

KEVIN PELLETIER, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in U.S. Antebellum Literature* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2015), 272 pp.

The turn to religion in literary studies over the past decade has yielded many fruitful insights, especially in scholarly understandings of sentimental culture. When Ann Douglas turned serious attention to sentimentalism in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), she established a narrative in which a “masculine” and serious-minded Calvinism gave way to a “feminine” and soft-hearted sentimentalism.¹ Jane Tompkins challenged Douglas, but left the basic paradigm—from Calvinism to sentimentalism—in place.² Both books depicted a vague evangelical Protestantism behind sentimentalism. The lack of distinction or theological depth in these accounts was recognized as a problem, but was seldom, if ever, addressed.³ Only now are scholars beginning to reveal the religious complexities and nuances of sentimental culture. In *The Altar at Home* (2014), Claudia Stokes reveals the powerful effect of Methodism and the Second Great Awakening on sentimentalism.⁴ Kevin Pelletier’s new book, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism*, likewise turns to “the fiery evangelical context in which American sentimentalism developed” (38). Demonstrating against Douglas and others that “there is no clean break between hard-line Calvinist theology and the more moderate forms of belief that sought to replace it,” Pelletier sets a fear of God’s vengeance at the center of abolitionist sentimentalism (12).

Pelletier’s idea that fear might be a forceful presence and an enduring feature of sen-

timentalism radically departs from usual understandings of this culture and its literature. Scholars most often see an “autotelic” view of love and sympathy at work: that is, depictions of love produce love; representations of sympathy spread sympathy. Some scholars call this approach *modeling*. By modeling scenes of love and compassion, sentimental writers hope to reproduce that response in readers. And indeed, sentimental novels often seem filled with contagious scenes of weeping, where right feeling is not just demonstrated, but replicated. Yet as Pelletier points out, focusing on such scenes actually prohibits scholars from seeing the many times when such responses fail. What happens when the heart hardens despite being surrounded by proper sentimental scenes? Sentimental novels, Pelletier demonstrates, worried constantly about how to move the unmoved, and they turned to a fear of God as their answer. The “apocalypse,” as Pelletier defines it, counted as any “suspended threat” of divine judgment and wrath: “Apocalypse is a warning that God would scourge reprobates for their sinful ways but never an actual depiction of this scourging” (12). Where sympathy would not suffice, God’s threats could move readers from fear to love in the cause of abolition.

In making this claim, Pelletier does important work distinguishing among multiple strains of sentimental culture—a move that more scholars might take up in order to clarify distinctions within the tradition. Pelletier admits that for some writers, like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, fear and apocalypse are largely absent. So too, Pelletier distinguishes among the sentimental strands of Maria Stewart (who practices the form he details), Catharine Beecher (who lacks fiery retribution and punishment), and Lydia Maria Child (who exercises a sense of fear, but divorces that fear from God’s vengeance and retribution). Still, in abolitionist sentimentalism, Pelletier claims, the use of an evangelically-infused apocalyptic fear becomes an essential component.

In invoking that apocalyptic tradition, Pelletier’s rewriting of sentimentalism helps especially to breakdown the old narrative of Calvinism replaced by sentimentalism. In my book *Sympathetic Puritans* (appearing simultaneously with Pelletier’s), I tried to overturn this paradigm by revealing the powerful role of sympathy and fellow feeling in

¹ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

² Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

³ In one critical review of Douglas’s book, for example, Barbara Welter asked: “Is there any difference, even a purely biographical one, among the denominations, or, as the book implies, was Protestantism monolithic throughout the hundred years or so that are encompassed?” Barbara Welter, “Review of *The Feminization of American Culture*,” *Signs* (1979): 785-86.

⁴ Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2014).

seventeenth-century Puritan culture.⁵ Many of the assumptions about sympathy that undergird sentimental literature, I showed, were already present in the preaching, poetry, and narratives of early New England Calvinism. In other words, I sought to undermine Douglas's narrative of "masculine" Calvinism by challenging her portrait of a rigorous, intellectual, fearful and unfeeling Puritan past—a view of Calvinism adopted by most scholars of sentimental literature. Pelletier challenges Douglas from the other side of the story—so much so that it seems sometimes as though *Sympathetic Puritans* and *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* were written together (though we did not know each other's work until after these books appeared). Pelletier contests Douglas's understanding of a "feminized" sentimentalism by showing it to be much more "masculine" (in Douglas's terms) than previously thought. It contained many of the elements long attributed to Calvinism. Taken together, our work—along with the broader study of Methodism and the Second Great Awakening by Claudia Stokes—will hopefully overcome and lay to rest Douglas's basic story of an intellectual Calvinist culture supplanted by a theologically naïve sentimentalism.

Harriet Beecher Stowe represents the perfect combination of Calvinist and sentimental cultures. Contrary to what some scholars have suggested or assumed, Stowe did not dismiss wholesale the Calvinism of her upbringing. Instead, many aspects of Calvinist thought continued to shape her work. Pelletier draws out the place of fear in Puritanism—lending weight at times to the caricature of Calvinism that I challenge in my own work—and he uses that aspect of Calvinist preaching to pose important new readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*. Pelletier shows, for example, just how often Stowe seems suspicious of the power of love to change hearts. Compassion and sympathy often *fail* to evoke the proper response. Haley, the slave trader in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, finds himself surrounded by sentimental domestic scenes, yet he remains unmoved. More importantly, Simon Legree, the main villain of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, had domestic, motherly experiences of love and sympathy, but he nonetheless became a debauched villain able to rape, torture, and kill

⁵ Abram Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015).

without conscience. "Nineteenth-century sentimentalists, including Stowe," Pelletier aptly writes, "expressed profound misgivings about the capacity of love to establish the kinds of sympathetic bonds contemporary critics now take for granted" (3). Stowe is thus suspicious of her readers. As Pelletier writes, "Stowe does not possess absolute confidence in the power of love to transform a nation of readers into vehement opponents of slavery" (26). As a result, she often tries to move the complacent heart with threats of wrath. She calls on readers to "feel right," but she ends with a stark reminder of the coming judgment of an Almighty God. Love and fear constantly operate together.

Beyond these important reevaluations of Stowe, Pelletier also shows that her invocation of fear drew on an African American literary tradition extending through David Walker, Nat Turner, and Maria Stewart—all of whom used the idea of a divine "suspended threat" to challenge slavery. Stowe's influences include not just Edwardsian Calvinism and the Scottish Enlightenment, but also "early black apocalyptic representation" (100). As Pelletier shows, Walker and Turner equated divine judgment with slave insurrection. For them, as for Stewart, the power of resistance relied on a subjection to God that overrode earthly submissions and oppressions. Here again, the broader turn to religion infuses Pelletier's understanding of the forces at work: the Christian tradition supplied an emancipatory power that was not based on "modern expectations of autonomy and empowerment" (21). Rather, *dependence* on God empowered action and resistance. Pelletier reveals that tradition at work in Walker, Turner, and Stewart, then shows how Stowe drew on it to write *Dred*, in which the title character gains the power to resist slavery through reading scripture and relying on God. The valences of religious tradition again become crucial to understanding how violence, resistance, and empowerment can be understood in nineteenth-century literature.

When a suspended threat becomes realized violence, however, the tradition finally collapses. Pelletier ends his narrative of apocalyptic sentimentalism by turning to John Brown, who is both this tradition's apotheosis and its finale. Northerners often embraced Brown in sentimental terms—as a man of love, sympathy, and compassion. At the same time, the presence of actual violence challenged a tradition that had only ever

threatened it (including in *Dred*). The coming of the Civil War—apocalyptic in many ways—further ended a tradition based in “a threat suspended” (12). After the Civil War, for example, depictions of Brown diverged into the familiar binary that Pelletier challenges: Brown became *either* a man of fear, wrath, and violence (as in *Tragic Prelude* by John Stewart Curry) *or* a man of love, family, and sympathy (as in *The Last Moments of John Brown*, by Thomas Hovenden). Pelletier’s book deftly invites scholars to revisit a time when, for religious reasons, fear and love cooperated. In the process, he accomplishes many important feats: he offers im-

portant new readings of several authors and texts; he helpfully distinguishes among multiple sentimental strains; he reveals the complexity of religious cultures and ideas shaping various American sentimental forms; he challenges the binary between love and fear that often guides scholarly understandings of sentimentalism; and he contests the paradigm that separates Calvinist theology from sentimental culture. All of these accomplishments make *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* an essential resource for scholars of nineteenth-century American literature.

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