



French Women, Italian Art, and Other
“Advocates of the Body” in Harriet Beecher
Stowe’s *The Minister’s Wooing*

DOROTHY Z. BAKER

IN “Saints, and their Bodies,” an essay published in the March 1858 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Thomas Wentworth Higginson lamented the common conception that “physical vigor and spiritual sanctity are incompatible.” “Ever since the time of that dyspeptic heathen, Plotinus, the saints have been ‘ashamed of their bodies,’” Higginson complained, and “what is worse, they have usually had reason for the shame.” John Calvin was an invalid; even Luther derided physical vigor as a pagan ideal. Higginson asked, “If Saint Luther fails us, where are the advocates of the body to look for comfort?”¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, a contributor to and avid reader of the *Atlantic Monthly*, would have taken note of Higginson’s article. Later that year, her *The Minister’s Wooing* was serialized in the same publication, and it signaled that Stowe was herself one such “advocate of the body.” Indeed, *The Minister’s Wooing*, which Stowe began writing three months after Higginson’s essay appeared, responds to its arguments and its multiple, direct references to Stowe and her family.² Of course the novel is in

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¹Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “Saints, and their Bodies,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1858, pp. 583, 582, 583.

²For a fuller discussion of the ways in which *The Minister’s Wooing* as serialized fiction responds to essays, fiction, and book reviews appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* *The New England Quarterly*, vol. LXXXIII, no. 1 (March 2010). © 2010 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved.

no way limited to that response, but it does dramatically reveal Stowe's belief that the physical body exerts a potent force in domestic life and religious experience. That belief, which she shared with her brother Charles, did not originate in Stowe's European experiences of 1853 and 1856, but it was, as is evident from an examination of her prose during that period, certainly nurtured and deepened by them, particularly by her engagement with paintings of the Madonna.³

Published soon after her early and prominent abolitionist novels *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*, Stowe's less well known *The Minister's Wooing* is, like many other popular novels of the period, structured around a marriage plot. Much of the novel's drama centers on young Mary Scudder's choice of a mate. Mary is drawn to the handsome and charming James Marvyn, but her mother encourages her to marry the Reverend Hopkins, a man she greatly admires. Tempering both her world view and the narrative's exploration of the caprices of young love is Mary's exceptionally mature religious disposition. One of her foremost concerns—although not her only concern—is the spiritual character of her suitors, and in this regard James Marvyn is clearly deficient. Despite Mary's intense physical and emotional attraction to James, she cannot consider him as a potential spouse until he evinces full and heart-felt Christian conviction, which he does before the story's end. As the novel moves toward that conclusion, it reveals itself to be one of Stowe's most thoughtful reflections on salvation, sectarianism, and the social imperatives of religion, with many of the novel's most profound statements about Calvinism, regeneration, and religious experience being delivered not by the Reverend Hopkins but by the African cook and the unregenerate James Marvyn.

while Stowe was composing and publishing her novel, see my "Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Conversation' with *The Atlantic Monthly*: The Construction of *The Minister's Wooing*," *Studies in American Fiction* 28 (2000): 27–38.

³Charles Howell Foster's early essay, "The Genesis of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*," which appeared in the *New England Quarterly* (21 [1948]: 493–517), prompted my thinking about visual arts in the novel. While Foster argues that members of Stowe's family provide the basis for many of the novel's characters, he nonetheless identifies Stowe's trip to Europe as the source of the author's frustration with the "Puritan distrust of beauty" (p. 498).

Moreover, in the narrative Stowe does not abandon her interest in abolition, a topical issue that, for many of the characters in *The Minister's Wooing*, is intimately coupled with religious belief. In one of the plot's central strands, Dr. Hopkins risks his pulpit and his theological standing when he insists on the political rights of Newport's slaves. As the narrator makes clear, he and other characters are valued to the extent that they act on behalf of Africans, especially when they compromise their own social and economic interests by doing so. Thus, although *The Minister's Wooing* departs from Stowe's earlier novels insofar as it spins around a marriage plot, it does not divorce itself from its historical moment but rather expresses her continued, fervent commitment to the religious and political issues for which she was and is known and respected. But in addition to that fundamental continuity, a more innovative, even surprising, aspect of the novel is that it discloses Stowe's keen attention to the female body, artistic representations of the female body, female sexuality, and the body's role in religious experience.



Although Higginson focuses on the physical well-being of the ministry in "Saints, and their Bodies," the essay goes on to advocate the fitness of the public at large. In a jocular aside, Higginson writes, "Guaranty us health, and Mrs. Stowe cannot frighten us with all the prophecies of Dred." Higginson disdains the prevailing image of the minister, and he offers multiple, often humorous, illustrations of that joyless, anemic figure to undercut its force. He then counters the stereotype with a description of three enormously popular, able-bodied ministers: Theodore Parker, Edwin Hubbell Chapin, and Henry Ward Beecher. Regarding Beecher's strength and athleticism, Higginson writes, "the vigor of the paternal blacksmith still swings the sinewy arm of Beecher." Stowe concurred with Higginson that the popular conception of the ministry was ill founded. In her essay "New England Ministers," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* one month before "Saints, and their Bodies" and which suggests how the magazine's contributors discussed

topical issues with one another within its pages, she had offered numerous examples from New England's history of "our stout-hearted and very practical" clergy.⁴

A good deal of Higginson's essay can be read as a defense of Henry Ward Beecher, in particular of his much-maligned sermon celebrating physical culture.

But so blinded, on these matters, is our accustomed mode of thought, that Mr. Beecher's recent lecture on the Laws of Nature has been met with strong objections from a portion of the religious press. These newspapers agree in asserting that admiration of physical strength belonged to the barbarous ages of the world. So it certainly did, and so much the better for those ages. They had that one merit, at least; and so surely as an exclusively intellectual civilization ignored it, the arm of some robust barbarian prostrated that civilization at last.

Taking up Beecher's cause, Higginson demonstrates that the dichotomy between physical prowess and the intellect is fallacious as he concurs with Juvenal's "mens sana in corpore sano" [a healthy mind in a healthy body], a maxim that—according to Higginson—Luther censured.⁵

⁴Higginson, "Saints, and their Bodies," pp. 586, 584; Harriet Beecher Stowe, "New England Ministers," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1858, p. 490. The broader claims of Stowe's article center on an argument related to Higginson's, the prevalent misapprehension that the work of ministers has no bearing on the daily lives of men and women. Among her many examples of practical, independent, and political clergy is Dr. Hopkins. The historical figure, Samuel Hopkins, studied theology with Jonathan Edwards following graduation from Yale College and became an intimate friend of the Edwards family. He was later called to the pulpit of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, the setting of *The Minister's Wooing*, where he served as minister until his death in 1803. As Stowe notes in "New England Ministers," Samuel Hopkins was an early and uncompromising opponent of slavery, and she commends his wisdom and courage in preaching against slavery within a congregation whose lay leaders were largely slaveholders. In 1776 Hopkins published "A Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans," which he addressed to the members of the Continental Congress. Stowe's depiction of Hopkins in the article forms the nucleus of the character in *The Minister's Wooing*, which she would begin to write four months later and which would appear in *The Atlantic Monthly* ten months later.

⁵Higginson, "Saints, and their Bodies," p. 585. Stowe and her sister Catharine Beecher later elaborate on this claim in their *American Women's Home* (1869; Hartford: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1991), in which they write, "There is such an intimate connection between the body and mind that the health of one can not be preserved without a proper care of the other" (p. 255).

Higginson acknowledges that although in his essay “we speak especially of men,” “the same principles apply to women.” Using the examples of painter Rosa Bonheur and sculptor Harriet Hosmer to make his case, he once again refers to the Stowe and Beecher families: “when [Harriet Beecher Stowe’s] sister Catherine [*sic*] informs us that in all the vast female acquaintance of the Beecher family there are not a dozen healthy women, we confess ourselves a little tempted to despair of the republic.”⁶ In later issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Stowe will redress her sister’s observation when she trains her sights on the physicality of *The Minister’s Wooing’s* female characters, thus opening up herself and her readers to the sensual joys of representations of the body, those portrayed in painting and sculpture as well as in her own literary art.

According to her own accounts in *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, when Stowe traveled to Europe in 1853, she sipped champagne, attended “Romish” services, and viewed exposed necks and rising bosoms—even full nudes—at the Louvre. These sensual experiences were new to her and clearly remarkable. Before leaving for her trip, Stowe had carefully planned which museums she would visit, even which paintings she would seek out in each. Fashioning herself an “art-pilgrim,” she was especially eager to encounter representations of the Madonna, to explore the various ways in which artists had conceived of the mother of God. Her preference, she professes in *Sunny Memories*, is for historically accurate and historically contextualized representations of Mary. The Madonna should be depicted as a “dark-eyed Jewish maiden,” she insists, as opposed to the “countless catalogue of the effeminate inane representations.”⁷

Stowe’s predilection is consistent with her brother Charles Beecher’s representation of Mary. In 1849, while serving as the pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Charles released *The Incarnation; or, Pictures of the*

⁶Higginson, “Saints, and their Bodies,” pp. 585, 586.

⁷Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, 2 vols. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1854), 2:340, 341, 350.

Virgin and Her Son, to which Stowe had contributed an introductory essay.⁸ Beecher concedes that “to portray her with golden ringlets, azure eyes, and blonde complexion, may be more poetical, more angelic,” but historical accuracy requires that the mother of God be rendered as an “Oriental beauty,” positioned near the synagogue in the mountains of Galilee, surrounded by pomegranates and lush vines. He writes,

I behold her a daughter of the Hebrews, presenting that peculiar style of features which in all ages marks that sacred, that mysterious race; a beauty, glorious in its glossy raven locks, lustrous hazel eye, full red lip, aquiline nose, finely-arched eyebrow, and the rich, deep complexion of the East.

He envisions Mary dressed in exotic garb, a silk turban and veil. Whatever one may think of the stereotypically racialized representation of Jewish women or the orientalizing of the figure of Mary, Stowe’s introduction strikes a similar chord. The artist and writer should seek “as clearly as possible, the *probable* truth of the case,” which is, she believes, a representation of Mary that embodies “the strong national peculiarities of her race.” Brother and sister are equally exacting about the ways in which Mary’s life experience should be incorporated into representations of her body. Charles contends that her eyes and mouth should “reflect justly on life’s vicissitudes,” whereas Harriet is drawn to paintings in which Mary’s eyes have a “sorrowful, far-darting look,” as if she can see the pain her future holds.⁹

During her 1853 European trip, as she viewed different renditions of the Madonna, Stowe refined her sense of what she

⁸Joan Hedrick, in recounting that Charles Beecher exhibited less passion for his ministry than for romantic literature, described his avocation as a “near-fatal attraction.” When Charles enlisted his sister Harriet to collaborate on *The Incarnation*, she consented, editing the manuscript and writing an introductory essay as well as a page on the Christ child. She did so partially to redirect her brother’s writerly energies toward his ministry but also to offer the reading public an alternative to current, wordly literature. As Hedrick puts it, “Thus did Harriet help in a Beecher family project to fend off Romanism and secular decadence” (*Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], p. 188).

⁹Charles Beecher, *The Incarnation; or, Pictures of the Virgin and Her Son*, intro. by Harriet Beecher Stowe (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1849), pp. 53, 52, 54, v–vi, 54; Stowe, *Sunny Memories*, p. 350.



FIG. 1.—Raphael's *The Alba Madonna*, c. 1510. Image courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection.

considered an appropriate representation, identifying the qualities she prized as well as those she disliked. She particularly admired Raphael's *Alba Madonna* (fig. 1), which she described in *Sunny Memories*:

The figure is that of a young Jewess, between girl and womanhood, in whose air and eye are expressed at once the princess of the house of David, the poetess, and the thoughtful sequestered maiden. She is sitting on the ground, the book of the prophets in one hand, lying listless at her side; the other hand is placed beneath the chin of

her infant son, who looks inquiringly into her face. She does not see him—her eye has a sorrowful, far-darting look, as if beyond this flowery childhood she saw the dim image of a cross and a sepulcher. This was Mary.

Raphael's Madonna is not the blonde, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, angelic Madonna that Stowe and her brother dismissed as historically inaccurate; she is, instead, a robust woman, with sturdy limbs, ample breasts, and an exposed neckline. Her clothing is rather simple, with the exception of her headdress, an elaborate turban, twisted at the crown of her head and falling as a veil. Stowe's assertive phrasing, "This was Mary," suggests what she goes on to affirm: Raphael's painting approaches the "scriptural idea" of the Virgin Mary.¹⁰

In the early pages of *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe writes that James Marvyn's travels gave him "other eyes for received opinions and established things."¹¹ Stowe's travels had the same effect, freeing her from mid-nineteenth-century images of the Madonna as blonde and angelic and, therefore, as distinct from the women of the Old Testament. Although Stowe's aesthetic of the Madonna was certainly racialized, it did not participate in what Mary De Jong has identified as a persistent racial degradation of Hebrew women. De Jong has discovered that gift books and magazine articles from 1825 into the 1860s uniformly portrayed the Bible's Hebrew women in both words and illustrations as "exotic, attractive, and sexually available," thus reinforcing Christianity's "ideologies of gender, race, class, and national identity."¹² In brief, these women were constructed as stereotypical dark maidens—with swarthy complexions and Semitic features—so that they might serve as direct foils for

¹⁰Stowe, *Sunny Memories*, p. 350. Stowe may have applauded fellow *Atlantic* contributor John Lothrop Motley's praise of Cimabue's famous *Madonna*: "The Madonna is colossal. She wears a hood, and holds her child in her arms. There is a strong human, yet spiritualized expression upon the face . . . and the color is strong and liberally laid on" ("Florentine Mosaics," *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1857, p. 18).

¹¹Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (1859; reprinted, Hartford, Conn.: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1990), p. 26. Further references to the novel will be to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

¹²Mary De Jong, "Dark-Eyed Daughters: Nineteenth-Century Popular Portrayals of Biblical Women," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 19 (1991): 294.

pale, delicate, English fair ladies. In other words, scriptural iconography asserted Christianity's superiority over a primitive, sensual, and debased Jewish religion.

In her extensive survey and analysis, De Jong finds that Harriet Beecher Stowe is unique in criticizing the self-serving motivations of her culture's religious iconography. She cites Stowe's tale of Hagar, from the 1873 publication *Woman in Sacred History*, in which the author refuses to exploit Hagar's status as a concubine and instead compares her condition to that of the female slave in nineteenth-century America.¹³ In her introduction to Charles Beecher's *The Incarnation*, Stowe had attested to the "reasonable probability" of her brother's representation of the Virgin Mary, a representation that emphasized the rich, mysterious, and exotic beauty of the Madonna, to be sure, but that also underscored that beauty's origins in "an unconscious dignity, the result of habitual communion with the highest themes, the holiest natures of the past." Her charm results not from sexual availability but from "riches of the soul."¹⁴ Stowe's depiction of the Madonna may well be racialized, but it is racialized in the service of a benign agenda, contrary to that pursued by the culture at large. While mid-nineteenth-century religious iconography was using race to assert the hegemony of a westernized, Protestant Christianity, Stowe was using racialized images to demonstrate that all races are noble and virtuous.

Iconography being an index of ideology, Stowe championed representations of Jesus' mother that emphasized her physicality and vitality as well as her emotional depth, thus rendering the Virgin not as an ethereal angel but as a worldly woman of substance. Given this interest, the novelist who had already portrayed and would continue to portray women as possessing both faculty and agency detected a special affinity for the Marian culture of the Roman Catholic Church. In exalting New Testament female characters who wield both social and political power, Stowe suggests that, by extension, the female

¹³De Jong, "Dark-Eyed Daughters," pp. 295–96.

¹⁴Beecher, *The Incarnation*, pp. vi (Stowe's intro.), 54, 53.

readers of nineteenth-century America may aspire to a similar influence.



Employing her redefined iconography, Stowe brings Raphael's artistic conception of the scriptural Madonna to bear on her rendering of Mary Scudder, the protagonist of *The Minister's Wooing*. The narrator introduces Mary to the reader as a figure in a *tableau vivant*: she is standing in the doorway, golden light highlighting her brown hair; a Java dove appears and perches on her finger; and the narrator explains that Mary Scudder is the very picture of the young Virgin Mary (p. 19). In scenes of the annunciation, which is the earliest biblical reference to the Madonna, the scriptural Virgin Mary is regularly depicted with a dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. Although Mary Scudder embraces such religious iconography—she displays an engraving of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna* in her garret, her private space¹⁵—her mother is repelled by it. When Mary's appearance is compared to “some old pictures of the girlhood of the Virgin,” the narrator uses the occasion to elevate the daughter at the expense of her mother. Mrs. Scudder “was thinking of no such Popish matter, I can assure you,—not she! I don't think you could have done her a greater indignity than to mention her daughter in such connection. She had never seen a painting in her life, and therefore was not to be reminded of them” (p. 19). Rejecting both the “Popish” Marian culture and the visual arts, Mrs. Scudder, a loving but limited woman, betrays her inadequacies.

As a model of the young Virgin, Mary Scudder is both beautiful and grave. When James Marvyn walks through the orchard and leans into her bedroom window, he observes that she resembles a portrait of the *Mater dolorosa*, which he had

¹⁵The significant detail of the reproduction of Da Vinci's *Madonna* in Mary's garret figures in Susan K. Harris's feminist and Bachelardian analysis of the novel, “The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*,” *New England Quarterly* 66 (1993): 185.

viewed in a European cathedral. Mary's face was "kindled with a sad earnestness," as if she understood the sorrows that awaited her (p. 36). In short, Mary possesses the two characteristics that Stowe values in artistic representations of the Madonna—physical beauty consistent with what she understood of Jewish women, and an air of gravity, even sorrow, in her facial expression.

Mary's abstract melancholy is precipitated into actual grief when she learns that James has been lost at sea and is presumed drowned. Once again, the narrator describes her as the embodiment of an artist's Madonna: "In her eyes there was that nameless depth that one sees with awe in the *Sistine Madonna*,—eyes that have measured infinite sorrow and looked through it to an infinite peace" (p. 363). Stowe viewed Raphael's *Madonna di San Sisto* (fig. 2) in Dresden, where she traveled solely, she claimed, to see it.¹⁶ She was initially disappointed, primarily by the figures of Pope Sixtus and Saint Barbara. She wasn't keen on the green drapery, and there was much about the painting that "annoyed" her. She was, however, moved by the depiction of Mary, a response for which she listed three reasons. She was touched by the resemblance between mother and child. She admired the Madonna's dark coloring and Jewish features, which she would have considered historically accurate. And, finally, she saw in the Madonna's eyes the prefiguration of the passion of Christ. The Virgin's gaze excited and troubled Stowe because it expressed that mother's complex and conflicting emotions—love, sorrow, and fear.

Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* is also remarkable for her health and physical strength. Like his *Alba Madonna*, she is a vital

¹⁶Returning from Europe in 1853, Stowe wrote to her sister-in-law that she hung a reproduction of the *Sistine Madonna* in her home in Andover (Harriet Beecher Stowe to Sarah Beecher, 3 November 1953, Stowe-Day Library, Hartford, Conn.). John Gatta notes that Stowe owned three additional reproductions of the Madonna, Raphael's *Madonna of the Goldfinch*, which was displayed in her Hartford home, as well as his *Madonna del Gran Duca* and the *Holy Family del Divino Amore* (*American Madonna: Images of the Divine Woman in Literary Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. 54). Gatta has observed elsewhere that "Stowe's attraction to images of sacred womanhood, and to a specifically Marian iconography of Mother and Child, indicates her drift from Calvinist iconoclasm toward a more Catholic sensibility" ("The Anglican Aspect of Harriet Beecher Stowe," *New England Quarterly* 73 [2000]: 418).



FIG. 2.—Raphael's *Madonna di San Sisto*. Image courtesy the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

woman with ample limbs, large hands and feet, and substantial breasts. Unlike other images of the Madonna and Jesus in which the baby appears weightless, Raphael's Mary fully supports the robust child Jesus, now no longer an infant, in her arms. In this respect, too, the *Sistine Madonna* is reflected in the character of *The Minister's Wooing's* protagonist. Although Mary Scudder's frame is described as petite, especially in contrast with that of her mother, cook Candace, and the busy, chatty Cerintha Ann Twitchel, she is not fragile. Mary spins wool on the big wheel, which requires considerable strength. Possessing faculty, she amazes her mother with the amount of housework she is able to accomplish.

Equally important, Mary enjoys expressing her love physically. She instinctively encircles Mrs. Marvyn with her arms. She craves her mother's embrace because she delights to "feel how much her mother loved her, as well as to know it" (p. 427). For Mary, physical sensation is an alternate form of understanding, equivalent to intellectual apprehension, a quality the narrator stresses with a quotation from John Donne's "The Second Anniversarie of the Progres of the Soule":

Her pure and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought
That you might almost say her body thought. [P. 539]

For Mary—and we can safely assume for Stowe as well—the body thinks, knows, prays, and preaches.

Many scholars have rightly characterized the African cook, Candace, as one of the female ministers of *The Minister's Wooing*. I would like to suggest that she can also be viewed as another Madonna and that, in that role, she extends Stowe's redefined iconography of the mother of God.¹⁷ Using scriptural language, the narrator notes that Candace appears "in gorgeous raiment" (p. 568), which the story goes on to detail. Candace

¹⁷Gatta rightly terms Candace a "Black Madonna who spreads her 'ample skirts' over the transgressions of black and white children and who has 'secret bowels of mercy' for James when he is convicted of youthful misbehavior" (*American Madonna*, p. 65).

wears “yellow morocco slippers with peaked toes,” a “splendid Mogadore turban and a crimson and yellow shawl” (pp. 116, 563), all of which signal the character’s resemblance to eastern Madonnas with turban and veil. In addition, Stowe constructs two scenes in the novel in which Candace figures as the Mary of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, both scenes following the news of James Marvyn’s shipwreck. When she comes upon Mary Scudder, Candace displays the “majesty of sorrow in her bearing,” much like the *Alba Madonna* and the *Sistine Madonna*. Immediately she takes Mary Scudder “up in her arms . . . as if she had been a child” (p. 329).

We see the same composition when she comforts Mrs. Marvyn, “gather[ing] the pale form to her bosom . . . as if she had been a babe” (p. 347). And just as she herself models the mother of Christ, Candace refers explicitly to the passion of both Christ and his mother as she seeks to console James’s mother. “*Look right at Jesus*,” she instructs Mrs. Marvyn, “jes’ look at *Him*, hangin’ dar” (pp. 348, 349). “Don’t ye ’member how He looked on His mother, when she stood faintin’ an’ tremblin’ under de cross, jes’ like you?” (p. 348). Ultimately, both women figure as the Madonna in this scene, Candace cast as the mother of God in the *Pietà*, holding a stricken body, and Mrs. Marvyn as the *Mater dolorosa* at the foot of the cross. For each woman, the consoling mother and the suffering mother, the physicality of the Madonna is central to the comfort religion promises.

In Michelangelo’s sculpture of the *Pietà*, the scale and physicality of the Madonna are remarkable. The broad, robust Madonna—again with a full bosom, sturdy limbs, and large hands and feet—is fully equal to the task of bearing the body of her mature, deceased son. Candace is likewise “powerfully built,” her glowing skin and gleaming teeth acknowledged to be “indications of perfect physical vigor” (pp. 111, 112). She takes exception to the scriptural mandate that a woman should defer to her husband because “the wife is the weaker vessel.” Asserting her spiritual, physical, and marital authority, Candace looks upon her diminutive, frail husband and asks, “*I de weaker vessel?*” (p. 178).

Candace not only expresses her religion outwardly through her body but she experiences it inwardly as a physical sensation. When she prays, she “feel[s] enlarged” and “strong” (p. 143). Her conviction that James Marvyn had been redeemed before he died she knows corporeally; she feels it in her bones (p. 447). By means of Candace, Stowe communicates her own belief that the strength of the physical body does not diminish a woman’s spirituality but rather confirms and conveys the comforts of religion.

It may be daring to propose that Virginie de Frontignac, susceptible to seduction as she is, is also cast as a Madonna, but certain evidence in the novel suggests that Stowe wanted readers to consider this characteristic as another aspect of the French woman’s personality. When Virginie first visits the Scudder cottage, she is wearing a splendid black velvet riding habit, buttoned in coral, and a hat sporting a dramatic, long plume. Her dark eyes “shone like jewels,” Stowe writes, and her “pomegranate cheeks glowed with the rich shaded radiance of one of Rembrandt’s pictures.” Her riding gloves, which are embellished with seed pearls, and her rings form part of the exotic and luxuriant picture. Immediately after introducing Virginie, Stowe abruptly interrupts the narrative to describe a painting by Rubens. She writes,

In Antwerp one sees a picture in which Rubens, who felt more than any other artist the glory of the physical life, has embodied his conception of the Madonna. . . . *His* Mary is a superb Oriental sultana with lustrous dark eyes, redundant form, jewelled turban, standing leaning on the balustrade of a princely terrace, and bearing on her hand, *not* the silver dove, but a gorgeous parouquet. [P. 297]

Stowe’s literary portrait recalls Rubens’s *Holy Family with Parrot* (fig. 3), which offers a decidedly different representation of the Virgin Mother from that portrayed by Raphael or Michelangelo.¹⁸

¹⁸I am grateful to Catherine Essinger of the William R. Jenkins Architecture and Art Library at the University of Houston for identifying Rubens’s *Holy Family with Parrot* from Stowe’s description.



FIG. 3.—John Paul Rubens, *Holy Family with Parrot*. Photograph by Lukás-Art in Flanders VZW. Image courtesy the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen.

Rubens's Madonna, who dominates the painting, is elegantly attired in a scarlet dress, trimmed with lace, its low-cut neckline partially revealing her bosom. She wears the jeweled oriental turban that Stowe describes. The setting for the family composition is patrician, and nearby, perched on a column, is a large parrot. *Holy Family with Parrot* is similar to Raphael's *Alba Madonna* and *Sistine Madonna* in that its Madonna's coloring is dark, her face broad, and her physique robust. Like the *Sistine Madonna*, this mother caresses her child with both arms. The similarities end there, however. Whereas Raphael's Madonnas appear gentle and modest, Rubens's is dramatic, vibrant, and alluring, with her gaze fixed not on her child or on the future but on the viewer. Stowe enlists the *Holy Family with Parrot*—and the character of Virginie de Frontignac—to illustrate the varied origins, guises, and roles of women who have been chosen by God to do God's work on earth. Stowe rejects the dichotomy between Mary and Martha, American and French, Calvinist and Catholic.¹⁹ Instead, in valuing the myriad ways in which women of differing characters can serve as models of virtue, Stowe reveals herself to be truly catholic, in the broad sense of the term.

In addition to identifying Virginie de Frontignac as an alternate configuration of the Madonna, Stowe draws on her own experiences in Europe to construct a specific element of the subplot in which Virginie participates. While in Paris, Stowe carefully observed French women. She watched as they strolled with their families in the city's public gardens or along its boulevards and, more intimately, as they moved about a reception room. Impressed by their artistry and their natural joy, Stowe endowed Virginie with both characteristics. In *Sunny Memories*, Stowe proposed that

instead of scorning, then, the lighthearted, *mobile*, beauty-loving French, would that we might exchange instructions with them—

¹⁹Gail K. Smith makes a similar, if more radical, claim for Stowe's female characters in her later novel *Agnes of Sorrento*. Smith writes that in this work "Stowe continually emphasizes the blending of pagan and Christian, physical and spiritual, in the novel's insistent image of the palimpsest" ("Art and the Body in *Agnes of Sorrento*," in *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, ed. Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer, and Emily B. Todd [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006], p. 171).

imparting our severer discipline in religious lore, accepting their thorough methods in art; and, teaching and taught, study together under the great Master of all. [2:392]

In *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe models that enriching mutuality in the relationship between Mary Scudder and Virginie de Frontignac. As she recommends in *Sunny Memories*, the two women school one another in domestic tasks. Mary teaches Virginie to spin, and Virginie introduces Mary—and Prissy—to French techniques for executing fine, decorative needlework. More important, the two educate each other about Christian marriage, Virginie teaching Mary about the emotional and physical dimensions of marriage, and Mary instructing Virginie in her moral obligations to her husband. When she finally resolves to break with the rakish Aaron Burr, Virginie's dedication to adhere to Christian ideals of marriage is evident in her expression. Like artistic depictions of the Mother of God, Virginie's eyes "seemed larger and tremulous with a pathetic depth" that bespeaks both sadness and resolve (p. 384).

At the close of the novel, Virginie bears a son, thus fulfilling her role as Madonna. She writes to Mary that the vision of the infant Jesus lying in the manger is constantly before her. Continuing to delight in the physical body, she describes her baby in aesthetic terms. His eyelashes are like silk, his fingernails are like gems. But although ever the French sensualist, she is now also sanctified. When her baby "puts his little hand on my bosom, I tremble with joy," she tells Mary (p. 574). Also showing herself to be a keen student of Mary Scudder's lessons on marriage, Virginie reveals that her husband's love of her is heightened because of her instinctive maternal skill. She closes her letter with a vow to raise her son to be Christian (p. 575). In the character of Virginie, Stowe marries the physical and the religious, and she insists that each quality reinforces the other. This principle she also applies to her other Madonnas—Mary Scudder and Candace.



In *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe acknowledges that saintly individuals are stereotypically represented as invalids. She comments on Jonathan Edwards's habit of fasting, and her readers would have known of his early death and the still earlier death of the minister Aaron Burr Sr., his son-in-law. Stowe also mentions Rev. David Brainerd, whose enormously popular biography, written by Edwards, emphasized his poor constitution, physical mortification, and illness, which led to his untimely death.²⁰ Given these examples, we are right to be concerned about Cerintha Ann Twitchel's fiancé, a devout minister who is thought to have consumption. Herself robust, Cerintha Ann takes it as her mission to "keep *such* a man's soul in his body," to use her strength to care for the pious young man (p. 501).

Despite that example, however, throughout the novel Stowe, like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, gives lie to the notion that "physical vigor and spiritual sanctity are incompatible." Instead, she asserts that they are properly paired naturally in men as well as in women. For example, James Marvyn's "fine athletic figure" in chapter three anticipates his "Christ-like manhood" in the closing chapter (pp. 32, 568). In addition, although Dr. Hopkins is described as preoccupied, confused, and severely bashful, he is also "a man of gigantic proportions, over six feet in height, and built every way with an amplitude corresponding to his height" (p. 59). Like James, he walks "manfully" (p. 150). Stowe's consistent argument within her novel is that both men and women must develop and honor their bodies and use their physical selves in service to God and his people. "So we go, dear reader,—so long as we have a body and a soul. Two worlds must mingle,—the great and the little, the solemn and the trivial" (p. 205).

Stowe carries the theme of physical and religious mutuality into her treatment of matrimony. Desire, she avows, is one of the cornerstones of Christian marriage, an argument

²⁰ Ministerial biographies, a popular genre in mid-nineteenth-century New England, frequently emphasized the minister's poor health, sickness being associated with saintliness. See Jonathan Edwards, *An Account of the Life of the Late Rev. Mr. David Brainerd* (Boston: D. Henchman, 1749).

that is not constrained solely to the subplot of Virginie de Frontignac. Indeed, it is critical to the relationship of Mary and James as well and, thus, is at the center of the novel. In the third chapter, we are introduced to James when he enters Mary's bedroom through its window, "stepping deliberately behind Mary, putting his arms around her neck, and kissing her" (p. 32). If she objects at all, she does so playfully. Our saintly heroine, we are reminded, is mortal, her imagination given to "the things of earth" (p. 29). She blushes, her hand "throbs" in his, she dreams of his thick, dark curls, she yearns for him, and upon his return, "she felt herself borne in those arms" (p. 506). In this poignant image, suggestive of the Marian assumption, Stowe creates an earthly "assumption" for Mary Scudder, who experiences heavenly rapture in the arms of her lover. This "plaintive vibration" that characterizes Mary's intense response to James Marvyn contrasts starkly, of course, with the "calm friendship" she holds for "her future husband," Dr. Hopkins (pp. 505, 506).

Seeking scriptural validation for her belief in the intimate relationship among physical strength, desire, religious devotion, and passion, Stowe turned to the Old Testament book Song of Songs. She structured the plot of *The Minister's Wooing* to parallel the dramatic sweep of that biblical book, wherein the man who is "black but comely" and the woman described as the "rose of Sharon" discover their love for one another "under the apple tree" (1:5, 2:1, 8:5), a scene that Stowe reprises when James and Mary exchange kisses in the apple orchard by the Scudder home. Stowe casts James Marvyn as the seductive, scriptural lover, whose "head is like the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven" (5:11). Like Stowe's novel, Song of Songs quickly moves from ecstasy to pain, as the beloved retreats and the bereft lover experiences intense physical loss: "Whither is my beloved gone?" and "I sought him, but I found him not" (3:1, 6:1). When the lovers are reunited, we again hear Mary Scudder's voice in that of the biblical woman as she confesses the confusion she initially felt about her sexual longing: "O that thou wert as my brother, . . . I would kiss thee. . . . I would lead thee, and bring thee into

my mother's house" (8:1–2). Ultimately, the scriptural lovers acknowledge the "seal" of their devotion as they state, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it" (8:7), an assurance Stowe replicates not once but twice in the final chapters of *The Minister's Wooing* (pp. 507, 521): first, the newly regenerate James Marvyn quotes the passage in a letter to his lover; and then, when Mary and James are reunited, they speak the same words together, as if to signal the novel's scripturally sanctioned dénouement.

In addition to sealing the lovers' vows, eroticism serves another critical, and perhaps surprising, function in *The Minister's Wooing*: it engenders and secures Christian faith. At the outset of the novel, James is acknowledged to be a "natural man," "little better than an infidel," but this infidel freely admits that his passion for Mary Scudder may be his path to regeneration (pp. 34, 26).²¹ He casts his desire for Mary as her "strange power" over him, which compels him to borrow her Bible, to read it, and ultimately to find salvation. To highlight her contention about the religious potency of a redemptive eroticism when given the right personalities and circumstances, Stowe contrasts James's spiritual surrender to Aaron Burr's exclusively profane seduction of Virginie as well as to Dr. Hopkins's chaste, almost fraternal, love for Mary. Neither Burr nor Hopkins, Stowe suggests, is motivated by the sanctified and sanctifying eroticism that is the foundation of Christian marriage.

The sensuality that infuses *The Minister's Wooing*, a sensuality Stowe reveled in and grew comfortable with during her European travels, is all the more apparent if we view her use of art in that novel against her use of it in *The Pearl of Orr's Island*. The first installment of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* appeared in the *Independent* in 1861, after the publication of *The Minister's Wooing*, but Stowe began *The Pearl* in 1852 and worked on it intermittently for nine years, during which

²¹In this respect, Cerintha Ann Twitchel is the female counterpart to James Marvyn. She is acknowledged to have a "high stock of animal spirits" and is "classed as a sinner," but she, too, is drawn to religious observance through desire. Cerinthy Ann's cheeks redden and she picks clover "passionately" when she speaks of the young minister, and her lover confesses to being drawn to her for her "looks" (pp. 497, 499, 501).

time she composed *Dred*, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, and *The Minister's Wooing* and also made substantial progress on *Agnes of Sorrento*. *The Pearl of Orr's Island*, decidedly suspicious of art, reflects the opinions of an author who had not yet allowed herself fully to absorb the glorious works of art housed in European museums.

The *Pearl's* narrator pointedly dismisses the experience of viewing paintings. Pairing the real with the important in contrast to the imaginary and the trivial, the narrator describes the protagonist, Mara, as Mrs. Pennell's "picture-gallery, who gave her in the twenty-four hours as many Murillos or Greuzes as a lover of art could desire." Popular literature is also disparaged. When the otherwise practical and blunt Sally Kittridge becomes sentimental, the narrator asks, "Had she been reading novels? Novels! What can a pretty woman find in a novel equal to the romance that is all the while weaving and unweaving about her?"²² Mara masters chenille embroidery and landscape painting, but she exemplifies her maturity and seriousness of purpose only when she begins to take on utilitarian needlework, such as mending linen. Furthermore, although one of the narrative's subplots centers on Mara and Moses reading *The Tempest*, the novel quotes three hymns by Isaac Watts and refers to a John Bunyan passage about death but never introduces the sensual painterly and poetic imagery that *The Minister's Wooing* relies upon. *The Pearl of Orr's Island* is trained on the afterlife and does not attempt to understand the relationship between the physical experience of this world and salvation in the next. Its devaluation of the body and of the healthy sensations of healthy bodies is, of course, consistent with a devaluation of the sensual experience of the arts.

By contrast, when Stowe approaches *The Minister's Wooing*, she embraces not only the domestic arts and painting, as we have seen, but also a broad range of literature. Quoting the

²²Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1861; reprinted, Hartford, Conn.: Stowe-Day Foundation, 1979), pp. 31, 334.

work of Jonathan Edwards and John Donne, she even describes Mary Scudder via five lines of Lord Byron's *Don Juan*:

Radiant and grave, as pitying man's decline;
 All youth, but with an aspect beyond time;
 Mournful, but mournful of another's crime;
 She looked as if she sat by Eden's door,
 And grieved for those who would return no more. [P. 36]

Doing so, Stowe announces her commitment to the world of art.²³ Furthermore, she capitalizes on each intertextual and interartistic reference to convey her expansive understanding of female physicality and spirituality and to distance herself from their singular depiction in the character of the dying angel.

Although her experience of Italian and Flemish art and her observation of French women deepened her belief that the female body was an instrument of spirituality, her American Calvinist tradition had already instilled that conviction in her. She details that religious legacy in *The Minister's Wooing* when she introduces Jonathan Edwards, his wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, and their grandson, Aaron Burr.²⁴ Two generations removed from Edwards, the influential clergyman, the rakish Burr embodies the decline of American spirituality, a decline signaled in part by the passage from Byron. His romantic interest in a married woman defies his grandparents' marital devotion, which Stowe highlights in the novel.²⁵ Despite Burr's penchant to womanize—"he had been wont to boast that he could subdue any woman, if he could only see enough of her"—he cherishes the memory of reading his grandfather's depiction of the beautiful, saintly, thirteen-year-old Sarah Pierpont, which is quoted in its entirety in the novel (pp. 264, 265). A key element of Edwards's praise is Sarah's emotional and sensual

²³Stowe used these very lines in her "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life," noting that Aurora Raby was a portrait of Lady Byron. See the *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1869, p. 300.

²⁴The books in Mary Scudder's boudoir include a few sanctioned novels, the Bible, and the "works then published of Mr. Jonathan Edwards" (p. 29).

²⁵I offer a larger argument for Stowe's use of Aaron Burr in "Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Conversation' with the *Atlantic Monthly*," pp. 31–33.

experience of God's presence, which Hopkins relates. Sarah nearly faints, loses the ability to speak, and becomes chilled when she receives the Holy Spirit. Hopkins concludes that "in matters of grace God sets a special value on woman's nature" and, further, that "most uncommon manifestations of divine grace have been given to holy women," the "uncommon manifestations" being physical (pp. 364, 365). Hopkins's observation is consonant with those recounted in Sarah Pierpont Edwards's narrative of her renewed conversion in 1742 and Jonathan Edwards's *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, in which he, too, details his wife's leaping, fainting, and weeping during her experience of God's presence.²⁶ Although Mary Scudder's physical manifestations of grace are not nearly as dramatic as Sarah Pierpont Edwards's, she too, as her mother describes, is "carried out of herself" while praying. An observant Hopkins reflects that Mary will certainly follow in the path of that well-respected woman (p. 365).

As early as the mid-eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards had encouraged his wife to document the ways in which her body dramatically revealed the agency of God. Thus was the exploration of the female body legitimized, even celebrated. Within *The Minister's Wooing*, the potency of the female body is expressed when Stowe's Madonnas pray, work, comfort one another, and confront life's mysteries. For some time, scholars have argued that Stowe's female characters inhabit a ministerial role.²⁷ I heartily agree, and nowhere is Stowe clearer on this matter than in the final chapter of *The Minister's Wooing*, when she identifies Mary Scudder Marvyn as "priestess, wife, and mother" (p. 567). Mary Scudder, Candace, and even Virginie

²⁶*The Silent and Soft Communion: The Spiritual Narratives of Sarah Pierpont Edwards and Sarah Prince Gill*, ed. Sue Lane McCulley and Dorothy Z. Baker (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), pp. 1–17, and *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, ed. Perry Miller, John E. Smith, and Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957–), pp. 331–47.

²⁷See, especially, Nancy Lusignan Schultz's essay on the ministerial role of Prissy, "The Artist's Craftiness: Miss Prissy in *The Minister's Wooing*," *Studies in American Fiction* 20 (1992), which concludes that within the novel the woman as domestic artist "turns the tables on the voices of authority," familial, social, and religious (p. 34).

share a special relationship with the divine resulting from their affinity to the mother of God, an affinity that issues from their physicality. The acts of giving birth, nursing, nourishing, and nurturing are, for Stowe, so wed to woman's spiritual mission that the body becomes a prime instrument of their ministry.

With her exquisite attention to the female body in *The Minister's Wooing*, Harriet Beecher Stowe joined the public debate—taking place in the *Atlantic Monthly* and elsewhere—on the role that physicality appropriately played in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans. Her evident conviction that the body is inherently holy and her exploration of sanctified eroticism in *The Minister's Wooing* shift the meaning of that novel's often cited, sentimental dictum on the means to salvation:

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 higher and higher, refining as she goes, till she outgrows the human, and changes, as she rises, into the image of the divine. [P. 87]

Just before rising to the level of the divine, Stowe's affectional hierarchy ends with sacraments of love, that is, with acts that embody love—cradling a bereaved mother, caressing expectant hands, drawing an infant to the maternal breast—acts that engender pleasure, and presage redemption. Those acts held for Stowe an enormous material and sacred power, a power fully capable of shattering the barriers that divide people from one another—barriers between ministry and laity, Calvinist and Catholic, Jew and Gentile, free woman and slave, saint and sinner.

In a novel constructed around a conventional marriage plot, Harriet Beecher Stowe puts forward a suite of radical arguments on religious art, human physicality, salvation, sectarianism, the ministry, and social justice. Through the frame of a domestic novel, she demonstrates women's wisdom and leadership, realized through embodied acts, both within the home and throughout the community. Thus, beyond the

specific themes advanced in the novel, *The Minister's Wooing* alerts readers to the far-reaching, activist goals of devout authors writing in ostensibly conservative literary modes.

Dorothy Z. Baker is Professor of English at the University of Houston and author of MYTHIC MASKS IN SELF-REFLEXIVE POETRY and AMERICA'S GOTHIC FICTION: THE LEGACY OF "MAGNALIA CHRISTI AMERICANA."