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In Outrageous Defiance of Slavery's "Logic"-Makers: Nicholas Brimblecomb's *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Ruins!*

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Although both the nature of the public reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Ruins!: Triumphant Defense of Slavery! in a Series of Letters to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (1853) and the true identity of its "author," Nicholas Brimblecomb, remain mysteries, it is not so difficult to conceive how an adamant anti-slavery man with a flair for witty, hilarious, biting prose might have felt compelled to offer such a scathing, over-the-top, Swiftian satire of the defenders of slavery—or how such a man might have believed that there was not much reason to jump into the fray were you not ready to take off the gloves and give the "peculiar" defenders a relentless and humiliating drubbing.

Ms. Stowe sensed that her fictionalized exposé of Southern slavery—families ripped apart, slaves' flesh ripped open—would be incendiary enough, and believed that any excessive laying of blame on the people of the South as a whole would, in the end, prove counter-productive. Thus, she was careful to address, without sarcasm, her southern readers as the "generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South," as possessing "virtue, and magnanimity, and purity of character" (UTC 403)—and was careful to make her arch villain a man hailing from the North. She insisted on the logical possibility that "a barbarous thing" (the whipping that killed Prue) could occur in a place in which the inhabitants were not "all barbarians" (UTC 213), and she granted the complexity of the slavery problem by having her one southern character certain of slavery's inherent evil, the thoughtful Augustine St. Clare, express his absolute frustration over not knowing how to resolve it. She allowed St. Clare to plea to us that while slavery, "the *thing* itself," was unquestionably "the essence of all abuse" (UTC 204), resolving the slavery problem was far from an easy matter, as human beings, in the face of monumental problems, often found it difficult to take the very actions they knew, ultimately,

to be right (*UTC* 202).

Stowe's "gloves on," lady-like¹ attack on slavery resulted in a huge national debate, and in book form that debate sometimes seemed a great shuffling of dry and tedious "courtroom briefs," a sifting through of mountains of "testimony"—which could, depending on the predilections of any particular "barrister," either justify slavery or denounce it. Stowe herself published, in 1853, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a great compilation of personal experience testimony, newspaper articles and advertisements, and excerpts from legal codes and court records, presented to justify the anti-slavery argument her novel made. In response to both Stowe's novel and her *Key*, Edward Josiah Stearns, a southern apologist, published *Notes on Uncle Tom's Cabin: Being A Logical Answer to Its Allegations and Inferences Against As An Institution*, also in 1853 — and also a great compilation of personal testimony, newspaper articles and advertisements, and excerpts from legal codes and court records.

A small difference between the structures of the two works is that Stowe interweaved her primary arguments with extensive supplementary materials (for a total of 262 pages), while Stearns put all his primary arguments in the first section of his book (pp. 7 – 210) and the alluded-to supplementary materials in the second (pp. 211 – 314). But a similarity much more interesting than this difference is that both writers used a standard-sized font for their primary arguments but a much smaller font for their supplementary materials. The primary argument section in Stearns' *Notes* averaged around 300 words a page, whereas the supplementary materials section averaged about 600 words a page. In Stowe's *Key*, pages comprised solely of quoted material regularly weighed in at a whopping 1200 words a page. If then, in plowing through the supplementary materials provided in these two works, one felt he were straining to read the "fine print," it might have been because much of the print was, literally, fine indeed.

Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Ruins!* was officially published in 1853, at least one review of it appeared in 1852—a long, one-column piece that appeared in the December 31, 1852 edition of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. Thus, Brimblecomb (whoever he really was) could not have read either Stearns' *Notes* or Stowe's

¹ Some readers, of course, found Stowe's voice in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* anything but "lady-like."

Key before penning his *Ruins!* Still, he certainly must have been aware of the nature of the public debate that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had encouraged, as well as the debate in print that had preceded it, and must have been able to imagine such books being written. He must have been enlightened and insightful enough to understand that although ending slavery—as entrenched in the American socio-economic system as it was—would be no easy task, there was an immense danger of the debate getting bogged down further in long-winded, sometimes legalistic, sometimes Bible-centered, sometimes “but-what-I-heard-was-this” “testimony” that somehow left the primary point—that human beings owning other human beings was wrong and any system allowing ownership of other human beings could only encourage the darker angels in men’s souls—out of clear focus.

One “secondary” issue that became part of the debate, to take an example, was whether or not the Apostle Paul sanctioned slavery by not speaking out against it. In her *Key*, Stowe labeled arguments that concluded that Paul did not find slavery un-Christian to be “specious” (236). She argued as below:

[The gospel] did not command the Christian father to perform the legal act of emancipation to his son; but it infused such a divine spirit into the paternal relation, by assimilating it to the relation of the heavenly Father, that the Christianized Roman would regard any use of his barbarous and oppressive legal powers as entirely inconsistent with his Christian profession. (*Key* 236)

Not unsurprisingly, Stearns, in his *Notes*, called Stowe’s arguments so much “sophistry.” He countered with a long paragraph that concluded as follows:

The fact, therefore, that while our Lord *did* prohibit even the formal relation of polygamy and concubinage, as being corruptions of the marriage relation (Matt. xix. 3-9, Luke xvi. 18, et al.) he did *not* prohibit the formal relation of slavery, shows clearly that he did not regard it as a “*corruption* of servitude.” (Stearns 209)

Neither of the above arguments is unassailable, to say the least, and many

readers of the day most certainly must have found the argument providing the conclusion they were predisposed to from the very beginning the most sound.

Judging from his *Ruins!*, Brimblecomb must have been both incensed and frustrated by the way “logic” was being abused in the debate of the day—of course, in particular, by the “logic” of the defenders of slavery—and by the way the debate was becoming more complicated and windy than it needed to be, the key point being simple, that ownership of human beings was wrong.

As he sat down to write *Ruins!*, then, Brimblecomb’s thinking must have gone something like this: The *only* point is that owning other human beings is wrong, and I cannot let my readers escape it. I must pound it into them again and again and again—and in the plainest of English. It has to be fast-paced, readable, and not too long. No joining of the windbags. And the mockery of logic that slavery advocates have made will have to be exposed with a no-holds-barred mockery of *their* logic. No feelings spared. The best means will be the most shocking means: scathing, over-the-top satire. The debate has grown pedantic. A fire needs to be lit.

And thus we have *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Ruins!*. Published by Charles Waite of Boston. 162 svelte pages. In-your-face satire from beginning to end. Immensely readable prose. Delightful prose. And no fine print. A bold attempt to make clear what should have been obvious to all.² It is certainly a work that deserves more attention than it has received for the last one hundred and seventy years—virtually none.

*

Ruins! begins like this:

Slaves are property. It is on this simple basis that the following sentiments rest. This one fact constitutes my premises; and I defy the world to point out

² Obviously, in antebellum 19th-century America, slavery being wrong was not at all *obvious* to a great many people. But it is important to understand that it was not impossible for any individual to think that it was *obviously* wrong, even in that “dark” age. This is one reason Brimblecomb’s book is important. Its force comes from Brimblecomb’s position: he believed the wrongness of slavery was obvious—and that the task before him was to show the obvious to those whose worldview made it nearly impossible for them to see the obvious. Or, at least, to give strength to the anti-slavery movement, by showing how indefensibly stupid the defenders of slavery were in failing to admit the obvious. Over-the-top satire was the means he thought gave him the best chance of succeeding.

any defect in the logic of the Letters. (n.p.)

It's a brilliant beginning. Indeed, the argument of Brimblecomb's creator, the true author, will prove "simple"; the point he will make will only be "one": slaves are property, and this is wrong. He will fling in his readers' faces as many defects in Brimblecomb's logic as he possibly can and dare them not to find them. He will dare them not to *recognize* them. He will hit them over the head with Brimblecomb's single premise—and dare them *not* to see the horrors to which that premise logically leads.

In making sure that we understand his premise, Brimblecomb is relentless. The word *property* appears almost once per page on average, and the fundamental fact that slaves *are* property—or "chattel," "merchandise," "thing"—is repeated *ad nauseum*. In his first "letter" to Ms. Stowe, he rams the point down our throats.

For, with all your ignorance, madam, are you so ignorant as not to know that the three millions of slaves belonging to our southern brethren are, every one of them, *articles of property*, and are, consequently, proper *articles of merchandise*? Are you not aware that the constitution of these United States *recognize these animals as property*—or, at least, seems to do so? And do you not know that the laws of the slave states do, without exception, most clearly *recognize them as property*—*and that, too, just as truly as they do horses, sheep, dogs, cats and the like?* (*Ruins!* 8, my italics)

As Brimblecomb continues this indefatigable doggedness throughout *Ruins!*, the true author, bit by bit, reveals where this "naked" premise, this "only" premise, invariably leads.

Property, property, madam! How shall I write this idea upon your shallow brain, and upon others like you? *Property*, I say. Shall you, or a senator, or any one else, withhold and secrete from me one thousand dollars of my property? This is the question, the naked question, and the only question. I own a nigger. Then he is mine, — his body, — his soul, if he has *any*, — his

thoughts, his strength, his skill, his comeliness, his sprightliness, his acquirements, his breath,—every part of him is my property,—his eyes and ears, his teeth, his hands and feet, his bones, and muscles, and sinews, and nerves. I may keep him and work him just as I please,—and as hard as I please,—as long as I please. I may work him so that he will live ten years, or five years, or three. I may feed him just as I please—feed him as well as I do my pigs, or not so well, just as it suits my interest, whim, or pleasure. (*Ruins!* 42-43, Brimblecomb’s italics)

Had Stearns read this, he (and others like him) may have wanted to counter by pointing out all sorts of laws and court rulings that prevented any owner from abusing his slave, offering up all sorts of “common-sense” reasons why owners would never abuse slaves, but *his* prose does not provide the pure reading joy that Brimblecomb’s does. His prose, simply, is not as readable—and as a narrator, he does not come off nearly as well as Brimblecomb, who strikes us as a full-fledged character—spirited, exuberant . . . and demented—and thus a narrator/character whose bizarre turn of thought feels, to readers, both irresistibly real and truly horrifying. Sure, Mr. Stearns, his creator does not allow Brimblecomb to stop to quibble over details. But that is his strength. He does not make us yawn.

It is hard to imagine readers failing to spot the irony very quickly, as in Brimblecomb’s very first letter, he insists that there should be no different consideration for black slaves than for pigs (“The southern plantations may, in many cases, be denominated *piggeries*—being conducted, by their honorable proprietors, on very much the same principles, and for very much the same purposes”), with pigs, if anything, needing to be fed a bit better. But if readers did, the humorous way in which Brimblecomb’s creator has him defend slavery with arguments that are diametrically opposed to the typical arguments laid out by the defenders of slavery should have set them straight (*Ruins!* 11). Two examples will suffice.

First, there is Brimblecomb’s take on Marie St. Clare. Most defenders of slavery were appalled by Stowe’s portrayal of Marie. Louisa S. McCord, a South Carolina essayist, for example, insisted that Stowe’s presentation of Marie suggested that “mothers do not love their beautiful children in the South,” that the “husbands have to go to New England and bring back old maids to take care of

them, and to see to their houses, which are going to rack and ruin under their wives' surveillance." McCord argued that southern readers would "gasped for breath" when they read of Marie hitting a slave and then sending her out to receive lashes (Gossett 200). Stearns himself declared of Marie that "certainly no lady, not to say, no Southern lady, ever sat for that portrait" (Stearns 143).

Brimblecomb, on the other hand, believes that were "all the female sex, from Eve down to the latest generation, to be arrayed side by side," a more "exalted personage" than Marie St. Clare could not be found (*Ruins!* 59). And for the simplest of reasons: she understands clearly that slaves are property, and that if they are going to be maintained as such a property owner must "*put them down* and keep them down," no matter how much whipping is required (*Ruins!* 62, *UTC* 157). Brimblecomb assures his readers that there can be no more enlightened view of slavery than Marie's: "If people generally, like the elegant Mrs. St. Clare, would only compare the slaves with other cattle instead of comparing them with human beings, the main difficulty which many have with slavery would fade away in a moment." This is impeccable logic for sure—if we are only willing to equate human slaves with cattle!

Then Brimblecomb takes us over the top. It is not the slave who is whipped by Marie who is to be pitied, but Marie herself for having to do the whipping, she such a delicate angel.

I ask, Who can refrain from being affected to tears at this picture? Behold the cowhide,—the cowhide in that white and delicate hand,—that white and delicate hand laying it on to the aggravating and lazy wretches, and the over-exertion to which this angelical woman is thus cruelly subjected. (*Ruins!* 64)

What person can there be, Brimblecomb asks, "that has any of the feelings and sentiments of a man" that *cannot* feel great pity for this great woman? (*Ruins!* 64). And he cannot, as the passage below illustrates, praise her enough.

Charming Marie St. Clare! O, how I love and cherish thy beautiful memory! How I admire the majestic and massive grandeur of thy transcendent and magnificent intellect! How I weep in ecstasy at the celestial beauty

and richness of thy gushing affections! How am I lost in astonishment at the multiplicity and splendor of thy supernal virtues! How I stand in awe at the contemplation of thy august and matchless beauty! How—But I must pause: all language is lame. (*Ruins!* 71)

Lame is what the brain of anyone who doesn't hear the sarcasm is. And *all language is lame*. Brimblecomb speaks this of his own language, but his creator, the true author, is certainly commenting on the language used in the arguments of the true defenders of slavery.

Stowe made her demon slave owner, Simon Legree, a New Englander, giving defenders of slavery the opportunity to counter with a double-punch: first, they could testify that there never had been a southerner like Legree; second, they could point out that, northerners being barbaric in general, it was not surprising that Legree could be so cruel. Stearns insisted, for example, that Legree's boasts of beating slaves with his own fists was absurd: "the supposition that he could make [a boast] *bona fide*, and in *sober earnest*, to a *gentleman*, is really, too ridiculous for any but the greenest of greenhorns to swallow." He then called into question *all* of Ms. Stowe's investigations into the behavior of southern slave owners (Stearns 151-152). William Gilmore Simms, the Charleston novelist, took the other approach, not denying Legree as a believable character, just pointing out that he was not a *southern* character.

He is a Yankee by birth and education and is representative of New England, — not of the South. He belongs to the same race which butchered the Indians, burnt the witches, tortured the Quakers, persecuted the Manhattanese Dutchmen [. . .] Yes, we do not doubt that Legree is true to the parish from which he came. He inherits all its virtue. (Gossett 197)

Brimblecomb, on the other hand, refuses to see Legree as horrid, no matter where he is from, but rather as "an admirable Personification of Slavery." For Brimblecomb, Legree is an "upright, straightforward, and consistent" property owner who understands clearly that Uncle Tom — an unbelievably "saucy and impudent" piece of property, a "hypocritical, fanatical, rebellious, lawless, and

wicked nigger” (who, in fact, “was one of a herd of cattle—a *thing*”)—cannot be given any soft treatment without severely damaging the essential nature of the relationship between property and owner and, indeed, “the whole spirit of the [slavery] system.” Brimblecomb concludes that Stowe representing Legree as a bad man and Uncle Tom as a good one can only be considered the most shameful of “perversions” (*Ruins!* 112, 113, 118, 122).

The true author of *Ruins!* keeps his tongue steadily in his cheek as he allows his fictional author, Brimblecomb, to lavish thick “praise” on Legree. The more absurd that praise sounds, the true author must have calculated, the more absurd the whole notion of men as property will sound—and the more stupid anyone who supports or allows slavery will seem.

Mr. Legree was a fine and almost exact exemplar of slavery. Slavery gave him to own niggers; he owned them. Slavery gave him complete dominion over them; he assumed and exercised this dominion. Slavery gave him authority to keep them cheap; he kept them cheap. Slavery gave him power to work them to the utmost; he worked them to the utmost. Slavery gave him power to whip them as he chose; he whipped them lustily and heartily. Slavery gave him power to take possession of all the earnings of his niggers; he pocketed every penny of such earnings. Slavery gave him power to whip and burn his slaves to death, provided he should do so out of sight of white witnesses; he purposely occupied a remote plantation, and purposely proceeded to kill such niggers, from time to time, as he saw fit, and in the manner he saw fit, whether by whipping, burning, or cutting to pieces. Slavery gave him power to compel such slaves to be his concubines as he saw fit; he acted accordingly, and when he was weary of one, he would buy another for this particular purpose.

In a word, Mr. Simon Legree may be denominated *slavery personified*; and in him shone forth this grand and magnificent system in all its prominent and select features. (*Ruins!* 114-115)

The true author’s main point is the same as Stowe’s: from the premise that a human being can be property all horrors will flow. Unlike Stowe, however, he is

not afraid to take the gloves off—and to fling in the faces of anyone dense enough not to see it the reality that, he is sure, the “peculiar institution” is nothing short of idiotic.

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The true author begins *Ruins!* by daring us to find fault in the logic of his creation, Brimblecomb, and then swiftly and certainly goes about calling attention to the defects in that logic. When Brimblecomb tries to justify to Stowe the need for slave traders, he asks her if she is not aware of southern laws recognizing slaves as property, and then suddenly states, “These laws, therefore, being correct, the merchant of slaves is engaged in a profession as fair, respectable, and honorable as any business whatsoever that is transacted in society” (*Ruins!* 8). *Therefore*, the laws are correct? Where does that *therefore* come from? What makes those laws *correct*?

In defending the Fugitive Slave Law, Brimblecomb makes the following dubious argument:

[I]t is a fine feature of this law that it allows *ten* dollars to the commissioner, in case of his deciding the identity of the slave, and only *five* dollars in the event of his deciding the nigger to be free. This was doubtless designed by the shrewd and benevolent framers of the law to impart an additional stimulus to the commissioner concerned to identify, rather than otherwise. In all probability, a black, being caught, is a fugitive; and, of course, it should almost always be so decided; and hence commissioners should be encouraged to render such a decision, — and especially as, in some cases, there would naturally appear a lack of evidence, so that a slight pecuniary stimulus on the mind of the officer would be indispensable in order to bias him in the right direction. (*Ruins!* 48)

Perfect! Impeccable logic! Any black who can be apprehended will most likely be a runaway. But since he may not *appear* to be a runaway, the commissioner must be bought off to produce the “correct” judgment!

Brimblecomb is certain he knows what “sound reasoning” is. When he takes up the scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in which Henrique beats Dodo for *no* reason,

he notes that “Henrique observed to Eva, after administering the whipping, if [Dodo] did not deserve it then, the chastisement might go for some time when he should deserve it.” Brimblecomb then comments that Eva was too dense to follow this “sound reasoning” (*Ruins!* 81-82). Sound reasoning indeed!

The question of whether slaves were originally stolen from Africa is quickly dismissed by Brimblecomb as a *non sequitor*:

All these scruples about a clear title, in the matter of purchasing live stock, is little better than humbug. Do the goods come into your hands, whether by gift, purchase, or any other way? Then hold on, and make the most out of your property that you are able.

On these principles of sound reasoning, it is manifest that our southern slaves are rightful property. (*Ruins!* 133)

Again the true author’s sarcasm—“sound reasoning”—rings out loud and clear.

A few pages later, Brimblecomb tries to make everything clear and simple for Ms. Stowe: “Slaves are *things* — are not to be reckoned among sentient beings. Keep this in mind, and you will have no more difficulty with slavery, nor with any of the circumstances and so called cruelties connected with it” (*Ruins!* 135). Finally he has provided a reasonably sound argument—if you accept the premise!

Naturally, then, as the satire of slavery in *Ruins!* becomes more over-the-top, so does the satire of the logic used to justify it. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Marie St. Clare sends Rosa to “the calaboose” for trying on one of her dresses and then talking back to her. For that moment of impudence, Marie judges, fifteen lashes is appropriate. Brimblecomb praises Marie for her sound judgement—and then assures us that it is no stretch of logic to conclude that had Marie failed to insist on the fifteen lashes that all civilization the world over would have fallen into absolute wrack and ruin. Marie, at least, understands this “sublime chain” of logic.

The nations of the earth must be edified and instructed by the example of liberty and happiness which we, as a people, enjoy. Therefore,—

The union of these states must be preserved. Therefore,—

Slavery, the grand cement of the Union, must be guarded and cherished

most assiduously by the whole nation. Therefore,—

The enslaved niggers must be brought down, and kept down. Therefore,—

Multitudes of them must be wholesomely whipped. Therefore,—

Rosa, in the present case, must have fifteen lashes or more, well laid on.

Such is the sublime chain whereby every whipping of niggers, every lash at the calaboose, every shrinking and writhing of nigger flesh, every lacerated and bleeding neck and bosom of whipped girls, every cathauling along the gory backs of fainting and agonized wretches; such, I say, is the sublime chain whereby all of these are jointly and severally connected with the great interests of men, and the final illumination, elevation, and happiness of the human race. But I am aware that these refined and enchanting views are much too lofty for the masses to understand or appreciate, while to throw them out before you, madam, and other low and grovelling minds like you, would be little better than casting pearls before swine. (*Ruins!* 68)

One of Stowe's purposes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to demonstrate that slavery was not just a problem "peculiar" to the South, but a crime that implicated all Americans. To me, the above passage from *Ruins!* demonstrates that point loud and clear — perhaps more loudly and clearly than any passage in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The absurd logic followed by the graphic descriptions of the pain that that logic engenders, followed by the snooty, snide "attack" on the "low and grovelling minds" of Ms. Stowe and anyone like her is a combination that is extraordinarily powerful.

Two of Brimblecomb's most extraordinary "logical" deductions remain. The first involves the chains and manacles used to secure slaves. Brimblecomb is absolutely indignant that Stowe could use the matter of Legree handcuffing and chaining as a means of prejudicing readers against both Legree and "the holy cause of slavery." To Ms. Stowe, he asks rhetorically, "Are not all prudent people careful about the security of their property?" (*Ruins!* 99). Now that *is* a reasonable point. And it brings us back to that basic premise, slaves being property. If we still have any doubt that there is a serious, serious problem with that basic premise, the true author gives us yet this one more opportunity to see where an acceptance of it leads us. He has Brimblecomb tell us that it is "astonishing" that

some people are horrified by “chains and handcuffs, and fifty-sixes attached to chains, and thumbscrews, and the like.” He adds, “Why, they might as well be horrified at the system itself—that greatest hope and wealth of the land.” Yes, the true author is screaming, we *should* be horrified by “the system itself”—as he has Brimblecomb argue “logically” that as slavery is essential to our nation and chains are essential to slavery, there is nothing to deduce but that chains must be held up high as one of the most appropriate symbols of the entire nation.

The chain, the chain for niggers, is a national badge as truly as the stars and stripes; and the sooner it is adopted and inscribed upon the bunting as a part of our national manifesto the better. Nothing could then exceed the beauty of our flag, as it should float in the breeze over all our free and glorious country, and aloft on all our naval and commercial marine in every port and every sea. *Chain*, *stars*, and *stripes* would then be our country’s appropriate and noble motto, and the significance of all these should be one and harmonious. *Chains* should signify the slave’s normal, natural, and proper condition. *Stars* should be emblematical of brandings, burning, bruises, on rebellious niggers’ face, arms, &c. *Stripes* should represent, of course, those marks of the cowhide, well laid on the bleeding backs of nigger property. (*Ruins!* 100-101)

If the above “logical” deduction was aimed at forcing America as a whole to recognize how slavery had become a part of its soul, another similar type of deduction was aimed at forcing *Christian* America to take a good look at the logic of slavery being “Bible-approved.” The true author of *Ruins!*, through his Brimblecomb’s demented take on Moses, encourages readers to re-examine *all* slavery-related interpretations of the Bible.

Brimblecomb’s “logical” argument goes like this: Once upon a time, the Israelites were slaves. Moses set them free. Therefore, Moses was an abolitionist. Abolitionists are all evil. Therefore, Moses was evil. Thus, Moses could not have been God’s chosen one. Therefore, he had to have been a despicable, black-magic-yielding imposter. If we are hesitant to accept this interpretation, Brimblecomb tells us, he is willing to consider the possibility that “this whole account of

the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt, and their running away from their masters, is a sheer fabrication, having been foisted, it may be, into the Bible by some lying and wicked abolitionists” (*Ruin!* 153). Either way, the “logical” conclusion remains the same. If the Moses story is bunk, then the Old Testament is bunk. If it’s true, then Moses must be evil and the Old Testament is still bunk.

In all, this over-the-top interpretation of Moses freeing the Israelites shows you can, if you want, interpret the Bible to mean just about whatever you want it to. As long as you do not concern yourself too much with logic (or worry yourself with a straight moral compass), you can create just about any “logical” argument you like. Surely, Christian defenders of slavery would not have been amused by the true author’s facetious, belittling of God’s chosen one in the passage below.

[I]t clearly appears that Moses was not only an impostor and necromancer, but a wholesale enticer and robber of human property; and, were just such a personage to make his appearance among us, and proceed to enact similar measures for the emancipation of our slaves as he enacted in Egypt, nothing is more obvious than that he would be apprehended immediately, and lynched on the spot. We are fixed in this—firm as the everlasting hills. Who-soever undertakes to meddle with our nigger property is a doomed man, and may be as sure to receive summary vengeance as he is detected. We would have hung Moses had we been in the place of the ancient Egyptians; we will hang every Moses we can catch on our free soil. (*Ruins!* 157)

When Brimblecomb tells us that “[w]e must regard this matter with the cool, clear eye of reason” and that “if this course of reasoning bears heavily and fatally against this great leader, he alone is responsible, and not myself,” we know his creator is daring us not to see that his argument, from a Christian perspective, is nothing short of wacky (*Ruins!* 154-155).

The true author satirically attacks, as well, other Biblical interpretations of the defenders of slavery, but to end his book, he chooses to make a remark on the golden rule. This makes perfect sense, for the golden rule —“all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them”—seems to be a simple concept invulnerable to political interpretation, and it is such simple yet

essential premises that he is, ultimately, most concerned with.

As one might expect, however, the defenders of slavery were in no way willing to concede the golden rule's most straightforward interpretation to Stowe, the Brimblecomb creator, or any others like them. In her anti-Tom novel, *Aunt Phyllis's Cabin*, Mary Eastman takes issue with the typical abolitionist's "absurd" interpretation of the golden rule:

The application made by the Abolitionist of the golden rule is absurd; it might then apply to the child, who *would have* his father no longer control him; to the apprentice, who *would* no longer that the man to whom he is bound should have a right to direct him. Thus the foundations of society would be shaken, nay, destroyed. Christ would have us deal with others, not as they desire, but as the law of God demands: in the condition of life in which we have been placed, we must do what we conscientiously believe to be our duty to our fellow-men. (*Aunt Phyllis's Cabin* 19)

Stearns spins the Golden Rule in the same direction: "Most men would like to be let off without punishment, if they had committed a crime; does it follow, therefore, that they should let off others" (Stearns 61). The creator of Brimblecomb must have been maddened by such twisted logic, especially the "logical" interpretation of Eastman's: Treat others compassionately as you'd hope to be treated—unless they have been forced into a different social position, and then you can treat them however you judge people *in* that position *should* be treated — not *at all* as you would expect to be treated.

With Brimblecomb's final paragraph, his final swat at Ms. Stowe, his creator clearly brings his argument to a logical conclusion: What if we assume that human beings can be property, where will that leave the golden rule, the heart of Jesus' teachings? It will leave the golden rule, and really Christianity itself, *civilization* itself, in total ruins.

Finally, the golden rule has been alleged as irreconcilable with slavery; and we slaveholders are tauntingly asked whether we would be willing to be treated as we treat our slaves. Our answer is, No! and neither would we be

willing to be treated as we treat our horses. Yet no one pretends to find fault with us for the way we manage this species of cattle. Why, then, blame us for our treatment of our niggers?

Madam, I have done.

With due respect, &c. (*Ruins!* 162)

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With the recent digitalizing of a great many books from the 19th century, many of those books being made available either for downloading from the Web or as print-on-demand texts, there is likely to be a renewal in interest in such works as *Uncle Tom's Cabin in Ruins!* It certainly deserves a renewal of interest—though it is hard to say if *renewal* is the right choice of words, for, as I said in the beginning, the nature of its public reception remains a mystery.

And, at the moment, it does not seem that those who hope to encourage its study always even understand that it *is* a satirical text and was recognized as such, at least by some, from the get-go. As of April, 2012, Wikisource's page entitled "Portal:Slavery" placed *Ruins!* in a list of twenty-six works under the heading of "Defenses of Slavery," and a Cornell University Library page provides a blurb on *Ruins!* that in no way suggests that Brimblecomb's premise "that slaves were property, and that no one had the right to interfere with another person's property" is satirical. The University of Virginia's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture* page rightly identifies *Ruins!* as satirical ("It doesn't take a modern reader long to identify [the author] as a Swiftian ironist"), but then states that "an unsigned notice of this text that Frederick Douglass printed in his paper [in 1853] took 'Brimblecomb' at his word, assuming the book was written to 'sustain slavery.'" Actually, I suspect that Douglass (or whoever wrote the review for his paper) was well aware of the satire, as he carefully qualified Brimblecomb's stance, calling him a "professed" defender of slavery, and then printed the section of *Ruins!* dealing with the evil abolitionist Moses, surely one of the most over-the-top sections of the book. And Douglass (or whoever) almost certainly would have been aware of the review in Garrison's *Liberator*, published three weeks earlier, in which the "keen irony" of *Ruins!* was clearly pointed out, and its true argument clearly delineated:

If the slave is a man, then God has endowed him with the same inalienable rights that belong to *every* man; then he cannot be the property of another; then it follows that the entire slave system ought to be cast into the bottomless pit.

The Liberator reviewer then called for “a rapid and wide sale” for *Ruins!*, as it would “help to prostrate every slave cabin in the land, and to hasten the day when every fetter [would] be broken!” Douglass (or whoever) might also have seen the review in another Boston periodical, *The Carpet-Bag*, which clearly saw *Ruins!* as it was: “an ironical work” that would “prove a strong adjunct to the book it pretend[ed] to crush.”

To date, my investigations into the contemporary public response to *Ruins!* have only uncovered the three above-mentioned reviews from Boston periodicals. (The editorial staff at *The Liberator* claimed, in its review, that the author of *Ruins!* was as anonymous to them as he was to the public.) With a little luck, future investigations will uncover other reactions to the book, and a better picture of how this book was received will come into focus.

The author of *Ruins!* seems to have transcended the prejudices of his time. He wrote as we might write, were we to be shuttled back to 1853 with our current concept of basic human rights and racial equality—that is, with absolute confidence that his abhorrence of slavery was unassailable. His images—vivid, intense, painful—gave great force to his irony and wit. One would have to guess that the contemporary readership was rather small, as apparently neither those who it would have had grinning broadly and muttering “Yes, yes!” nor those who would have been indignant at both its arguments and its outrageous (ungentlemanly-like) attitude produced a very big response to it in print. Still, how its rhetorical strategy and style effected the readers it did have—whether it had them cursing “Brimblecomb” because he had “gotten” to them, or whether it had them merely cursing him, or whether it had them secretly admiring its wit and honesty (being too gentlemanly to shout out their approbation in public), or whether it had made them question their support of slavery, as passive as it might have been, maybe made them question their complacency—is a tantalizing mystery.

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