

The Slaveries of Sex, Race, and Mind: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Lady Byron Vindicated*

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HARRIET BEECHER STOWE'S notorious 1869 exposé, "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life," has quite plausibly been described as "the most sensational magazine article of the nineteenth century,"¹ but as is often the case with sensations it has tended to be talked about much more than understood. Stowe's nominal project in the "True Story" was the defense of the poet Lord Byron's wife against criticism levied against her in the British and American press both before and after her death in 1860, and she continued advocating on her behalf the following year in a subsequent, stand-alone treatment titled *Lady Byron Vindicated* (1870). Her larger aim, however, was to strike a blow in the service of women's rights, with Stowe attempting in her Byron studies to refine her earlier thinking about the institution of slavery and to expand its definition in such a way that it could be applied to the condition of women in the United States and elsewhere. But her project's fate is a textbook illustration of the grievous consequences that can occur when an example used in the service of an argument overshadows the argument itself, as it was the inflammatory means by which Stowe made her point that received the most attention during her lifetime and afterwards.

First aired in America's *Atlantic Monthly* and England's *MacMillan's*, Stowe's polemic could not have been better designed to provoke controversy. The "True Story" proclaimed in a public forum the long-whispered rumor that Lord Byron had carried on an incestuous affair with his half sister and had fathered a daughter by her, and the reaction was swift, angry, and damaging for nearly everyone involved. Partisans of Lord Byron and defenders of his memory were predictably incensed, claiming that the story would permanently besmirch his reputation and that his wife had fed it to Stowe out of disloyalty and deceit. A large contingent of Stowe's audience was horrified that she would so exceed the boundaries of propriety and pollute mainstream publications with salacious subject matter, with fifteen thousand of the *Atlantic's* subscribers (about one third of the readership) canceling in protest and almost wrecking

the magazine in what Oliver Wendell Holmes dubbed “the Byron whirlwind.”² And Stowe, who was of course no stranger to controversy, stood to lose a great deal. The *Atlantic* survived and the poet’s work ended up suffering little in its popularity and critical esteem, but Stowe’s career was not the same after 1870. Forrest Wilson, one of Stowe’s early biographers, despaired in 1941 that after the Byron affair, “Never again would she stand alone as the supreme female figure in the American scene. . . . Today with the millions the most conspicuous and influential American woman of the 1850’s and 1860’s is but a name—the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—she who deserved to be remembered for so much else.”³ Stowe’s later writing, of course, now has a more secure place in the academy than it did when Wilson wrote her literary obituary, but the sheer peculiarity of the imbroglio still lingers: why would the author of the nineteenth century’s best-selling novel jeopardize her career in such spectacular fashion, airing an allegation that was all but certain to inflame the public and yet was unlikely to benefit anyone other than Lady Byron, a woman whom Stowe considered a friend but who had been dead for nearly a decade?

Until relatively recently, scholars who discussed Stowe’s Byron texts mainly concerned themselves with the veracity of their allegations and the motivations that led Stowe to make them, with most concluding either that she made a fool of herself or that Lady Byron rather craftily took advantage of her. Biographies of the poet have varied a great deal over the years, but one constant has been the tendency to dismiss Stowe as a hack and to treat Lady Byron’s collaboration with her as an expression of vanity and revenge: in 1925, John Drinkwater called *Lady Byron Vindicated* “one of the most nauseating essays in sanctimony that has ever been written”; in 1970, Leslie A. Marchand deemed Stowe’s account of the controversy “garbled”; and in 2002, Fiona MacCarthy included an unflattering photograph of Lady Byron in her *Byron: Life and Legend*, a caption declaring that she “devoted herself to self-justification and philanthropy” in her final years.⁴ In Americanist circles, meanwhile, twentieth-century studies of Stowe’s Byron texts were for quite some time essentially speculative, taking quasi-psychoanalytical form as critics attempted to make sense of her baffling professional decision. In years past some of her theorized motives for writing *Lady Byron Vindicated* have included a desire to boast of her connections to the English aristocracy, a hope of making money by exploiting a celebrity, and, most eyebrow raising of all, a peculiar kind of crush on Byron himself, a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from a bad-boy literary idol left over from her schoolgirl days.⁵ In many ways, then, the conversation about Stowe and the sensation she caused has gone on as it always has, with

commentators on both sides of the Atlantic sharing a certain disbelief at her audacity and a need to make sense of it.

Such reactions are to be expected, given Stowe's sordid subject matter, but they tend to distract attention from the forceful claims about gender and social marginalization that she makes in *Lady Byron Vindicated*, with this oversight being no less pressing for Stowe's having more or less brought it upon herself. Only recently have scholars been able to get beyond the text's lurid claims about the Byron marriage and consider what the couple's relationship might have represented to Stowe more broadly, with a handful of investigations having uncovered Stowe's implicit arguments about the female voice, the burden of authorial proof, and transatlantic readership.⁶ But perhaps the most compelling characterization of *Lady Byron Vindicated* has also been the least explored: the biographer Joan D. Hedrick's suggestion that Stowe intended it to be "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of sexual slavery,"⁷ an explosive portrait of a famous female victim whose example would help correct a pervasive and institutional abrogation of women's rights. The term "slavery" in connection with the brief and unhappy Byron marriage might from the outside seem something of an overstatement on Hedrick's part, but Stowe deploys or implies it at several points throughout *Lady Byron Vindicated* and appears to mean it quite literally. As Stowe put it in a letter to Horace Greeley, Lady Byron's sad life had for her come to typify "the old idea of woman: that is, a creature to be crushed and trodden under foot whenever her fate and that of a man come in conflict."⁸ What is more, Stowe had recently found a new way of framing and criticizing this "old idea" thanks to John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which had appeared in the same year as the "True Story" and provocatively conflated the institution of marriage with that of chattel slavery. And if ever there were a writer capable of considering the condition of women in relation to theories of enslavement it would be Stowe, whose novels of the 1850s were instantly recognized as monuments of abolitionist literature.

One of the peculiarities of *Lady Byron Vindicated* and its place in American literary studies, however, is that scholars have made precious few attempts at connecting Stowe's treatment of the "slavery" Lady Byron is alleged to have suffered with race slavery of the sort found in Stowe's other works. Stowe's ridiculers in the cartooning community certainly had no compunctions about broaching the subject while the Byron controversy was raging, caricaturing the affair by playing up the incongruous, presumably comic juxtaposition of a conspicuously whitened Byron with leering, pitch-black characters from Stowe's novels. Men of letters did the same: Charles Mackay's 1869 biography of Medora

Leigh (the daughter produced by Byron's alleged incest) speculated that Lady Byron had attracted Stowe's attention in part because she was active in abolitionist circles and was therefore "what the Americans call a nigger-worshipper."⁹ Still others speculated, somewhat gleefully, that the American Civil War and the end of the most obvious depredations of chattel slavery had robbed Stowe of her most reliable and best-selling subject matter, leaving her unable to make fiction out of what one scholar has termed "the difficult and unglamorous problems of reconstruction" and leading her to defame Byron out of desperation.¹⁰

But all this nastiness aside, sustained critical attention to Stowe's earlier concern with emancipation and American slavery can make her decision to leap to Lady Byron's defense seem considerably less odd than it otherwise might. Her treatment of the poet's wife has often struck readers as a departure from the social and political concerns of her 1850s fiction, but putting *Lady Byron Vindicated* into conversation with Stowe's antebellum, racially oriented works not only makes it seem more of a piece with her previous career, but also reveals a more expansive, even philosophical understanding on her part as to what "slavery" entails. Exploring Stowe's ideas about race and sexual subjugation through the prism of *Lady Byron Vindicated* puts her in the company of such metaphysically minded writers as Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, and even Byron himself, all of whom understood slavery to be an institution of the mind as well as a matter of public policy, its tyrannical masters found, as Thoreau put it, everywhere from Mississippi to Massachusetts, enslaving "understandings and consciences" in addition to black bodies.¹¹ Far from a mere exercise in literary score settling or sensationalism, *Lady Byron Vindicated* advances a conception of slavery that goes beyond legal and social conditions and defines it as a way of thinking, with Stowe arguing that women can as a sex be enslaved in much the same way that Africans once were as a race, and worse, that women can be complicit in the act of enslavement by enslaving themselves. Indeed, one of the ironies of this text is the fact that the extraordinary controversy that has surrounded it over the years has had so little to do with its feminism—a feminism so radical that, had it not been overshadowed by Stowe's invocation of scandal, might have caused every bit as much of an uproar in its time.

The evolution of Stowe's thinking on the subject of sexual slavery is best illustrated by the differences between her magazine and book treatments of the Byron affair, which, when taken together, illustrate a

growing sense on her part that Lady Byron was an especially prominent victim of a broader male conspiracy against all of womankind. In the “True Story,” Stowe’s claims are comparatively modest, mostly in relation to the question of whether and how women ought to go about defending themselves and their family members in public. Perhaps the most notable quality of Lady Byron that emerges in this account is her unfailing discretion, with Stowe depicting her as a woman who took refuge in a “perfect silence” after she and her husband separated in 1816 and who refrained from responding to the many attacks that were subsequently levied against her in print—attacks that, according to Stowe, frequently came from Byron himself.¹² Much of the first half of the “True Story” finds Stowe engaging in literary exegesis, quoting and condemning lengthy passages of Byron’s poetry that are alleged to be an insulting commentary on his wife. While Stowe’s doing so invites the charge that she has failed to recognize, as Peter W. Graham has put it, that much of Byron’s work depends upon “fiction-making that braids or weaves two or more realities into a whole that resists reduction into any one of its component strands,” her portrait of Lady Byron is nevertheless one of extraordinary forbearance.¹³ And yet, Stowe writes, even this forbearance has been twisted into a fault by her detractors, with a recent memoir by Byron’s mistress—the Countess Guiccioli—dwelling “with a peculiar bitterness on Lady Byron’s entire *silence*” during the years in which the poet became an infamous public figure and was himself in need of defenders (*TS* 532, emphasis in original). For Stowe, the irony is simply too cruel: Lady Byron’s unwillingness to damage her husband’s already-shaky reputation has been transformed into an act of disloyalty, “the most aggravated form of persecution and injury” (*TS* 532).

Then, about halfway through the “True Story,” Stowe drops her bombshell, making for one of the most extraordinary instances of “burying the lead” in all of American literary history:

From the height at which he might have been happy as the husband of a noble woman, he fell into the depths of a secret adulterous intrigue with a blood relation, so near in consanguinity that discovery must have been utter ruin and expulsion from civilized society.

From henceforth, this damning guilty secret became the ruling force in his life, holding him with a morbid fascination, yet filling him with remorse and anguish and insane dread of detection. (*TS* 542)

Stowe may not have realized just how inflammatory this claim would turn out to be, for in the “True Story” it is essentially a supporting detail, an occasion for her to illustrate the superior character of Lady Byron,

the grace with which she handled her husband's "secret adulterous intrigue," and the generosity of her never having revealed the truth. The poet, Stowe writes, was torn "between angel and devil" throughout his life, but his wife was entirely committed to saving his soul, showing "that immortal kind of love such as God feels for the sinner,—the love of which Jesus spoke" (*TS* 545–46). This eminently Christian goodness, Stowe argues, was in part a consequence of Lady Byron's "heroic self-abnegation and self sacrifice" (*TS* 555), her determination to put aside her own injuries (no matter how painful) in order to ease her husband's torment (no matter how self-inflicted). But even more importantly, Lady Byron's unwillingness to denounce her husband's crime is presented not as a consequence of doctrinal obedience or wifely obligation, but rather as the manifestation of unusual strength. Stowe's Byron is tragically divided and utterly confined by his wicked impulses, whereas her Lady Byron is a divine liberator: "Her love was never the doting fondness of weak women; it was the appreciative and discriminating love by which a higher nature recognized godlike capabilities under all the dust and defilement of misuse and passion" (*TS* 557).

As introduced in the "True Story," then, Lady Byron is an object of admiration rather than of pity, with her silence represented as stoicism and her charity as munificence. But the outcry that followed the article's publication forced Stowe to take a very different tack as she expanded on and clarified her claims the following year in *Lady Byron Vindicated*. Here Stowe relies considerably more on evidence and documentation than she does on character analysis, including a voluminous array of articles, letters, literary works, and other commentary related to the affair. Stowe also writes with a more defensive tone, justifying her involvement in the case with nearly as much fervor as she declaims Lady Byron's virtue. Most importantly of all, however, *Lady Byron Vindicated* is broader in scope and intention than the "True Story," with Stowe concerned not only with the Byron marriage but also with a transatlantic "slavery for women" that she believes the affair has brought to light.¹⁴ Stowe's broader intentions are evident at the very beginning of her book: to those critics who have argued that her previous article had failed as a "literary effort," she asks, "Are the cries of the oppressed, the gasps of the dying, the last prayers of mothers,— are *any* words wrung like drops of blood from the human heart to be judged as literary efforts?" (*LB* 4, emphasis in original) Stowe's violent imagery and accusatory, direct mode of address should of course be familiar to anyone who has read the abolitionist pronouncements of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and for Stowe the stakes in *Lady Byron Vindicated* are every bit as high.

Stowe returns to the subject of Lady Byron's silence in the first half of the text, but this time finds much larger and more sinister social

problems at play. Some of her points are relatively unremarkable, such as her assertion that sexual double standards obliged Lady Byron to remain quiet so as not to damage the woman who bore her husband's child: "The world may finally forgive the man of genius anything," Stowe observes, "but for a woman there is no mercy and no redemption" (*LB* 74). More notable is Stowe's sense that the vilification Lady Byron endured after her separation was the result of her having been subject to a pervasive and unjust taboo, one holding that wives, even those in the most abusive of marriages, may not contest the wrongs they suffer at the hands of their husbands. Stowe recounts with particular fury the editorial attention that a rare statement of clarification from Lady Byron drew after Thomas Moore's biography of the poet appeared in 1830, with one representative article in *Blackwood's Magazine* declaring that Lady Byron had, in asserting herself, trampled on "the rights of a husband to his wife's silence when speech is fatal . . . to his character as a man" (*LB* 113). Even worse, in Stowe's estimation, is the model that another writer suggests that Lady Byron ought to have followed instead, that of a local widow who declined repeatedly to cast aspersions on her husband after his death in spite of the fact that he had in life treated her with extraordinary violence and cruelty, even beating her while she was pregnant: "Nay, I remember once how her pale countenance reddened with a sudden flush of pride, when a gossiping crone alluded to their wedding . . . That, I say, sir, whether right or wrong, *was—forgiveness*" (*LB* 116, emphasis in original). As Stowe glosses this conversation, the outrage is not simply that these writers are suggesting that Lady Byron attempt to burnish her husband's posthumous reputation but rather that they expect her to alter her inward, private estimation of him, that "this abused, desecrated woman must *reverence* her brutal master's memory" (*LB* 117, emphasis in original).

For Stowe, this doctrine of perpetual feminine silence and forgiveness is not only restrictive but also seems to demand outright masochism, as though the woman in question is somehow to enjoy the abuse she receives from her husband. The corrective image of femininity that Lady Byron's detractors offer is, in Stowe's words, that of

helpless, cowering, broken-hearted, abject women, given over to the animal love which they share alike with the poor dog,—the dog, who, beaten, kicked, starved, and cuffed, still lies by his drunken master with great anxious eyes of love and sorrow, and with sweet, brute forgiveness nestles upon his bosom, as he lies in his filth in the snowy ditch, to keep the warmth of life in him. Great is the mystery of this fidelity in the poor, loving brute,—most mournful and most sacred! (*LB* 118)

Here and elsewhere, Stowe finds the construction of feminine false consciousness to be the greatest of all social outrages perpetuated on women and argues that it leads to “utter self-abnegation” (*LB* 138), a condition that in no way resembles the “heroic self-abnegation” that she had attributed to Lady Byron in her earlier article. There Lady Byron is presented in explicitly religious terms, but *Lady Byron Vindicated* is more concerned with the “patron saint” of femininity venerated by the masculine press, a woman whose state is described in such grotesquely unequal terms that she seems almost to have sprung from the pages of antebellum abolitionist literature. In Stowe’s words, the husband of such a woman “tears her from her children; he treats her with personal abuse; he repudiates her,—sends her out to nakedness and poverty; he installs another mistress in his house, and sends for the first to be her handmaid and his own: and all this the meek saint accepts” (*LB* 138). And for Stowe, the danger is that these outrages will become all the more entrenched in England and America if so prominent and accomplished a woman as Lady Byron is silenced. “If the peeress *as a wife* has no rights,” she asks, “what is the state of the cotter’s wife?” (*LB* 120, emphasis in original)

It is worth pausing at this point to acknowledge the polemical, frequently bombastic quality of Stowe’s language and to consider whether her comparison of even the most abused wife with that of an enslaved African is in fact reasonable. Certainly Stowe’s comparison is an extreme one, but by making it in *Lady Byron Vindicated* she entered a long-running conversation on women’s rights that had been unfolding—at least in America—for about forty years, one that routinely invoked the term “slavery” to describe the legally inferior condition of women. As virtually every history of the women’s rights movement notes, it was the antislavery cause that gave American women their first, significant opportunity to engage in political advocacy, that provided them with a model of how such campaigns could be organized and operated, and that most importantly of all theorized a doctrine of higher laws and human rights that was quickly invoked in the service of other marginalized groups.¹⁵ More than three decades before *Lady Byron Vindicated*, Angelina and Sarah Grimké advanced the notion that free women not only could empathize with African slaves but also were enslaved themselves, with Sarah declaring in 1838 that “it requires but little thought to see that the condition of women and that of slaves are in many respects parallel.”¹⁶ Before long the woman-slave analogy was, according to Blanche Glassman Hersh, “the most frequently used feminist argument in the antebellum period,”¹⁷ and such rhetoric reached a high point in the “Declaration of Sentiments” drafted at the Seneca Falls Convention of

1848, which invoked Jeffersonian, emancipatory language in much the same way that Abraham Lincoln later would and declared: "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."¹⁸ In subsequent decades it was almost *de rigueur* for Lucy Stone and other reformers to declare that "marriage is to woman a state of slavery,"¹⁹ and in so doing they laid the groundwork for Stowe's defense of Lady Byron.

So too had other thinkers anticipated Stowe's notion that the ultimate product of sexual slavery is a warped feminine consciousness. Perhaps the most significant early articulation of such a theory was Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), a text that was somewhat in vogue at the time of *Lady Byron Vindicated*, thanks to its having been serialized in the American feminist journal *Revolution* in 1868. Among other things, Wollstonecraft argues in the *Vindication* that Western society seeks "to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses," subjecting them to a regimen of indoctrination that deadens their mental faculties, intensifies their sensual urges, and produces submissive creatures beholden not just to men but also to their own degraded appetites. "To their senses, are women made slaves," Wollstonecraft declares, such that they come to "despise the freedom which they have not sufficient virtue to struggle to attain."²⁰ And while Wollstonecraft was too infamous a figure to be much invoked by feminists during the first half of the nineteenth century, her notion that a person could be mentally enslaved even while enjoying legal freedom was routinely echoed in American intellectual circles, whether politically or philosophically. Thoreau would famously argue in 1854 that it is conventional wisdom, and not the government, that most often turns humanity into chattel, declaring that "the law will never make men free"²¹ and advancing an argument suggested in 1837 by the title of Angelina Grimké's *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States*. Indeed, when thus expanded the term "slavery" could be made to apply to virtually any sentient person, such that nineteenth-century advocates for Native Americans, European immigrants, white laborers, and even free lovers could all claim those populations to have been "enslaved" in one way or another. Thus does Herman Melville's Ishmael show himself to be very much a man of his era in posing his famous rhetorical question in *Moby-Dick*: "Who ain't a slave?"²²

Perhaps the single most important influence on Stowe's thinking in *Lady Byron Vindicated*, however, was John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* of 1869 and his contention therein that the same primitive desire for dominion that had produced African slavery was continuing, albeit

more insidiously, to characterize relations between the genders. As does Stowe, Mill argues that Western institutions of custom, education, and religion all are designed to rob women of their ability to ponder and question their status as second-class citizens, thereby bestowing upon men “not a forced slave but a willing one.”²³ Indeed, Mill goes so far as to declare that sexual slavery is even more encompassing than the sort that had been practiced in the antebellum South, which, while more spectacular in its brutality, nevertheless left slaves with at least some degree of privacy, “off duty” moments that could not be impinged upon. As Mill puts it: “‘Uncle Tom’ under his first master had his own life in his ‘cabin,’ almost as much as any man whose work takes him away from home, is able to have his own family. But it cannot be so with the wife.”²⁴ Much of Mill’s argument on this score, of course, can be disputed, particularly his notion that marriage slavery is more totalizing than the racial variety because it has a built-in sexual component, requiring a “last familiarity” from wives that chattel slaves can refuse.²⁵ But the important thing to grasp in *The Subjection of Women* is Mill’s belief that the degraded position of black chattel and that of the English wife differ only in degree and not in kind; as for Stowe, she credited Mill with making her thinking on gender relations “all clear,” and she appears to have brought his theorization of a mentally stunted female underclass to bear on her second, more expansive treatment of Lady Byron.²⁶

Perhaps the most significant difference between Stowe’s “True Story” and *Lady Byron Vindicated* is her concern not just with the Byron marriage and its aftermath, but also with the larger process of socialization that it seems to reveal: those who would enforce Lady Byron’s silence are seeking also to imbue her with “that utter *deadness to the sense of justice* which the laws, literature, and misunderstood religion of England have sought to induce in woman as a special grace and virtue” (*LB* 119, emphasis in original). Social institutions, and in particular the “misunderstood religion of England,” are for Stowe bent on forcing women to view themselves as a degraded sex and become their own, self-regulating captors, and it is on this subject that the connections between her conception of sexual slavery and the racial variety she had opposed nearly two decades earlier can be seen most clearly. Frederick Douglass, whom Stowe read and attempted to correspond with during the writing of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had years before reached much the same conclusions about the psychological dimensions of the slavery he had suffered. He observes in his 1845 *Narrative* that “to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one,” usually by a series of steps that not only force the slave to submit to a master’s will but more importantly convince him of the essential rightness of his enslavement.²⁷ In Douglass’s theorization,

the completely mastered slave must believe that he is morally unfit for freedom, that his fate is best left in the hands of an enlightened other, and that Christianity reserves a special reward for those who suffer worldly torments; once this has been accomplished, the slave will rule himself far more sternly than any outside authority could. And it was the ignorance that had been systematically forced upon Southern blacks that gave Stowe her first opportunity to develop a broad conception of slavery that could later be applied to the condition of women, with her novels of the 1850s considering subjection in both its legal and metaphysical terms several years in advance of her encounter with Mill.

The influence of Douglass's theorization of slavery on Stowe's fiction is most obviously evident in her characterization of the perennially suffering, unerringly forgiving, and supremely Christian Uncle Tom, whose inflexibly doctrinal way of thinking—"confined entirely to the New Testament"²⁸—produces in him a wellspring of love for those who own him and a comparative disregard for worldly justice insofar as it affects the master-slave relationship. Such assured and even enthusiastic martyrdom, of course, is precisely what has rendered Stowe's novel uncomfortable for contemporary readers and made the name "Uncle Tom" synonymous with passivity, accommodation, and racial shame. But it is important to note that Stowe would in her later writings find such self-abasement—particularly when informed by religion—to be more disturbing than saintly, not only in regard to sex in *Lady Byron Vindicated* but also in her subsequent treatments of black slavery. Hence, her second novel *Dred*, the story of a slave conspiracy and uprising, is in many ways an extended meditation on the perversions Christianity suffers when used to justify slaveholding and on the pronounced intellectual shuttering required if one is to believe that it is, in fact, God's will that slaves serve their masters. For each African moved to a "higher piety" through Biblical instruction, Stowe observed in 1856, "thousands are crushed in hopeless imbecility," rendered docile and even accepting of the outrages perpetuated on them.²⁹ And if slavery's most important hallmarks include a tendency towards self-restriction and self-deprecation in the slave, then it does not take too many associative steps to see how Stowe might eventually conclude that women—even so prominent a woman as Lady Byron—could suffer the fate that Africans had.

The key question in *Lady Byron Vindicated*, then, is whether or not the object of its inquiry—a woman whom Stowe had praised the year before for her "heroic" silence and loyalty—had upon further reflection come to seem a slave instead. Put another way, have the men whom Stowe accuses of attempting to master Lady Byron succeeded? In the second half of the volume, Stowe provides a lengthy account of her personal

meetings, interviews, and correspondence with Lady Byron, and to some degree the portrait of her that emerges seems to indicate that she had in fact lived up to the standard of self-repressing femininity that Stowe now finds so objectionable. Lady Byron remains proud of her long-departed husband: "We talked for some time of him then; she with her pale face slightly flushed, speaking, as any other great man's widow might, only of what was purest and best in his works, and what were his undeniable virtues and good traits, especially in early life" (*LB* 218). She strikes Stowe as passive, "an interested spectator of the world's affairs" instead of "an actor involved in its trials" (*LB* 206). And even in revealing the secret of her husband's incest, she seems still to believe that it is improper of her to do so: "There was something awful to me in the intensity of repressed emotion which she showed as she proceeded," Stowe writes (*LB* 235).

The sticking point lies once more in the question of self-assertion, in whether or not Stowe now finds Lady Byron's decision to be "a silent sufferer under calumny and misrepresentation" to be impressive or an exemplary expression of sexual slavery (*LB* 360). Certainly Lady Byron has not descended to the sickening, animalistic level that Stowe fears men would consign women to, but even the Byron defender Charles Mackay (he of the "nigger-worshipper" comment) had been taken aback by Stowe's depiction of her in the *MacMillan's* piece. If Stowe's allegations are in fact true, Mackay writes, then Lady Byron is a woman "so meek, so spiritless, so abject, so stupidly forgiving, so unconscious of the respect due to herself and to the outraged laws of God and man, that she preferred to be a dog sleeping at the door of an incestuous adulterer, rather than an honest and outraged woman."³⁰ Once more Lady Byron is faulted for failing to speak on her own behalf, and Stowe seems to support such criticism at points in *Lady Byron Vindicated*, arguing that

utter self-abnegation has been preached to women as a peculiarly feminine virtue. It is true; but there is a moral limit to the value of self-abnegation.

It is a fair question for the moralist, whether it is right and proper wholly to ignore one's personal claims to justice. The teachings of the Saviour give us warrant for submitting to personal injuries; but both the Saviour and St. Paul manifested bravery in denying false accusations, and asserting innocence. (*LB* 196)

Here and elsewhere, Stowe's implications are stern indeed: by allowing herself to be the victim of injustice, Lady Byron could perhaps also be said to have become an instrument of it, as acquiescence and passivity are in Stowe's estimation as often as not the moral equivalents of active support for an ideological position. Stowe even goes so far as to accuse

those Americans who have done nothing more than read rumors about Lady Byron in the print media of having been “betrayed into injustice, and a complicity with villainy,” and she will not allow the Byron controversy to be treated simply as a case of one woman’s failing to protect her reputation (*LB* 194, 196). Rather, the principle at stake has an effect on women more broadly: “There are thousands of poor victims suffering in sadness, discouragement, and poverty” to whom Lady Byron’s testimony “might bring courage and hope from springs not of this world” (*LB* 162–63). Lady Byron’s story, in other words, belongs not just to her but also to her sex, and her failure to defend herself is by extension a failure to defend women more broadly.

For Stowe, the mind-forged manacles that enslaved women and left them thoughtless participants in an unjust system could only be broken by active resistance, and to a point she is offering—she did in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—an iconic sufferer who is too weak for rebellion but who might be able to inspire it in others. Indeed, the tragedy of Lady Byron as presented in *Lady Byron Vindicated* is less that she has suffered abuse than that she aspires to a freedom of thought that she is ultimately too bound by convention and doctrine to attain. In some ways, Lady Byron is depicted as remarkably heterodox: at her most bold she tells Stowe, “I look upon creeds of all kinds as chains,—far worse chains than those you would break,—as the causes of much hypocrisy and infidelity” (*LB* 210). But when all is said and done, she cannot bring herself to speak against her husband or on her own behalf, in spite of the fact that she recognizes, as Stowe paraphrases it, a “last duty which she might owe to abstract truth and justice in her generation” (*LB* 368). Stowe’s ultimate estimation of Lady Byron’s degree of “enslavement” is best expressed in the following:

Lady Byron’s hopes for her husband fastened themselves on all the noble fragments yet remaining in that shattered temple of his mind which lay blackened and thunder-riven; and she looked forward to a sphere beyond this earth, where infinite mercy should bring all to symmetry and order. If the strict theologian must regret this as an undue latitude of charity, let it at least be remembered that it was a charity which sprang from a Christian virtue, and which she extended to every human being, however lost, however low. (*LB* 398–99)

In the end, Stowe’s Lady Byron is more an Uncle Tom than a Dred, but if she has not served the cause of highest justice by publishing her story herself, she has gone part of the way and given an intermediary the opportunity to do so in her stead. She did not defy those who sought to confine her, but neither could her condition be classed as total enslavement.

Indeed, if there is a true slave to be found in this text it is not a woman, but rather the “master” himself, Lord Byron. For Stowe he is ultimately a figure of lost potential, a man who possessed the capacity to be a friend of universal liberty but was too shackled by worldly vice for his work or life to reflect it. Stowe notes in *Lady Byron Vindicated* that there has always been a “peculiarity in Lord Byron, that the pure and the impure in his poetry often ran side by side without mixing,” and for most of her life she seems to have understood him to represent an almost poignant failure of possibility (*LB* 397). The poet and his works were profoundly attractive to Stowe when she was a girl, but she would later remember that, upon Byron’s death in 1824, her father mourned his “wasted life and misused powers” and eulogized him thus: “I did hope he would live to do something for Christ. What a harp he might have swept!”³¹ Following Stowe’s lead, scholars have classified a great many characters in her novels as “Byronic” over the years, usually because they are impossibly divided between lofty principle and base actuality—for example, the sardonic Augustine St. Claire of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a man who mocks the intellectual justifications of chattel slavery but is too unprincipled to free the slaves he owns. But perhaps nowhere is Stowe’s sense of Byron’s moral schizophrenia more evident than in *Dred*, a novel that she wrote around the time she made Lady Byron’s acquaintance and in which there seem to be two utterly opposite and yet entirely plausible versions of the poet. He first appears in the form of Edward Clayton, a young man who is “quite Byronic” in appearance and who devotes his law career to the cause of abolition.³² But he can also be found in the wicked Tom Gordon, a slaveholder who drinks away his time at university, threatens to purchase and rape a slave married to his mulatto half-brother, and, significantly, shares the surname of Lord Byron himself. These antithetical Byrons, when taken together, manifest the duality that Stowe had so often found in him, with the poet emerging at some points as a friend of liberty and at others as the product of a primitive and dying social order. And if *Lady Byron Vindicated* is any indication, it was the latter fate—that of the very worst kind of conventionality—that Stowe believed had ultimately befallen him.

There are a great many ironies implicit in Stowe’s project, among them the fact that her moral inflexibility rather uncomfortably resembles the rigid closed-mindedness that she identifies at the root of gender inequality. But perhaps most important of all are the myriad ways in which Stowe, by denouncing tyranny, winds up sounding like the very poet she condemns. Many of Byron’s poetical works contain a similar sense that it is in its thinking that humanity is most completely enslaved and that emancipation is a matter of the mind, but perhaps none does so more

effectively in the context of *Lady Byron Vindicated* than his verse drama *Cain* (which, as it happens, Stowe believed to have been motivated in part by Byron's obsession with incest). Cain is introduced as a Promethean figure, a man told to be "cheerful and resign'd" in a postlapsarian world of toil but who yet desires to satisfy those "thoughts which arise within me, as if they / Could master all things."³³ God has left him in what the tempter Lucifer calls "a Paradise of Ignorance, from which / Knowledge was barr'd as poison"³⁴ and so he abjures it, choosing to think freely and heretically even at the cost of having his progeny condemned to eternal labor—a divine sentence against one man's subsequent race that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century proponents of African slavery often claimed to be carrying out, on the grounds that black skin was in fact the residual "mark of Cain."³⁵ For the contemporary novelist Charles Johnson, the rebelliousness that Byron attributes to Cain is in part a product of his despised "blackness," but it is also in this crucible of slavery that modern thought is born. In Byron's treatment, Johnson writes, "Western man himself was Cain, cursed with the burden of restlessness and the endless quest for selfhood."³⁶ And thus does Byron bring together many of the ideas that Stowe would grapple with fifty years later, questioning whether the act of enslavement can ever be completed unless the mind as well as the body has been mastered.

In the end, it is difficult to reconcile the fact that Byron could at the same time be, as one scholar has put it, "the single greatest literary and imaginative influence on the writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe" and also one of her greatest villains.³⁷ Understanding the figure of Byron as reflected in her works requires readers to think of him as both a champion of liberty and a symbol of sexual subjection, and this paradox is no doubt at least part of the reason why Stowe, on one striking occasion in *Lady Byron Vindicated*, figures him in feminine terms. "There have been women able to lead their leashes of blinded adorers; to make them swear that black was white, or white black, at their word," Stowe observes. "Such an enchanter in man's shape was Lord Byron" (*LB* 84). Most immediately, Stowe is referring here to Byron's uncanny ability to command the admiration of other men, even those whom, like Walter Scott, he might have previously insulted. But Byron's femininity, given the larger context of feminine self-slavery that hangs over *Lady Byron Vindicated*, is surely meant by Stowe to be seen as not a little pathetic, as well. For Stowe, the coquettish woman, even one able to reduce a company of men to a coffle that she can lead about as she pleases, is still the greater slave, still subject to those social dictates that give her the illusion of control but that nevertheless render her complicit in her own unwitting imprisonment. And if women can be understood to enjoy their

enslavement and do the work of their masters for them, then perhaps even Lord Byron—feminine “enchanter” that he is—can become the very sort of stifling master he claims in his poetry to despise.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA—LOS ANGELES

NOTES

- 1 Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), 83.
- 2 Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, ed. John T. Morse, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 2:183.
- 3 Forrest Wilson, *Crusader in Crinoline: The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1941), 551.
- 4 John Drinkwater, *The Pilgrim of Eternity: Byron—A Conflict* (New York: George H. Doran, 1925), xxiii; Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Portrait* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 476; Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: John Murray, 2002), photo insert.
- 5 In addition to Wagenknecht and Wilson, see Jean Willoughby Ashton, “Harriet Stowe’s Filthy Story: Lord Byron Set Afloat,” *Prospects* 2 (1976): 373–84; and Alice C. Crozier, *The Novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969).
- 6 See Jennifer Cognard-Black, *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Caroline Franklin, “Stowe and the Byronic Heroine,” in *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, ed. Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer, Emily Todd (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2006), 3–23; Susan McPherson, “Opening the Open Secret: The Stowe-Byron Controversy,” *Victorian Review* 27, no. 1 (2001): 86–101; and Susan Wolstenholme, “Voice of the Voiceless: Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Byron Controversy,” *American Literary Realism* 19, no. 2 (1987): 48–65.
- 7 Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 356.
- 8 Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 369.
- 9 Charles Mackay, *Medora Leigh: A History and an Autobiography* (London: Richard Bentley, 1869), 17.
- 10 Ashton, “Harriet Stowe’s Filthy Story,” 378.
- 11 Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 342.
- 12 Harriet Beecher Stowe, “The True Story of Lady Byron’s Life,” *The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader*, ed. Joan D. Hedrick, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 538 (hereafter cited as *TS*).
- 13 Peter W. Graham, *Don Juan and Regency England* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990), 27–28.
- 14 Stowe, *Lady Byron Vindicated* (Boston: Fields, Osgood and Co.: 1870), 114 (hereafter cited as *LB*).
- 15 For two excellent studies that take up the woman-slave analogy in detail, see Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1989); and Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Brewer Stewart, eds., *Women’s Rights and Transatlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2007). Other useful histories of the women’s rights movement and its connection to the antislavery cause include Bonnie S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First*

International Women's Movement, 1830–1860 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America, 1848–1869* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978); Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975); Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978); Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sally G. McMillen, *Seneca Falls and the Origins of the Women's Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008); Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement, 1830–1870: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford, 2000); Kathleen S. Sullivan, *Constitutional Context: Women and Rights Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007); Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman's Rights Convention* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004); and Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994). For a study of the women's rights movement that argues that its debts to the antislavery cause have tended to be overstated by historians, see Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998).

16 Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and Other Essays*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 130.

17 Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex*, 196.

18 Sklar, *Women's Rights Emerges*, 176.

19 Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex*, 197.

20 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792.; repr., New York: Norton, 1982), 22, 61, 52.

21 Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 338.

22 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851; repr., New York: Norton, 1967), 15.

23 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmas, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), 26.

24 Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 23.

25 As Eric J. Sundquist has noted, no attentive reader of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could agree that American slaves were free from sexual abuse at the hands of their masters, as Stowe consistently shows "that slavery and sexual violation were inseparable and that the plantation could become an arena of erotic dissipation and male lust." See Sundquist, "Introduction," *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 24.

26 Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 359.

27 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; repr., New York: Norton, 1997), 64.

28 Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852; repr., New York: Penguin, 1986), 210.

29 Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856; repr., New York: Penguin, 2000), 51.

30 Mackay, *Medora Leigh*, 45.

31 Stowe, *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Annie Fields (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 39.

32 Stowe, *Dred*, 9.

33 George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 885, 889.

34 Byron, *Major Works*, 910.

35 For more on this subject see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003); and Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

36 Charles Johnson, *Dreamer: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 161–62.

37 Crozier, *The Novels*, 203.