



Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus

Patricia Roberts-Miller

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What was the relationship between rhetoric and slavery, and how did rhetoric fail as an alternative to violence, becoming instead its precursor?

Fanatical Schemes is a study of proslavery rhetoric in the 1830s. A common understanding of the antebellum slavery debate is that the increased stridency of abolitionists in the 1830s, particularly the abolitionist pamphlet campaign of 1835, provoked proslavery politicians into greater intransigence and inflammatory rhetoric. Patricia Roberts-Miller argues that, on the contrary, inflammatory rhetoric was inherent to proslavery ideology and predated any shift in abolitionist practices.

She examines novels, speeches, and defenses of slavery written after the pamphlet controversy to underscore the tenets of proslavery ideology and the qualities that made proslavery rhetoric effective. She also examines anti-abolitionist rhetoric in newspapers from the spring of 1835 and the history of slave codes (especially anti-literacy laws) to show that anti-abolitionism and extremist rhetoric long preceded more strident abolitionist activity in the 1830s.

The consensus that was achieved by proslavery advocates, argues Roberts-Miller, was not just about slavery, nor even simply about race. It was also about manhood, honor, authority, education, and political action. In the end, proslavery activists worked to keep the realm of public discourse from being a place in which dominant points of view could be criticized--an achievement that was, paradoxically, both a rhetorical success and a tragedy.

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