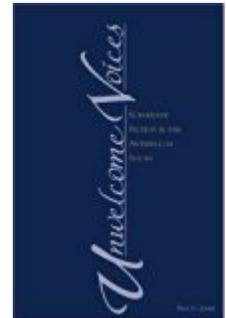




Paul Christian Jones. *Unwelcome Voices: Subversive Fiction in the Antebellum South.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005. 225 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57233-327-7.



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Dashing cavaliers, virtuous damsels, bumbling slaves--these are the stock character types most closely associated with antebellum southern literature, populating the romances of such prominent authors as William Gilmore Simms and William Caruthers. In most literary histories of the American South, such fictions are the sum total of the antebellum period's creative output. Little more than propaganda for the planter class, these poor imitations of Sir Walter Scott ameliorate the region's aristocracy and defend the institutions of slavery.

Undoubtedly, this assessment of antebellum southern literature is oversimplified and misleading. Historical scholarship on the nineteenth century has all but dismissed the idea of a unified, aristocratic South. Yet, as Paul Christian Jones points out in the introduction to this slim but substantive study, many critics still hold a reductive vision of the southern literary past. Building on the work of Michael O'Brien and Michael Kreyling, Jones traces this critical supposition back to Allen Tate and the generations of scholars he influenced, who "constructed the literature of

the Old South as the ashes from which the phoenix of the literature of the Southern Renaissance could rise" (p. 5). In this formulation, the dearth of imaginative and innovative literature in the antebellum period makes the accomplishments of twentieth-century southern writers all the more impressive. Jones claims that it is "the challenge for present and future scholars of southern literature to move beyond the invented literary history of the region, to begin to revise the familiar story, and to recover a vision of the South as a diverse region" (p. 6). He attempts to do his part in this enterprise by reconsidering five "unwelcome voices" of the antebellum South--James Heath, Frederick Douglass, Edgar Allan Poe, John Pendleton Kennedy, and E. D. E. N. Southworth.

Jones demonstrates how, in some significant way, each of these writers challenged the idyllic myth of southern plantation society. Furthermore, he illustrates how each entered into a dialogue with the region and period's dominant genre--the historical romance. Drawing on the theorization of Frederic Jameson and Northrop Frye, Jones em-

phasizes the close relationship between genre and politics, especially in the antebellum South. He affirms the standard claim that the southern historical romance was most often used for reactionary purposes, but he argues that a significant minority of authors subverted the norms of this regional subgenre and used it for progressive aims. By complicating oversimplified notions of the southern historical romance, Jones aims to "illustrate that there was indeed a subversive vein of writing in the South prior to the Civil War" (p. 21). He accomplishes just that, making *Unwelcome Voices* a productive synthesis of genre and cultural studies.

Little-known romancer Heath is the first author to which Jones devotes a chapter. Heath published his two-volume masterwork *Edge-Hill* in 1828, several years before the first prominent romances of Simms, Caruthers, and Kennedy. Despite the genre's later popularity, *Edge-Hill* did not even warrant a second printing. Jones suggests that this was due to its progressive content and its closer adherence to the genre conventions established by Scott. Mark Twain once claimed that the South had the "Sir Walter disease," and traditional literary histories of the region maintain that southern romances merely imitate Scott's model (p. 2). Yet, Jones surveys a growing body of recent scholarship that demonstrates marked differences between Scott's prototype and the southern subgenre. In Scott's works, tradition gives way to progress, and the hero is rarely a partisan extremist, but instead a moderating presence. In the conservative southern model, tradition prevails over an intrusive assault from progress, and the hero is always a staunch young supporter of the status quo. Heath's Revolutionary War romance is a much closer adherent of the Scott model, featuring a protagonist who challenges the hierarchies of the southern aristocracy and a slave who is perhaps the romance's most heroic figure. Due to these progressive elements, Jones rightly concludes that *Edge-Hill* "ultimately

argues for a system of meritocracy to replace the region's aristocratic ideals" (p. 38).

The next chapter focuses on Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853), a historical romance that even more strongly counters the genre's usual portrayal of inept and ignorant slaves. Jones points out that Douglass's protagonist, Madison Washington, shares many traits with the heroes of conservative romance—he is eloquent, idealistic, and brave. These admiral qualities and Washington's strong appeals to the rhetoric of liberty allow Douglass to draw in resistant readers and subvert the genre's usual political content. In the end, Douglass even manages to turn a slave rebellion on an American ship—an event that most antebellum Americans, both northern and southern, would have found horrifying—into an affirmation of revolutionary values. Jones concludes the chapter by analyzing how romantic conventions operate in Douglass's earlier work, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

Jones brings this convincing analysis of *Heroic Slave* and Douglass's first autobiography into conversation with the burgeoning scholarship on how former slaves appropriated and revised traditionally white genres. He points out that while important work has been done on the relationship between slave narratives and such genres as the domestic novel, spiritual autobiography, and captivity narrative, little attention has been given to how the historical romance influenced antebellum African American writings. He maintains that "it would be inexplicable if the Waverly novels of Sir Walter Scott were not as much a part of popular influence upon [these] writings as works by figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Mary Rowlandson, or Alexander Pope might be" (p. 61). Jones aptly demonstrates that Douglass's *Heroic Slave* serves as a logical departure point in an investigation of such influence.

Less convincing is Jones's differentiation between the romance of *Heroic Slave* and the sentimentalism of Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin (1852). He is certainly right to draw a distinction between the two title characters. Indeed, close similarities in the introductory descriptions of Washington and Tom suggest that Douglass perhaps meant to revise Stowe's more passive hero. Washington is not, however, far removed from one of Stowe's other slave protagonists, George Harris. This character is equally eloquent and equally ready to take up arms against his oppressors in the name of liberty. While Tom is a character out of the sentimental mode, Harris and his subplot are the stuff of romance. One of Jones's great strengths is his careful attention to an author's manipulation of genre conventions, but his juxtaposition of *Heroic Slave* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* relies on an oversimplification of Stowe's work.

Jones's chapter on Poe focuses on how horror writing amounts to a type of "anti-romance." Poe's own politics were often reactionary, but his choice of genre forced him to expose some of the South's deepest anxieties. As Jones claims, "an effective monster in horror fiction tailored to the antebellum South must threaten [those] binaries that are held to be the natural order of society, either by dissolving the distinction between them or by overturning the established hierarchy accepted by the region" (p. 95). Poe's fiction frequently draws on two "monstrous" character types that would have been anathema to the hierarchies of the conservative southern romance--the rebellious slave and the dangerous woman. Jones explores how these figures function either literally or figuratively in a wide range of Poe's stories, including "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "Hop-Frog" (1849), "The Oval Portrait" (1842), and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). While the scope of this chapter is impressive, Jones could have delved a bit deeper into several of the works he mentions, especially Poe's novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and its depiction of a black cook inciting mutiny.

The ensuing chapters focus on two other prominent authors who never fully embraced the historical romance. While they certainly drew on romantic conventions more than Poe, the popular antebellum writers Kennedy and Southworth maintained ironic distance from the genre's tropes and themes. Jones claims that despite this departure, both have been unfairly charged with codifying the reactionary model of the plantation novel. His reading of Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832) emphasizes its irony regarding romantic notions of chivalry and aristocracy. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, Jones claims that the multitude of stories and viewpoints in *Swallow Barn* counters the monolithic voice of the conservative romance. This irony is well noted by other scholars, and this portion of Jones's argument is very convincing.

However, *Swallow Barn* is most often studied for its highly problematic depiction of slaves, and Jones controversially asserts that much of this depiction is also ironic. Throughout the work, Kennedy's narrator gradually transforms from a northern moderate with abolitionist sympathies into a staunch supporter of slave society. This model of the "converted" northern visitor is one readily found in many of the period's proslavery fictions, especially the later anti-Tom novels that emerged in the wake of Stowe's bestseller. Yet, Jones argues that "by recording Littleton's own conversion from sharp-eyed skeptic to southern romantic, Kennedy illustrates how antebellum southerners themselves, in order to maintain their idyllic and self-serving vision of the region, viewed slaves as less than human and slavery as a kind of institution. Further, he displays the southern tendency to romanticize even the most brutal aspects of its culture" (p. 141). Jones supports these claims with close readings of three slave sketches in *Swallow Barn*. This is perhaps his most tenuous argument. While his analysis of specific passages is cogent, these scenes do not counterbalance the abundance of proslavery rhetoric

and imagery that many of the work's other scholars have explored.

Jones's revisionary reading of Southworth is much more convincing. Like Kennedy, she has frequently been charged with propagating proslavery images of southern life. Yet, Jones argues that much of her huge body of work focuses on "the personal ruin--sometimes financial, but primarily spiritual and physical--suffered by white women living under the institution" (p. 161). He begins the chapter by tracing Southworth's maturation as a writer in the abolitionist circles of Washington, D.C. He then moves on to analyze her early novels *Retribution* (1849) and *India* (1855), both of which sharply critique the peculiar institution. Jones uses this background as a scaffold for his lengthy analysis of Southworth's most famous work, *The Hidden Hand* (1859). He claims that while the novel is not as openly abolitionist as its fellow best-seller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it does suggest that southern women must take ownership of their agency in slave society. Southworth issues a challenge to these women that "their own hands are as stained with blood as those of the most abusive slave owner or tyrannical slave driver. Their hidden hands, their own unutilized and unrealized power, are more than capable of putting an end to slavery and its evils" (p. 177).

Overall, *Unwelcome Voices* is a well-argued and lucid study. It invites a much-needed reconsideration of long-held assumptions about southern literature before the Civil War, and it opens the door for future scholarship on the conservative romance and its dissenters. Jones is to be particularly commended for drawing attention to such understudied works as Heath's *Edge-Hill* and Southworth's early novels. He is perhaps a bit too harsh, though, in his criticisms of recent scholars whose studies of antebellum southern literature have largely focused on such conservative romancers as Simms. He often attributes this to an allegiance to Tate's version of southern literary history. There is truth in this, and revisionist work

has been long overdue, but it is equally true that conservative romances were quite popular, whereas Heath's *Edge-Hill* had a limited readership and Douglass's *Heroic Slave* probably never reached an audience below the Mason-Dixon Line. As Jones points out, both the welcome and the unwelcome voices are essential in understanding antebellum southern culture and the myths it propagated about itself. Jones should be applauded for helping to bring the repression of progressive authors to light, and any ensuing study or literary history should better recognize the types of barriers that constrained such writers from making a greater mark on the South's literary culture.

The brevity of *Unwelcome Voices* is one of its few other shortcomings. In addition to dwelling more on Poe, Jones could have easily brought other antebellum works into this study. An obvious omission is William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), which focuses on the illegitimate slave descendants of Thomas Jefferson. This would have been a provocative and fitting addition to Jones's discussion of romances and anti-romances. Another chapter could have been spent on the highly popular writings of the southwestern humorists, which Jones gestures toward with a few paragraphs in his conclusion. An even more daring chapter, and one that would have further pushed against our notions of "southern" literature, could have focused on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--its manipulations of romantic conventions and its appeals to a southern readership. Yet, given the length of his study, Jones does cover a wide range of primary and secondary sources. If not comprehensive, *Unwelcome Voices* is still an important new work that responds to a major oversight in southern studies. It will be a firm foundation for future investigations of antebellum southern literature.

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