Lincoln, Stowe, and the “Little Woman/Great War” Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote

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In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Cindy Weinstein begins, as so many others have, with one of the most popular anecdotes in American literary history: “Harriet Beecher Stowe’s most famous introduction took place on or around Thanksgiving Day, 1862, when she was introduced to President Abraham Lincoln, who allegedly greeted her with these memorable words, ‘So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!’” Weinstein’s evocation of Lincoln is not surprising; of all the biographical details currently in circulation about Stowe, this anecdote certainly ranks among the most well known, and one finds some version of Lincoln’s greeting employed in hundreds of articles, books, reviews, and Web summaries. Despite its popularity, however, the quotation is entirely apocryphal, emerging from within Stowe family tradition without any textual support or verification from the author herself. Most of Stowe’s biographers have included some version of the quote, almost always scrupulously attributing it to its apocryphal origins. Many twentieth-century literary scholars, critics, and historians who reference the incident were not as careful as Weinstein to


qualify the quotation with phrases like “allegedly said” or “is reported to have said.” The quote is a rarity in Lincoln biographies, however, and many of the Lincoln biographers and historians who have used it have been sloppy about noting its apocryphal origins. On the Internet, where historical summaries are often disconnected from their sources entirely, Lincoln’s alleged words are rapidly hardening into unqualified historical fact.

How did an apocryphal story emerge as the main evidence for Stowe’s cultural legacy before the Civil War? That question is seldom asked by scholars, who treat the quotation more as a treasured Stowe family heirloom than a problem text, footnoting it and then moving on. But despite its popularity, Lincoln’s greeting drifts in the same strata of pseudo-historical flotsam that increasingly defines that which is considered “historical” in the digital age. The story persists not because of its historicity, but because it resonates with the dominant frequency of Lincoln-as-cultural-icon in American society and because it confirms American cultural expectations of nineteenth-century literature as generally sympathetic to the goals of abolitionism. The Lincoln-Stowe “relationship” in the twentieth century is a mutually beneficial negotiation between two cultural icons: the linkage to Stowe extends Lincoln’s influence further into the culture, into the realm of the literary; Stowe, by her association with Lincoln, is elevated to the pantheon of abolitionist writers that includes such writers as Frederick Douglass, Lydia Maria Child, and Henry David Thoreau.

What are the origins of this apocryphal anecdote? If there was no historically significant meeting between these two abolitionist icons, why, despite its questionable origins, did this anecdote gain such purchase in the American imagination? The answer lies in the literary, historical, and biographical discourse on both Stowe and Lincoln. Literary scholarship and Stowe biography have paved the widest path for this quote in American culture, so many of the sources I reference here

come from this area of study. For reasons that should be obvious, Stowe scholars have been more consistently interested in the Lincoln-Stowe connection than Lincoln scholars.

I

Lincoln’s famous greeting was reportedly uttered to Stowe during a meeting on December 2, 1862. But the quotation did not begin to appear in print until thirty-four years later, in 1896, the year Stowe died. That year, the Atlantic Monthly published a piece by Annie Fields, wife of the popular magazine’s publisher James Fields and a biographer of Stowe, who wrote, “It was left for others to speak of her interview with President Lincoln. Her daughter was told that when the President heard her name he seized her hand saying, ‘Is this the little woman who made the great war?’” Fields’s attribution of the quotation to its secondhand source is prudent, as the details of Stowe’s trip to Washington have always been difficult to reconstruct, even when eyewitnesses to the event were still living. Stowe wrote almost nothing about her visit with Lincoln, though she shared one possible reminiscence of their dialogue in an article she wrote for The Watchman and Reflector, recalling that Lincoln had told her, “Whichever way it ends, I have the impression that I sha’n’t last long after it’s over.” Otherwise, Stowe’s writing offers no insights into what transpired between them. Lincoln made no known record of the encounter either, which left Stowe’s relatives to reconstruct the historic meeting in their writings, and they left a deeply conflicted portrait of the event. Three of Stowe’s relatives claimed to have been present at the meeting with Lincoln, but only

5. The quotation was apparently not yet widely circulated in the mid-1890s. Other notable sketches and reminiscences published in 1896, such as Richard Burton’s biographical piece “The Author of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” Century 52 (September 1896): 698–715, and Charles Dudley Warner’s “The Story of Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” Atlantic Monthly 78 (September 1896): 311–22, make no mention of it. The anecdote is also absent from the first of two biographies published by Charles Stowe—*The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* in 1889.
one—Harriet’s son Charles—recorded some version of the president’s famous words to Stowe, and his status as an eyewitness is questionable. The quotation also now exists in several versions, which raises questions about its original form.

Stowe and several members of her family apparently did travel to the capital in late November 1862, but the impetus for the visit remains unclear. Annie Fields reports that Stowe sent her a “hurried note” announcing that she was going to “see the heads of departments myself, and to satisfy myself that I may refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a reality and a substance not to fizzle out at the little end of the horn.”

In the first of two biographies he published about his mother, son Charles recalled that Harriet had been “invited to visit Washington, to be present at a great thanksgiving dinner provided for the thousands of fugitive slaves”; in a revised version published twenty-two years later, he added a political justification to the trip that seems to echo Fields’s explanation of her reasons. Stowe biographer Joan Hedrick suggests that Mrs. Lincoln had invited Stowe to tea at the White House. The letter that Harriet wrote to her husband Calvin while in Washington is entirely devoted to her reunion with their son Fred, an army lieutenant stationed near the capital. It mentions no details of the meeting with Lincoln.

Three Stowe family members wrote accounts of the meeting—Harriet’s daughter Hattie, her son Charles, and her sister-in-law Isabella Beecher Hooker—but their accounts differ substantially. The list of Stowe’s relatives who accompanied Harriet on the trip to Washington, for example, is a matter for debate. Biographer Barbara White summarizes this uncertainty when she writes, “Most twentieth-century accounts of the Lincoln visit mention the presence of Charles Stowe, Harriet’s youngest son. However, Harriet, Hatty, and Isabella do not refer to him in any of their letters from Washington.” White strongly suggests that twelve-year-old Charles did not accompany the three women to the capital. Charles’s potential absence is significant because his 1911 biography, written with his son Lyman, is clearly the

12. White, Beecher Sisters, 93.
13. Ibid.
source for the most commonplace version of the quotation currently in circulation: “Mrs. Stowe, in telling of her interview with Lincoln at this time, dwelt particularly on the rustic pleasantry with which that great man received her. She was introduced into a cozy room where the President had been seated before an open fire, for the day was damp and chilly. It was Mr. Seward who introduced her, and Mr. Lincoln rose awkwardly from his chair saying, ‘Why, Mrs. Stowe, right glad to see you!’ Then with a humorous twinkle in his eye, he said, ‘So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war! Sit down please,’ he added, as he seated himself once more before the fire, meditatively warming his immense hands over the smouldering embers by first extending his palms and then turning his wrists so that the grateful warmth reached the backs of his hands. The first thing he said was, ‘I do love an open fire. I always had one to home.’”  

Charles’s treatment of this incident illuminates how “family tradition” was perhaps moved by ideological forces. Charles published his first biography, *The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, in 1889 with his mother’s assistance. Composed almost entirely of Stowe’s letters and journal entries with brief introductions written by Charles, that biography contains no details of the encounter with Lincoln, though Stowe’s above-mentioned letter to husband Calvin is reprinted in the book. The introduction to this same letter was revised for the later 1911 biography. The revisions, printed in bold, are instructive: “In November, 1862, Mrs. Stowe, with many others, was invited to visit Washington, and attend a great Thanksgiving dinner which was to be provided for the thousands of fugitive slaves who had flocked to that city. This invitation she accepted the more gladly because her son’s regiment was then encamped near the city. She wished also to have a talk with Mr. Lincoln. By a proclamation issued September 22, 1862, he had warned the states still in rebellion that unless they should return to their allegiance by January 1, 1863, he would, purely as a matter of military necessity, declare the slaves within their borders free. Mrs. Stowe was anxious to learn from his own lips what was to be his policy in this matter.”

The 1889 biography casts the visit as entirely a family affair—an opportunity for Harriet to see her son—while the revised 1911 account introduces the political motivation for the trip. This politicization of Stowe’s trip is reinforced in the section that immediately follows the

15. Ibid, 203.
description of the meeting between his mother and the president: “‘I want to ask you about your views on emancipation.’ It was on that subject that the conversation turned. Mrs. Stowe, like so many others at this time, had failed to grasp Lincoln’s far-sighted statesmanship. ‘Mr. Lincoln has been too slow,’ she said, speaking of what she called his ‘Confiscation Bill.’ ‘He should have done something sooner, and with an impulse. . . .’ Bismarck has said something to the effect that a statesman who should permit himself to be guided exclusively by abstract moral considerations in his public acts would be like a man taking a long pole in his mouth and trying to run through a thick woods on a dark night. Would it have been for the best interests of humanity to have had a John Brown or a Garrison in Lincoln’s place in those critical moments of the Civil War?”

For Charles and Lyman, it is important to situate Harriet Beecher Stowe’s legacy within Lincoln’s; Lincoln becomes the standard by which Stowe’s abolitionism is measured, and Lincoln—a reluctant emancipator by any standard—is shown to possess the superior prescience and wisdom regarding the abolition of slavery. Lincoln’s brand of realpolitik abolitionism is privileged over the “abstract moral considerations” of such committed abolitionists as William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown, while Stowe is gently reprimanded for not immediately apprehending the grand purpose behind Lincoln’s pragmatism.

In many ways, Charles’s revision of his mother’s abolitionism is consistent with the spirit of the age. The revision’s first appearance in print parallels an important era in Lincoln’s cultural legacy. The post-war generation was dominated by a powerful Republican political machine that kept Lincoln’s name in the foreground of American life, and the “Nationalist School” of American historians that included Hermann von Holst, James Schouler, and John Fiske helped turn Lincoln into a national hero. By the turn of the century, Lincoln’s repu-

16. Ibid.

17. Writing in “A Man but Not a Brother,” Journal of Southern History 41 (February 1975): 39, George M. Frederickson sums up Lincoln’s attitudes towards black people by saying he was “neither a common Negrophobe or a principled champion of racial equality.”

18. Brown’s abolitionism can hardly be described as a “moral abstraction,” considering his long-term and ultimately fatal commitment to the violent overthrow of slavery.

tation was undergoing a cultural makeover that would culminate in the opening of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922 as a symbol of national unity that appeared to transcend all of the divisions within American society.\(^{20}\) He was emerging as a redeemer or Christ figure within the American civil religion—the savior of the nation, the unifier of North and South. Consequently, his role as “Emancipator” was also being downplayed in favor of the self-sacrificing balancer of national interests who sagely weighed the slavery issue against other concerns.\(^{21}\)

As nation-building took precedence in the national culture, the revolutionary energies stirred by abolitionism were quickly curtailed. Abolitionists like Garrison and Brown were increasingly critiqued for their divisive pre-war rhetoric and tactics. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that in 1905, while walking with his wife on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, he stopped at the statue of Garrison and remarked that he could not honor “a man who broke the condition of social life by bidding the very structure of society perish rather than he not have his way—expressed in terms of morals, to be sure, but still, his way.”\(^{22}\) Unlike Garrison, John Brown would become a cultural icon, but a century of distortions in American history textbooks guaranteed that he would be remembered more as a deranged and violent prophet figure rather than a committed abolitionist whose ideas are worthy of serious consideration.\(^{23}\) Historian Robert McGlone explains: “Brown was a symbol of racial acceptance in a time of growing racial intolerance. Paradoxically, he was divisive for his very effort to unite black and white. He had appealed to the tenets of an American creed, but his raid polarized sentiment over slavery. He had proclaimed the brotherhood of man yet helped to cut away the fragile sutures of trust and political fellowship that bound the nation together. Using the language of the Declaration of Independence, he had denounced the principle of government by and for whites alone. Thus, he had helped to shatter the moral compromises that sustained a precarious armistice between North and South. And, implicitly, he


\(^{21}\) Land was commissioned for the Lincoln Memorial in 1901. In 1911, the same year the second Stowe biography was released, Congress created a special commission to memorialize Lincoln.

\(^{22}\) This portrait should be familiar to any American sixth grader, who, studying the Civil War for the first time, wonders why the president waited so long to announce the Emancipation Proclamation and then only freed slaves in the states that had seceded from the Union, only to be reassured that Lincoln was cautious with good reason.

challenged the principles of white supremacy and local-rule on which the next generation restored the Union.”

As Lincoln emerged as a transcendental signifier in American culture and history, the other abolitionists were being aligned beneath him as less successful or relevant. After all, Garrison had once burned the Constitution at a Fourth of July celebration to protest its enshrinement of slavery, and Brown had fomented revolution against institutions of state that had survived the war. These were hardly appropriate icons for the new culture of national unity that celebrated Lincoln as the preserver and savior of the union.

Stowe’s abstract principles also required explanation after the war. Like Brown’s anarchism and Garrison’s anti-constitutionalism, Stowe’s vision of anti-institutional Christian perfectionism required a new framing after the war began. Theodore Hovet explains the dilemma for such Christian perfectionists as Gilbert Haven, Thomas Upham, Jesse Jones, and William Boardman when the war arrived: “By allowing slavery to become the symbol of an unjust social order and concluding that only revolution could abolish it, such individuals were forced to surrender their adherence to the abstract principles inherent in the New Covenant in order to insure the success of what they considered to be a revolution initiated by the union government.” Like many abolitionists, Stowe surrendered those abstract principles when the war broke out. According to Hovet, she moved from an anti-institutional position to a pro-government one, largely because she, like many Christian perfectionists, began to regard Lincoln as fulfilling a divine purpose. In 1911, with Lincoln emerging as the transcendental signifier for abolitionism in American culture, Charles and Lyman Stowe were certainly aware of the need to situate Harriet’s abolitionism within Lincoln’s.

Whether or not Charles was present on the Washington trip to witness anything firsthand, his account—however colorful—stands in stark contrast to Isabella’s. In her version, Massachusetts senator Henry Wilson, not Secretary of State William Henry Seward, introduces the Stowe party to Lincoln. The differences do not end there. Isabella describes

ton argues that academic historians in the twentieth century have been hostile to John Brown because of southern partisanism and because many historians were offended by the intensity of Brown’s religious convictions. He also suggests that twentieth-century Americans labeled him crazy because he was a white man dedicating himself to helping black people (342–43).


Lincoln as “a rough scrubby—black—brown withered—dull eyed object as advanced to meet us—on entering—I can give you no idea of the shock—sister Hattie immediately became so engaged in silent observation of the unexpected apparition—there was no conversation to be expected from that quarter—so I put in vigorously on behalf of the charming open wood fire—& started various topics—till at last Mr. Lincoln—was ‘reminded of a man out west’—& then I collapsed & enjoyed myself vigorously— tho’ quite internally—so we all did.”

This “apparition” is a radical departure from Fields’s enthusiastic hand-pumping politico and Charles’s twinkling homespun frontier statesmen. Isabella concludes her recollection that “owing to Mr. Wilson’s perfectly unsophisticated manner of introducing, that father Abe. had no conception who Mrs. Stowe was—& will not have till Mrs. Lincoln instructs him on the subject in her own peculiar manner.” Daughter Hattie, who was twenty-three years old at the time, accompanied her mother on the trip and wrote a letter to her sister describing the incident as so funny “we practically screamed” with laughter after the Stowe party had retired to their rooms. Of these potential eyewitnesses to the meeting, Charles alone records some version of Lincoln’s greeting, and his status as an eyewitness, as I have already said, is rather tenuous. Which Lincoln greeted Stowe that day? Who introduced him to Harriet? What did he say? The collective Stowe family remembrance is hardly a reliable source to answer any of those questions.

Lincoln and his many biographers are far less reliable sources of information on the meeting. It is mentioned in none of Lincoln’s known writings, and many important Lincoln biographies omit the quotation altogether. Where the quotation does appear in accounts of Lincoln’s life, the incident seldom occupies more than a paragraph or two, and Lincoln biographies are far more likely to mention the cultural and political influence of Uncle Tom’s Cabin than the meeting between Stowe and Lincoln. John George Nicolay and John Hay’s Abraham Lincoln: A Life History (1890) ignores Stowe altogether, but the quotation began to

27. Hattie remembers Wilson introducing Lincoln as well, which perhaps provides evidence that Hattie and Isabella were there, but not Charles.
29. Ibid. Thomas Gossett speculates in his Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985), 314, that Lincoln likely never read the book, though some evidence exists that Lincoln was following her career. On May 26, 1862, the library of the Executive Mansion ordered both The Pearl of Orr’s Island (1862) and Agnes of Sorrento (1862); a month later, on June 16, the president borrowed Keys to Uncle Tom’s Cabin from the Library of Congress (Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809–1865, 115, 121).
30. Quoted in White, Beecher Sisters, 92.
appear in Lincoln biographies just after the turn of the century. From the beginning, Lincoln biographers were paraphrasing and shortening the quotation and treating it as historical fact. Wayne Whipple’s *The Story-Life of Lincoln* (1908) and Joseph Fort Newton’s *Lincoln and Herndon* (1910) use truncated versions of the quotation; neither notes its apocryphal origins. Albert Beveridge, Carl Sandburg, and Albert Shaw treat the quotation as a simple fact; Shaw paraphrases heavily from more well-established versions, writing, “So this is the little woman who brought on this big Civil War.” Beveridge, too, offers a shortened version of the most commonplace version of the quotation: “Is this the little woman who made this big war?”

Perhaps owing to their relative distance from the Stowe source material and one-hundred-year-old biographical debates about the authorship, Lincoln’s twentieth-century biographers have been generally careless in identifying the apocryphal nature of Lincoln’s alleged greeting. Later biographers, including Benjamin Quarles (*Lincoln and the Negro*, 1962), Jan Morris (*Lincoln: a Foreigner’s Quest*, 2000), and Susan Martinez (*The Psychic Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2007) are similarly guilty of taking Lincoln’s words as carved in stone. Some contemporary Lincoln biographers and scholars appear to understand the apocryphal nature of Lincoln’s words. Stephen Oates, in *With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1994), attaches the phrase “supposedly jested” to Lincoln’s words. David Herbert Donald uses “according to family legend” in *Lincoln* (1995). Mark Neely, in *The Last Best Hope of Earth* (1993), calls the quotation “the famous (though questionable) anecdote.”

There appears to be a gradual accretion of awareness on the part of Lincoln scholars that Lincoln’s words to Stowe are apocryphal.

Lincoln scholars who, like Shaw and Beveridge, have shortened the quotation, are in good company. As many as three early Stowe biographers also recorded this version of the greeting in a punchier,
shortened form: “So this is the little lady who made this big war.”36 The differences may seem insignificant on the surface, but they point to the perhaps inevitable process of evolution that shapes any widely circulated anecdote. Alternate versions of the quotation have circulated throughout the twentieth century, the most common replacing “great war” with “big war?” This particular mutation appears as early as 1937, in Catherine Gilbertson’s biography of Stowe—“So this is the little woman who wrote the book that made this big war?”37 One wonders, for example, if “big war” replaces “great war” simply because “big” serves as an antonym for “little.” And in a similar vein, perhaps “lady” replaces “woman” because of its alliterative parallel to “little.” As we watch Lincoln’s words become more poetic throughout the twentieth century, one naturally wonders what processes were at work before 1896, shaping them, whatever their original content, into a more aesthetically and ideologically satisfying product.

Lincoln’s precise words are unknowable, but we can easily speculate about why the famous anecdote, whatever its origins, took hold so firmly after Stowe’s death: Lincoln’s greeting neatly encapsulates a common sentiment about Stowe that was in circulation during her lifetime. In the March 1876 issue of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, for example, Edwin P. Whipple writes of Uncle Tom’s Cabin: “Its original publication, in 1852, was an important political event. It was one of the most powerful agencies in building up the Republican party, in electing Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency, and in raising earnest volunteers for the great crusade against slavery.”38 In 1892, Stowe was introduced by the American Missionary Association in this way: “It is proper that the American Missionary Association [. . .] should pay the tribute of this honor to you who have done more than any other one person now living to arouse the conscience of our nation to the sin of slavery, and to secure the emancipation of that race among which this Association has its chief field of labor.”39 In each of those tributes, Stowe’s abolitionism is directly linked to emancipation and the “great crusade” to end slavery—Lincoln’s crusade. The Lincoln-

Stowe quotation is so appealing because it vocalizes this sentiment through Lincoln himself, who reaches out from beyond the grave to testify to the author’s reputation as an important abolitionist voice.

II

The anecdote is certainly apocryphal, but does that invalidate its underlying claim? Throughout the twentieth century, scholars, biographers, and historians have deployed Lincoln’s greeting of Stowe as a colorful shorthand for the idea that Stowe’s novel was a lever for social and political change, but the claim that Stowe helped spark the Civil War has always been difficult to prove. Among literate Northerners who were inclined to publicly comment on Stowe’s novel in print, the novel appears to have received a mixed reception. In his thorough survey of the impact of Uncle Tom’s Cabin on American culture, Thomas Gossett suggests that the plethora of favorable reviews by abolition leaders obscures the complexities of their responses. “Most of these leaders, especially the Garrisonians, said little or nothing about it, and what they did say was in most cases expressed soon after its publication.”

Little is recorded in their memoirs about the novel, he continues, hinting that they may have found the idea of an antislavery novel distasteful. The novel garnered many negative reviews among Northern critics, many disturbed by its challenge to the Fugitive Slave Act. Its positive reviewers wondered whether it would influence Northern opinion about slavery.

In the eight years between the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the outbreak of the Civil War, few political leaders commented on the novel. Gossett concludes his chapter titled “Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the North” by assuring readers “it is probable that the novel had a profound effect on public opinion with regard to slavery in the North in the 1850s,” but his evidence, presented in one short paragraph, is typical of the thin anecdotal support so often advanced to support that claim.

In the South, “The response . . . to Uncle Tom’s Cabin was nearly all outrage and invective,” writes Gossett. Some Southerners publicly

40. The American Missionary 46 (December 1892): 418.
41. Gossett, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Culture, 175.
42. Ibid, 176.
44. Ibid, 183.
45. Ibid. He cites a prominent proslavery lawyer, a biographer of Horace Greeley, and James Ford Rhodes, a prominent early twentieth-century historian of the Civil War.
supported the novel (many of them anonymously), but most did not, and their objections came in many forms. Clergymen made personal attacks on the “tall, course, vulgar-looking woman—stoop shouldered with a long yellow neck, and a long peaked nose—through which she speaks.”46 Critics complained of the novel’s suggestion that “black people were like white people”47 and of its depictions of slaveholders. Satirical novels like Marcus Warland (1852), Aunt Phillis’s Cabin (1852), and The Lofty and the Lowly (1853) present rhetorical reversals of the Uncle Tom story—benevolent masters who rarely whip their slaves because such abuse is unseemly and illogical. By contrast, these novels presented abolitionists as well-intentioned but profoundly misguided do-gooders, or as loathsome, hypocritical, and even sexually exploitive.

It is perhaps tempting to interpret this anti-Stowe vitriol as more sticks added to the pyre of Southern paranoia that would eventually ignite at Fort Sumter, but again, the traces of dissent left by a few literate Southerners hardly constitutes evidence for such a claim. Far fewer Southerners than Northerners likely read the book, in part because of direct censorship of the novel. Weinstein has acknowledged that evidence of large-scale readership in the South is “sketchy,” preferring instead to comb the content of responses rather than try to gauge the scope of the novel’s proliferation throughout the South.48 The Southern flare-up over Uncle Tom’s Cabin also did not persist throughout the 1850s. Gossett has concluded that despite its initial anger over Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the South “began to ignore Stowe and Uncle Tom’s Cabin about two years after its publication.”49

Ultimately, the case for Stowe’s role as instigator to war must rely on the kind of anecdotal testimony Gossett and Weinstein provide. The novel’s oft-quoted sales figures are impressive, but only the most naïve scholar would gauge the novel’s impact in the culture by adding up a publisher’s sales receipts. And the anecdotal evidence, however plentiful, must be measured against the oceanic backdrop of Northern ambivalence towards the plight of slaves. Complaints about Northern apathy are commonplace in abolitionist literature. “The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead,” lamented William Lloyd Garrison in his “Commencement” to the Liberator in 1831.50 Lydia Maria Child

46. Ibid, 185.
47. Quoted in Gossett, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Culture, 192.
48. Ibid., 193.
49. Weinstein, Cambridge Companion, 41.
50. Gossett, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Culture, 211.
wrote in 1833 that “such a general apathy prevails and the subject is so seldom brought into view, that few are really aware how oppressively the influence of society is made to bear upon this injured class of the community.”\textsuperscript{51} Thoreau complained that the majority of Americans “are not men of principle,” regularly sending men to Congress who are more concerned with “the mismanagement of wood and iron and stone and gold” than the evils of slavery.\textsuperscript{52}

Did the novel make inroads against this apathy? Again, it is too easy to cherry-pick positive assessments of the novel’s impact among the nation’s most literate citizens while ignoring the subaltern response to abolitionism. The vast majority of Americans were still ambivalent towards the plight of black slaves when the war finally arrived,\textsuperscript{53} and in the three decades leading up to the conflict, many Northerners took to the streets to express their feelings about abolitionists with fists, clubs, torches, and rocks. Mob violence against abolitionists was commonplace in the North. There were seventy-three attacks against abolitionists in the free states before the Civil War, and though about half of those occurred between 1834 and 1838, the violence continued right up to the Civil War. Pennsylvannia Hall was burned by anti-abolition mobs in 1838; mob violence broke out in Cincinnati in 1841 and 1843; there were eleven mob attacks in the North between 1842 and 1848; riots broke out in New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia in 1850 and 1851; eleven anti-abolitionist riots broke out in Northern cities between the start of 1859 and the attack on Fort Sumter.\textsuperscript{54} Although those attacks were generally leveled against property, not individuals, they suggest a deep well of anti-abolitionist sentiment in the North leading up to the Civil War.

Nowhere is the novel’s success as a vehicle for promoting Northern sympathy for the slave more in question than in New York City, where William J. Wilson, a contributing editor to Frederick Douglass’s newspaper, expressed amazement at the novel’s impact on the city in 1852 by observing, with a tinge of cynicism, that the same shopkeepers who had displayed Zip Coon or Jim Crow were “now proud


to illumine these very windows through the window of my Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”55 Ten years after the book hit the streets of New York, however, the city would erupt into one of the worst anti-black riots in the nation’s history. Enraged by police enforcement of a law that allowed men to buy their way out of conscription by paying $300, rioters roamed through the city for four days between July 13 and 16, 1863, burning businesses and looting. Dozens of blacks and abolitionists were singled out for fatal beatings; some were even lynched. An orphanage for black children was burned to the ground, leaving hundreds of children to wander the streets.56 If Stowe’s novel had inculcated a sustained burst of Northern sympathy for the abolitionist cause among New Yorkers, the evidence was nowhere to be found on the city’s streets in mid-July 1863.

In a society that rests so firmly on the ideological foundations of the post-Civil War national reconstruction project, Uncle Tom’s Cabin will inevitably be remembered as instrumental in sparking a necessary conflict over slavery, but this claim must be greeted with skepticism. Cindy Weinstein is correct when she observes that “To what extent Stowe’s own words of ministration and protest catapulted the nation toward Civil War is an unanswerable question.”57 Perhaps the novel’s main cultural legacy is its ability to provoke a necessary discourse on slavery and racism in the present. A century and a half after its publication, Uncle Tom’s Cabin remains a potentially explosive work of literature because many of the cultural currents flowing through it still pulse like exposed nerves in contemporary American society. The novel addresses itself to a nation that remains bitterly divided by racism, race consciousness, and the unresolved memory of slavery.

III

How do we read the Lincoln/Stowe quotation in the modern world? What should we do with it? Lincoln’s greeting of Stowe is not technically poisoned fruit, because no one can say for certain that it was manufactured, but its “nutritional value” as historical fact is quite low given its apocryphal origins. For Lincoln scholars, the famous anec-

dotal quotation serves as optional decoration to Lincoln’s legacy. For Stowe biographers and literary historians, on the other hand, Lincoln’s imprimatur is far more essential. Its value seems to be determined in large part by a general acceptance of its underlying meaning. For this reason, it will likely continue to survive in some form as long as people continue to care about either Lincoln or Stowe.

The long-term durability of Lincoln’s greeting as an anecdote in literary studies and Stowe scholarship can perhaps be explained in part by the desire among many contemporary intellectuals to make literature a lever of social or political change. The 1960s made the explicit politicization of literature popular among an entire generation of literary scholars and historians; in this milieu, Stowe’s novel seems like the ultimate example of a literary work exerting revolutionary influence on American society. Like Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be cited to affirm the role of literature as an agent of social change.

But Lincoln’s quotation also establishes a powerful justification for continuing to read and discuss *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in an academic environment that is sometimes hostile to it. Not every contemporary literary scholar or critic is comfortable with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. James Baldwin called it “a very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous virtuous sentimentality, much in common with *Little Women*,” and Richard Yarborough bluntly observed that Stowe’s obvious sympathy for the slave was “undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes.” Feminist critics including Ann Douglas have charged the entire sentimental genre with a wide variety of “cultural evils.” To continue to teach and discuss *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in such an antagonistic environment requires reassurances that—at the very least—its main claim to cultural and historical relevance stands on solid ground. Whatever troubling questions might arise about the novel’s cultural legacy after 1865, its place in antebellum history is secured by “Father Abraham,” who reaches across time to reassure late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century readers of its unassailable core cultural value.

Finally, Lincoln’s apocryphal greeting is a reminder that the Internet is rapidly changing the meaning of “apocryphal.” *Apocrypha* is a concept firmly rooted in the print world, beginning with the body of

noncanonical works associated with the Bible and carrying over into the field of history as a way to indicate that a fact or quotation lacks textual authority in an established canon of writing. When we say that Lincoln’s greeting is “apocryphal,” we mean that it cannot be traced back to the canon of writing left behind by either Lincoln or Stowe, and therefore occupies a second-class tier of evidence, to be used with caution and always with a warning label attached—“allegedly said,” “is reported to have said,” “according to family tradition,” and so on. This distinction between a canon of authorial writing and the body of critical and scholarly work that surrounds it—the difference between a primary and secondary source—can be clearly defined in a world where the tangible artifacts of an author or historical figure’s words still have value. The continued existence of the manuscript librarian and the archive suggest that this distinction is still valid. But on the Internet, the distinction mostly vanishes, because everything is sourced through the same medium—the computer screen—which effectively erases any clear distinction between an “original” and its many reproductions, versions, snippets, and fictionalized accounts. Everything is simulacra on the Internet, even the carefully rendered facsimile of a letter or journal entry from an historical figure. Once the Internet becomes the primary tool for scholarly research—once all sources have been rendered as simulacra—historians and biographers may not be able to point to the apocryphal anymore.