrelsy served as a mechanism for defining in-group values” (Mahar 184). The crux of Mahar’s argument is that minstrelsy was too popular and pervasive of a performance genre to ignore the cultural significance that it had for white artists. Minstrel plays were indeed attempts by the white community to define and renegotiate their own values in a setting that mostly belonged to whites. Minstrelsy was used to respond to

contemporary social issues like miscegenation, poverty, pseudoscience, and the social hierarchy; however, Mahar seems to take too lightly the sub-textual implications that performing such social commentary in blackface has for the depiction of African-Americans in theatre.

Mahar describes several different varieties of the blackface minstrel play, one of them being the inversion play. In these types of minstrel shows, a character of lesser intelligence or social status would, due to abnormal circumstances, possess a position of authority or rank, such as a judge, and blunder their way through the situation until they were inevitably undone by their inability to control their authority. Mahar's point is that these plays did not seek to demonize the black characters for seizing power, but rather they mocked white classes or social groups in order to facilitate actual change in white society in a way that was palatable to a general white theatre-going audience. According to Mahar, "the blackface characters were not depicted as slaves who seized power, but as vulgar comedy types whose ability to control events was limited to their brief appearances as power players in farcical situations" (Mahar 199). What Mahar seems to ignore is that, regardless of intent, the characters of the plays were still presented as black. It was black people who would be obtaining power, bumbling their way through a farcical situation, and eventually losing that power due to their own innate inability to keep it. Enough productions of this type of show would create a logic that black people were generally undignified and therefore generally unable to control a situation of authority.

Mahar goes into detail about a minstrel play titled *The Draft*. This play featured several characters attempting to avoid being drafted into the Civil War, most notably the blackface Irishman, Casey. Mahar writes that "what makes Casey funny is not the blackface costume," but how "his plan to avoid service by feigning mental or psychological incompetence deceived no one while his ineffective entreaties and pitiful pleadings entertained all" (Mahar 202). Casey's

character was not humorous *because* he was black, but the groundless excuses he made to avoid consignment were intended to illicit humorous reactions. The character was designed to reflect the audience's own feelings about the war, but still feel superior to the shiftless character because he was portrayed as black. Though his blackness was not what made him humorous, the punchline lies in the fact that he appeared lazy and flighty. These characteristics were more easily received by a white audience coming from a character that was black because they allowed the audience to feel superior not only in race but also in character.

With a plot similar to *The Draft*, the 1870s minstrel show *Fighting for the Union* by George Griffin features several ethnic stereotypes all portrayed in blackface. The show features "Blue Nose" Jim, a derogatory nickname indicating a Presbyterian or puritanical person, attempting to enlist several people, namely a man named Pete, into the Union Army. Griffin uses several class stereotypes to satirize class issues in the context of the Civil War draft. He features Augustus Blower, whose bombastic language indicates that he is a member of the upper-class, Bridget Mahoney, a stubborn and quarrelsome Irish woman, and Pete, a black man who is trying his best to avoid being drafted. Using Mahar's logic, one of the strongest points of social satire in Griffin's play is the character of Augustus. At the recruiting office, Augustus delivers a verbose speech about how every man should "do his duty, and fight as I intend to, and his country will pray for him while living, and mourn for him while dead" (Griffin 6). He speaks at length about the honor and duty of fighting for one's country and then immediately gives the Marshal two hundred dollars to take his name off the list. Augustus, as a member of the upper class, can buy his way out of the draft while the members of the lower class cannot. Pete's character stands similar to Mahar's evaluation of Casey in *The Draft*. Pete is constantly trying to outrun Jim, who is ironically not puritanical at all. Pete is not a humorous character because he is black, rather he

is funny because he is so earnestly attempting to avoid a war that will free the enslaved members of his race. When Jim comes to his house, Pete exclaims “what is going to become ob [sic] us colored folks” conveying an ironic misunderstanding of the war (Griffin 1). All of the characters are presented with a relative ludicrousness that, as Mahar suggests, seems to be conveying a message about class rather than establishing an image of authentic black representation; however, the play is ridiculous enough that the range of blackface characters would have certainly perpetuated an image of the black stage figure as a buffoon and clown.

From Mahar’s summary of the genre, it becomes clear that audiences were not used to seeing black characters presented on stage as either heroic or dignified. Andrew Carlson’s investigation of Shakespeare-based minstrel shows makes it clear that audiences abhorred the idea of characters that were both black and dignified. Minstrel parodies of Shakespeare plays were extremely popular during the nineteenth century, particularly parodies of *Othello*. There were many minstrel versions of *Othello* and they all treated blackness as property while stripping *Othello* of his Shakespearean characteristics (Carlson 177). In George Griffin’s *Othello; a Burlesque*, *Othello*’s blackness is the main issue of the play. Though all the characters are presented in blackface, both Iago and Desdemona use language that sets their blackness apart from *Othello*’s, implying that his is a more base condition (Carlson 178). *Othello* is presented as simple, naïve, and naturally violent—qualities that are expressly associated with the fact the he is black (Carlson 179). In the play *Desdemonum*, *Othello*’s character, known as “Oteller” is remarkably unintelligent and violent. He is little more than a character that “reinforces an idea of blackness as violent, stupid, and inferior” (Carlson 179). These presentations of *Othello* were essential to the presentation of the play on the nineteenth century stage. Carlson includes several statements by members of the white popular press that contend that Shakespeare’s character

could not have been of the same race as African-American slaves *because* he was of noble birth. Samuel Taylor Coleridge questioned, “can we imagine [Shakespeare] so ignorant as to make a barbarous negro claim royal birth, —at a time, too, when negroes were not known except as slaves” (Carlson 180)? These critics concluded that Othello could never be a black man because a black man could never embody the noble qualities with which Shakespeare endowed the character; if the character was to be portrayed by a black actor, it would be an affront to the sensibilities of any reasonable theatre audience.

For these critics, and white theatre audiences, seeing Othello embodied onstage by a black actor was a threatening concept because it presented a black character who was wholly dignified, even noble. Carlson’s essay contributes to a conception of two poles on an ideological spectrum for analyzing nineteenth century performance: poles of baseness and dignity that exist along a spectrum of whiteness and blackness. A “dignified” character is one with a respectable morality, who speaks nobly and captures the respect of other characters. Characters who can be categorized by “baseness” lack morality or even a conception of it, their dialogue is bastardized and their presence is largely intended for humor. The critics in Carlson’s essay suggest that dignity and whiteness were conventionally aligned with each other whereas minstrelsy perpetuated a perception that blackness and baseness were correlated. If a black character appeared as dignified, their position on the whiteness/blackness spectrum was less polarized; these characters would be represented as either mixed-race or possessing characteristics unconventional to black stage representation. Additionally, other characters who fell on the black and base sides of the spectrum served to outweigh the unorthodoxy of the black heroes and heroines in the context of the play as a whole. The idea that African-Americans could be morally or socially equal to whites was one that would not sit easily with an audience that was attending

theatre for the purposes of escapism or entertainment. For the writers of minstrel shows, in order to present stories that satirized white society with black characters, it was essential to present those characters as base, non-threatening stereotypes. For the playwrights of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon*, it becomes necessary to balance out how each black character embodies both blackness and dignity. To present black characters as heroic and moral, especially in the face of slavery as an institution, other black characters had to represent the qualities of minstrel characters that made the audience feel safe in their superior social positions.

The Harrises and Topsy: Different Ends of the Dignity Spectrum

Uncle Tom's Cabin follows the two stories of the Harris family and Uncle Tom as they live in the confines of chattel slavery in the South. George Harris, tired of being treated inhumanely, resolves to run away in order to obtain freedom for himself and his family. His wife, Eliza, decides to run away as well when she discovers plans to sell her son. The Harris' are both pursued by slave catchers. With the help of a kindly Quaker, Phineas Fletcher, the Harrises are able to stand-off against and outrun their pursuers. Meanwhile, Uncle Tom is sold from his original master to the benevolent St. Clare family. Tom forms a close relationship with perpetually innocent but terminally ill Eva St. Clare. Following the death of Eva and then her father, Augustine, Tom is sold to a vile slave owner, Simon Legree. Legree, in an attempt to break Tom from his moral standards, beats Tom to death just before his original master returns to buy him back. The play ends with Tom, Eva, and Augustine meeting in heaven.

The Harrises stand out from the rest of the play's black characters because of their mixed ethnicities, Eliza being a quadroon and George being half-white. Consequently, their characters are presented with a different air and dignity than one of the more stereotypical slave character, Topsy. Topsy is a mischievous, uneducated slave of the St. Clare family given to the shrewd

Miss Ophelia, Augustine's cousin, to be taught manners. Both HARRISES would have likely been portrayed by actors that were made-up to appear closer to white than they were black (Hughes 92, Aiken 32). Despite being largely based on the characters of Stowe's novel, Aiken's version of the Harris family maintains a characteristic dignity connected to their representation as white while Topsy's character, being played completely in blackface, is more performatively stereotypical and undignified.

When George and Eliza first appear at the opening of the play, they both exude qualities that make them more dignified than a typical blackface character. George has a sense of his own agency; in regard to his oppressive master, George proclaims "I'm as much a man as he is. What right has he to make a dray-horse of me" (Aiken 4). George has a clear sense of his worth as a human being and what he believes to be fair; he questions the logic of the master-slave dynamic and decides to revolt against it. Eliza, apprehensive at the idea of George's escape, chooses to remain with her owners until George is free, reasoning that she "must obey [her] master and mistress, or [she] couldn't be a Christian" (Aiken 4). Unlike George, Eliza's owners have treated her quite well, so she believes it to be in her best interest to remain in servitude rather than risk living the life of a fugitive slave. Eliza's resolve is significant because she connects her obedience to her owners to her Christian faith. It is apparent from their first conversation that George and Eliza are educated and faithful people. The characters' dialogue is dissimilar to almost all of the other black characters in the play. They do not speak in the stereotypical dialect that most of the slave and lower-class characters use; rather, George and Eliza use complete and well-formed sentences akin to those spoken by the play's wealthy white characters.

Though, initially, Eliza is steadfast in her desire to remain with her master and mistress, she quickly resolves to run away when she learns that her son will be sold. Eliza's dignity lies

first and foremost in her love for her son. When Eliza meets her Quaker ally, Phineas Fletcher, her dialogue immediately contrasts with his broken, regional Southern dialect. Phineas, whose dialogue tends to be coarse and malapropistic, highlights the boldness and courage of Eliza's commitment to, as she says, "sink beneath the cold waters [of the Ohio River], with [her] child locked in her [arms], than have him torn from [her] and sold into bondage" (Aiken 16). This powerful statement conveys Eliza's entire moral drive. She conveys an anti-slave sentiment that the audience might be able to relate to because, aided by the fact that Eliza is portrayed by a white actress, they can sympathize with the idea of losing their own children.

As George is on the run, he comes into contact with Phineas Fletcher at a tavern where he also meets Mr. Wilson, the owner of the factory that George was forced to work at by his owner. While Phineas attempts to secure George a safe passage, George discusses his flight with Wilson. Wilson, though happy to see George free, expresses regret that George should have to become opposed to "the laws of our country," but George expresses a dignified resolve that he would rather die than remain a slave (Aiken 29). George asks Wilson, "if the Indians should come and take you a prisoner away from your wife and children and want to keep you all your life hoeing corn for them, if you'd think it your duty to abide in the condition in which you were called" (Aiken 29). George offers, in resolute and magisterial language, a strong comparison to his own situation that each member of a white audience would be able to sympathize with. Within the fiction of the play, Wilson is asked this question by a black man, but the audience can better receive such a provocative hypothetical coming from a distinguished white actor. George continues to assert himself as a slave character that is relatable to a white audience. He tells Wilson "I don't want anything of *your* country, except to be left alone... I'll fight for my liberty, to the last breath I breathe! You say your fathers did it, if it was right for them, it is right for me"

(Aiken 30). George boldly sets himself apart from the country that has institutionally oppressed him, a country that is governed by white people; however, he compares his cause to that of the white revolutionaries of the prior century. George does not relinquish his black identity, but he asserts the dignity of his own life using language that is provocative to a white audience. He establishes himself as a rebel against the white oppression but does so in a way with which whites can empathize.

George's confidence has an outward effect on his character as well. Wilson remarks that now George is carrying himself like a whole other person to which George replies "Because I'm a freeman" (Aiken 31). George's seizure of his own freedom has changed his countenance; he speaks boldly and proclaims his values. What is striking to Wilson, is that George is speaking and acting like a freeman, which, in this case, should be read as white man. Wilson notices this change in George because to see a black man in the south acting with this kind of dignity, the dignity of a free, white man, is unusual. As George gets closer to freedom, closer to "whiteness," his increased dignity begins to manifest itself physically. In this case, dignity is connected to whiteness making it even more necessary for white actors to play black characters so that a character rising from bondage to freedom is not threatening to the white social order.

Topsy is an example of a character who exists on the black and base sides of the spectrum. In Stowe's novel, she is a character who represents slavery's institutional ability to breed children that white society would deem uncivilized and immoral. Topsy is a blank slate of morality as she was raised by a speculator only to be sold and worked as a slave. St. Clare gives Topsy to his cousin, the scrupulous and frugal Miss Ophelia, who, after much protesting and frustration, grows to appreciate Topsy after Topsy abandons her mischievous ways. Topsy provides a stark contrast to the Harrises in Aiken's play. Aiken assigns Topsy a more

stereotypical blackness, a racial performativity. If Alex Black's description of Cordelia Howard, Topsy's originating actress, on the cover of the play's published music is any indication of how Topsy appeared, she wears "an oversized dress that hides her height and figure," a billowing, plain garment that indicates her low status (Black). When she initially appears, St. Clare and Ophelia ridicule Topsy for her appearance; Ophelia exclaims, "Good gracious! What a heathenish, shiftless looking [*sic*] object" (Aiken 23). She is immediately set apart from St. Clare and Ophelia as base and subordinate. St. Clare has Topsy dance at which point the stage direction prompts "Topsy sings a verse and dances a breakdown," a breakdown being a distinctly African-American slave dance. Black's analysis of Topsy includes the song "I'se So Wicked" by George C. Howard, the play's producer, director, and original St. Clare. She sings of her abusive old home and her inclination toward mischief. Ophelia launches into a derogatory admonishment of St. Clare's slaves, exasperated that she must see so many "lying on the door mat and... moping and mowing and grinning between all the railings, and tumbling over the kitchen floor" (Aiken 24). Topsy exemplifies this caricature of her race when, according to the stage directions, she grinningly answers Ophelia's questions about her childhood with ignorance. Aiken makes Topsy's racial stereotyping visible, performative. Topsy's character displays to the audience the more conventional comedic characteristics portrayed by black characters, right down to the song and dance routine trademark of the minstrel play. Topsy is there to display an overtly stereotyped black character as a contrast to the nuanced heroism and dignity of the Harrises.

In many cases, Aiken stays true to the integrity of Stowe's novel, often lifting lines straight from the original prose but, in some instances, especially with Topsy, Aiken condenses some plot lines and chops up certain character arcs for the sake of adaptation. The resulting liberties that Aiken takes with the dialogue reveal a characterization of Topsy that is more like a

minstrel character than she was in the novel. When Topsy next re-enters, she is procaliming the general baseness of all African-Americans and her own wickedness; she exhorts “Law! you niggers, does you know you’s all sinners? Well, you is—everybody is. White folks is sinners too—Miss Feely says so—but I ‘spects niggers is the biggest ones. But Lor! ye ain’t any on ye up to me. I’s so awful wicked there can’t nobody do nothing with me” (Aiken 33). This dialogue is pulled directly from Stowe’s novel; however, Aiken follows it with another performance of “I’s So Wicked.” The playwright thematically connects Topsy’s declaration of black depravity with a minstrel piece. Eva enters and questions why Topsy’s does such bad things like destroying the earrings and ballgowns of the housemaids, to which Topsy replies, “Don’t dey despise me cause I don’t know nothing? Don’t dey laugh at me ‘cause I’m brack, and dey ain’t” (Aiken 34). Topsy’s rationale indicates that she feels inclined to act the way she does *because* she is black, she acts with a lack of dignity that others have come to expect out of African-Americans. Topsy is convinced that nobody loves her because she is black, but then Eva expresses how much she loves Topsy, reducing Topsy to tears and prompting her to resolve to be good. This single moment marks Topsy’s shift from an inclination toward mischief to a desire to be good. With Eva’s hand on Topsy’s shoulder and Topsy in tears, the two create an image of how white dignity and black baseness are embodied in the play’s characters.

Aiken prolongs Topsy’s reformation process whereas, in Stowe’s text, Topsy strives to make improvements immediately following her conversation with Eva. Later in the play, Ophelia brings Topsy to St. Clare to answer for her misbehavior. When St. Clare asks Topy why she is behaving in such a way, Topsy answers, again grinning due to Aiken’s stage direction, “‘Spects it’s my wicked heart... I’s nothing but a nigger, no ways” (Aiken 43). Topsy is still resolved to

believe that she is inherently bad because of the fact that she is black. Aiken almost denies Topsy character development:

ST. CLARE: What makes you so bad, Tops? Why won't you try and be good? Don't you love any one, Topsy?

TOPSY: Dunno nothing 'bout love; I loves candy and sich, that's all.
(Aiken 43)

In Stowe's novel, this conversation between Ophelia, St. Clare, and Topsy immediately precedes, even instigates, the conversation between Eva and Topsy. By breaking up the scene and placing the preceding section later, Aiken makes Topsy's character less docile, less intelligent. Topsy's repentance does not occur until after Eva dies thus removing power from Topsy's own moral will and placing emphasis on the death of white person as Topsy's motivation for self-improvement. After Eva's death, Topsy begins to behave but almost without any knowledge of it: "Dar's something de matter wid me—I isn't a bit like myself. I haven't done anything wrong since poor Miss Eva went up in de skies and left us. When I's gwine to do anything wicked, I tink of her, and somehow can't do it. I's getting to be good, dat's a fact. I 'spects when I's dead I shall be turned into a little brack angel" (Aiken 57). Aiken's added dialogue adds a tinge of unintelligence to Topsy's character, making her lack self-awareness to the point that she believes her good behavior means that there is "something the matter" with herself. The character traits added by the playwright only seem to reduce Topsy to an unintelligent, dancing and singing, comic character, a performative type not unlike a minstrel.

Scenes Two and Four of Act Five are some of the few parts of the play completely of Aiken's own creation. It features Topsy and Miss Ophelia once they have gone from St. Clare's estate to live at Ophelia's home in Vermont, which did not appear in the original novel at all. At this point, Topsy has reformed herself from her old ways and is adjusting comfortably to life as

Ophelia's ward; however, little has changed about the way she is represented on stage: "By Golly! [Ophelia has] been dre'ful kind to me ever since I come away from de South; and I loves her, I does, 'cause she takes car' on me and gives me dese fine clothes. I tries to be good too, and I's getting 'long 'mazin' fast. I's not so wicked as I used to was" (Aiken 64). Topsy has improved morally and she no longer does song and dance routines, yet her language is still stereotypically ineloquent and she is still presented as unintelligent, sometimes to a comedic effect; she is beginning to move up the spectrum toward dignity but her dignity is still a uniquely black-stereotyped dignity.

Aiken juxtaposes Topsy with a character of his own imagination: Gumption Cute, a transient con-man always looking to make an easy dollar. Cute is a character who is wholly white but wholly undignified. Cute comes to Vermont in an attempt to mooch off of Ophelia, who he claims is a distant relative of his. When Cute appears, he first meets Topsy, creating an on-stage comparison of black dignity and white baseness. Now more dignified, Topsy is able to obtain a position of dominance in their conversation. Cute calls Topsy's attention by calling her "Charcoal" to which she quickly replies, "My name isn't Charcoal—it's Topsy" (Aiken 64). Here, Topsy knows and asserts her identity, a stark contrast to the earlier Topsy who proclaimed herself "nothin' but a nigger, no ways" (Aiken 43). In fact, Topsy seizes a wholly uncharacteristic authority in the conversation when Cute orders her to call on Ophelia for him; she reprimands Cute, exclaiming, "Does you call yourself a gentleman! By Golly! you look more like a scar'crow" (Aiken 65). Topsy, by virtue of her authority, has become more of a dignified character but she does not completely shed her minstrel-like characterization, rather Cute appears to share in the minstrel performance.

Topsy's remaining stage time plays out almost exactly like a minstrel show with Ophelia, Cute, and Deacon Perry, another character of Aiken's own creation, filling out the rest of the cast. Act Five, Scene Four closely resembles the structure of the inversion play genre of minstrel plays that Mahar describes but, instead of an undignified black stereotype as the central character, Cute, an undignified white stereotype, plays the inverted figure. Topsy informs Ophelia of their visitor, providing a dubious description of Cute that leaves Ophelia suspicious. When Cute enters, he explains his distant relationship with Ophelia, convincing her to hospitably offer her home to him. After Ophelia exits, Cute begins to plot how he will take advantage of his new situation when the Deacon enters. Cute, learning that the Deacon intends to marry Ophelia and ruin Cute's plans to obtain Ophelia's estate, resigns to bullying the Deacon out of his courtship. The two begin a loud battle of insults until Ophelia puts an end to their shouting, agrees to marry the Deacon and banishes Cute from her home. Cute behaves like the "vulgar comedy types whose ability to control events was limited to their brief appearance as power plays in farcical situations" (Mahar 199). Cute, thinking himself an authority figure, attempts to kick the Deacon out of the house, only to lose control of the entire situation and lose his authority completely. To add to this scene's minstrel construction is its hackneyed ending. Put out by Ophelia, Cute is determined not to leave without a fight and lunges at the Deacon. Topsy then appears on the stage, beats Cute around with a broom, Ophelia faints, and the curtain closes—the last to be seen of most of these characters. Mahar writes of the "stage business of minstrel show comedy," the "contrived and staged violence designed to end the sketch by disrupting the seemingly orderly" that had "the power to transform even the most trivial action into scenes of comic chaos" (Mahar 200). For example, Griffin's *Fighting for the Union* ends in all of the characters shouting at each other, upending tables, jumping on other's backs, and

beating each other. Aiken borrows the trope to conclude Topsy and Ophelia's entire story line, but doing so diminishes the characters to farce, making their purpose to alleviate the impending drama of Uncle Tom's violent death. This scene also places Cute on the dignity spectrum. He is a white minstrel character, possessing the stereotypes usually attributed to black characters. Not only do Cute's actions "blacken" him, they also serve to place Topsy back into the context of a black minstrel. While Eva functions as a force of white dignity that elevates Topsy's character, Cute is a white force of baseness that serve to test Topsy's newfound dignity. Though Topsy manages to end the play with more dignity than she began it with, it is a dignity not like that of the Harrises, but the dignity of a black stereotype that is slightly "reformed" by white exploitation and framed as a stock comedic type familiar to the genre of minstrel performance.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a play that clearly benefits from a balancing of racial types. The Harrises represent a type of black stage character that breaks stereotypes, but a type that white audiences would find threatening to their social superiority. Topsy acts a character who represents that traditional, stereotyped characteristics of a black minstrel figure. As a type, Topsy's character serves to create a cast of varying black stage figures that do not all challenge the audience's conceptions of black characters, like the Harrises do. This matter of racial-type balancing is less of a problem in *The Octoroon* as none of the overtly black characters are attempting to transcend their class status; however, several of the characters must traverse status and color in a context in which the specificities of color are much more strict.

Complications: *The Octoroon* and Indeterminate Race

Katy L. Chiles offers an incredibly succinct summary of Dion Boucicault's 1859 play in her essay "Blackened Irish and Brownfaced Amerindians: Constructions of American Whiteness in Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*":

At the outset of the play, George Peyton returns...to the plantation owned by his aunt, Mrs. Peyton, and late uncle, Judge Peyton. He soon falls in love with Zoe, who, unbeknownst to him, is an octoroon, fathered by his white uncle and one of his uncle's 'quadroon slave[s].' The audience then learns that due to the manipulation of the late Judge by the former overseer, villainous Yankee Jacob M'Closky, ... Terrebonne is mortgaged and all Peyton property, including slaves, must be auctioned. M'Closky, himself lustful for Zoe, discovers that a prior lien on the estate renders moot the free papers that the late Judge had bestowed upon her. While the Peyton family waits for a letter...that would save the plantation, M'Closky schemes to purchase Zoe for himself. When the slave boy Paul and his beloved Native American companion Wahnotee depart to retrieve the correspondence, M'Closky slaughters Paul...and intercepts the letter. Meanwhile, Zoe informs George of her octoroon status that...prohibits their union. The slave auction proceeds, and M'Closky succeeds in buying Zoe. However, before he can 'collect' his newly-acquired slave...[Salem Scudder] reveals M'Closky's murderous act, and Wahnotee avenges Paul's death by killing M'Closky. Feeling doomed to a life without George, Zoe dies by her own hand... (Chiles 28-29)

The play's ending received mixed reception after its New York premiere. Some critics saw Zoe's death as the character exercising agency in the immoral system of slavery while others considered her death restorative of the white family's status and thus placatory of slavery (Merrill 138). Boucicault himself was evidently neutral to the system of slavery but, according to Chiles, "Boucicault crafted his narrative to be 'pro-northern,' calling attention to the inhumanity of slavery, while the characters themselves were 'pro-southern,' as the villain is purportedly a 'Yankee' and the southerners are portrayed as generous paternalistic slaveowners" (29). Boucicault's vague position on the subject matter of his play creates a complex world which the racially-aligned characters occupy. Many of the characters, not just Zoe, occupy a vacillating position on the spectrum of whiteness and blackness that provide multi-faceted instances of black representation by white stage actors.

The more traditionally represented characters of *The Octoroon* are the slave characters, named Pete and Paul. They are two characters who would have been portrayed by white actors in

blackface and their conformity to stage stereotypes is evidenced by their unelevated dialogue. Yet, neither Pete nor Paul fit exactly into the mold of the stereotypical black stage representation. Pete is a house slave who manages the rest of the house workers. Whether by his seniority or his position, Pete establishes himself outside the other slaves' racial characterization. To borrow Carlson's language, Pete uses his dialogue to establish his own "community of blackness." He refers to the slave children as "dem black trash" and Minnie, one of the servants, as "de laziest nigger on dis yere property" who "don't do nuffin" (Boucicault 5-6). But Pete's admonishment of Minnie is ironic, almost minstrel-like. As the family and Terrebonne proprietors gather for breakfast, Mrs. Peyton tells Pete to let Zoe know that they are waiting outside for breakfast. Pete immediately relinquishes this task to Minnie before calling her "the laziest nigger" and then immediately sits down. Pete is an old man who walks with a cane; the image of him passing off a task to someone else, calling them lazy, and immediately sitting down is a humorous bit intended to make Pete a comic character. This minstrel-esque characterization of Pete continues during the auction scene. When Pete is called to the auction table, he "tumbles upon the table," according to the stage direction (Boucicault 32). The auctioneer announces that Pete is 72 years old to which he replies "What's dat? A mistake, sar—forty-six" (Boucicault 32). Pete, who is obviously not 46, begins to make a humorous show out of his sale. When the bidding is started at 100 dollars, Pete is astounded ("What, sar? me! For me—look ye here!") and begins to dance (Boucicault 32). The auction table, which has just been used to sell Pete's son and his family, Pete turns into something of a minstrel stage, almost as if to undercut the impending drama of Zoe's sale. Pete becomes a character of a different kind of blackness, still black by virtue of his bondage, but apart from the rest of slaves. Pete is not exactly dignified; given his stereotypical dialect and

minstrel-like representation, he occupies a position on the dignity spectrum that is closer to baseness but he maintains his virtue in a way that is placatory of the white characters.

Before the auction commences, Pete calls together the house slaves to inform them of their situation. When he delivers the news, he is met with cries of lamentation from the rest of the slaves. Pete continuously degrades and silences their grieving, constantly ordering them to “hold quiet,” “hole yer tongues,” and asking, “will you hush” (Boucicault 28). He also calls them a “trash o’ niggers” and “ye mis’able darkies” (Boucicault 28-29). Pete is attempting to prevent the white characters from hearing their grief. He does not want the slaves to do anything more to upset the wealthy white family who is already so distraught, not for losing the land, but for losing the home of the slaves who “all the strings of [Mrs. Peyton’s] heart have grown around and amongst” (Boucicault 24). Pete separates his racial identity from the rest of the slaves, prescribing them a more base blackness in order to assert the superiority of his position over them so that they may support their white master and mistress in a difficult time. Pete even begins to rile the other slaves, telling Grace, one of the servants, that when her and her children are sold “she’ll be screechin’ like a cat;” he tells Dido, the cook, that “she nebber was ‘worth much ‘a dat nigger” (Boucicault 28). Pete intends to challenge the slaves to be on their best behavior, to “let every darky look his best for the judge’s sake” (Boucicault 29). He wants the slaves to act orderly so that they may be auctioned off for as much as possible so as to benefit the family that has done so much for them. In his words and actions, Pete seems to align himself with the white Peyton family. Like Topsy, Pete is afforded a dignity that comes *from* white influence by virtue of his position. He possesses a different kind of blackness that is superior to that of the other slaves, a blackness that makes him an immediate subordinate to the white Peytons. If the Peytons occupy the most dignified position on the spectrum because of their

whiteness, and the slaves occupy the most base position because of their blackness, Pete is somewhere in between.

Pete is not the only slave character to occupy an ambiguous position on the spectrum of race and dignity. Paul is a slave boy who lives on Terrebonne; however, he does not do work. In fact, Paul has almost as much agency as the play's white characters. He goes hunting and spends time with George and Wahnotee, his Native American friend. Mr. Sunnyside, the Peytons' wealthy neighbor, expresses what a shame it is that Paul should be "hunting and fishing his life away instead of hoeing cane" (Boucicault 10). Mrs. Peyton explains that Paul was one of the judge's favorites, so he enjoys some privileges that the other slaves do not. Just when it seems like Paul enjoys a similar familial freedom as Zoe, Paul makes a comment that upsets M'Closky, causing him to rise and ready his whip to beat Paul. The audience does not witness a whipping scene as they do in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for Zoe stops M'Closky, but they are reminded of the social forces that are still at play in this idyllic plantation.

Paul occupies a similarly ambiguous position on the spectrum of dignity as Pete. His dialogue is unelevated and he is certainly not educated but he possesses more agency and dignity than the other slaves. Paul's death conveys a sentiment that this type of dignified outlier cannot exist on stage. As the critics of *Othello* were opposed to seeing a dignified black character on stage, the audience of the Octoroon would have perceived Paul as an anomaly whose continued existence would have been a concern for the future Terrebonne. Though the audience likely would not have liked to see Paul as a free and independent black adult, it does not mean they wanted to see him dead. Paul's death is particularly pathetic; he is only attempting to take a picture of himself using Scudder's camera when M'Closky murders him without a second thought. If Paul's death itself did not incite the audience's sympathy, then Boucicault puts it in

Southern terms by having the auction attendees lament Paul's loss in terms of Paul's monetary worth. The white men remember Paul for how much money he "picked up for his dance and nigger-songs, and he supplied [their] table with fish and game from the Bayous" (Boucicault 22). If Paul is one of Boucicault's more dignified slave characters, he is not remembered for his dignity or humanity. Boucicault humanizes the racial others of his play at Paul's death. The stage direction that describes Wahnotee discovering Paul's body is strikingly poignant. He initially thinks Paul is joking, discovers that he is dead, and violently attacks the camera; returning to Paul's body, he "expresses grief, sorrow and, fondness, and takes him in his arms to carry him away" (Boucicault 21). Boucicault goes to lengths to illustrate the attachment that these two racially disparaged characters have to each other yet they are murdered and villainized by the other characters. The America that Boucicault reflects in his play is not a world in which characters of a non-white identity can live peacefully.

Katy L. Chiles attempts to analyze how the "racially liminal" figures of Wahnotee and M'Closky occupy the prejudiced world of Boucicault's play in her essay "Blackened Irish and Brownfaced Amerindians." Chiles examines what M'Closky and Wahnotee represent as two characters who exist outside of the white norms of society, much like Zoes does. Central to Chiles argument is the conception that M'Closky is a character who is not wholly represented as white. M'Closky would not have been presented in blackface, but Chiles argues that there would have been a tendency by the audience to perceived M'Closky as a "blackened" Irish character (32). Chiles cites Richard Dyer's study of how the Irish were depicted as both black and white in 19th century American popular culture. As another marginalized racial group "scientists applied the 'index of nigrescence' in order to determine how closely related the Irish Celt was to the 'negro,' and that in England and the United States, the discursive representation of the Irish as

black...was quite prevalent” (Chiles 32). Chiles argues that M’Closky’s social positioning as closer to the black slaves than to the other whites drives his attempt to assimilate into white culture by destroying the power of the white Peytons and owning Zoe. Chiles posits that “the possibility of being seen by the audience as white and/or as black marks the Irish M’Closky as another liminal racial figure who, like Zoe, is suspended, and perhaps even stuck, in the interstices between U.S. whiteness and blackness” (Chiles 32). Both Zoe and M’Closky occupy ambiguous places on the spectrum of color but they each maintain a clear distance from each other on the spectrum of dignity. Each played by a white actor, Zoe and M’Closky are two characters who the audience perceive as white but know to contain various characteristics of the “othered” race, only to be distinguished from each other by their dignity. In this regard, M’Closky acts as Zoe’s racial counterpart and moral foil.

Zoe is a privileged member of the Peyton family. Though her birth is illegitimate, Mrs. Peyton has long accepted Zoe and raised her like her own daughter. Zoe’s status as an Octoroon is long hidden from the audience; she is presented with all of the characteristics of a dignified white character, her language as articulate and elevated as any of the white upper-class characters. Zoe conveys an exceptional amount of dignity; she maintains the dignity of independence like any other white character, at least in the first part of the play, and she is dignified in character, being one of the few people to display compassion toward the marginalized figures of Paul and Wahnotee. It is not until Zoe reveals herself to be an octoroon to George that Zoe’s character begins to display the indignity usually associated with the stage representation of black characters; however, this indignity is exclusively applied to Zoe by herself. Zoe claims that George’s love for her is as bad as if he were to catch a “fever, were stung by a snake, or possessed of any other poisonous or unclean thing” (Boucicault 26). She sees her

mixed-race identity as nothing but an intrinsic blemish to her humanity. None of the other characters treat Zoe with the indignity that black slave characters usually receive on stage; given the laws of Louisiana and the systemic prejudice of the society she lives in, she attributes the indignity to herself. The institution of slavery has convinced Zoe that to be at all black is to be base. Zoe's perception of her own race starkly contrasts that of the Harris family in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who are also mixed. George and Eliza see no reason why their color should make them slaves; Zoe sees the opposite. She reveals her and George's secret love to Dora Sunnyside, George's wealthy, female suitor, ruining any hope that the Sunnysides might buy Terrebonne and save the plantation. Zoe confesses that she revealed her love for George because "it was the truth; and [she would] rather be a slave with a free soul, than remain free with a slavish, deceitful heart" (Boucicault 27). Zoe would rather maintain the dignity of her virtue even if it means she must suffer the indignity of slavery. She is a virtuous character who attempts to make herself out to be base because of her blackness; however, by the end of the play Zoe is more dignified and quite physically white. When Zoe appears at the auction, in captivity for the first time, the stage direction notes that she is "very pale" (Boucicault 32). In the final scene, as Zoe is about to poison herself, Dora notices "how pales she looks" (Boucicault 45). Zoe submits to selling herself in order to save her family's debts, and she dies so that George may love uninhibited by law. While she actively reviles and deprecates herself as an undignified black character, Zoe literally becomes whiter and more dignified. She occupies a vague and vacillating position on the spectrum of color and dignity; while appearing both white and stately she continuously undignifies herself as her reality of slavery continues to unfold. M'Closky behaves inversely. He is a racially indeterminate character who, in his own attempts to align himself with whiteness, undignifies himself, and finds himself on the outside of the white in-group.

Chiles defines the stereotypical Irish stage figure as “displaying ‘loquaciousness, lack of funds, overfondness for pure whisky, an allergy to work and an overpowering cheerful Blarneying friendliness’” (Kosok qtd. in Chiles 31). Chiles reads M’Closky as a depiction of the Stage Irish because of his name, his propensity for liquor in the morning, and his desire for wealth through thievery and not work. As a character who is not considered exactly “white” but not completely “black,” M’Closky is then located “in the middle strata between the rich, status-holding white Peyton family and the revealed-to-be poor, slave, black Zoe” who “can only retain his proximity to whiteness by working to distance Zoe from it” (Chiles 34). He started off low on the spectrum of dignity and ambiguously intermediate on the spectrum of race. Though M’Closky works to become white and distance Zoe from her blackness, his act of killing Paul only succeeds to un-dignify him and distance him from white status. In the first scene, Salem Scudder, the other overseer equally responsible for bankrupting Terrebonne, squares off with M’Closky. Scudder, who regrets his exploitation of the Peytons, knows that M’Closky is out to ruin them for good. He confesses to M’Closky, “I can’t bear the feeling, its keep at me like a skin complaint, and if this family is sold up...I’d cut my throat—or yours—yours I’d prefer” (Boucicault 14). The two men profess their rivalry over the Peytons and their affection for Zoe.

It would seem that Scudder has M’Closky right where he wants them when they try him for Paul’s murder. The mob of boatmen, at M’Closky’s suggestion, want to try and lynch Wahnotee for Paul’s murder. Scudder is the only level-headed witness who calls for a fair trial and, when presented with it, the use of the photographic plate from the camera as evidence. The plate catches M’Closky right in the moment before he killed Paul, easily convicting him. At this, the crowd’s racially-charged hysteria immediately turns toward M’Closky. He becomes a replacement for the racial prejudice the crowd just previously held for Wahnotee. When the

makeshift jury finds M'Closky guilty, Wahnotee makes to attack M'Closky, but Scudder stops him, saying, "We deal out justice here, not revenge. 'Tain't you he has injured, 'tis the white man, whose laws he has offended" (Boucicault 38). Scudder's remark is loaded with irony because it seems as if Scudder is the one who is finally achieving a legally authorized form of revenge. Scudder's distinction of "the white man" as the victim implies that M'Closky is an outside transgressor on the in-group's laws. M'Closky escapes the lynch mob only to be pursued through the Louisiana bayou by Wahnotee. Relentless in his pursuit, Wahnotee eventually drives M'Closky to extreme terror, to the point that he, finding them on their way back to Terrebonne, begs Scudder and Pete to protect him. Scudder, reluctant to offer M'Closky mercy, delivers a speech about the white man's relationship to people of color: "nature has said that where the white man sets his foot, the red man and the black man shall up sticks and stand around. But what do we pay for that possession? ...in all them goods that show the critters the difference between the Christian and the savage. Now, what have you done to show them the distinction? for, darn me, if I can find out" (Boucicault 43). Scudder insinuates that M'Closky is devoid of the dignity that the colonizing white man should possess. It is not the traditional dignity possessed by characters like Zoe or the Harris family, but it is the dignity endowed in the white characters of Boucicault's play. M'Closky, who has not exhibited this particularly brand of white dignity, finds himself at the end of the play completely rejected by white society. His attempts to possess whiteness by usurping the Peyton family has only succeeded in distancing himself from white society, solidifying his place on the black and undignified side of the spectrum.

Boucicault creates a world of race relations that are, in reality, identical to those of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; however, narratively, the dramatic relationships between the characters of *The Octoroon* display complex racial tensions that, as the characters act on and respond to the events

around them, shift and vacillate in order to convey racial identities that are as superficial as the social conventions that construct them. The dignity with which the characters are presented is easily manipulated as all the characters are played by white actors. The colorization of the black characters is achieved through Boucicault's dialogue, stage direction, and, of course, blackface. These characters were played as racially identifiable as the script permitted, with few extraneous theatrical conventions to convey their racial dignities. Balancing the racial dignity of the characters so as to not create threatening black stage figures is unneeded in *The Octoroon* because the racial identities are already so complex and indeterminate. The racial dynamics of *The Octoroon* are far more complex than those of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, possibly because of Boucicault's purported indifference toward slavery. Whereas Stowe sought to write a novel supporting the abolitionist movement and Aiken sought to adapt it for the stage, Boucicault wrote a melodrama intended to incite complex feelings toward race within the audience because the subject of miscegenation was intrinsically complex and dramatic.

The "New Stage Negro": The Indeterminate Representation of Uncle Tom

In his analysis of Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its effect on subsequent American theatre, Mark Robson recounts a story of Green Germon, the first actor to play Uncle Tom in Aiken's play. Apparently, Germon was "reluctant to play the part without a minstrel 'breakdown' or a 'Jim Crow' dance to give the audience what it expected, but director G. C. Howard finally convinced him that Uncle Tom was a 'new type of stage Negro'" (Robson 73). Uncle Tom reads almost more like one of Boucicault's characters than any other character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He is not as refined and radical as the Harries nor is he as base and minstrel-like as Topsy. Uncle Tom maintains a dignity that is rooted in his kindness and faith, characteristics that derive directly from the character created by Harriet Beecher Stowe;

however, Tom's position on the racial spectrum, as it relates to his dignity, seems to vacillate due to his relationships with the other characters in the play.

Tom speaks in the unelevated dialect akin to that of Topsy and Gumption Cute, yet Tom's language is nowhere near as base. His language sits uniquely between the refined language of the Harrises and the stereotypical "vernacular" of Topsy. When Tom first appears on stage, he assumes a dignity that is not unlike the slaves of Terrebonne who feel privileged to support their masters. When Eliza reveals their master's plan to sell her son and Tom, she offers Tom the chance to run away with them but Tom refuses. His refusal is not necessarily predicated on serving his master, but on the fact that his sale prevents the rest of his master's plantation from going under and the displacement of the rest of the slaves. Tom makes a decision for the sake of others, it is a decision that will keep him in bondage constituting a uniquely black kind of dignity. This black-connotated dignity is shifted when Tom comes under the ownership of the St. Clares. Tom is bought by Augustine St. Clare to act as a coachman for his wife, Marie, and is described as a "regular hearse of blackness and sobriety" (Aiken 18-19). Marie dismisses St. Clare's praise, sure that Tom will drink. St. Clare vouches for Tom's character by recounting how Tom saved Eva when she was knocked off the ferry they were on, thus explaining how Tom came into their acquaintance. Aiken takes several liberties in this scene emphasizing Eva's fondness for Tom, such as having Eva hug and kiss Tom rather than another of the house slaves (Aiken 19). Aiken's emphasis displays Tom as a unique black figure in the lives of the St. Clare family, creating a juxtaposition between Tom's congenial blackness and the St. Clare's patronizing whiteness.

Tom's black dignity begins to affect the lives of the St. Clare's. In Scene One of Act Three, Tom stands up to St. Clare, expressing concern for St. Clare's penchant for coming home

drunk. Tom is deeply affected by St. Clare's behavior; he implores St. Clare, "clasping his hands and weeping," to give up drinking before it consumes him as the Bible suggests it will (Aiken 41). St. Clare agrees to Tom's entreaty, pledging his honor to him. Aiken's inclusion of this scene develops the relationship between St. Clare and Tom in a way that conveys Tom's superior dignity. Tom is not the drunk stereotype that Marie thinks him to be, rather he is attempting to prevent St. Clare from becoming a drunk. The stage picture of Tom begging for St. Clare's sobriety inverts black stereotyping and presents Tom as the "new type of stage Negro" that Howard described him as. Tom's stage time with Eva is also significant in this regard. Aiken truncates much of the novel so that Tom and Eva's relationship can be developed onstage. Unlike in the minstrel adaptations of *Othello*, the black presence onstage with a white presence is not seen as threatening. To justify Othello and Desdemona's relationship in the minstrel adaptations, Othello was always presented as a stereotype. Tom and Eva's relationship is allowed to be one of the more poignant relationships in the play because Tom is a dignified black character who is played by a white actor.

Tom continues to convey himself with unflinching dignity of character. After Eva's death, Tom sticks loyally close to St. Clare. St. Clare is completely distraught over the death of his daughter because he cannot help but doubt the Christian faith. Even when St. Clare offers Tom his freedom, Tom is resigned to "stay with mas'r as long as he wants me, so as I can be any use" (Aiken 55). Tom considers it privileged work to help St. Clare find his faith; he promises not to give up on St. Clare until he is a proper Christian. Tom's loyalty to St. Clare seems to transcend the master/slave dynamic. Tom is not loyal to St. Clare necessarily *because* St. Clare is his master—he vows to stay with St. Clare even if he were free—rather Tom is loyal to St. Clare because of his Christian faith. Tom possesses a Christian dignity that separates his dignity from

black or white versions of dignity. It is a kind of dignity that avoids colorization and subsequently Tom's racial identity hinders on how he utilizes his Christian dignity with the characters around him. The religiously-tinged relationship and loyalty that Tom builds up with the St. Clare family begins to align Tom more with a white identity. This will change when St. Clare dies and Tom is sold to Simon Legree.

Legree is the complete antithesis of St. Clare. Where St. Clare treated his slaves with human decency, Legree treats his slaves as nothing more than living property. His first order of business is to break Tom's optimistic Christian spirit. When Legree returns to his plantation with Tom and another newly purchased female slave, he orders Tom to flog the girl because she was being disobedient. Tom refuses to do so, claiming that he would die before he did such a thing. Legree questions Tom's refusal, citing the master/slave rationale that he owns Tom "body and soul," but Tom corrects Legree: "my soul a'nt yours, mas'r; you haven't bought it—ye can't buy it; it's been bought and paid for by one that is able to keep it, and you can't harm it" (Aiken 69). Tom believes that he has a Christian right to disobey his master because to do the thing he is being commanded would damage his Christian soul. Legree is performatively evil, throwing characters around the stage and brandishing his whip constantly. Tom's refusal to obey Legree on the grounds of his faith is a heroic action that, in this scenario, aligns Tom with the black characters rather than Legree's evil whiteness. Even to the point of death, Tom's Christian faith triumphs against Legree's evil. Legree has beaten Tom within an inch of dying and Tom still manages to express his desire for Legree to repent. Tom tells Legree, "I forgive you with all my soul" (Aiken 89). The recalled image of Tom's soul situates Tom in a morally superior position to Legree; *Legree* is invoking *Tom's* pity. Legree stands as the physical embodiment of the evils of slavery, the level of white dominance that M'Closky attempted to gain. Tom's refusal to

acknowledge their master/slave relationship robs Legree of his white authority. After delivering the final blow to Tom, Legree's plantation is stormed by men who have arrived to buy back Tom and arrest Legree for St. Clare's murder. At this point, Legree no longer maintains authority over his slaves; Sambo, who has hitherto been completely obedient to Legree, gives up Tom without Legree's consent and gets to carry his dead body off stage, laughing. At the end of the play, Legree is, like M'Closky, separated from his superior white identity, wholly undignified, and dead. Tom, now aligned with his blackness, inverts social norms by offering his pity to his white master. Tom has a constant dignity that serves to convert Tom's racial identity to the appropriate side of the spectrum so that he may appear non-threatening.

Tom's Christianity helps him connect with Eva and St. Clare. He teaches Eva and feels a spiritual connection to her purity and innocence. St. Clare's religious doubts are almost a kind of mission work for Tom. Tom's Christian dignity here allows him to connect with the white family in a kind of interaction that still makes him servile to them. Because Legree is evil, Tom does not attempt to obey him but still exercises his faith so that Legree is the object of Tom's pity; Tom, by maintaining his religious dignity, rids himself and Legree of the master/slave dynamic. It is easy to read Tom's faith as a submission that keeps him peacefully subject to white authority, but Tom's submission is not weakness. Tom's faith is a mechanism by which he maintains his dignity in a world of racial dynamics beyond his control. Though his alignment on the color spectrum may shift, Tom's dignity never wavers; it is an inherently Christian dignity that provides Tom with a religious dimension that few of the other characters have. The dignifying aspect of religion in the lives of slaves is never one that seems to come up in Black's study of the minstrel genre. Tom living his faith on stage as a black character of multidimensional racial allegiances certainly makes Tom a "new type of stage Negro."

Conclusion

Minstrelsy provided a racial context for the colored characters of *The Octoroon* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to perform in. Their various representations, whether from an adaptation or the mind of a playwright, conveyed an image of how the non-white stage character was perceived by theatre audiences of the nineteenth century. The fact that, for decades after their debut, these colored characters were portrayed by white actors adds multiple layers of racial complication to these characters. The audience's perception of these characters as colored was no doubt influenced by their understanding that the actor was white. If a venerable black character was scandalous, then plays about the advancement of colored peoples would have a fine line to walk in order to not injure the sensitivities of their pre-emancipation crowds. Conventions of minstrelsy, especially the implementation of blackface, gave *The Octoroon* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a source of racial performativity that served to represent black characters as images far less stereotypical than the minstrel but not completely free of the stereotypes pervasive in American theatre. Black characters could push the boundaries of slavery, look and sound strikingly similar to white characters, so long as there were other characters who provided an image of the minstrel in order to alleviate any audience distaste for enterprising free blacks that were stronger than the white characters. Racially-mixed characters had a certain degree of agency as long as they were presented as mostly white and received some type of penalty for their mixed identity. The dignified black character who remained loyal and non-threatening to whites but true to its black identity was a black representation that could easily be presented as a hero on stage. *The Octoroon* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were two of the most popular plays of the century that maintained their popularity for decades following their debut. One is left to wonder if their presented images of black identity were active factors in their sustained fame.

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