

Calvinism Feminized: Divine Matriarchy in Harriet Beecher Stowe

JOHN GATTA

I

Confronting her New England religious heritage with more personal credulity than Hawthorne ever did his, the seventh child of Lyman and Roxana Beecher found herself engaged in a lifelong struggle to assimilate—and to remake—her ancestral Calvinism. The fruit of this engagement is evident in the subject matter of later novels such as *The Minister's Wooing*, *Oldtown Folks*, and *Pogunuc People*, as well as in the apocalyptic urgency and evangelical fervor of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Deficient in several crafts of the belletristic novelist, Stowe yet knew how to infuse her writing with the powerful rhetoric of conversion preaching. In fact, her best fiction often shows a temper closer to symbolic romance than to novelistic realism, with the author drawing on mythic and personal energies to sustain her heightened rhetoric. Thus, episodes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* such as Eliza's perilous crossing of the Ohio River or the deaths of Eva and Tom amount to rituals of passage laden with mythological import.

Inspired with regenerative confidence that the last will be first in God's Kingdom, Stowe exalted society's powerless people—children, blacks, and women—in her tales of the lowly. And as critics like Elizabeth Ammons and Dorothy Berkson have demonstrated for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,¹ her recognition of women and endorsement of feminine piety centered especially on the saving force of maternity. Stowe's agonistic involvement with Jonathan Edwards and the original faith of New England's fathers issued at length in a reconceived Christianity of American mothers.

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At one level, of course, this paean to motherly love betrays the influence of a post-revivalist and sentimental Christianity, of emerging bourgeois values, and of feeling loosed from all strictures of logic. As Berkson suggests, it also shows Stowe's theological impulse to displace the monarchical God of Edwardsean Calvinism with a divine principle of maternal compassion. At the same time, one can see the author's matrifocal spirituality flowing directly from evangelical tradition insofar as her motherhood theme grounds more incarnationally that classic Reformation-Pauline metaphor of conversion as a "new birth."

For Stowe the resulting focus on divine womanhood, which is central to her vision of this life and the next, drew particular inspiration from the biblical Mary. That Stowe reflected deeply on the Marian Madonna is a little-known fact one might not have predicted in a woman of her era, place, and religious background. She shared this interest with her brothers Charles and Henry Ward Beecher.² One indication of it can be seen in her zeal for visual art, particularly as stimulated by her three visits to Europe. In her Hartford residence on Forest Street, tour guides today may point to a copy of Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch* hanging conspicuously in the front parlor to illustrate her pioneering display of Madonna artifacts among the households of local Protestant gentility. What is more, Stowe owned copies of at least three other sacred Madonnas—including the *Holy Family del Divino Amore* and Raphael's *Madonna del Gran Duca*—in addition to secular renderings of the Mother and Child motif. After her first European tour in 1853, she reported in a letter to her sister-in-law that she had just installed a copy of Raphael's Sistine Madonna, the original of which she had viewed at Dresden, in her home at Andover, Massachusetts. She remarked elsewhere that this picture "formed a deeper part of my consciousness than any I have yet seen."³

So her iconographic fascination with the theme is plain. And in conjunction with her fiction, Stowe's written discourses on Mary in her verse and nonfictional prose—especially as delineated in *Woman in Sacred History*—offer us valuable understanding of the personal, cultural, and theological significance of her interest. Her Marian attitudes help to clarify, in turn, the distinctive sort of domestic, matrifocal feminism that informs her fictions. It is scarcely accidental that several of Stowe's

redemptive heroines—Mary Scudder in *The Minister's Wooing*, Mara in *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, and Mary Higgins in *Pogunuc People*—even bear Marian names. In the limited purview of this essay, however, my first aim is simply to describe the character of Stowe's attraction to the mythical image of divine womanhood—or, in Christian terms, the Madonna—as indicated in nonfictional prose and poetic writings. What is the import of this Protestant writer's interest in the ostensibly Catholic image of the Madonna?⁴ I then want to consider how this interest might bear particularly on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and on one less familiar novel, *The Minister's Wooing*.

II

Stowe's revalorization of the Madonna presented Mary not as Virgin so much as paradigmatic Mother, focusing especially on her conjunctive relation to a maternal Jesus. Thus accommodating Marian piety to Protestant orthodoxy, Stowe sought to refashion her inherited Calvinism into what she conceived to be a more encompassing Christianity. In biographical terms, Stowe's interest in the Marian Madonna may have been stirred not only by her European travel experiences but also by highly sanctified memories of her own deceased mother, Roxana Beecher, who died when Harriet was only five years old. Brother Henry Ward Beecher even testified that "My mother is to me what the Virgin Mary is to a devout Catholic."⁵

Two revealing expressions of Stowe's responses to the biblical Mary can be located in her devotional account of "The Blessed Woman"—included in her *Footsteps of the Master* (1877)—and in her volume of character portraits celebrating *Woman in Sacred History*.⁶ Devoting separate chapters of *Woman in Sacred History* to "Mary the Mythical Madonna" and "Mary the Mother of Jesus," Stowe seems at first to reject the mythical Mary altogether on the usual Protestant grounds of scant biblical evidence. To allow unscriptural legends, iconography, and pagan associations to image a Mary who overshadows Jesus is, she charges, a grave mistake.

Yet the resistance here to deifying Jesus' mother may derive less from biblical hermeneutics than from Mrs. Stowe's urge to identify with Mary's palpable experience of womanhood. For Stowe, the woman highly favored is no timeless goddess but a figure of history. Though "the crowned queen of women," Mary manifests her blessedness for Stowe not through supernal powers but in her exemplary bearing among those "that have lived woman's life."⁷ And not surprisingly, Stowe identifies this womanhood chiefly with maternity.

Indeed, Stowe's domestic sense of Mary as Mother is so strong that it all but effaces the title of Virgin from her nonfictional commentary. Rejecting in usual Protestant fashion the theory of Mary's perpetual virginity, Stowe reflects instead with knowing sympathy on the trials Mary faced by virtue of "the unbelief of her other children."⁸ Moreover, Mary's maternity extends beyond the momentous act of birthing Christ to include her teaching of Jesus and domestic familiarity with him.

This sense of an integral association between Mary and Jesus is central to Stowe's theology. It helps to explain not only her Protestant reluctance to view Mary as an autonomous goddess, but also her arresting insistence on the feminine character of Jesus. For if Jesus lacked a biological father, "all that was human in him" derived from Mary's nature. Accordingly, "there was in Jesus more of the pure feminine element than in any other man. It was the feminine element exalted and taken in union with divinity." So intimate is this association that to express it, Stowe combines imagery of marriage and parthenogenesis: "He was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh—his life grew out of her immortal nature."⁹

Yet Mary herself retains for Stowe a crucial role as exemplar. It is evident that Stowe identified personally not only with Mary's motherhood, but also with Mary's ironic attainment of public significance through values and activities centered in the private, domestic sphere.¹⁰ Stowe does praise Mary's self-abnegating acceptance of the divine will, to the point of echoing the blessed woman's "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" in the course of describing the newfound faith and vocation beyond perplexity she found in her own religious experience.¹¹ But Stowe also attributes to Mary the divine fire of poet and prophet, as reflected presumably in her one great effusion, the Magnificat.¹²

Plainly Stowe identifies, too, with Mary's perseverance in facing keen personal loss. She dedicates her 1867 verses on "The Sorrows of Mary" quite explicitly "to mothers who have lost sons in the late war,"¹³ and surely the "anguish of disappointed hopes"¹⁴ that pierced the *stabat mater* was comprehensible to a mother who in 1849 lost one son to plague and in 1857 another, nineteen years old, to death by drowning in the Connecticut River. In fact, Stowe's ability to draw mythic power from her own maternal mourning over baby Charley became crucial to her conception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, just as her affliction over Henry's state of soul at the time of his drowning helped to precipitate *The Minister's Wooing*.¹⁵

In the final analysis, Stowe's nonfictional writings testify that she could not fully resist the imaginative attraction of "Mary the Mythical Madonna." Even as she laments displacement of "the real Mary" by poeticized imagery, she writes appreciatively of iconographic representations by Raphael, Titian, and Fra Angelico as well as of legends passed down through apocryphal writings. She confesses she is attracted, for example, by the mythic tradition of the Greek Church that "Mary alone of all her sex was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and pray before the ark of the covenant."

By envisioning Mary as a "second Eve" and quintessential mother worthy of "love and veneration," Stowe comes close to recognizing her—if not invoking her—as the mother of us all. But she is careful to distance herself from Catholic allegiances, observing that the Mariological excesses of the Roman Church "have tended to deprive the rest of the world of a great source of comfort and edification by reason of the opposite extreme to which Protestant reaction has naturally gone."¹⁶

III

Against the backdrop of such concerns, the prophetic purpose of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can be seen all the more clearly. Just as the Marian Magnificat looks toward that era when God shall put down the mighty but exalt the humble and meek, so also Stowe's bestseller represents a womanly triumph of evangelical rhetoric on behalf of "the lowly."

And despite the book's technical deficiencies as novel, it is indeed a masterwork of rhetoric. Addressed above all to the maternal soul and conscience of the nation, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is also a book full of motherly characters—to the point where even its black hero, Tom, has been aptly described as figuring a feminized and maternal Christ.¹⁷

Already in the book's second chapter, entitled "The Mother," Stowe invokes an heroic image of motherhood in the flight of Eliza Harris. Warned as Mary had been that on account of her male child "a sword will pierce through your soul,"¹⁸ Eliza nonetheless enjoys almost miraculous protection as she flees from bondage across the Ohio River, her figurative Jordan and Red Sea, on dancing icefloes. What drives this thrilling Exodus, Stowe suggests, is Eliza's powerful assent to faith and hope combined with "maternal love, wrought into a paroxysm of frenzy by the near approach of a fearful danger" (105). And just as Stowe perceived something stronger in Mary's assent to Gabriel's annunciation than shrinking submissiveness, so also she highlights the fierceness of Eliza's parental commitment.

Another case of compelling maternity is presented by Senator Bird's wife, named Mary, who intercedes successfully with her husband on behalf of the fugitives. In view of the familiar charge that Stowe's sentimental portrayal of womanhood reduces all argument to mere feeling, it is worth observing that Mary applies a fairly rigorous logic of consistency and biblical authority in making her case against the fugitive slave law. By contrast Senator Bird, who lacks Mary's concrete, integral sense of moral reality, succumbs initially to a fallacy of uprooted abstraction in which "his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word" (155). Yet ironically, he patronizes his wife as having more heart than head, just as Haley dismisses Mrs. Shelby's concern for her slaves as irrational because women "ha'nt no sort of calculation" (46).

Even more than Mrs. Shelby or Mary Bird, Rachel Halliday, whose comfort Eliza enjoys in the Quaker settlement, presents an image of archetypal maternity. It is surely no accident that in the epigraph appearing one chapter before Halliday's introduction, Stowe cites Jeremiah's prophetic account of Rachel weeping for her children. (192) For Rachel Halliday supplies potential nurture to the whole of afflicted

humankind since “hers was just the face and form that made ‘mother’ seem the most natural word in the world” (216). As Jane Tompkins observes, Halliday personifies for Stowe something of divine presence because as she is “seated in her kitchen at the head of her table, passing out coffee and cake for breakfast, Rachel Halliday, the millennialian counterpart of little Eva, enacts the redeemed form of the last supper.”¹⁹

Yet Stowe portrays only one virgin mother within her gallery of memorable women. Or at least one could argue that the child saint Eva, who is evidently a holy virgin, qualifies metaphorically as a mother by virtue of her role in mediating the new birth to characters such as Topsy, Miss Ophelia, and her father Augustine. Hers is thus a true, spiritual motherhood in opposition to the false, fleshly motherhood of Marie St. Clare. Consistent with the book’s ironic reversals in which the last become first, Stowe develops here a curious sort of reverse typology in which Eva replaces Mary (or second Eve), and in which the child emerges as more effectively maternal than her own mother.

Beyond the ironic nomenclature by which Eva supplants Marie, Stowe exploits other dimensions of Eva’s name. As Evangeline, she serves of course as the book’s strongest evangelical instrument of conversion. For the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, conversion to the cause of immediate emancipation, with its conviction of slavery as sin, must be founded at base on the heart’s conversion to Christ. But Stowe portrays Eva as stimulating this twofold conversion not through her speech, so much as through a quality of presence that bears the Word into the world. As an antitype of Eve, Eva epitomizes—within the sentimental terms of Stowe’s narrative—the saving power of natural womanhood. Recreating her namesake’s title as “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20), Eva also epitomizes a more universal maternity than that presented by Marie.

At the same time, Eva reveals herself to be a new Eve in that she bears the Word into a world enslaved by sin and offers herself as agent of the New Birth. She also absorbs the pain of others; for like the *mater dolorosa* of Luke 2:51, she knows what it is for such sorrow to “sink into” her heart (326). Through her devotional exercises, this “fair star” (383) consents to act as feminine intercessor before God for her sinful father. When St. Clare sees her off to church where he will not follow, he

nonetheless bids her “pray for me” (278). This intercessory role parallels and supports that of St. Clare’s own mother.

However embarrassing by present-day standards of critical taste, Eva’s deathscene plainly occupies a pivotal place in the book—and in this character’s brief career as mother of conversions. Of course, Stowe does not hesitate to milk the episode for all the Victorian sentiment that a pious maiden’s early demise could supply. Precisely the sort of nineteenth-century conventions regarding death that Dickinson mocks so brilliantly in “I heard a fly buzz when I died” come in for solemn treatment here: the circle of chastened mourners, the sacramentalized curls of hair Eva confers as “a last mark of her love,” an edifying farewell discourse reminiscent of that given by Jesus in St. John’s gospel, and the mourners’ urge to glimpse something of the saint’s dying vision of joy, peace and love.

Yet beyond its individual demonstration of holy dying, Eva’s translation is intended to signal the larger birthpangs of a new order opening from the womb of eternity. As such, the scene incorporates birthing similitudes in its mention of Eva’s spasmodic agony leading toward exhaustion, its passage through the tension of midnight vigil when eternity’s veil “grows thin” (426) to that blessed change which Tom describes as an opening wide of heaven’s door. Still presented as beautiful despite her crimson coloring, Eva dies nobly of consumption, as had the author’s mother. In Stowe’s idealized fable she is indeed consumed—immediately and integrally, without apparent corruption of body or conflict of spirit—into the dawn of God’s Kingdom. No wonder a favorite hymn of Stowe’s was the comforting song of death beginning “O mother dear, Jerusalem.”²⁰ This untraumatic form of Eva’s rebirth parallels the translation of Mary, otherwise termed her assumption or (in Eastern Orthodox usage) dormition, as set forth in apocryphal and iconographic traditions later described by Stowe in detail. Such traditions regard Mary’s assumption as an instance of realized eschatology in which Jesus returns to escort Mary not merely in his role as Son but also as Bridegroom of his beloved.²¹ So also Tom counsels watchfulness for the bridegroom’s rendezvous with Eva at midnight.

In tandem with this scene, Stowe later depicts a more traumatic version of passage toward the new birth in Tom’s martyrdom at the hand of

Simon Legree. Already a reconceived *alter Christus*, Tom is delivered to the Kingdom's larger life as "He began to draw his breath with long, deep inspirations; and his broad chest rose and fell, heavily" (591). Moreover, Stowe associates his death mystically with the birthpangs of the apocalyptic endtime. And plainly the archetype of Tom's triumphant passion is found in Jesus' life-giving labor on the cross: "In his patient, generous bosom he bears the anguish of a world. Bear thou, like him, in patience, and labor in love; for sure as he is God, 'the year of his redeemed shall come.'"²² In the closing pages of her book, the author underscores the natal trauma of this coming age of cataclysm or millennialistic renewal, "an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed," when "a mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world." (629) As George Harris interprets the signs of these times, "the throes that now convulse the nations are . . . but the birth-pangs of an hour of universal peace and brotherhood" (611).

Predictably, readers unsympathetic to Stowe's religious values have scorned Tom's nonviolent resistance, his self-sacrificing resignation, as a form of passive docility demeaning to African Americans. No matter that in his defiant love Tom refuses to flog a fellow slave, that he will die rather than betray Cassy and Emmeline, that his response makes possible both their escape and the liberation of slaves on the Shelby estate in Kentucky. In dramatizing her belief in the spiritual force of kenotic or self-emptying love, Stowe does indeed draw on conventional pieties surrounding motherhood and childhood; at the same time she subverts normative values, insofar as she argues not simply for a redistribution but for a redefinition of power. That the "powerfully made" (68) and indubitably masculine Tom nonetheless functions as a kind of heroine, incorporating values traditionally branded as feminine or maternal, is a notable finding of recent feminist criticism. And when Tom assures Legree that he (Tom) "can die," the affirmation carries for Stowe an active import understandable only within the visionary terms of his role—shared with Eva—as divine mother of the nascent Kingdom of God.

Because Tom carries maternal compassion so fully in the body of his own person, his biological mother need not play a role in this narrative. Yet two other mothers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, both deceased, continue

to influence their sons despite or through their absence. These are the absent mothers of Simon Legree and of Augustine St. Clare. Even Simon Legree, it seems, might have claimed salvation had he not rejected definitively the humanizing and divinizing influence of his mother. From beyond the grave she haunts this would-be reprobate with the spectre of an unresolved identity and almost irresistible grace. Linked to Eva by association with a golden hairthread, Legree's mother signifies not only the shadow of potential regeneracy, but also the suppressed anima of this "grotesquely masculine tyrant."²³ Despite her son's perdition, her intercessory power bears fruit—even at a heavenly distance—by making possible the escape of Emmeline and Cassy.

As a choice version of what Puritans would recognize as the "natural man," an unconverted but sympathetic man of the world, the ironically named Augustine St. Clare does achieve full conviction of his personal depravity. He might therefore be considered ripe for regeneration. Yet before his deathbed change, he is incapable of passing beyond this stage toward the assurance of grace and forgiveness needed for "effectual calling." He also abandons hope when he fails in his romantic ideal of love. Briefly, this Augustine believes more deeply in his capacity for sin than in his ability to embrace the saving goodness of God. He can appreciate, intellectually, the evil of slavery though he is helpless to affirm, existentially, the imperative of emancipation. Accordingly, his predicament reflects Stowe's moral critique of Calvinism. Without the intervention of heaven-sent intermediaries, "Saint Clare" can be neither saintly nor clear of vision.

Yet he is peculiarly susceptible to the influence of feminine grace by virtue of his "marked sensitiveness of character, more akin to the softness of woman than the ordinary hardness of his own sex" (239). And we know that his bible-loving mother had been, literally, another Evangeline. In St. Clare's estimation she "was divine," or at least immaculately conceived in the sense that she betrayed "no trace of any human weakness or error about her" (333). We are told that St. Clare's father once over-ruled her, despite his supreme reverence for her, as brazenly as he would have "the virgin Mary herself" (336). Yet as a woman of Protestant (French Huguenot) stock who plays Catholic organ music, she transcends sectarian categories. That St. Clare's maternal piety leads

toward a virtual identification of motherhood with divinity seems apparent when, on his deathbed, he declares he is returning "HOME, at last" and invokes "Mother!" as his final word. Thus St. Clare's absent mother ultimately regains Presence.

In her closing exhortation to the congregation of all America, Stowe warns of wrath from above unless the nation reverses its course toward a dis-union effected by slavery and sin. If "this Union" is "to be saved," to regain health and wholeness, her readers must seize the "day of grace" and assist the birth of God's Kingdom in a convulsive era. (629) But by the close of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe establishes that within her hopeful vision of the mother-savior lies the mother-healer who could restore integrity to dis-membered families, souls, and sections of the United States.

IV

Seven years after releasing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in book form, Stowe confronted more directly her own religious and familial heritage in a New England novel featuring an overtly Marian protagonist. Despite its title, *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) focuses less on the historically based character of Samuel Hopkins than it does on the saintly figure of Mary Scudder. If Hopkins fictionally encompasses Lyman Beecher so as to epitomize for Stowe New England's Calvinist patriarchy,²⁴ it is telling that Mary ends up displacing Hopkins as the novel's theological center. Similarly, Stowe had already advanced her own claim, within a family of noted clergymen, to exercising a ministry of the Word through her authorship of works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

It is telling that the opening still life of Mary Scudder in *The Minister's Wooing* shows her enshrined as the New England maiden, an image superimposed on her iconographic portrayal as the original Virgin Mary. The picture of this girl who at first means never to marry comes complete with a descending dove, forming an overall impression of "simplicity and purity" reminiscent "of some old pictures of the girlhood of the Virgin."²⁵ Indeed the Roman Catholic Virginie de Frontignac later confides to Mary that "I always think of you when I think of our dear

Lady." (394). In her grief, Stowe's American heroine is also likened to the Sistine Madonna and associated with one of da Vinci's Madonnas. Linked repeatedly to the ocean beside Newport, she is even decked out playfully for her nuptials by Madame de Frontignac to resemble a "sea-born Venus." (423)

This image of Mary's divine womanhood—reinforced by further comparisons to Catherine of Siena, to Dante's Beatrice, and to the saintly wife of Jonathan Edwards—is qualified only slightly by recognition that the dove painted into the *mise en scène* actually belongs to her heathenish cousin James. For Stowe quickly establishes that at another level Mary is herself the dove, one in whom the Holy Spirit ultimately bears vitalizing power as "priestess, wife, and mother" (567).

Like Eva, Mary Scudder fulfills a crucial vocation as the mother of new birth for others. She is a regenerative agent not only for James Marvyn—her cousin, future husband, lusty sailor, and natural man—but also, if with less certain results, for the notorious Aaron Burr, grandson of Jonathan Edwards. She even succeeds in "wooing" the learned Doctor some distance from his overcerebral, self-tormenting Calvinism toward a Christianity allowing greater scope for beauty and divine compassion.

While preserving Mary's image of unspotted virtue, Stowe attributes to her the same initiated understanding of affliction that James remembers seeing pictorialized in "the youthful Mother of Sorrows" (36). Even before she finally achieves biological motherhood at the story's conclusion, then, and particularly after gaining precocious wisdom in her grief over James's supposed death at sea, Mary appears less the virginal innocent than her friend, the nearly ruined "Virginie." Stowe's New England maiden qualifies as a mother-nurturer to others because of her initiation "as a sanctified priestess of the great worship of sorrow" (380).

Yet the way in which Mary Scudder quickens conversion differs in at least one crucial respect from that displayed by Eva St. Clare. For Mary, unlike Eva, draws on sexual energies directed initially toward herself on the way to stirring male desires for the love of God.

Thus, in *The Minister's Wooing* Stowe ventures to affirm that *agape* need not efface *eros* in the divine economy of grace. To be sure, disordered *eros* gives rise to the rapaciousness of Burr, or the psychic bondage of

Virginie. Rightly directed, however, natural impulses might elevate the soul toward higher loves, as in the instance of Dante's love for Beatrice. Stowe demonstrates this theological hypothesis by indicating how much of the regenerative inspiration Mary supplies to James Marvyn, Hopkins, and Burr is fueled by eroticism. So *this* Mary is clearly lover as well as spiritual mother—and, without conscious design, she fulfills much of her latter role through the former. The figurative ambiguity corresponds to some traditional symbolizations of the Madonna as both mother and spouse of God.

In *The Minister's Wooing*, then, Stowe underscores her conviction that a progressive scale of affections connects the theological orders of nature and grace, that natural love is indeed sacramental. In contrast to the all-or-nothing ideality of austere Calvinism, she insists that "There is a ladder to heaven, whose base God has placed in human affections, tender instincts, symbolic feelings, sacraments of love, through which the soul rises . . . into the image of the divine." (87).

Within this sacramental scheme, Mary Scudder clearly qualifies as high priestess. Thus James testifies that Mary's image, standing "between me and low, gross vice" (70), elevated his character. In her office as mediator and intercessor, Mary Scudder typifies for Stowe that charism of spiritual maternity shared by many women and some men.

In contrast to this sacramental theology, the hyper-Calvinistic theology of the rungless ladder demands an heroic, unmediated leap of virtue to the point of accepting one's own damnation for the greater glory of God. Stowe suggests that Hopkins' sublime theory of benevolence betrays a masculinized privileging of heroic achievement and individual force of will. For at its worst, the damned theology of Hopkins ends up exalting the nobility of man's self-abnegating exertions over the gracious benevolence of a God who presumably wills to save all repentant sinners. Ironically, this New Divinity comes close to supplanting Calvinism's favored Covenant of Grace with a new Covenant of Works centered in human volition, to replacing the charitable bonds of communitarian Christianity with a virtue borne of heroic individualism.

Depicted novelistically as a sound-hearted eccentric, Doctor Hopkins embodies true virtue both in his personal charity toward African slaves and in his willingness to free Mary from her promise to marry him. But

the novel portrays him as a good man largely despite, rather than because of, the theological system he espouses. For Stowe, the rationalistic, disjunctive logic supporting his theology is far less sound than the pneumenal wisdom that sustains the faith of characters like Mary and Candace, the Scudder family's black housekeeper and nurse. In underscoring this point, the author elaborates a gender division in which the epistemology and semiotic expression of male clerics are superseded by those of holy women.

The male-sponsored, rationalistic approach emphasizes verbal knowledge and expression as epitomized by the Doctor's monumental treatise. It is essentially analytic, cerebral, abstracted. By contrast, Stowe's pneumenal way accents iconic or wordless communication, intuitive and poetic knowledge, and matrifocal values.

It is fair to question the gender-specific validity of this opposition, or what appears to be the anti-intellectual tenor of Stowe's sentimental focus on a religion of feeling. Yet the pneumenal epistemology favored in *The Minister's Wooing* does respect a logic of its own.

Thus, the Puritan logic of "evidences" for election is shown to be ultimately illogical insofar as it purports to find rationalistic criteria for judging pneumenal motions of the Spirit. During James's fearful absence at sea, there is no external, empirical evidence to prove that this natural man ever found personal evidence of his conversion and salvation. Hence Hopkins offers no hope for him. Yet Candace, eschewing the "white folks' way of tinkin'" and following another "mode of testing evidence," rightly affirms that "Mass'r James is one o' de 'lect' and I'm clar dar's considerable more o' de 'lect than people tink." (447-88, 349)

By contrast with Hopkins, Candace and Mary demonstrate other, more womanly ways of knowing. As Stowe's African re-embodiment of the archaic earth mother, Candace not only displays special powers of intuitive prophecy but also exercises the universal motherhood typified by the Christian Madonna. Thus, Candace rocks the grieving Mrs. Marvyn "as if she had been a babe" (347), reminding her of how tenderly Jesus of Nazareth "looked on His mother" and assuring her that such a Savior "knows all about mothers' hearts" and "won't break yours" (348).

This black mother's pneumenal and aboriginal power as intercessor likewise emboldens her to invoke the authority of the Spirit when she assures Ellen Marvyn, contrary to one version of Calvinist evidence, that James has been "called an' took" (349) among God's elect. Candace bustles about the house, half comically, as a latter-day goddess of abundance and the hearth, an "African Genius of Plenty" (445) resembling one of those rotund fertility figurines from the Neolithic era. But she also performs Christian intercession as a Black Madonna who spreads her "ample skirts" over the transgressions of her white and black children and who has "secret bowels of mercy" (112) for James when he is convicted of youthful misbehavior. Hers is indeed a queenly motherhood, as underscored by Doctor Hopkins' joking reference to her name as that of an ancient Ethiopian queen (138); and for nineteenth-century scholars like J. J. Bachofen, "Candace" became a generic term associated with a phase of material and spiritual matriarchy.²⁶

In her office as evangelizing intercessor, Mary Scudder likewise mediates the Spirit—as when she quickens Hopkins' soul, passions, and instinct for beauty through "the silent breathing of her creative presence" (93). And though James finds her "a living gospel" who shelters the Word, she achieves this end not mainly through verbalized discourse but through an iconic force issuing from silence. Particularly in her pain, she is framed descriptively as an image of reflective and attentive meditation, like her namesake who ponders words in her heart. Stowe underscores the inspirative power mediated through her face, gestures, and listening presence. As Kristeva says of the Virginal Maternal, Mary Scudder's semiotic import extends "to the extralinguistic regions of the unnamable."²⁷ Because the language of the Virginal Maternal issues from the Spirit's silence, it is fitting that James progresses toward his shipboard conversion not through any direct verbal initiative but through possession of Mary's bible, that physical relic whose extra-linguistic power extends the presence of her physical body.

Yet the author's feminized theology reflects more of an adaptation and transformation than a wholesale rejection of masculine precedents in her Christian tradition. It is scarcely surprising that within the sacred bower of Mary Scudder's bedchamber, the library that feeds her

imagination includes not only the Bible and a few secular writings but also the works of Jonathan Edwards. For holy New England women could find much to sustain them in the contemplative Edwards—the Edwards who recognized the beauty of divine virtue and the virtue of beauty, or who appreciated the emotive power of affections in drawing souls toward conversion.

Only the ultraCalvinist Edwards, the rigorist who highlighted divine sovereignty and human depravity, needed to be shelved. For Stowe this less congenial exponent of the rungless ladder and a monarchical God had, like his follower Hopkins, lost contact with that homelier life sanctified by Mother and Child:

These hard old New England divines were the poets of metaphysical philosophy, who built systems in an artistic fervor, and felt self exale from beneath them as they rose into the higher regions of thought. But where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance, woman often follows with bleeding footsteps;—women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks (25).

In a subsequent letter, Virginie de Frontignac enlarges the meaning of these “bleeding footsteps” when she exclaims with reference to Mrs. Marvyn’s loss that “the bleeding heart of the Mother of God can alone understand such sorrows” (382) as the book’s grieving women—and, presumably, its author—have known. No wonder Mrs. Marvyn, after James’s return, sits “looking into her son’s eyes, like a picture of the Virgin Mary” (566). Stowe’s narrative returns often to this notion that the *heart of the mater dolorosa* lies close to the mystery of a suffering God and that “Sorrow is divine” (360). For “the All-Father treats us as the mother does her ‘infant crying in the dark;’ he does not reason with our fears, or demonstrate their fallacy, but draws us silently to His bosom, and we are at peace” (425-26).

V

As I hope to establish in a forthcoming full-length study of six literary figures, Stowe was not unique among Protestant writers in expressing

fascination with the idea of a Christian Magna Mater at odds with the pragmatic, rationalistic, and competitive impulses of American culture. Especially for writers like Hawthorne and Stowe, figures of Divine Maternity also challenged the predominantly masculine symbol-system inherited from Puritan forebears. But a distinctive mark of Stowe's treatment of Divine Womanhood is the way her fiction draws from Catholic antecedents but re-presents them in Calvinist instances—in characters like Eva St. Clare, Mary Higgins, or Mary Scudder, who are infused in turn with reminiscence of real-life New Englanders such as Sarah Pierrepont. For Stowe this feminized amalgam of Calvinist rectitude and Catholic mythography attached itself, in addition, to Romantic notions of salvific womanhood and to Victorian glorifications of Motherhood. Praising Goethe's great Romantic poem, Stowe observes that Faust is raised from sin not simply through the abstract force of "the eternal womanly" but through the particular intervention of Margaret, "who, like a tender mother, leads the new-born soul to look upon the glories of heaven." And of course many works published in nineteenth-century America, including Lydia Sigourney's *Letters to Mothers* (1838) or Charles Goodrich's *The Influence of Mothers* (1835), witness to popular faith in the sacred power of a mother's influence in home and community.²⁸

Yet for Stowe, post-Calvinist Christian piety supplied an essential continuity beneath all these elements. Thus, her reading of Faust credits Goethe not for articulating a Romantic vision but for displaying appreciation of Christian forgiveness and redemption. It is, after all, not through works but through the womanly mediation of grace that Faust is ultimately saved. And a conspicuous companion of Margaret in the "shining band" of purified women encircling him at his death is "Mary the mother of Jesus."²⁹ For Stowe, then, the archetype of Divine Maternity found its historic center in the conjoined Mother and Son of Nazareth—the unified epitome of compassionate mother-love.

In personal terms, though, the experience of motherhood seems to have yielded considerable bitterness as well as satisfaction for Stowe.³⁰ Accordingly, her theologizing imagination drew her persistently toward images of God as suffering servant rather than as superintending monarch, and toward a Jesus who learned something of that servanthood

in the household of the *mater dolorosa*. Stowe could envision only such a woman, recalled in her several variants as Eva, Mary Scudder, or Mara with roots in the "salt, bitter waters of our mortal life," interceding on behalf of struggling humankind.

University of Connecticut
Storrs

NOTES

¹Elizabeth Ammons, "Heroines in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Literature* 49 (1977): 161-79; Ammons, "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior," *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York: CUP, 1986) 155-95; Dorothy Berkson, "Millennial Politics and the Feminine Fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe," *Critical Essays on Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Elizabeth Ammons (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980) 244-58.

²For a summary of views on Mary expressed in writings by Charles and Henry Ward Beecher, see Peter Gardella's *Innocent Ecstasy: How Christianity Gave America an Ethic of Sexual Pleasure* (New York: OUP, 1985) 108, 128. In Charles Beecher's *The Incarnation; or, Pictures of the Virgin and her Son* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1849), the author supposes that Mary's beauty of soul was matched by an "exquisite symmetry of physical development" (53).

³Letter to Sarah Beecher, November 11, 1853 at Stowe-Day Library; Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1854) 2:343. For information concerning the inventory of Stowe's art works, I am indebted to Kristen Froehlich at the Stowe-Day Library and to Renee T. Williams of the New Britain Museum of American Art for her detailed notes on file at Stowe-Day.

⁴I say "ostensibly" because Marian devotion also figures notably in Eastern Orthodox spirituality and to some lesser degree in the Anglican and Lutheran traditions, as Frau Inge Leimberg reminded us at the recent *Connotations* conference in Cologne. Yet Marian piety found scant encouragement indeed within the more Calvinist scheme of faith and practice to which Stowe was first exposed.

⁵Charles Foster, *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1954) 115.

⁶The footsteps material is also available in the collection, *Religious Studies: Sketches and Poems*, vol. 15 of the Riverside Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896). Although Stowe produced many of these religious writings (which typically appeared first as articles in the *Christian Union*) considerably later than her best-known novels, the views they offer of theology generally and of Marian themes in particular show a consistent development from earlier brief statements such as her 1849 Introduction to Charles Beecher's book on *The Incarnation; or Pictures of the Virgin and her Son*. The *Incarnation* volume also includes an early printing of Stowe's poem "Mary at the Cross," which demonstrates the role Mariology already played in her thinking

by 1849. "The Sorrows of Mary," another relevant poem collected (with minor revisions) in *Religious Studies*, first appeared in the Supplement to the *Hartford Courant* for February 16, 1867.

⁷*Religious Studies* 31.

⁸*Woman in Sacred History* (1873; rpt. New York: Portland House, 1990) 193.

⁹*Religious Studies* 36.

¹⁰*Woman in Sacred History* 183, 185-86, 198; *Religious Studies* 36.

¹¹"For many years my religious experience perplexed me—I could see no reason for it—why God led me thus and so, I have seen lately, and I believe that He has a purpose for which He has kept me hitherto. I am willing to be just such and so much and be used for what He wills—"Behold the handmaid of the Lord.'" Letter to Charles Beecher, likely date fall 1852, at Stowe-Day Library and printed in *Stowe Day Foundation Bulletin* 1:2 (September 1960).

¹²*Woman in Sacred History* 198, 183; *Religious Studies* 70.

¹³Reprinted in *Religious Studies* 190, 70; *Woman in Sacred History* 183, 70, 190.

¹⁴*Woman in Sacred History* 190.

¹⁵Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: OUP, 1994) 190-91, 214, 254, 274-83. Written after Stowe had lost both Charley and Henry, "The Sorrows of Mary" exposes the poignance of her identification with the *stabat mater*: "Had ye ever a son like Jesus / To give to a death of pain?" (*Religious Studies* 353). But her earlier verses on the same theme, published in 1849 as "Mary at the Cross," were composed before Charley's death. In Charles Beecher's *Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Burr, 1863), a Protestant work with which Stowe was closely associated, Hymn #26 extends involvement of the *stabat mater* figure to any instance of oppression, grief, or terror.

¹⁶*Woman in Sacred History* 172; *Religious Studies* 31.

¹⁷In addition to Berkson and Ammons, critics Alice Crozier (*The Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe* [New York: OUP, 1969]) and Jane Tompkins (*Sentimental Designs*) have stressed the central role of mothers in Stowe's novel.

¹⁸*Uncle Tom's Cabin, Or Life Among the Lowly*, ed. and intro. Ann Douglas (New York: Viking, 1981) 63. Subsequent references, identified parenthetically, are to this edition.

¹⁹Jane Tompkins, *Sentimental Designs* 142.

²⁰Joan A. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* 8.

²¹*Woman in Sacred History* 174-75.

²²In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, which Stowe could not have read, the fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich envisions a similar connection between birthpangs and the Passion of Jesus.

²³Elizabeth Ammons ("Heroines" 175) aptly describes Legree as "a caricature, and a very serious one, of supermasculinity, which Stowe associates with the devil."

²⁴See Lawrence Buell, "Calvinism Romanticized: Harriet Beecher Stowe, Samuel Hopkins, and The Minister's Wooing," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 24 (1978): 121.

²⁵*The Minister's Wooing* (Hartford: Stowe-Day, 1859, 1988) 19. Subsequent references, indicated parenthetically, are to this edition.

²⁶I am grateful to my graduate student Kurt Heidinger for pointing out this significance of Candace's name. I have also benefitted from discussion of this issue in an unpublished essay by Monica Hatzberger.

²⁷Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) 250.

²⁸*Religious Studies* 93-94. In her *Letters to Mothers* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1840), Sigourney extols maternal love as changeless and "next in patience to that of a Redeemer" such that it fulfills a "sacred mission." The nearly complete "dominion" of mothers over their children allowed Christian mothers to perform an angelic ministry within the household (49, 53, 16, 10). Elizabeth Ammons ("Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior," 158-59), drawing in turn on historian Ruth H. Block, points out that a distinctly idealized concept of "feminized parenthood" or "motherhood" did not take hold in America until after the Industrial Revolution.

²⁹*Religious Studies* 93.

³⁰In *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (esp. 127, 140-41), Joan A. Hedrick points out that Stowe suffered not only bereavement but also persistent failure in attempting to raise her children and govern her household in a manner consistent with her professed ideology.