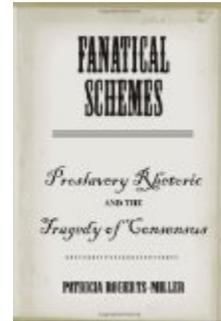


Patricia Roberts-Miller. *Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009. x + 286 pp. \$38.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1642-6; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5653-8.

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Antebellum Proslavery Writers Adrift, But Not at Sea?

According to Patricia Roberts-Miller, professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas, the prevalence of proslavery anti-abolitionism in the U.S. South predated the famous 1835 mail campaign by the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS). Instead, she suggests in *Fanatical Schemes* “that anti-abolitionism was on the rise before the AAS mailing, and that hyperbole was the norm for southern public discourse” (pp. 72-73). In the author’s telling, anti-abolitionism served proslavery writers as a useful rhetorical strategy for preventing any discussion of slavery. Southern unity on the slavery question proved politically useful as well. However, this unity built on rhetoric also had tragic consequences for the American nation. In their quest for these selfish ends, she argues, proslavery rhetors “made war inevitable” (p. 237).

This is a book about rhetoric, and as such the argument follows a more thematic than narrative line. In chapter 1, Roberts-Miller demonstrates that proslavery proponents frequently projected their own worst fears onto an “imagined” group they termed “abolitionists” through a powerful “rhetorical and political” process (done consciously or unconsciously), which she terms “cunning projection” (p. 37). To that end, she suggests that proslavery “could only engage in fear-mongering, and not a practical discussion, regarding the possible consequences of abolition” (p. 45). This was accomplished, in part, by what the author calls in chapter 2 a “rhetoric of doom.” As she acknowledges, this is also referred to by

other historians as “fatalism” or, more simply, the “Lost Cause Myth.” Roberts-Miller states that such ideas were popular in 1830s literature “long before” the Civil War and reflected the idea that “it was an imaginative narrative that defined heroism” for the hero “to enter a conflict even though he knows the forces of progress are against him” (p. 49). Relying on two accounts produced by northerners in 1836, Robert Montgomery Bird’s frontier novel *Nick of the Woods* and a pamphlet entitled *The Bulwark of Freedom* by Theophilus Fisk, she contends their altogether typical tragic narratives “serve as a defense of slavery and slaveocracy, while barely mentioning the institution, though reinforcing the imaginative foundation for that system.” Such accounts rationalized the complicated narrative of “a dreamy, noble, and tragic ethos” that accompanied the brutal reality of slavery itself (p. 70).

Chapters 3 through 7 continue similar themes introduced in the first two chapters, examining the form and function of proslavery rhetoric in different settings, including the momentous sectional conflict in the Twenty-Fourth Congress. Irrespective of locale, proslavery rhetors employed the same rhetoric of doom, cunning projection, and an increasingly martial rhetoric that shamed southern dissenters into conformity on the slavery issue and hectored northern critics into submission in what Roberts-Miller calls “manly politics.” The author thereby argues that “proslavery rhetoric was no different in the House of Representatives than it was in the newspapers, pamphlets, novels, or speeches” (p. 204). In

sum, Roberts-Miller contends that proslavery's "consistently inconsistent philosophy" of "farmongering" and "policies designed to silence abolitionists, [and] control free African Americans" were based on its "internal irrationality, bellicosity, and hyperbole" that were "ultimately self-destructive" (pp. 216, 209, 233). Proslavery rhetors, she believes, in the end brought about the Civil War as a consequence of their rhetoric.

This is a thought-provoking work that urges historians to look more carefully at the consequences of rhetoric in the antebellum era. From a historical standpoint, however, it suffers from critical weaknesses. The basis of *Fanatical Schemes* rests on what Roberts-Miller repeatedly suggests is the so-called scholarly consensus of "calm waters broken by the pamphlet mailings" in 1835. To that end, she engages most frequently with the dated studies of Drew Gilpin Faust (*The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South* [1981]), Kenneth S. Greenberg (*Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* [1985]), and Larry E. Tise (*Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* [1987]). "The narrative that makes the AAS pamphlets the catalyst is wrong in its attribution of causation, not in its description of the situation," Roberts-Miller consequently argues (p. 232). In this assertion she is correct, of course, but only because the consensus with which she quarrels is now badly outdated.

For example, missing in her analysis is the critical period surrounding the Missouri Crisis of 1819-20. Recent works, like Matthew Mason's *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (2006), argue that the issue of slavery was already an integral part of the national political landscape well before the Missouri debates. However, Mason contends that the Missouri issue was pivotal in altering the sectional dialogue over slavery due to "the length and intensity of the controversy" that "forced its participants to confront the implications of their—and their opponents'—positions."^[1] Roberts-Miller appears to read Mason to mean that the Missouri Compromise was somehow unimportant to worsening sectional relations. In paraphrasing Mason, she states simply "that 'the conventional view' that slavery burst upon the political scene during the Missouri Compromise 'as if out of nowhere' is false, and that 'there was never a time between the Revolution and Civil War in which slavery went unchallenged'" (p. 73). But David Brion Davis has correctly stated that "the Missouri Crisis was aggravated by a sense that understanding had been broken, veils torn off, and true and threatening motives exposed."^[2] Here and elsewhere there seems to be little indication in

Roberts-Miller's account that proslavery rhetors clearly reacted to what they considered significant challenges to their dominion. Nevertheless, what remains important for her argument, and is missing throughout *Fanatical Schemes*, is a sufficient explanation for why "proslavery rhetors insisted, as early as 1802, that [insurrections] were caused by criticism of slavery" and why "they objected to the criticism" and "wanted it silenced" (p. 17, emphasis added). The answer, as recent scholarship has shown, is the impact of the larger context of the Atlantic world.

Like their abolitionist counterparts, proslavery rhetoricians had significant personal and professional ties that stretched throughout the Atlantic world. One need look no further on this point than such figures as William Lloyd Garrison and Zephaniah Kingsley and his Caribbean proslavery views, both of whom appear frequently in *Fanatical Schemes* and are testaments to these broader contexts. News from abroad traveled quickly, especially as it related to slavery in the period chronicled by Roberts-Miller. Recent studies highlight two critical aspects that weighed heavily on southern slaveholders: the specter and influence of Haiti; and the debates and prospect of British emancipation. The slave revolution in French Saint Domingue (1791-1804) was a watershed in Atlantic history that sparked prolonged transatlantic debates over the meaning of Haiti itself, and the contagion of liberty that it inspired for decades. As *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War*, a recent work by Edward Bartlett Rugemer, rightly asserts, "Haiti framed the background of every discussion about slavery and its abolition."^[3] More important, the most well-read Caribbean proslavery arguments adopted by American proslavery writers, particularly those of Bryan Edwards in Jamaica, came from histories chronicling the Haitian Revolution itself. Rugemer persuasively suggests that what he coined the "Edwards thesis" repetitively linked abolitionist agitation to fomenting insurrection coupled with the need for silence on the subject of slavery. This formula for avoiding revolution, as it might be called, bore its way into the worldview of the southern master class, to which a sufficient body of scholarship demonstrates the ways in which real and imagined connections to Haiti attached themselves to repeated insurrections (and rumored insurrections) throughout the Atlantic world well past British emancipation.^[4]

Nonetheless, there were considerable connections between events abroad and thorny issues at home. A few instances bear mentioning. The aborted revolt of

Denmark Vesey, the Virginia slavery debates after Nat Turner's revolt, and the Nullification Crisis in South Carolina all corresponded to news of slavery attacked by what proslavery rhetors considered "outside agitators." For example, the Haitian Republic's open call for American free blacks to emigrate prompted Vesey and his followers in the wake of the Missouri Crisis to plan to revolt, raid Charleston's banks for specie, and sail to freedom in the Black Republic. Anxious Virginia slaveholders, racked by the appearance of David Walker's pro-Haitian pamphlet and the wake left by Turner's revolt, in late 1831, deliberated the future of slavery within its borders when news of the Baptist War in Jamaica arrived. Lastly, the sticky issue of nullification that commanded headlines in 1832 and 1833 coincided with sustained news of parliamentary debates over emancipation in the British West Indies and cast widespread uncertainty over the future of slaveholding in the Atlantic world.

The stormy relationship between antebellum proslavery rhetoric and the wider world that is all but absent in Roberts-Miller's account feels like a missed opportunity to advance our historical knowledge about the human costs resulting from what Walter Johnson calls the "quicksilver slipperiness" of slaveholder discourse.[5] Not to excuse, but instead to account for how and why proslavery rhetors demanded the silence that they lost over the slavery issue in the wake of Haiti (or the "world turned upside down") means taking the history of proslavery rhetoric seriously. Collapsing their worldview to encompass only vague articulations of honor or manliness, drunk with power and paranoia, does little to that end. I sympathize with Roberts-Miller's ultimate conclusions about the "tragedy of consensus," but *Fanatical Schemes* only offers a small part of a much larger

story.

Notes

[1]. Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 211. Other recent works appearing well before *Fanatical Schemes* also point to the fallout over Missouri as a critical watershed in sectional relations. For example, see Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[2]. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 275.

[3]. Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 42-43.

[4]. Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); and Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

[5]. Walter Johnson, "A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five," *Common-Place* 1, no. 4 (July 2001), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-01/no-04/reviews/johnson.shtml>.

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