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The Redemption of the Literary Diva: The Role of Domestic Performance and the Body  
in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*

Chrisanne Schraedel

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The Redemption of the Literary Diva: The Role of Domestic Performance and the Body  
in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*

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Master of Arts

An exploration of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* as viewed through the lens of performance studies and domesticity. Previous tales of fallen women, both in novels and operatic form, deprived the coquette of the agency to change her societally determined route of personal destruction as previously shown in the studies of Catherine Clément. Stowe's unique tale of a French coquette overturns the typical plot of the fallen woman, as demonstrated in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, by giving the coquette agency to redeem herself through key performative, domestic and, according to Judith Butler, transformative acts. Such treatment of this character made Stowe a forerunner in sexual equality.

Keywords: Harriet Beecher Stowe, performance, coquetry, literary diva, undoing, Judith Butler, domesticity, Hannah Webster Foster, *The Minister's Wooing*, redemption

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## Introduction

*The Minister's Wooing* by Harriet Beecher Stowe has drawn scholarly interest in recent years because of its treatment of religious abuse, race, and depictions of inter-feminine relations. Joan Hedrick wrote about its historical background, rooted in Stowe's own deeply religious concerns, claiming that it was a counterattack "implicitly at odds with the pastoral model of her father and explicitly challenging [to] the male clerical establishment."<sup>1</sup> Because the separation of the sexual spheres was so clear, Hedrick claims that "women were free to develop their own forms, expressions, rituals, and cosmologies" and suggests that Stowe's role was to minister within those forms, preferring to focus more on the differences between the male and female world and why and how bonds developed between women.<sup>2</sup> She argues that these bonds developed because women were on the front lines of life. Women attended and aided in birth, death, and were wet-nurses to their neighbor's children when required. Although Hedrick acknowledges that women existed in their separate religious sphere, she does not address the implications of the bonds that were formulated between women within that sphere and why Stowe thought they were essential to female mental and emotional health.

Another scholar, Susan Harris, has explored the religious and inherently feminine metaphysical and sexual symbolism found in the central chapters of the book, more so in the characters of Mary and Virginie.<sup>3</sup> Using the French theorists Gaston Bachelard and

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<sup>1</sup> Hedrick, Joan D. "'Peaceable Fruits': The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe." *American Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1988): 307-332, 308

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 307-308

<sup>3</sup> Harris, Susan. "The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's the Minister's Wooing." *The New*

Luce Irigaray, Harris claims that examining the secondary plot between the two female characters “undercut[s] the explicit valorization of heterosexual and hierarchical relationships.”<sup>4</sup> While she focuses on the “gynocentric plot...that positions women in relation to each other, often in the absence or marginality of men” and suggests that Mary’s cloister-like existence provides her friend Virginie space to heal, Harris does not delve deeply enough into the methodology of Stowe’s healing process in the novel.<sup>5</sup> Virginie was raised in a convent surrounded by nuns, which must not have taught the tools for the healing that she required. What does the cottage provide that the convent did not and how is her experience there different from that of her childhood?<sup>6</sup> While Harris is correct in saying that the novel underlines the need women have for transcendent spaces and isn’t solely about Stowe’s struggles with patriarchal religion, there is more going on in Virginie’s healing process than just her prolonged stay at the cloisteresque cottage.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Dorothy Baker writes that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s acceptance and description of the corporeal feminine body is a manifesto in favor of the physical body and that Stowe believed “that the physical body exerts a potent force in domestic life and religious experience.”<sup>8</sup> Tracing Stowe’s trip through Europe and her favorite

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*England Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1993): 179-98. 180 Gaston Bachelard posits that a house contains “feminine space,” somewhat like a womb, and that women thrive emotionally and mentally within this space. Luce Irigaray claims that the feminine is shamed so by the masculine that women need to recover from that shame in secret. In this instance, the metaphysical refers to the intangible and abstract. In Bachelard’s era, this included emotions, thoughts, and other areas of a person that were not encompassed by the word “physical.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 180

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 183

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 187

<sup>8</sup> Baker, Dorothy. "French Women, Italian Art, and Other 'Advocates of the Body' in Harriet Beecher

paintings of the Madonna, Baker shows that Mary Scudder's physicality is meant to be earthly. Mary is depicted in a positive manner as expressing physical love—a unique stance for an American novel of that time—and the side character, Virginie, is compared to a fleshy Rubens painting by Stowe herself.<sup>9</sup> Mary teaches Virginie morality and Virginie teaches Mary about physicality in relationships.<sup>10</sup> Baker claims that it is the physical acts of mothering that allow women to eliminate “barriers between ministry and laity, Calvinist and Catholic, Jew and Gentile, free woman and slave, saint and sinner.”<sup>11</sup> While this helps explain the role of physicality, the article also overlooks the fact that Stowe includes prerequisite acts that the coquette must perform before motherhood is even possible. Motherhood is not the redemptive process, it is the result of the redemptive process. In short, all fail to delve deeply enough into the significance of their observations regarding the novel.

I suggest that Stowe, in *The Minister's Wooing*, is claiming that it is *through* performing specific physical and domestic acts with feminine bodies that fallen women can be healed of their spiritual and societal wounds. This is seen in the character of Virginie, the French coquette, who occupies the role of literary diva in this novel. In theater, a diva usually had the most demanding and dramatic role. She was an attention-seeker. In the opera proper, and in Stowe's time, a woman who stepped out of proper bounds to seek attention had to be punished—and the typical punishment was death. The diva archetype in theater is identical to the fallen woman character in literary works.

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Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing*." *The New England Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2010): 47-72, 48

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 61

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

While Stowe's solutions for that character may be deemed antiquated and misogynistic, given Judith Butler's theory of performance and Amy Kaplan's explanation of domesticity as a feminist movement, there is much more going on here than previous critics have discussed. Although they may not mirror the feminist actions of today, there is value in exploring Stowe's creeds and the manner in which they were expressed, however repressed they may seem in comparison. Given her work in *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe should be considered a feminist in her time who worked within the system, however flawed, to showcase what was, in her opinion, the highest recompense a woman could receive.<sup>12</sup> While *her* literary diva was not excused from her bad behavior, she was one of the first to redeem herself without the aid of man.

At this point it is necessary to explore some historical background, including the definition of terms, an example of the typical fallen woman in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*, and summary of the plot of *The Minister's Wooing*, before delving into the significance of the specific actions that the coquette must take before she can be redeemed. Ultimately, while she may have acted within her socially assigned sphere, Stowe's feminist methodology will be examined because to understand the works of an individual, one must first understand how they perceive themselves.

### **Historical Background**

Early Americans were fascinated with the role of the performing female body. Morality tales warned contemporaries about the dangers of behaving improperly with

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<sup>12</sup> Hedrick, "Peaceable Fruits": The Ministry of Harriet Beecher Stowe," 325. As a brief example, view Stowe's approach to slavery. It was perfectly acceptable for women to write and read what other women had written. Therefore she wrote a book that women would read about slavery.

men of ill repute. One poor decision would inevitably throw into motion a series of unstoppable events and, once lost, one's virtue was irretrievable. Such actions did not render offenders less lovable or pitiable, but they always merited the strictest punishment. Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*, and Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* are popular titles from the period, and all represent women who "fall" within their pages suffer consequences that result in their demise, no matter how penitent their characters. These "falls" from grace are the result of physical acts, demonstrating the presumed natural fallibility of the feminine body. However, rather than follow the path of her predecessors, Harriet Beecher Stowe takes another look at this frequently-maligned character and posits that the coquette is redeemable through replacing her acts of coquetry with repeated acts of domesticity, religion, and morality. Therefore, the body that creates the downfall of the coquette also allows her to make amends and redeem herself. Her performances can enable her redemption.

All this is not to say that the coquettes in those previously mentioned novels never felt shame. Nor did they submit completely to the subsequent consequences of their actions. Charlotte Temple is remorseful unto death, the mysterious woman in *Arthur Mervyn* goes about with sorrow in her eyes, and Clarissa, despite her incessant weeping, tries desperately to escape her living quarters that are a constant reminder of her "sin."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Even though, in the case of *Clarissa*, the sexual act is nonconsensual, her hysteria is not completely based in trauma. Because she ran away from home and, in so doing, behaved in a shameful manner, she instigated this sequence of events. Thus, her hysteria is based on the fact she has been violated and now feels that she is not clean before God. Her acts of fasting and prayer are acts of penitence, not pleadings for opportunities to escape.

Yet their creators never allow them redemption. Regardless of their repentant state, they were condemned to complete the journey.

Part of their failure to be redeemed is due to a cultural view of women and sex. Women of that time lacked “sexual agency” or the ability to govern themselves sexually.<sup>14</sup> Some claim that this flaw is tied to their ability to be impregnated. Pregnancy carried with it a high risk of death for both child and mother and, since women had limited ability to control reproduction, “autonomous female sexuality” was not encouraged—even by those unconcerned with morality.<sup>15</sup> To become pregnant was literally to risk death. These stories were morality tales to warn girls of the inevitable consequences of such acts.<sup>16</sup>

Central to this argument is understanding what has been termed by Faye Dudden as “the body problem,” which is the idea that sexually mature women cannot be separated from assumptions about their bodies.<sup>17</sup> As John Berger said, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.”<sup>18</sup> For a nineteenth century culture that believed Eden’s apple was symbolic of the sex act, it was impossible to reach a middle ground regarding the body: a woman was either Eve—the instigator of pain, sexuality, and death—or she was Mary of the immaculate conception, a

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<sup>14</sup> Waterman, Brian. “Elizabeth Whitman’s Disappearance and her ‘Disappointment.’” *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Third Series, Vol 66, No 2 (Apr, 2009), 327

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> Rust, Marion. *Prodigal Daughters*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, 2008, 48-54.

<sup>17</sup> Dudden, Faye E. *Women in the American Theatre*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994, 3

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

woman worshipped and honored for her lack of sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Women, like these two Biblical archetypes, were classified by what they did in public or private with their bodies---their performances.

Judith Butler claims that it is repeated actions, or performances, that alter identity.<sup>20</sup> All performances are pre-performed actions that will, in turn, affect future enactments. Acting like a woman transforms the performer bit by bit into a woman. Transformative performances associated with transitory events in life, such as marriage and the birth of a child, help the participants through that liminal state to form identity.<sup>21</sup> In Butler's argument, there is a difference between performance and performativity. Performativity is a social construct that is hard to distinguish because it is embedded in the world around it. Usually disguised in the nurturing process, it is an action that happens without thought, like dressing in the morning. In most cultures, to walk in public unclothed is taboo. Therefore, it is almost second nature to clothe oneself. Performativity, additionally, "is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformed."<sup>22</sup> In this instance, the initial behavior of Stowe's coquette, is performative.

Performance, on the other hand, is a deliberate choice made by the performer—an act entirely dependent on the intent of the actor.<sup>23</sup> This is the type of action that Stowe

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<sup>19</sup> Gayle Kimball, *The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Mellen Press, New York, 1982), 157, 74, 72

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, Kelly. "What Is Transformative about the Performative? From Repetition to Working-Through." *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 1, no 2 (fall 1999), 144-66; Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 186-187. Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Construction." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 521, 524-28

<sup>21</sup> Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies*. Routledge, London; New York, 2002. 64

<sup>22</sup> Butler, Judith P. *Excitable Speech*. Routledge, New York, 1997, 160

<sup>23</sup> Performance Theory as a genre was developed in the 1970s by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner.

includes in her redemptive process. In this instance, performance is not limited to stage work, but includes actions, behaviors, and choices made in our daily life. What is worn, how it is worn, and what is done are all part of the composite performance if it is a thoughtful act by the agent. The study of performance theory includes invisible acts, like thought patterns, spoken acts like an expression of belief, and physical acts. These behaviors change or create identity, entertain, engender community, heal, educate, and invite communication with other worlds, such as the sacred.<sup>26</sup> Such rituals evoke a feeling of unity that is generated between the performers and those watching the performance. Included in this study of performance is the term *communitas*, which describes the short-lived feeling of connection felt by the performers and the viewers during the performance.<sup>27</sup>

Performance can also extend to the written word. As Michel de Certeau claims

Every story that relates what is happening or what has happened constitutes something real to the extent that it pretends to be the representative of a past reality. It takes on authority by passing itself off as the witness of what is or of what has been. It seduces, and it imposes itself, under a title of events; which it pretends to interpret...in effect, every authority bases itself on the notion of the "real," which it is supposed to recount.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, to interpret, de Certeau, performance is manifest when a writer portrays the past, just like Stowe is portraying the late eighteenth century. Even when scrupulously based on written histories, journals, and letters, she is still portraying those characters as performing a certain role or fitting into a certain mold.<sup>29</sup> In other words, by setting their

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<sup>26</sup> Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 38

<sup>27</sup> Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications 1982, 44-48

<sup>28</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p 203.

<sup>29</sup> While some of Stowe's characters are fictitious, others are portrayals or performances of people who

stories in the past, authors add legitimacy to their portrayals because it seems as if the performance really happened. This legitimacy adds to the potential implications of their work. While huge physical transformations do not immediately occur in *Virginie*, mental transformations happen. *Virginie* is Americanized and domesticated.

Even though it isn't entirely a physical performance, like a theatrical play, I argue that the text is nonetheless being performed by the author and the reader. Through mentally creating those words and sentences, Stowe is performing the actions depicted in the text in her head as she writes, as are readers when they read the book. These portrayals, in turn, make the book a literary description of performance. It is a performance of a time and place, with people who act the way that the author portrays them.

Additionally, since this is Stowe writing about her own sex, her writing adds a sense of integrity about this portrayal of women. When men write about women, they create a script to which the women must conform. In Stowe's book, however, she is not communicating how men wish women to act; rather, rather she is dictating what she herself feels. Stowe understands femininity, motherhood and the performance of it in a way that no male can. When we ask Roland Barthes' question, "Who is speaking?" there are no gaping distinctions between the author and the character.<sup>30</sup> Stowe writes or speaks to truly express herself to her female contemporaries, and she does it publically through

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really did exist in Rhode Island at that time. While Aaron Burr has already been mentioned here, Stephen Hopkins is a central character who was living at the time. Stowe does take some liberties with his story (at this time in history, the real Hopkins was comfortably married and settled in his own home). Additionally, Sarah Pierrepont Edwards and Jonathan Edwards were real people who Hopkins had known. However, Stowe spent more time on their theology in the novel. In other areas, they are not faithful representations.<sup>30</sup> Barthes, Roland G. "The Death of the Author." *Aspen* no. 5 6, item 3: Three Essays. Accessed January 31, 2017. <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>.

word, unlike the disreputable coquette, who shames herself publically through her actions.<sup>31</sup>

One of the common traits of coquetry was physical visibility in the public sphere. In a male-centric society, outspoken and performing women were problematic because they abandoned the feminine sphere and occupied a role in the masculine sphere.<sup>32</sup> At the publication date of the novel women were allowed to perform on stage but, in order to work around the potential temptation of a publicly displayed feminine body, the central roles for women in opera and theatre portrayed them as fallen. These theatrical productions gave birth to the diva—or the woman who becomes “undone.” This theory about the way opera undoes female characters was developed by Catherine Clément, who focused on the libretti of opera. She noticed that the characters of women on stage were richly explored, displayed in opulent settings, and given the most glorious music to sing. However, these female characters were women of ill-repute who, in the end, were silenced by the advent of their own death or descent into madness.<sup>33</sup> Susan McClary deduces from Clément’s theory that that in a male-constructed universe, a female character who flouted convention must die in order to preserve the status quo.<sup>34</sup> McClary explains that, on the one hand, women are the center of the opera but, on the other hand, they are its victims.

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<sup>31</sup> Additionally, as Foster points out, the reader sees Stowe in the story of Mrs. Marvyn (who believes that her son, who was lost at sea, is damned because he was not converted before his death). Harriet Beecher Stowe performs her own tragic sorrow, worry, and wonder through the writing of this character. Stowe performs the writing and Mrs. Marvyn performs Stowe’s sorrow for her. Words are actions and they perform—even though they are not oftentimes visible to another.

<sup>32</sup> Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 3, 21-23,

<sup>33</sup> Clément, Catherine. *Opera, Or, the Undoing of Women*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, 59

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi, xviii

No prima donna, no opera. But the role of a jewel, a decorative object, is not the deciding role; and on the stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing... And when the curtain closes to let the singers take the last bow, there are the women kneeling in a curtsy...and there beside them, the producer, the conductor, the set designer... Not many women have access to the great masculine scheme surrounding this spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character... Opera concerns women. No, there is no feminist version; no, there is no liberation. Quite the contrary: they suffer, they cry, they die...Not one of them escapes with their life.<sup>35</sup>

In the literary world, female characters seem to have a similar fate. In other words, because of their diva-like performances, flirtatious literary characters must be silenced in the same way divas are undone in opera<sup>36</sup> For example, in Hannah Webster Foster's *Coquette*, which displays the typical fallen woman plot, the demise of the female character becomes certain as Eliza grows increasingly closer to her illicit lover. The letters from her cease and the reader only learns of the events and her thoughts through fragments, unfinished notes, and reports from others<sup>37</sup> She confines herself to her room, leaving only for rendezvous with Sanford and short visits with her concerned friends. Her ability to use words and perform daily tasks diminishes until she places herself in the care of a hotel in a neighboring town.<sup>38</sup> The last words we have from her are two letters pleading for the continued love of her mother and friends.<sup>39</sup>

While Stowe and Foster's female protagonists are not opera stars, they perform roles similar to the diva. Eliza's well-wishers, women who conform to societal norms,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5-6, 11

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., xi, xviii, 47, 180

<sup>37</sup> Couch, Daniel Diez. "Edith Wharton's Scraps of Writing: Dissipation and Fragmentation in the *Coquette*." *Early American Literature*. 49, no. 3 (2014), 687

<sup>38</sup> Hotels in this time period were often makeshift rest homes. Elderly or sickly persons with no family to care for them would be given shelter, care, and food in exchange for money.

<sup>39</sup> Foster, Hannah. *The Coquette, Or, the History of Eliza Wharton: A Novel, Founded on Fact*. Proquest LLC, Charlottesville, VA, 2000. 235-238

warn her about her need to be noticed, to flirt, and have fun. In essence, Eliza's problem is that she wants to be on a stage—to be seen. The natural punishment, according to the culture of the time, is too much attention for the wrong reasons and eventual death, thus solidifying her undoing. Virginie, repressed by the patriarchal system that dictated her formative years and her marriage, wants to flout that tradition and follow her heart. She is in the process of being undone as Burr plays with her emotions, tempts her to leave her husband, destroys her reputation, and makes her jealous by flirting with other women in the process.

Additionally, these desires are emphasized because Stowe's character Virginie is French, and the avoidance of moral conformity were considered typical French traits.<sup>40</sup> Virginie's ethnicity is important to note because another typical role of the diva is that of societal outsider, a role often emphasized by foreignness and lack of masculine ties. In *Carmen*, an opera written during the same time period, Carmen is an outsider, a gypsy who runs her own life, flouts convention and is culturally unacceptable because of her foreignness. Similarly, Isolde is brought as a foreigner to Mark's court, her wants and desires already silenced by virtue of her sex, and by the end of the opera, she dies. Coquetry, as a performance, was part of the problem.<sup>41</sup> The negative effects of performing flirtatiousness and refusing the restraint that was so valued in the surrounding culture were exacerbated by being foreign.<sup>42</sup> As Amy Kaplan explains, in Antebellum America "a sense of the foreign [was] necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the

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<sup>40</sup> Baker, "French Women, Italian Art, and Other 'Advocates of the Body,'" 63-64

<sup>41</sup> Korobkin, Laura H. "'Can Your Volatile Daughter Ever Acquire Your Wisdom?' Luxury and False Ideals in the Coquette." *Early American Literature* 41, no. 1 (2006), 80

<sup>42</sup> Clément, *Opera, Or, the Undoing of Women*, 59

nation as a home.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, because Virginie is French, she represents someone who has intruded upon and is a threat to Anglo-American boundaries, underscoring the danger of her coquetry.

Virginie’s flirtatious behavior as a foreign woman in Antebellum America necessitates her domestication. In the earlier years of the “Manifest Destiny” movement, women occupied their own place. Not physically strong, they were nevertheless thought of as the moral and mental strength in the traditional marital union of the time. As Kaplan put it: “if domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as a home, then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign.”<sup>44</sup>

Women learned that their role in life was to tame or domesticate the foreigners who surrounded them. While men went into the wilderness to tame the land, women went with them to tame the Native Americans or the surrounding communities. Of course, intertwined with the domesticating “Americanization” process was spreading the protestant Christian religion. However, religion didn’t just include the conversion of the various tribes. It also applied to those who immigrated to the shores of the United States. The largely Catholic and starving Irish were, in the opinion of the elite middle and upper class, just as much in need of domestication.<sup>45</sup> A woman’s influence was not felt merely among her daily contacts, but was magnified as a lower-class woman went on to form a household of her own, after being properly domesticated. Therefore, when we speak of

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<sup>43</sup> Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998), 582

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 591; Hale, Sarah Josepha. *The Good Housekeeper, Or the Way to Live Well and to Be Well While We Live*. 1st ed. Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Company, 1839, 124

women as having a domesticating influence, we are talking about a conversion to Protestant American ideals as exemplified by Virginie's relationship with Mary.

As defined by the culture around them, Rowson, Richardson, and Brown's fallen women could not use agency to alter their performances. They were caught in a performative loop.<sup>46</sup> Because the social pressures of the time didn't allow for a coquette to reverse the tide of events and regain happiness, her pitiable condition was understood to be a guaranteed consequence of immoral behavior. While this turn of events is predictable, given the culture of the time, it is interesting to note that few, if any, of those women performed domestic tasks after their fall. In contrast to the flirtatious behavior of fallen heroines, Stowe portrays domesticity as a repentant act that enables agency.

In early America, character was an integral part of identity. It was common thought in the late 1700s and early 1800s that a woman's ability to mother determined whether or not her child would live through gestation and birth.<sup>47</sup> If the woman's body could not appropriately care for the child, she would be infertile or the child would be deformed or have other complications. Likewise, the likelihood of coquetry increased if a woman did not perform the appropriate motherly behavior, allowing her to permanently become a coquette. Thus, these fallen women would be incapable of conceiving, bearing, and giving birth to a healthy child.

The Americans saw the French as a particularly volatile culture in need of domestication. Their preoccupation with what puritanical America considered frivolities

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<sup>46</sup> Oliver, "What Is Transformative about the Performative?," 144-66

<sup>47</sup>Fowler, Orson Squire. *Maternity, Or, the Bearing and Nursing of Children Including Female Education and Beauty*. 1st ed. New York: Fowlers & Wells, 1853. 31, 72, 75-76

led Stowe to write, “Instead of scorning, then, the lighthearted, mobile, beauty-loving French, would that we might exchange instructions with them---imparting our severer discipline in religious lore.”<sup>48</sup> Again, in this era of Manifest Destiny, it was expected that the men would tame the land while women, as the moral compasses of the nation, would subdue the foreigners through conversion. Thus, it is no coincidence that Mary, an American woman, domesticates Virginie, a French woman. Mary is only performing her patriotic duty in promoting American domestic values.<sup>49</sup> Virginie’s inability to control herself is evidence of her lack of domestication. In other words, while there certainly were fallen American women, Stowe’s need to demonstrate the superiority of American ideals and perpetuate those ideas is enhanced when her fallen woman archetype was French.

#### **Elizabeth Whitman, Hannah Webster Foster, and *The Coquette***

In order to understand how Stowe rewrites the fallen woman plot with her French character, it is important to have an idea of the norm. The fallen, or undone, female archetype is not only present in fictional tales but in real life as well. Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* was based on real events—the life of Elizabeth Whitman. Impregnated by a man whose identity is still not known, 40-year-old Whitman ran from her friends and family and lived for a time at a hotel until giving birth to a stillborn child.<sup>50</sup> Whitman died two weeks later from complications of that childbirth, after having destroyed letters that would identify her or (presumably) the father. One of the suspected

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<sup>48</sup> Baker, "French Women, Italian Art, and Other 'Advocates of the Body,'" 63-64

<sup>49</sup> Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 582

<sup>50</sup> Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, 221

fathers of her child was no less than Aaron Burr, a member of the social and political elite, but more will be said about him later.<sup>51</sup> A notice placed in the newspaper enabled her identification by family a few weeks later and a marker was placed over her remains.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike the fictional heroines that surrounded her, as well as Foster's character Eliza, Elizabeth Whitman was in good spirits preceding her death. One newspaper commented on "her deportment, amiable and engaging; and though in a state of anxiety and suspense, she [preserved] a cheerfulness... of a firm and patient temperament."<sup>53</sup> Foster reworked the tale in her epistolary novel, giving her coquette a similar name and a fictional identity to the unknown father. She also added the moral remorse that would have been requisite for appropriate public consumption in her time; Eliza Wharton, Elizabeth's counterpart, most definitely was not cheerful in her final moments.

Eliza's demise allows the consequences associated with improper female behavior to be exemplified in the novel. The main character, Eliza Wharton, is solely focused on fun and frivolity. Engaged to marry a pastor much older than she, Eliza cares for him when he falls ill and continues this care until his death. The novel begins at this point, with a letter to her friend Lucy, including Eliza's admission, in that letter, that she is excited to leave home. As she continues to write her letters, the audience discovers that she prefers wealth, position, and frivolity to the subtle comforts of home. This leads to a flirtation with a man, Peter Sanford, who is unconcerned with her personal well-being.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 222

<sup>52</sup> Foster, Hannah Webster. *The Coquette and The Boarding School*. Norton & Company New York. Ed. Jennifer Harris and Bryan Waterman, xi

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xiv

Sanford's character stands in for multiple men, among them Aaron Burr, who are suspected to have been Elizabeth Whitman's lovers. Because Eliza finds culture and customs repressive, she avoids responsibility and duty throughout the novel, not just in finding a husband, but performing other typical domestic tasks of the day. She favors parties and other playful pursuits.<sup>54</sup>

Although she has officially rejected Sanford (on the advice of her friends) and he is now married to another woman, she is still intrigued by his power, prominence and apparent wealth. After a series of clandestine meetings, she discovers that she is pregnant. True to the conventions associated with the archetype of fallen women, Eliza's health and spirits decline, worrying her close friends and family. She runs away one night, leaving the comfort of her mother's home for a public hotel in a nearby town. After giving birth to a stillborn child, she writes a letter of remorse and dies, unredeemed in the eyes of Foster's God and society. While her epitaph, included at the end of the book, may not be fully condemning, it does not completely erase the sins of either Whitman or Wharton and warns women of a similar temperament. It is telling of the culture's moral perspective that, after the publication of the novel, sympathetic readers added a similar epitaph to the real Elizabeth Whitman's grave.<sup>55</sup>

### **Harriet Beecher Stowe and *The Minister's Wooing***

A generation later, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her short novel *The Minister's Wooing*. Set in the late 1790s, a time corresponding with the Whitman episode and, subsequently, Foster's *The Coquette*, it tells the story of another fictional woman named

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 8-9

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 148

Virginie who had also been seduced by Aaron Burr. In Stowe's novel, however, the coquette is not the main character. This honor belongs to Mary, an intensely religious girl whose widowed mother boards the celebrated minister of the town. Admired by all who know her, she falls in love with a young sailor named James Marvyn whose ship is lost at sea. It is at this point that Mary becomes friends with Virginie de Frotignac, the wife of a French ambassador, who is trying to escape her paramour's charm. To avoid temptation and find healing, Virginie comes to live with Mary, who domesticates Virginie through her American virtue. After a proper time of mourning, Mary, to please her mother who never approved of the sailor, accepts the proposal of the resident minister and plans for her wedding. The sailor, of course, has not drowned, and when he returns, Mary, bound by her honor, refuses to break her engagement. However, well-intentioned friends intervene, the fiancé relents, Mary and James are married, and "the fair poetic maiden, the seeress, the saint, [passes] into that appointed shrine for woman, more holy than cloister, more saintly and pure than church or altar, --- a Christian home."<sup>56</sup> At the end of the novel, Mary is instrumental in redeeming the coquettish Virginie, who finds redemption in the eyes of God and society.

If Stowe were working within the conventions of her time, a fate similar to Eliza Wharton's would have been Virginie de Frontignac's destiny. Her reputation in tatters, Virginie would have been abandoned by Burr and left to muddle out the rest of her shortened life alone in repentant agony. She would die in childbirth and leave an infamous legacy. However, contrasting with the trends of the time, Harriet Beecher

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<sup>56</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *The Minister's Wooing*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1859. 410.

Stowe changes the story of *her* literary diva, Virginie, and allows her to perform actions that lead her to redemption.

Virginie is different from Elizabeth Whitman in several unique ways. First, she is essentially an orphan. Raised in a convent “where she was kept for the very purpose of educating her in ignorance of the world,” she has not had the benefit of continuing feminine companionship typically provided by a mother.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, she is French. The French were the opposite of everything that the Puritans, and by extension Stowe, believed.<sup>58</sup> They were the epitome of style, frivolity, and gaiety—all characteristics of a lifestyle that Virginie performs very well at the beginning of this tale.<sup>59</sup>

Virginie’s husband is an older man and their marriage was an arrangement. He married her because she was pretty and had been trained to be the perfect hostess of a titled man.<sup>60</sup> She is French, a baptized Catholic, obviously meant to be distrusted by the puritanical audience, and spends her time at parties, entertaining herself. Like Eliza, Virginie, though she is aware of them, lacks a respect for cultural conventions, responsibilities, and duties and finds certain customs repressive. After living for some time in the fledgling United States, she falls for charismatic and unconventional Aaron Burr and is tempted to run away with him.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 229

<sup>58</sup> Baker, “French Women, Italian Art, and Other ‘Advocates of the Body,’” 63-64

<sup>59</sup> Hedrick, Joan D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe* Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, 12. Stowe, on the other hand, was raised in a strict Congregationalist household by her father Lyman Beecher (a prolific preacher and father to 13 children who in turn became prolific writers and preachers) and was well versed in life of strict denial. She remembers that one time they celebrated Christmas with gifts—not because her father relented in his aversion to celebrations—but because her Episcopalian relatives sent gifts for the day.

<sup>60</sup> Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing*, 229.

Modeled on the actual infamous grandson of Jonathan Edwards, the charmer Aaron Burr, not satisfied with his current conquest, attempts to attract Stowe's virtuous heroine, Mary.<sup>61</sup> Rebuffed because of his lack of respect for God and religion, he returns to his current residence and is ultimately unrepentant at the end of the novel. Burr is a masculine intruder and the ultimate traitor in Stowe's eyes. Known for his fatal duel with Hamilton, Burr becomes much worse when you look at his life from Stowe's Congregationalist-Sentimentalist background. Burr is the grandson of the famous preacher-author Jonathan Edwards, who is revered by Lyman Beecher and his family as an upright, irreproachable man.<sup>62</sup> As his grandson, Burr has no excuse to not know the standard of moral behavior and act accordingly. In fact, several times in the novel, Stowe refers to Burr's venerated ancestors (both grandmother and grandfather) and urges him to do the right thing in their memory.<sup>63</sup> But these invitations are coolly ignored by the unrepentant man.

Aaron Burr's disregard for virtue and morality highlights another inequity between men and women of that time. A woman, having sinned or trespassed the law, was irredeemable. She could not go about in society without being branded as fallen. In cases of sexual transgression and pregnancy, the performance of illicit sexual actions physically changed her body. However, a man, such as Burr or Sanford, was more easily accepted back into society once he had admitted his guilt and made sufficient

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<sup>61</sup> While we do know that some claimed that Sanford in Webster's novel was thought to be Aaron Burr, there is no definite proof. However, it is safe to claim that Sanford's character in *The Coquette* and Burr's character in *The Minister's Wooing* are meant to be similar. The role of the American rake offers the same threat and suffers the same fate in both novels.

<sup>62</sup> Edwards was a prominent Early American preacher who gave the famous *Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God* sermon. This sermon would have been widely published and well-known in his day.

<sup>63</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 271. The real Stephen Hopkins would have known Edwards personally.

reparation.<sup>64</sup> In Stowe's eyes this is reprehensible because Burr, as an American, should be an example of true Americanism in his actions. His apathy towards women damages the emotional health of his female victims—a point referred to by Mary when she refuses to let him see Virginie.<sup>65</sup> In Clément's words, he undoes the women he seduces.

While Burr and, by extension Sanford, are redeemable, Virginie is a different story. Wanting redemption for her sins, but not certain how to achieve it, Virginie finds a religious and philosophical helpmeet in Mary. Coming to live with her in the town of Newport, Virginie begins to imitate Mary's daily physical performances. Eventually, Virginie returns to her husband and to France, where, after a time, she gives birth to a baby boy.

Subscribers to popular belief at that time would claim that Virginie's sins were physical and that her feminine body was inherently culpable; existing in a female body, a woman is culpable for every thought or act of that body. However, as the story continues, Stowe argues that physicality also makes redemption possible for women.

### **The Redemption of the Coquette**

The physicality of one's daily actions underscores a vital belief that the body is not just a symbol that "implies morality, vulnerability, [and] agency."<sup>66</sup> It is not about merely being exposed and exposing yourself "to touch and to violence."<sup>67</sup> The body is an

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<sup>64</sup> Rust, *Prodigal Daughters*, 51-52, 55

<sup>65</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 477-478 This is a huge point for Stowe in the novel. Looking at some of the narrator's pleas for understanding, one does see that the author is aware of a disconnect between the prominent religion and feminine emotional needs. When James is presumed lost at sea, the narrator attacks some of the doctrines that cause women to be emotionally torn. She really is making a case here for the emotional as well as physical care of women.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, Judith, *Undoing Gender* Routledge, New York; London, 2004. 21

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

instrument for change and can be used as the means for repentance. Therefore, outward acts must be required in order to completely redeem the body.

For Stowe and Virginie, the body is as much of a blessing as it is a curse. While mortality allows for sin and pain, it is also through physicality that Virginie is able to perform the acts required for redemption, which, for Stowe, begin with desire. Virginie says in an early letter to Mary that “I am sad... I am not so happy as I used to be, when I cared for nothing but to sing and smooth my feathers like the birds. That is the best kind of life for us women—if we love anything better than our clothes, it is sure to bring us great sorrow.”<sup>68</sup> During her time with Mary, however, Virginie performs six specific actions that allow her to be redeemed in the eyes of the culture, God, the prevailing American puritanical tradition of the time-period, and the reader.

### **A New Identity**

First, she begins by leaving behind her un-American title and persona and behaving as if she were single: “Do you know... there are two mes to this person? —one is Virginie, and the other is Madame de Frontignac... Madame never comes here,—never call me Madame.”<sup>69</sup> Because she is trying to leave her old self behind, she is no longer “madame,” nor does she respond to her husband’s name that she assumed by marriage, but she is simply “Virginie” or, using the etymology of the word, “virgin.”<sup>70</sup> This suggests that she wants to return to her former, unmarried life.

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<sup>68</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 383

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 386

<sup>70</sup> Harris, "The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *the Minister's Wooing*," 187-188;

After establishing the fact that she wants to change her identity, then she can work on changing her outward performance of femininity:

At home I wear rouge; that makes all right;—but I don't put it on for you, Mary; you see me just as I am... You see, *ma blanche*, I have left all Madame's clothes at Philadelphia, and brought only those that belong to Virginie,—no *tromperie*, no feathers, no gauzes, no diamonds,—only white dresses, and my straw hat *en bergère*.<sup>71</sup>

As she changes her costume, she changes her persona. This action becomes an act of conversion to American thought. Additionally, because she is out in the country and away from society, she leaves her carriage and other visible signals of status behind. These tools of power, made necessary by masculine conventions, are not needed because she will be focusing on the feminine tools of power: religion, domestic tasks, and the maternal destiny of the body.

### **Religiosity**

Second in Stowe's process of redemption is the incorporation of religion a daily performance. It appears that, like many Catholics of the period, reading from scripture is not habitual for Virginie. This could be an aspersion on the heretical church of Europe or merely a signal of how far from God she is.<sup>72</sup> Either way, Mary introduces her to daily reading of the Bible:

'That is a beautiful book,' she said, 'and to read it all by one's self must be lovely. I cannot understand why it should be dangerous; it has not injured you... Talk to me so every day, and read me good cool verses out of that beautiful Book, and perhaps by-and-by I shall grow still and quiet like you.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 384, 403

<sup>72</sup> Largely because of the Separatist/Puritan heritage of its founders, Catholicism was highly distrusted in America during the colonial and Civil War era.

<sup>73</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 398, 486

She attends church with Mary and her mother and, while she does not abandon her Catholic faith in favor of the Puritan one, Stowe tries to make it clear that Virginie adopts some of their beliefs, such as daily prayer, church attendance and regular reading from the Bible. Harris, in fact, draws strong ties between Mary's calm, quiet abode and religious seclusion.<sup>74</sup>

Religion, as expressed earlier, is an important part of the domestication process. While a complete analysis of the religious commentary and subtexts is not the purpose of this paper, Virginie does let religion take a superficial role in her life, even taking the Abbe's suggestion that she pray for the heretical Burr.<sup>75</sup> She says "the offices to him daily" but it is not until she lives with Mary that she says "I felt your prayers in my heart," claiming that Mary is "as true a saint as Saint Catherine."<sup>76</sup> Thus, if taken literally, it isn't until she lives with Mary that she feels like her prayers are efficacious. In other words, Mary assumes the role of an intercessory saint for Virginie.

Prayer is valuable to consider in this context because it is a way that text and performance intermingle in religion. Certain words are said to create realities so that the performed metaphysical enables the physical. This adds a layer to J. L. Austin's claim that "things might be done with words."<sup>77</sup> Austin claims that words do things: create a married couple from two single people, or put people in public office. Therefore, the

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<sup>74</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 22; Harris, "The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's the Minister's Wooing," 194-195

<sup>75</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 390

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 394-395.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 17, 43

religious, among them Stowe and her characters Mary and Virginie, believe prayers are words and thoughts that have the power to create actions. In other words, the act of praying is a performance that creates something good in the world. For Stowe, prayers were powerful performed actions.

### **Domesticity**

Third, Stowe and her contemporaries subscribed to the idea that the culminating role for each woman was that of a mother, a guardian of the domestic sphere. While genteel women did not work outside the home, work within the home was acceptable because it was what women's bodies were created to do.<sup>78</sup> It was through guarding that sphere, teaching her children and sending them out into the world that a mother reached the pinnacle of her influence. In fact, Stowe's sister Catherine published a book called *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* and later they collaborated on *The American Woman's Home: Or Principles of Domestic Science*. In these manuals, the sisters provided advice on how to create the perfect home or atmosphere that will protect the family and impede potential threats to the body and the soul. The home is important to the Beecher sisters because the home will have a lasting, physical effect on the people who live there. The food and the level of cleanliness will affect their bodies, which will in turn have an effect on their souls.<sup>79</sup> In these manuals, the sisters liken domestic work to building a temple, saying that the workers were "agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Brown, Gillian. *Domestic Individualism*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990. 66, 68

<sup>79</sup> Beecher, Catharine Esther. *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science*, ed Stowe, Harriet Beecher, Library of Victorian Culture, American Life Foundation, Watkins Glen, N.Y., 1979. 70.

<sup>80</sup> Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 587

Fourth, Virginie's time with Mary and her mother allows her to perfect domestic skills and become domesticated—or Americanized and willing to develop the skills that Stowe and her sister Catherine deemed requisite to having a proper home:

‘Come now, mimi, coax the good mamma for me,—tell her I shall try to be very good. I shall help you with the spinning,—you know I spin beautifully,—and I shall make butter, and milk the cow, and set the table. Oh, I will be so useful, you can't spare me!’... ‘We feed the hens and chickens together, and we search for eggs in the hay and the barn. And they have taught me to spin at their great wheel.’<sup>81</sup>

For Stowe, domesticity is a physical business. The ideal home is that of a middle-class family where wife and mother are not completely removed from housework. So Virginie and Mary care for the livestock, cook, sew, spin and perform other homely, physical actions.

Later on, Stowe observed “the simple, homely ways of the cottage, the healthful routine of daily domestic toils, into which she delighted to enter, brought refreshment to her spirit.”<sup>82</sup> Because women had an effect on men and female coquetry undoes domestication of both sexes, this meant that domestication was essential to the role of a good woman. Women who went outside that sphere to earn their living were dehumanized. Such thought is demonstrated in James' statement to Mary about the prostitutes that sailors meet in every port: “You don't know what men, what women, --- no, they're not women! ---what creatures beset us in every foreign port.”<sup>83</sup> These women, lacking in any sort of maternal or domestic instinct, are no longer women but

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<sup>81</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 399, 489, 440

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 485; Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” 581-584

<sup>83</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 42

“creatures” lacking a specific role or attraction. Thus, in *The Coquette*, it is Wharton/Whitman’s refusal to perform proper female tasks and her apparent lack of domesticity that put her on the path to her inevitable death.

### **Feminine Influence**

Fifth, domestication or the redemption of women is available only through contact with women who are domestic. While Eliza Wharton had women surrounding her, she also allowed Sanford into her sphere—an action that had a destructive effect. In contrast, Virginie leaves all the men in her life behind and goes into seclusion with Mrs. Scudder and Mary.<sup>84</sup> Sexual intimacy, in Stowe’s eyes, is not restorative, so those who would be sexually threatening are detrimental to the healing process. Because her contact with sexualized men and women is limited in Mary’s home, Virginie becomes domesticated. As she frankly tells Mary when she arrives, “Poor Virginie wants something to hold to her heart; let me have you.”<sup>85</sup> Essentially, she is saying that women need women. While Eliza abandons and is self-righteously abandoned by the women around her (including Foster), Stowe upholds women as the moral fiber behind civilization and advocates for a gentler, more forgiving society, especially in the way women treat each other. Female nurturing is the most effective way for a woman to heal.

While Virginie is not immune to the appetites of the body, her attraction to Aaron Burr is more than a physical one. Though she feels the lack of physical attraction in her

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<sup>84</sup> Harris, "The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's the Minister's Wooing," 184. While Doctor Hopkins, who boards with the Scudders, is also present, Hopkins is, in a sense, a de-sexualized figure; he is male, yet he is also symbolically castrated by virtue of his position, his age, and a lack of physical attractiveness. Thus, he is a nonthreatening figure in this domestic space. His attraction to Mary comes because she has a fine, spiritual mind—he never expresses a physical desire for her in the novel.

<sup>85</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 394

own marriage, her disinterest in her husband is compounded by a lack of an emotional connection. Before meeting Mary, Burr provides her the attention she craves. Once she is removed from the world of men, she finds herself in an asexual environment. Performing femininity without the presence of sexually threatening and overbearing men creates an atmosphere not unlike a nunnery.<sup>86</sup> Mary's sisterly treatment of her helps bring about the healing needed after immersion in the world of men.<sup>87</sup> When they perform domestic tasks together, they build *communitas* that, in turn, heals them of their emotional and spiritual wounds.

Being taught how to become a domestic mother by other women also requires a protective space without masculine influence; for example, it is Mary to whom Virginie says of Burr "I never want to see him again without you... you must keep your blue eyes on me, or I shall be gone."<sup>88</sup> And when he does intrude, it is Mary who refuses him entrance—in order to better protect her friend. Mary's protection of Virginie debunks the masculine scheme that women need the protection of men and the feminist critique that claims that Stowe is submitting to their decrees.

### **Maternity**

However, Mary cannot shelter Virginie for the rest of her life. After domestication has taken its effect, Virginie goes back into the world to impart these values to others of her sex, thus fulfilling her and Mary's domestic role yet again.<sup>89</sup>

While this is done in sharing and re-performing this knowledge, the culmination of

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<sup>86</sup> Harris, "The Female Imaginary in Harriet Beecher Stowe's the Minister's Wooing," 194-195

<sup>87</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 397

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 399

<sup>89</sup> Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," 586

domesticity is motherhood. Teaching domestication to others is the final step of redemption that Stowe requires of her character. This is the final performance and an indication of her total redemption. It is obvious that this domestication has truly culminated while looking at Virginie's final letter.

It reads:

'You see me now, my Marie, a proud and happy woman. I was truly envious, when you wrote me of the birth of your little son; but now the dear good God has sent a sweet little angel to me, to comfort my sorrows and lie close to my heart; and since he came, all pain is gone. Ah, if you could see him! he has black eyes and lashes like silk, and such little hands!—even his finger-nails are all perfect, like little gems; and when he puts his little hand on my bosom, I tremble with joy. Since he came, I pray always, and the good God seems very near to me. Now I realize, as I never did before, the sublime thought that God revealed Himself in the infant Jesus; and I bow before the manger of Bethlehem where the Holy Babe was laid. What comfort, what adorable condescension for us mothers in that scene!—My husband is so moved, he can scarce stay an hour from the cradle. He seems to look at me with a sort of awe, because I know how to care for this precious treasure that he adores without daring to touch... I vow for him an eternal friendship with the son of my little Marie; and I shall try and train him up to be a brave man and a true Christian. Ah, Marie, this gives me something to live for! My heart is full,—a whole new life opens before me! ... how thankful for those dear children whose little hands had healed all the morbid places of my heart, so that I could think of all the past without a pang!'<sup>90</sup>

No longer is Virginie pining for a life of frivolity, wanting to be the mistress of Aaron Burr. She longs for a child whose birth heals not only her sorrow at infertility, but also her sins of the past with Burr. It heals the remnants of the separation between her and her husband and sanctifies—almost beatifies—her. Consider her language. It is through motherhood that she understands the traditional tableau at Bethlehem and, because of that, she will raise him to be “a true Christian.” The child is an “angel,” a “precious treasure” and since he has come she prays “always, and the good God seems very near.”

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<sup>90</sup> Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 575-576

He is the reason she lives and the one who lies close to her heart. She is no longer a trophy wife to her husband but someone of worth because she can care for this child. It is the physical performance of successful conception and delivery of a healthy child that makes the healing of Virginie complete.

Noticeable, as well, is the absence of French terms in the letter. Apart from Mary's name and the name of her little son, the letter is American in sentiment and form. Virginie states that she will train him up to be a brave Christian—intimating that he will not be a dandy like most of the French aristocracy.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, she herself draws the tying symbolic link between herself and her son, and the Virgin Mary and her son, the baby Jesus, further cementing the role of motherhood as sanctifying.<sup>92</sup>

With their limited knowledge of fertility, medical opinion believed that women who were incapable of mothering emotionally were also those who were incapable of mothering physically. Consequently, Virginie had no child at the beginning of the story not simply because relations between her and her husband were emotionally and physically distant, but also because emotionally she was not able to be a true mother. Being unfit to become a mother, according to the standard medical opinion in 1800, meant that her body would not be able to carry a child.

Stowe and her contemporaries considered motherhood as the perfect welding of the physical and spiritual missions given to women.<sup>93</sup> Mother's bodies were literally life-giving and life-sustaining, making the biblical connection between them and Jesus Christ

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 576

<sup>92</sup> Baker, "French Women, Italian Art, and Other 'Advocates of the Body,'" 64

<sup>93</sup> Beecher, *The American Woman's Home*, 71

a logical part of their theology. While the child was in the womb it was sustained, eucharistically, through the blood of the mother. The life-giving process of birth sanctified both mother and child.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, giving birth, especially to a son, is highly symbolic of the Virgin Mary and here Stowe paints it that way, conveniently overlooking the traditionally carnal sexual act that precedes conception. Because Virginie is finally able to become a mother physically, we can trust that her redemption and transformation is complete. Not only has repetition of performance transformed her soul, but it has transformed her body. She has moved from being viewed as a whore to being viewed as a Madonna. She is given, as she says, “new life” as a mother. In a Christian context, redemption signifies being given a new life. It is the ultimate sign that she has been cleansed of her past misdeeds.

In contrast, Eliza or Elizabeth’s motherhood is not a healing ordeal but rather the opening of a wound that was hitherto concealed in the body. As her story progresses, the tale gradually shifts from Eliza’s own words to being letters about Eliza by her friends—almost as if she is diminishing in education and identity as her coquettish tendencies overpower those values. Unwed, coquettish, and therefore unfit to be a mother, her child cannot live. Because she wouldn’t and then, after her infatuation with Sanford, couldn’t perform domestic tasks, she made herself vulnerable, allowing a man to violate her. While her body might be able to conceive a child, she could never care for one that would live after birth. Thus, she is physically incapable of mothering and, like every coquette, she must die.

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<sup>94</sup> Bingemer, Maria Clara Lucchetti. "The Eucharist and the Feminine Body: Real Presence, Transubstantiation, Communion." *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (2014): 366. 371

Virginie, on the other hand, has been domesticated and will continue performing motherhood as long as she lives, and this will redeem her in the eyes of her cultural prescriptions and God. The traditions that her French heritage taught her have been Americanized through domestication. We can deduce from her letter that her marriage has healed, her pain is gone, and she will perpetuate the tradition of dispensing Christian and American domesticity to the world through her son. He will speak her words for her. Motherhood is the highest role that the domestic woman can perform and it is transformative, not only physically, but metaphysically as well. A woman becomes more domestic after the traumatizing physical performance of birth, assuming, of course, that this birth is preceded by lawful matrimony. She performs motherhood not just in action, but in word, thought, and feeling as well. The hope of sexual touch from Burr has been replaced by the delight in the touch of her infant son. The sexual act of conception is glossed over completely, with her husband delighting more in the body of his son than in the sexual touch of his wife, whom he now regards as someone almost too sacred to touch.<sup>95</sup> While the birth of her child still does not grant her sexual autonomy, it makes her less of a sexual object in the eyes of her husband and culture.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Holier because she took less delight in sexuality. This delight is in the body, but it is in the liminal body of their son who is neither male nor female—a body that will allow for redemption.<sup>95</sup> In this era, the influence of her son would have been seen as a feminine one. Young children, at this time, occupied a uniquely gender-neutral space in the world. Both female and male babies were dressed in skirts, while their hair was grown long. Since Virginie's son is young, he probably was groomed in this asexual way. Additionally, he has not yet become sexualized through puberty—making him non-threatening.

Kimball, *The Religious Ideas of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 72; Orgel, Stephen. *Impersonations*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge England; New York, 1996. 15, 19-20

<sup>96</sup> Waterman, "Elizabeth Whitman's Disappearance and her 'Disappointment,' 327.

## Stowe As Feminist

Here we return to this notion of being undone.<sup>97</sup> As stated earlier, Virginie is in the process of being undone when this story begins and, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, some might find Harriet Beecher Stowe's principles of motherhood as misogynistic evidence of an antiquated society. Some see it as Stowe's attempt to "succeed according to the ... male definition of power—and failing. Or ... [that] she craves power of a male-defined sort."<sup>98</sup> However, Stowe did not see it that way.

While the central male character of the novel is Dr. Stephen Hopkins, the minister, he is surrounded by women who have more influence than he, even though he occupies the public role that was supposed to have the most influence in a town at that time. Early on, Hopkins is revered for his talent in preaching, but by the end of the novel he has instigated little to no lasting and beneficial changes in those around him. While he may be the "minister" in the title, it is women in the novel who are the true ministers to those around them. Women needed a voice, not because they were subjugated, but because they stood on higher ground and could lift others to that high ground.

In Stowe's eyes, women who truly filled their roles as mothers and wives, as evidenced by her protagonist Mary and Virginie, had more influence than men, in spite of or, perhaps, because of the "informality and fluidity" of their preaching.<sup>99</sup> Women were successful when they performed their own scripts that acted in harmony with their unique

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<sup>97</sup> Remember, to be "undone" refers to the unraveling of health or sanity. This was a narrative that was forced upon female characters that were performed on stage. It was a reaction against the sexualized female body.

<sup>98</sup> Hedrick, "'Peaceable Fruits': The Minister of Harriet Beecher Stowe," 325

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 326

strengths. It is a woman who instigates healing; defends the home; preaches, teaches, and loves her children; and advocates for lasting change. Thus, in Stowe's novel, Virginie is saved from being "undone" by being "redone" and invited into the purely feminine world, which Stowe sees as a realm that will have a stronger influence than the masculine one. After the birth of her son, Virginie vows "for him an eternal friendship with the son of my little Marie," extending the healing act outward from herself and home into the world. Stowe uses this as an example of how ideal feminism works in her time. She subscribed to poem's idea that women "rocked the cradle" and "ruled the world."<sup>100</sup>

While some might see Stowe as a product of male censorship because she has no vote, few rights should she get a divorce, and is limited in the roles she can fill in public, Stowe provides a different vision for women. Judith Butler says of censorship that

The author does not create the rules according to which that selection is made; those rules that govern the intelligibility of speech are 'decided' prior to any individual decision... repetition does not constitute the decision of the speaking subject as a redundancy. The gap between redundancy and repetition is the space of agency... This attempt to purify the sphere of public discourse by institutionalizing the norms that establish what ought properly to be included there operates as a preemptive censor. Such efforts... are also compelled to restage in the spectacles of public denunciations they perform the very utterances they seek to banish from public life.<sup>101</sup>

Thus it is the very strictness of the culture that allowed Stowe to decide to speak—to become an agent. Similarly, even though she may be speaking or writing according to the script that the culture has given her, she is repeating them in *her* way in favor of *her* results.<sup>102</sup> It is an originary subordination—allowing her to take the "words"

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<sup>100</sup> Wallace, William Ross. "What Rules the World" *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, edited by Knowles, Elizabeth. 8th ed. Online: Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>101</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 129

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, 88-89, 38

or role that they gave her and create her own context and meaning from those words. Thus, while they might dictate what she can say, they cannot dictate the way she says it.

### **Conclusion**

Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote to her brother “you see my dear George that I was made for a preacher—indeed I can scarcely keep my letters from turning into sermons... indeed in a certain sense it is as much my vocation to preach on paper as it is that of my brothers to preach viva voce.”<sup>103</sup> As the daughter and sister of preachers, Stowe, in her mind, saw her role as one of domesticating by preaching through the printed word and helping others to transform through physical and metaphysical actions. Finding redemption through the actions of the body solves the “body problem” for Stowe by replacing the erotically sexualized body with a maternal one and its actions through the words of her novel. The maternal body, as a literal house for the soul of both the mother and child, removes the body from public and allows women to perform in private as an asexual being occupying a liminal space. As she says at the midpoint of her novel, as her heroine must simultaneously choose how to alter a dress and how to heal from emotional trauma: “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.”<sup>104</sup> The body is not an evil thing, but a tool to be used in each woman’s performance of the domestic. The feminine body exists to perform the domestic and, through its performance of the domestic, it is redeemed.

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<sup>103</sup> Hedrick, “‘Peaceable Fruits’: The Minister of Harriet Beecher Stowe,” 309

<sup>104</sup> Baker, “French Women, Italian Art, and Other ‘Advocates of the Body,’” 65

Thus, reading *The Minister's Wooing* with domesticity and performance theory in the foreground provides clarifying evidence on Stowe's feminist agenda. Her role was that of a minister for social change in a time when women were largely banned from public speaking. Women in her novel did create necessary interlacing relationships between other women but it was for the purpose of relating and protecting each other spiritually and mentally. However, it was not just the presence of feminine space, or even women, that Virginie needed. She needed domestic women who would provide shelter from and ways to work within the masculine world that surrounds them. Finally, while the culmination of domesticity is motherhood, Stowe required certain acts prior to motherhood as proof of maternal preparation. She saw these actions and the action of motherhood as transformative; in fact, these performances reversed the negative effects of the "body problem." Redemptive performance through the body gave societal worth to fallen women. Through these enactments they stepped out of the role of literary diva and avoided the prescribed madness and early demise of their theatrical counterparts.

Stowe allowed the female body, previously something inherently tainted, to redeem itself through a series of private actions that resulted in public results. Because she used her agency within the censorship of the masculine system, presenting unconventional ideas in a conventional form, she was able to reframe the way fallen women were viewed. Instead of a future set in stone, Stowe's text gave her sex agency through domesticity. Harriet Beecher Stowe did much more than provide a place for Virginie to heal, a treatise on feminine physicality, or an argument in favor of the domestic sphere. She offered women a path of change, religiosity, domesticity,

femininity and maternity that allowed the fallen woman to reenter the public sphere as a domestic creator. She transformed the narrative of the coquette and paved the way for her redemption.

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