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Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin

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LATE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY Harriet Beecher Stowe announced that God wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The novel by then seemed too monumental even to its author to have been imagined by one woman.¹ Earlier in her life, in contrast, Stowe had no doubt that she wrote the subversive book or that she was inspired to write it, despite marital and household irritations, precisely because she was a woman.²

In a letter to her husband ten years before the publication of the novel, and almost ninety years before Virginia Woolf's famous declaration of independence on behalf of all women writers in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Harriet Beecher Stowe said: "There is one thing I must suggest. If I am to write, I must have a room to myself, which shall be *my* room."³ With her room came the mission to write what became America's best-known novel, and the mission fell to her, she believed, because she was a mother. She recalled for one of her grown children, "I well remember the winter you were a baby and I was writing 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' My heart was bursting with the anguish excited by the cruelty and injustice our nation was showing to the slave, and praying God to let me do a little and to cause my cry for them to be heard. I remember many a night weeping over you as you lay sleeping beside me, and I thought of the slave mothers whose babies were torn from them."⁴ One of her seven children died while still an infant. She says: "It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave mother may feel when her child is torn away from her."⁵ Authors'

¹ See Annie Fields, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston and New York, 1898), p. 377.

² Ellen Moers gives a telling glimpse of Stowe's domestic situation in *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York, 1976), pp. 3-4; for the view that Stowe's sympathy with enslaved people might be traced to her own experience with servitude as a wife and mother, see John R. Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1963).

³ Charles Edward Stowe, *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe Compiled from Her Letters and Journals* (Boston and New York, 1889), p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

remarks on the genesis of their work sometimes prove misleading, but not in this case. Stowe's insistence on maternal experience as the generative principle of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* identifies the ethical center of the novel, and helps explain the unusual, and often misunderstood, characterization of Tom.

Stowe's protagonist is gentle, pious, chaste, domestic, long-suffering and self-sacrificing. In a nineteenth-century heroine, those attributes would not seem strange. Associate them, however, with the hero of an American novel, a genre sifted for its Adamic rebels, and readers' complacency can evaporate. Indeed, the farther *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has moved in time from the historical reality of chattel slavery, the more obvious and the more criticized "effeminate" Tom has become; and whether it is stated in so many words or not, often what is objected to is the fact that Stowe makes him a heroine instead of a hero.⁶ That deliberate feminization of Tom, and the way Stowe links him to Eva and them both to a constellation of mothers, black and white, are what I wish to discuss.

The importance of women in Stowe's novel has attracted critical notice. Edward Wagenknecht remarks that "the great evangelists in her fiction are all female—some of them little girls like . . . Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, who saves Topsy by embodying the power of Jesus's love."⁷ Donald K. Pickens, who maintains that Tom is "admirable in spite of Mrs. Stowe's racist inclinations," bluntly states: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is subversive. It is a feminist tract. The men are not attractive. . . . Women, in counter distinction, are upright and true to their inner selves."⁸ Alice C. Crozier explains that

⁶ On Tom as an unmanned character who reflects his author's racism, see James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Partisan Review*, XVI (June, 1949), 581. Less responsible is the vehement and often *ad feminam* attack on Stowe and her novel in J. C. Furnas's *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (New York, 1956). (For a sound discussion of Stowe's racial attitudes in an historical context, which shows them liberal for her day, see Thomas Graham, "Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Question of Race," *New England Quarterly*, XLVI [Dec., 1973], 614-622.) The fact that much nineteenth-century fiction favored domesticated heroes is an historical commonplace (see, e.g., Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties* [New York and London, 1940]), and the prevalence of effeminized heroes (by today's standards) in popular fiction of Stowe's day does shed light on her depiction of Tom. Where Stowe departs from her contemporaries, primarily, is in making Tom inherently feminine rather than exteriorly domesticated—"tamed"—by women, and in providing her own theological and political construct to support her unusual conception of Tom.

⁷ Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York, 1965), p. 99.

⁸ Donald K. Pickens, "Uncle Tom Becomes Nat Turner: A Commentary on Two American Heroes," *Negro American Literature Forum*, III (Spring, 1969), 47, 46.

the novel characterizes mothers as "the real saviors of society," and she points out some similarities between Stowe's mothers and Uncle Tom on the one hand and little Eva on the other.⁹ What needs discussion is the nature of Stowe's feminism in the novel and her odd equation of mothers/Eva/Tom, an equation which, if followed through to its logical conclusion, argues the radical substitution of feminine and maternal for masculine values.¹⁰

Stowe's treatment of maternal values may at a glance look unremarkable. Nearly every page of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* hymns the virtues of Mother, the revered figure whose benign influence over domestic life in the nineteenth century was conveniently supposed, and promoted, to redress the abuses against humanity engendered in the masculine, money-making realm. Stowe, however, refuses to appoint Mother the handmaiden of Mammon in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead, she enlists the cult of motherhood in the unorthodox cause of challenging, not accommodating, the patriarchal status quo. Like her sister Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe displays in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a facility for converting essentially repressive concepts of femininity into a positive (and activist) alternative system of values in which woman figures not merely as the moral superior of man, his inspirer, but as the model for him in the new millennium about to dawn.¹¹

In the novel Stowe accepts the definition of woman popular at

⁹ Alice C. Crozier, *The Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1969), pp. 24, 33, 19. Crozier offers valuable analysis of the role of mothers and the importance of the family in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but her discussion does not study the symbolic implications and connections Stowe builds into the characters of Eva and Tom which, in my opinion, distinguish the novel from conventional nineteenth-century American novels in praise of mother-love and domesticity.

¹⁰ John William Ward, though he finally rejects Stowe's view as inadequate and criticizes her characterization of Tom, provides a concise summary of her feminine bias in the Afterword to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1966), pp. 490-492. Also, although he does not have space to explore the fact, Kenneth S. Lynn notes that Stowe's Christian vision is emphatically feminine yet: "Oddly enough, she made her main character a man. Uncle Tom has all the feminine virtues, however, that Mrs. Stowe wished to celebrate—gentleness, patience, understanding, devotion to his family, and a taste for religious reading that is 'confined entirely to the New Testament'" ("Introduction," *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [Cambridge, Mass., 1962], xxiv). Part of my purpose will be to explain how Tom, who is odd, emerges as an important heroine in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of how Catharine Beecher uses to woman's advantage popular nineteenth-century ideology about domesticity and femininity, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, Conn., and London, 1973).

the midcentury.¹² She recognizes that two “spheres” exist, one masculine and commercial, the other feminine and domestic, and has no quarrel with the set of qualities commonly partitioned to the left-hand “sphere.” For her, femininity—true womanliness—means unshakable allegiance to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, charity, mercy, and self-sacrifice; purity in body and mind; ethical dependence more on emotion than on reason; submission to mundane authority except when it violates higher laws; and protection of the home as a sacred and inviolable institution. Moreover, these stereotypically feminine attributes are in Stowe’s opinion the only worthwhile human ones because they place the welfare of the group, of the whole human family, before that of self. Her ideal person, therefore, is a heroine, and a completely conventional one: pious, pure, noncompetitive, unselfish, emotional, domestic, and outwardly submissive. Yet Stowe uses the conventional in unconventional ways in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Her novel proposes as the foundation for a new democratic era, in place of masculine authority, feminine nurture: a type of love epitomized in the Christlike girl-child, Eva, whose name calls to mind the Edenic mother of the race. Figuring as Eva’s adult counterparts are several mothers and one man: sweet-tempered black Tom, meek like Christ yet fiercely loyal to a domestic set of values. The author’s obvious contradiction of gender in the Eva/Christ and Tom/heroine associations, both of which serve as savior analogues in the novel, animates her conviction, as she later stated it plainly, that “there was in Jesus more of the pure feminine element than in any other man.”¹³ The feminine Christ is no figure of speech for Stowe.

¹² See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer, 1966), 151–174; Welter, “Anti-Intellectualism and the American Woman: 1800–1860,” *Mid-America*, XLVIII (1966), 258–270; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America,” *Social Research*, XXXIX (Winter, 1972), 655–656; Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History* (Boston and Toronto, 1970), p. 210; Aileen S. Kraditor, *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 11–13.

¹³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Religious Studies* (1877) in *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston and New York, 1896), XV, 36. In context Stowe analyzes the relationship between Mary and Jesus to support and explain Christ’s feminine nature: “He was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh—his life grew out of her immortal nature. We are led to see in our Lord a peculiarity as to the manner of his birth which made him more purely sympathetic with his mother than any other son of woman. He had no mortal father. All that was human in him was her nature; it was the union of the divine nature with the nature of pure woman. Hence 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” (ibid.).

It is a concept that guides characterization and inspires the maternal-feminist cast to her vision of ethical revolution in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Redeemer from the sins of the fathers in the novel is not, as traditional theology puts it, a second Adam (an emblem utterly familiar of course to anyone who was the daughter, sister, and wife of ministers), but as Stowe would put it, a second Eve.

The opening episode of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* introduces Stowe's argument by portraying mothers, black and white, as active opponents of slavery. The system itself, this first scene makes clear, is basically masculine: white men buy and sell black people while the white woman stands by powerless to intervene. This may not be the pattern in every case but, in Stowe's opinion, it is the model, as her prime and detailed treatment of it suggests. When the slave-holder, Mr. Shelby, gets himself into debt and decides that he must sell some property, he settles on Eliza's son, Harry, and Uncle Tom. Shelby, it is true, does not *want* to sell the pretty child or the kind man who raised him from a boy; but sell he does, and to a trader he knows to be so callous, so " 'alive to nothing but trade and profit . . . [that] he'd sell his own mother at a good per centage.' " ¹⁴ Figuratively Shelby would do the same, as his selling of Tom demonstrates, and Stowe emphasizes how fine the line is that separates the "benevolent" planter Shelby and the coarse trader Haley, whose favorite topic of conversation (to Shelby's discomfort) always has to do with slave mothers' aggravating attachment to their children, whom Haley is in the business of selling away from them. Shelby is in the same business, one step removed, but would rather not admit it. His wife confronts him. Although helpless to overrule him legally, she cries out against his refined brutality, calling slavery " 'a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!—a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. . . . I never thought that slavery was right—never felt willing to own slaves' " (I, 58). When her mate suggests they sneak off on a trip to avoid witnessing the black families' grief at separation, her resistance crystallizes. " 'No, no,' said Mrs. Shelby; 'I'll be in no sense accomplice or help in this cruel business' " (I, 59). Likewise Tom's wife, Aunt Chloe, reacts rebelliously, supporting Eliza in her decision

¹⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (Boston, 1852), I, 59. Citations in my text are to the pages of this edition and are preceded by the numeral I or II to indicate volume I or II.

to run away with her child and urging Tom to go with her. These two maternal antagonists of slavery secure Eliza's flight. Because Mrs. Shelby surreptitiously encourages the slaves to sabotage the search for Eliza, and because Aunt Chloe stalls the pursuit by producing culinary disasters which keep the search party at dinner for hours, Eliza is able to make her break for freedom across the frozen Ohio, baby in arms.

Due to the conspiracy of the two mothers, one white and one black, followed by the equally crucial assistance of stalwart Mrs. Bird, wife of a wrong-headed Ohio Senator and herself a recently bereaved mother, Eliza and child arrive safely at a Quaker station on the route to Canada. The community serves as a hint of the ideal in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is family-centered, nonviolent, egalitarian; and especially impressive among its members are two hearty matrons, significantly named Ruth and Rachel. Stowe remarks: "So much has been said and sung of beautiful young girls, why don't somebody wake up to the beauty of old women?" (I, 196). For Stowe Rachel Halliday's beauty issues from her perfection as a mother and from the way she uses her power in what is in practice a matriarchal (because completely home-centered) community. Stowe plays with the idea of Rachel as a mother-goddess, cailing her a figure much more worthy of a "cestus" than the overrated Venus whom "bards" like to sing about, and then immediately follows that remark with a glimpse of Rachel's husband happily "engaged in the anti-patriarchal operation of shaving" (I, 204-205). Of course, Stowe is being whimsical here, but only in the sense that she is too confident a Christian to need to appeal seriously to pagan concepts to express the principle incarnate in Rachel, whose earthy maternal love Stowe will bring to transfigured life in the two unlikely but motherly Christ-figures, Eva and Tom. As a matter of fact the Quaker community is "anti-patriarchal" in its pacifism and its matrifocal social structure, and that is its beauty for Stowe. "Rachel never looked so truly and benignly happy as at the head of her table. There was so much motherliness and full-heartedness even in the way she passed a plate of cakes or poured a cup of coffee, that it seemed to put a spirit into the food and drink she offered" (I, 205). Rachel Halliday, sitting at the head of her family's table in a scene that brings to mind Christ's ministry at the Last Supper, illustrates how humane and spiritually nourishing mother-rule might be.

Eliza and her family escape their white masters. Most slaves did not, and Harriet Beecher Stowe places particular emphasis on the horrors suffered by the system's maternal victims. The first slave auction in the book focuses on an aged mother and teen-aged son who are sold apart over the old woman's pleas and sobs. A young black woman whose baby is stolen and sold drowns herself in the Mississippi, her only obituary an entry in a slave trader's ledger under "losses." A middle-aged slave, her twelve children auctioned away, drinks to silence memory of her thirteenth baby who was starved to death; drunk once too often, the woman is locked in a cellar until the smell of her corpse satisfies her owners' wrath. The degradation of Cassy, Simon Legree's chattel concubine, began with a white lover's clandestine sale of her two small children. Cassy spared her next baby; in her own words, "I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death. . . . I am not sorry, to this day; he, at least, is out of pain'" (II, 210). These cruelly severed ties between mothers and children recur throughout Stowe's exposé of slavery for several reasons: to stir Abolitionist passion within parents in Stowe's audience, to assert the humanity of the black race in the face of racist myths that blacks do not share the emotions of whites, to show that women suffer horrible tortures in the midst of a society boastful about its chivalry toward the "gentle sex," and—most important—to dramatize the root evil of slavery: the displacement of life-giving maternal values by a profit-hungry masculine ethic that regards human beings as marketable commodities. Planters, traders, drivers, bounty hunters, judges, voters—all are white, all are men, all are responsible; and the mothers and motherless children in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* show the human cost of the system.

No character illustrates Stowe's charge more starkly than Topsy. Motherless all her young life and systematically kept ignorant by whites, what can the child believe except that she "just growed"? It is a miracle that she has managed that. For years her owners have routinely beaten her with chains and fireplace pokers, starved her, and locked her in closets until she can respond to nothing but pain and violent abuse. The child has been crippled psychologically by an entire social structure purposely designed to strip her (and her black brothers) of all sense of human selfhood. Stowe defends Topsy as a

credible character in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853): "Does any one wish to know what is inscribed on the seal which keeps the great stone over the sepulchre of African mind? It is this,—which was so truly said by poor Topsy,—‘NOTHING BUT A NIGGER!’ It is this, burnt into the soul by the branding-iron of cruel and unchristian scorn, that is a sorer and deeper wound than all the physical evils of slavery together. There never was a slave who did not feel it."¹⁵

It is significant that only Evangeline St. Clare can dress Topsy's "wound" and awaken in the motherless black girl feelings of tenderness, trust, and self-respect. To understand the ethereal blonde child's life-renewing influence, one must take seriously the unearthly qualities Stowe attaches to Eva. She is not a realistic character any more than Hawthorne's preternatural Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) or Melville's Pip in *Moby Dick* (1851). Stowe, too, relies on Romantic convention in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published serially in 1851–52. She consistently describes Eva as dreamy, buoyant, inspired, cloud-like, spotless; and flatly states that this child has an "aerial grace, such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being" (I, 211). Stowe is clear that her mythic and allegorical character resembles Jesus. Tom, who "almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine," often gazes on Eva "as the Italian sailor gazes on his image of the child Jesus,—with a mixture of reverence and tenderness" (II, 61). Eva's Mammy considers her a "blessed lamb" not destined to live long (II, 85). Stowe calls her a "dove" and associates her with the morning star (II, 47, 106, 114). Ophelia describes her as "Christ-like" and hopes that she has learned "something of the love of Christ from her" (II, 95, 117). Tom, before her death, visualizes Eva's face among the angels; and after she is gone he has a dream-vision of the saintly child reading Christ's words to him, words of comfort which end with " 'I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour' " (II, 187). Even while alive Eva's selflessness seems supranatural. Sights and stories of slavery's atrocity make "her large, mystic eyes dilate with horror" (II, 6) and move her to lay her hands on her breast and sigh profoundly. She explains, " 'these things *sink into my heart*' " (II, 28). The child identifies with the slaves' misery, telling Tom finally: " 'I can understand why Jesus *wanted* to die for us. . . . I *would die* for them, Tom, if I could' "

¹⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston, 1853), p. 51.

(II, 84). On the figurative level—the only level on which Eva makes sense—she gets her wish. Stowe contrives her death to demonstrate that there is no life for a pure, Christlike spirit in the corrupt plantation economy the book attacks.

None of this means that Eva “is” Christ. But I think it does mean that she reflects by way of her name a type of Christ, and Stowe’s unusual typology vivifies the moral center of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As Ursula Brumm explains of typology in general in *American Thought and Religious Typology*: “Typology is a pattern for constructing the world’s events as leading toward redemption. . . . The type is not a symbol of Christ. It is a definite historical person or event of the Old Testament that prefigures Christ, yet exists with its own independent meaning and justification.”¹⁶ The most common type has always been Adam-Christ; just as the race was born in Adam, so it is reborn in Christ, the new Adam. Stowe suggests a different type: Eve-Christ. (It is worth noting that Marie, Eva’s mother, in name—though in nothing else—helps strengthen the Christ portion of the emblem.) Eva is no ordinary personification of Christian love, even in nineteenth-century literature which is full of saintly tubercular children and incredibly virtuous heroines impeded as the spiritual betters of their less perfect men. One critic laughs at Stowe for the ignorant blunder of making the child “a sort of paper-doll Christ of the wrong sex.”¹⁷ Paper-doll she might seem; mythic and allegorical beings are not easy to bring to life. But there is no mistake in gender. Stowe creates a girl and names her for Eve as a prefigure of Christ because she believes, as is everywhere obvious in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that the Savior’s love is that of woman, especially mothers. Stowe said of the novel a couple of years after its publication, “This story is to show how Jesus Christ, who liveth and was dead, and now is alive and forevermore, has still a mother’s love for the poor and lowly.”¹⁸ To personify Christ’s maternal love in the novel Stowe alludes to the biblical mother of all people, Eve, whom she implicitly resurrects from infamy in the person of an innocent

¹⁶ Ursula Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1970), p. 23. Although Brumm mentions Stowe (pp. 200–203), she does not discuss *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Stowe’s use of typology; the book’s analysis of midcentury literature concentrates on Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville.

¹⁷ Furnas, p. 18.

¹⁸ Charles Edward Stowe, *Life*, p. 154.

child.¹⁹ Her unfallen Eva yokes the two Testaments: she is “‘one of the roses of Eden that the Lord has dropped down expressly for the poor and lowly’” (I, 257–258), at the same time that the motherly little girl is the living image of a dead Grandmother (also named Evangeline) who was “‘a direct embodiment and personification of the New Testament’” (II, 13). The idea of woman as evangelist and even as a new and better Eve working with the Redeemer to reclaim the world from its modern corruption was not unique with Stowe.²⁰ But her suggestion of an Eve-Christ typology is not common, and it is used to original purpose. Stowe makes her Christlike “‘evangel’” (I, 262) of a new, democratic millennium an Eve/angel—a female spirit who links the gospel of Jesus with the mother of the race—to offer an unmasculine ideal for all human behavior.

Tom embodies that ideal. As the title of the book indicates, home and family matter most to him. He first appears at his and Chloe’s cabin, surrounded by children,²¹ and the first thing we hear about this man who has “a voice as tender as a woman’s” (I, 151) is that he is “‘an uncommon fellow’” (I, 14). St. Clare pronounces him a “‘moral miracle’” (I, 305), and Stowe tells us that, in addition to his “‘remarkably inoffensive and quiet character’” (I, 208), he is blessed “‘to the full [with] the gentle, domestic heart, which, woe for them! has been a peculiar characteristic of his unhappy race’” (I, 140). Stowe offers the generalization admiringly. Sold, Tom hovers over his sleeping children for the last time in a scene the author makes memorable by refusing to paint a portrait of masculine reserve. “Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair [Tom leaned over], and great tears fell through his fingers on the floor” (I, 64). Tom makes no effort to hide his emotion, and he weeps more for his children than for himself. That is characteristic. Tom always places the well-being of others first. He goes peaceably with the slave trader Haley because he knows that if he runs away a large number of slaves will be sold to match the price Shelby can get for him. He can even forgive Shelby and continue to love the cruel man he cared for from infancy, much (Stowe implies) as Christ forgave his oppressors or a

¹⁹ On Stowe’s divergence from “glacial” Calvinism and its doctrine of natural depravity, see Crozier, pp. 85–150.

²⁰ See Welter, “Cult,” p. 152.

²¹ For discussion of the house/cabin/family motif in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, see Egbert S. Oliver, “The Little Cabin of Uncle Tom,” *College English*, XXVI (Feb., 1965), 355–361.

mother can continue to love the grown child who breaks her heart. The reason Stowe gives for such amazingly generous behavior is simple. Tom, like most women but few men in the novel, really tries to live according to the Gospel's injunction to love his neighbor as himself.

Structure in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* emphasizes that Harriet Beecher Stowe knows how unusual a "hero" she draws in Tom. He is the central character in the book, yet, though mentioned and glimpsed in the early chapters, he does not enter the action fully until Chapter 10, then to disappear for one chapter and reappear in Chapter 12, disappearing in Chapter 13 and finally reentering the action for sustained treatment in Chapter 14. Two devices are at work here. First, Stowe delays Tom's story until after Eliza's and George Harris's successful escapes from slavery have been assured. Their action shows Stowe's approval of courageous rebellion against slavery and, in the character of proud George Harris, her respect for conventionally manly defiance of injustice and enforced submission. Thus, by the time Uncle Tom's story becomes central, it should be clear that the author feminizes him not because she is unable to make him assertively masculine but because she does not wish to do so. Second, Stowe arranges Tom's sustained entrance into the action, Chapter 14, to associate him with maternal figures: Rachel Halliday in Chapter 13 followed by the motherly child Eva St. Clare in Chapter 14. Stowe's strategy is clearcut. She presents Rachel in all her warm maternal glory, switches to Tom reading his Bible forlorn and family-less on a southbound steamboat, then introduces the "sun-beam" Eva whose image refreshes Tom and whom Stowe immediately identifies as mythic and allegorical. This progression from Rachel to Tom and Eva marks a turning point in the novel. It sets the stage for Tom's story, a course of events inaugurated by his and Eva's immersion together in the Mississippi (the figurative baptism signifies their oneness in Christ, which will eventuate in their similarly redemptive, sacrificial deaths); and it serves as an interpretive crux. The three juxtaposed characters—the earthy mother, the gentle black man, and the ethereal girl-child—embody in different yet complementary ways the redemptive feminine-Christ principle that informs *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Action as well as structure accentuates Tom's feminine character.

He tearfully watches a mother's grief over the theft and sale of her baby, and

to him, it looked like something unutterably horrible and cruel, because, poor, ignorant black soul! he had not learned to generalize, and to take enlarged views. If he had only been instructed by certain ministers of Christianity, he might have thought better of it, and seen in it an every-day incident of a lawful trade; a trade which is the vital support of an institution which some American divines tell us has no evils but such as are inseparable from any other relations in social and domestic life. But Tom, as we see, being a poor, ignorant fellow, whose reading had been confined entirely to the New Testament, could not comfort and solace himself with views like these. (I, 190-191)

The author's mock contempt gets heavy-handed here, but her point about Tom is important. He reacts to the horror of slavery as Stowe's heroines do: from the heart. Empathy, compassion, comfort, practical assistance, psychological support—these dispositions describe Stowe's Uncle Tom just as they do most of her admirable women. The passivity which popular culture chooses to remember is not his dominant attribute; whenever possible (which is infrequent, given his slave status) Tom does take action. But he is always nonviolent and patient. At Legree's plantation, a microcosm of the commercial white ethic Stowe indicts, Tom's "tenderness of feeling, a commiseration for his fellow-sufferers, strange and new to them" (II, 188) so infuriates grotesquely masculine Simon Legree that he becomes obsessed with the challenge of making Tom "hard" (II, 189)—brutal, callous, authoritarian: a fit candidate for overseer. But no amount of torture can make Tom agree to flog his fellow slaves. Legree cannot harden him. To the end Tom remains soft, sacrificing himself rather than betray the hiding place of two fugitive slave women.

Stowe displays shrewd political strategy in choosing to characterize her hero as a stereotypical Victorian heroine: pious, domestic, self-sacrificing, emotionally uninhibited in response to people and ethical questions. Not only does the characterization make Tom unthreatening in any literal way that would play into the hands of belligerently racist whites who maintained that blacks were brutes who must be oppressed; the characterization insinuates Tom into the nineteenth-century idolatry of feminine virtue, sentimentalized in young girls and sacrosanct in *Mother*. Stowe's genius as a propagandist is that she exploits both conventions—the former in *Eva* and the latter in a

panorama of mothers of both races (especially Rachel Halliday)—and then, having captured her audience's allegiance, extends that allegiance to Tom by making him, a black man, the supreme heroine of the book. Implicitly the novel asks who, without forsaking reverence for Mother and the sanctity of the Home, could fail to champion Tom's right to liberty for himself and his family and, by extension, that same right for all slaves?

Stowe's feminization of Tom also is important because it argues her case for nonviolent resistance to the corrupting influence of slavery as the only hope for the permanent eradication of a system based on violence. In Stowe's view, ten years before the Civil War, the solution to slavery does not lie in armed rebellion, meeting violence with violence (though she sympathizes with that reaction in the character of George Harris and returns to the idea of black counter-aggression four years later in her antislavery novel inspired by the Nat Turner rebellion: *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* [1856]). In 1852 Stowe, thoroughly Romantic in this, locates the solution to slavery in a revolution of white values which will honor emotional verities above rationalized materialist schemes. Nurturant values in her opinion have been, but should not be, shunted off by men into the safekeeping of women; truths of the heart are considered feminine and therefore fit to govern only the domestic "sphere" of life. In *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* Stowe comments on the worldly drive "to be above others in power, rank and station" and says: "If there is anything which distinguishes man from other creatures, it is that he is *par excellence* an *oppressive animal*. On this principle . . . all empires have been founded; and the idea of founding a kingdom in any other way had not even been thought of when Jesus of Nazareth appeared"; she says that "Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon LOVE."²² This opposition between power and love as possible foundations for social organization appears in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as the alternatives of aristocracy or democracy and, in economic terms, capitalism or cooperativism. Stowe so obviously criticizes the first half of each antithesis (she uses the womanish spokesman Augustine St. Clare, Eva's father, to articulate her case) that Charles H. Foster does not distort the book

²² *Key*, p. 229.

by discussing it in a Marxian light.²³ Foster is mistaken, however, when he concludes that Stowe's attack on laissez-faire capitalism provides "the masculine edge, the intellectual bite of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."²⁴ Quite the contrary. Stowe's criticism of the profit motive reveals the distinctly feminine, specifically maternal, heart of her argument against what she and others referred to as "the patriarchal institution," slavery.²⁵ She insists that love is more important than power; and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* endorses a domestic ideology, especially in the person of its gentle male protagonist, to make the point that home and mother must not figure as sanctuaries from the world but as imperative models for its reconstitution. The task of feminizing or Christianizing dominant human values will not be easy. White men hold all worldly power; and until they undergo a radical change of heart, Stowe realistically believes, no fundamental change will occur. Nevertheless she argues, or one might more accurately say hopes, that radical yet peaceful change can take place. In the novel Tom's unbelligerent character provokes his murder, and that causes George Shelby, the son of Tom's original owner, to free the Shelby slaves when he returns to the Kentucky plantation. That is, Tom's martyrdom at the hands of brutal Simon Legree inspires limited but concrete social change, a change that begins in one young man's heart and radiates from there to bring one small segment of the social

²³ Charles H. Foster, *The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism* (Durham, N. C., 1954), pp. 49-55. Also Thomas P. Riggio points out that "Mrs. Stowe's decision to make the novel's archvillain [Legree] a nightmare version of the Yankee peddler . . . highlighted the capitalist basis of slavery," and implicated the North along with the South ("*Uncle Tom* Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book," *American Quarterly*, XXVIII [Spring, 1976], 64).

²⁴ Foster, p. 56.

²⁵ Stowe used the term in correspondence about her manuscript to the *National Era*, the weekly that serialized *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before it appeared in book form; see Forrester Wilson, *Crusader in Crinoline: The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Philadelphia, 1941), p. 259. The term "patriarchal institution" as a synonym for slavery was common, especially among Southerners who used it as a favorable label (see Severn Duvall, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*: The Sinister Side of the Patriarchy," *New England Quarterly*, XXXVI [March, 1963], 3-22, and Barrie Hayne's bibliography for "Yankee in the Patriarchy: T. B. Thorpe's Reply to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *American Quarterly*, XX [Summer, 1968], 180-181, n. 1); so too much should not be made of Stowe's repeating the phrase. Yet in the novel she does use the words "patriarch" and "patriarchal" and, as I have already pointed out, "anti-patriarchal" in provocative ways. She once refers to slavery as "the patriarchal institution" (I, 23) and her purpose is to deflate pretty myths about benevolent slavery. Also, she uses the word "patriarch" several times but never to refer to a white man. She attaches it instead to Uncle Tom and to a pious old Negro on Shelby's plantation (I, 50, 52; II, 309); in each case Stowe uses "patriarch" to refer to a black man who is respected in the black community for his religious faith and wisdom, not for his worldly power (neither man has any).

order in line with the values of Mrs. rather than Mr. Shelby, the mother rather than the father.

Finally Tom's character is important because it demonstrates Stowe's belief that a man can live admirably in accord with her nineteenth-century maternal ideal. Tom's sensitivity and gentleness do not in her opinion make him a weak character. Instead, they combine with his traditionally attractive male strength and courage to create a morally superior and more loving than average man in the America she fictionalizes. (Stowe does at times condescend to lowly, ignorant, black Tom. The other side of that controversy, however, is the fact that she makes the worthiest man in the novel black, and her commitment is genuine.)

One could argue that the purpose of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a book confident about what comprises true womanliness, is to define true manliness. Stowe gives her verdict on crude masculinity in the characters of Haley, Marks, Loker, Skeggs, and Simon Legree, who are all antisocial, misogynist, and dealers in death. Legree, with his bullet head and iron knuckles, is a caricature, and a very serious one, of supermasculinity, which Stowe associates with the devil, Christ's antagonist. Legree's plantation is the hell of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is built on antifeminine, antimaternal, antifamily principles, as Stowe emphasizes by making Legree's one terror his horror of the feminine. He is defenseless against the coil of Eva's hair that reminds him of his mother, and the softness of Tom's character maddens him. At the other end of the spectrum are white men like Senator Bird or Mr. Symmes and Mr. Wilson whose susceptibility to feminine influence or impulses makes them potentially admirable, but only potentially, because they defy the masculine, commercial ethic secretly and with a sense of guilt rather than doing so publicly and conscientiously like the maternally guided Quaker men. In between the poles stand Mr. Shelby, who is for all his refinement a man closer to Legree than to his wife, and Augustine St. Clare, the most tortured white man in the book. In his heart he subscribes to feminine, Christian values, as his verbal opposition to slavery and his dying word "*Mother!*" testify; but his will is impotent. In some ways St. Clare is a more terrifying example of masculine privilege and power than Legree: he knows what is right, he has the power to act on that knowledge at least with respect to his own slaves, but he invokes an arrogant paternalism to justify his refusal to act. If

Legree represents one face of the problem, brute masculine oppression, St. Clare represents another: pathetic masculine sophistry.

Stowe's indictment of masculine ethics does not mean that all of the women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* deserve admiration. Ophelia earns our regard only after she has confronted her own racism, and Eva's mother remains viciously self-centered to the end. (Stowe does extenuate her cruelty by including its pathology, but the woman is still a destructive person.) Nor are all white men villains—though most of them are. Yet this is not misandry. Stowe does not condemn white men for themselves but for the exploitive and inhumane values they live by and enforce as the ruling class in America. A disenchanted planter states Stowe's criticism directly in *Dred*, the novel that followed *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "As matters are going on now in our country, I must either lower my standard of right and honor, and sear my soul in all its nobler sensibilities, or I must be what the world calls an unsuccessful man. There is no path in life, that I know of, where . . . a man can make the purity of his moral nature the first object.'"²⁶ This man's sister, in contrast, denounces slavery "with that straight-out and generous indignation which belongs to women, who, generally speaking, are ready to follow their principles to any result with more inconsiderate fearlessness than men."²⁷ Women, excluded from the white masculine "success" ethic, had little or no power to begin with and could therefore in Stowe's view place principle before prestige or profit when confronted with the immorality of slavery. Consequently they do not figure as conservers of the status quo in her antislavery fiction. Most of them stand as models of an alternative, humane ethic which Stowe envisions as the foundation for an enlightened and equitable new era.

The architecture of the concluding chapters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* underscores Stowe's vision, her wish that masculinity be defined along more feminine lines for the reformation of society. The final chapters provide three positive male models and, finally, one female model. Foremost is Tom, an ideal. Stowe presents his death as a Christlike victory of the feminine principle over satanic Simon Legree. Then she presents George Harris. She makes him an eloquent spokesman for the proud, free, black man, whose understand-

²⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred, A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (Boston and New York, 1856), p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

able bitterness is tempered by his devotion to healing feminine values, such as Eliza's. His white counterpart, significantly named George as well, is the freed planter, young Shelby; he renounces his father as a model by emancipating the family's slaves, an action his mother has always favored. These three men—Tom, George Harris, George Shelby—illustrate Stowe's belief that the male of the species can be as beautiful morally as the female but only if old models of masculinity are radically revised.

To describe how that change of masculine heart might come about, Stowe reserves the last chapter of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for herself. She presents the last model in the book and offers the last testimony, and it is as a woman that she testifies. She admits that she was afraid of her subject. Slavery was too huge, too horrible for a woman to write about. But, then, if a woman, a mother, would not speak out, would anyone? She makes an impassioned appeal to white Americans, devoting a few lines to sailors, ship-owners, and farmers, and then addresses her vanguard:

Mothers of America,—you, who have learned, by the cradles of your own children, to love and feel for all mankind,—by the sacred love you bear your child; by your joy in his beautiful, spotless infancy; by the motherly pity and tenderness with which you guide his growing years; by the anxieties of his education; by the prayers you breathe for his soul's eternal good; —I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom! By the sick hour of your child; by those dying eyes, which you can never forget; by those last cries, that wrung your heart when you could neither help nor save; by the desolation of that empty cradle, that silent nursery,—I beseech you, pity those mothers who are constantly made childless by the American slave-trade! And say, mothers of America, is this a thing to be defended, sympathized with, passed over in silence? (II, 316)

She asks, "What can any individual do?" and concludes: "There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. . . . The man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ? or are they swayed and perverted by the sophistries of worldly policy?" (II, 317). Stowe's appeal is unabashedly emotional, and her vision of reform can be

criticized as nothing more than an adjustment of personal sentiment. But precisely that admission of emotion—being unafraid to feel and profess one’s feelings—is for her the first step to Abolition and thus the motivating aesthetic of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One heroine protests when her cerebral husband says “‘You allow yourself to feel too much’” on the issue of slavery: “‘Feel too much! Am not I a woman, —a mother?’” (I, 110). Stowe writes to make all Americans “feel too much” with her white women, her black slaves, and her children—legally nonexistent, “feminine” people who are still alive to natural feelings because they are untrained in the masculine discipline of automatically subordinating emotion to reason, the discipline responsible in Stowe’s opinion for legalized slavery. Like her older sister Catharine Beecher, Stowe turns a handicap into an asset. Lowly feminine feeling can revolutionize man’s world.

Harriet Beecher Stowe stopped short of the radical feminism of her younger sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, who became an avid follower of Victoria Woodhull. At least publicly, Harriet did not declare with Isabella the belief that “the Millennium was close at hand [when] the whole world would soon become a single matriarchy—a ‘maternal government,’ as Isabella called it.”²⁸ Nor do I find Harriet Beecher Stowe commenting anywhere on her sister’s conviction that she, Isabella, was destined to rule in the Matriarchy as Christ’s vice-regent. Harriet Beecher Stowe was more moderate. For instance, she supported but did not actively campaign for woman’s suffrage, let alone agree with Victoria Woodhull on the subject of free love. Nevertheless *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shows the Beecher half-sisters closer ideologically than biographers, convinced that Isabella was mad, like to imply.²⁹ Both women associated Christ with woman, defined the coming Millennium in matrifocal terms, and looked to feminine values as the foundation for ethical revolution in America. Clearly impatient by 1870, Harriet Beecher Stowe had a sympathetic character pronounce on the issue of women’s rights: “The woman question of our day, as I understand it is this—Shall MOTHERHOOD ever be felt in the public administration of the affairs

²⁸ Wilson, p. 571.

²⁹ Wilson, pp. 571, 599; Wagenknecht, p. 34; Johanna Johnston, *Runaway to Heaven: The Story of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York, 1963), p. 437.

of state?''³⁰ Stowe had reason to sound impatient. She had asked America that same question twenty years earlier in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with its purposefully odd, maternal-yet-Christlike characters, Uncle Tom and Eva, as well as a variety of literal mothers, black and white.

³⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I; or, Henry Henderson's History* (New York, 1871), p. 37.