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Prayer and the role of the ‘Soul-Artist’ in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Historical Fiction

Elizabeth Ludlow

IN HER 1852 TRACT, *EARTHLY CARE A HEAVENLY DISCIPLINE*, HARRIET BEECHER STOWE reasons that since ‘worldly care forms the greater part of the staple of every human life, there must be some mode of viewing and meeting it, which converts it from an enemy of spirituality into a means of grace and spiritual advancement.’¹ Critiquing the strands of Christian Platonism and Calvinism which see discontinuity between the worldly and the eternal, Stowe emphasises the continuity between ‘worldly care’ and ‘spiritual advancement’ with her reading of how the ‘Bible tells us that our whole existence here is disciplinary; that this whole physical system, by which our spirit is connected with all the joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, and wants which form a part of it, is designed as an education to fit the soul for its immortality’ (ibid.). She moves on to ask readers to ‘suppose’ that

the glorified form of some departed friend should appear to us with the announcement: ‘This year is to be to you one of special probation and discipline, with reference to perfecting you for a heavenly state. Weigh well and consider every incident of your daily life, for not one is to fall out by accident, but each one shall be a finished and indispensable link in a bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies.’ (p. 14)

Should readers have this experience, Stowe suggests, they would look upon ‘every incident of our daily life’ in an entirely different light. While in her first novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), Stowe imagines the strength that Tom takes from the vision of Eva in glorified form, I suggest that it is through the heroines of her later historical fiction that she more explicitly expresses the continuity between the earthly and the heavenly.

In what follows, I explain how the two historical novels that Stowe serialised in the *Atlantic Monthly* – *The Minister’s Wooing* (December 1858-December 1859) and *Agnes of Sorrento* (May 1861-April 1862) – present a radical theological challenge to the legacies of Christian Platonism and Calvinism, and were quick to see the earthly in terms of depravity and sin. Prayer is central to this discussion as it is represented through both novels as the horizon where the eternal converges with the everyday and where the emotions and desires of protagonists are shaped. When Stowe invites the reader to view the historical events that she describes from the perspective of this horizon, the details of the everyday – and the bodies through which the Divine is experienced – take on particular significance and become links in what she perceives as the ‘bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies’.

Historical fiction and the rhetoric of prayer

According to Ellery Sedgwick, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* between 1909 and 1938, the magazine was launched to ‘promote good literature and speak out against

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Earthly Care a Heavenly Discipline*, Cincinnati, American Reform Book and Tract Society, 1852, p. 4. Online version by Steven Railton, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin in American Culture*, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/christn/chfihbsat.html> (accessed Jan 8, 2019), p. 4.

slavery'.² Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of American Transcendentalism and one of the founders of the *Atlantic Monthly*, envisaged the way in which its content would 'guide the age' (ibid, p. 214). While both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* exemplify the aims and premises of the magazine in their critique of religious and social strategies of oppression in eighteenth century New England and fifteenth century Florence, they also attest to the dictum, repeatedly attributed to Emerson, that 'fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures'.³ Through both novels, truth is revealed through the narrative not in epistemological description but in the accounts of things which transform and re-orientate the individual. My purpose here is to show how it is through prayer that the female protagonists re-orientate vision and exert an influence that outweighs the reach of the historical figures of the religious and political establishment with whom they come into contact.

Like every other major novelist of the period, Stowe's conception of historical fiction was informed by the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott. As Joan Hedrick recounts, it was not long after Lyman Beecher had permitted his children to read the novels that Scott 'became a family institution'.⁴ *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* take their structure from Scott's *Waverley* (1814) in that they are centred on a fictional protagonist who is imagined at a particular moment of historical change. However, Stowe's protagonists are not – like Edward Waverley – active participants in battle but are instead young women whose lives remain on the margins of the established historical record.

Stowe's prefaces provide a helpful context for understanding her contribution to the debates about the role of historical fiction and her resistance to expected teleologies at a time when, as Harold Orel explains, the historical novel faced a crisis over the relationship between fiction and historical source materials, and over the development of scientific worldviews.⁵ Introducing *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe is quick to offer a disclaimer to the exacting reader who is looking for historical accuracy. Although some of the characters in *Agnes of Sorrento* are also historic, Stowe uses the preface to warn readers that 'whoso wants history will not find it here, except to our making, and as it suits our purpose'.⁶ In her article connecting Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento* with Eliot's *Romola*, both of which centre around the fall of the fifteenth century monk and reformer Fra Girolamo Savonarola, and both of which were serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine*, Robin Sheets suggests how, 'for both writers, history gives way to hagiography as the idealised heroine achieves heroic stature equal to or even exceeding Savonarola's'.⁷

² Nancy Koester, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2014, pp. 213-4.

³ Qtd. in L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*, Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, p. 62. For a discussion of how *The Minister's Wooing* 'constitutes Mrs. Stowe's "conversation" with the authors of readers for the *Atlantic Monthly*' see Dorothy Z. Baker, 'Harriet Beecher Stowe's Conversation with the *Atlantic Monthly*: The Construction of *The Minister's Wooing*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 28.1 (2000), 27-38 (p. 28).

⁴ Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, OUP, p. 20.

⁵ Harold Orel, *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes toward a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*, Macmillan, 1995, p. 25.

⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Agnes of Sorrento* [1862], Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899, p. ix.

⁷ Robin Sheets, 'History and romance: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Agnes of Sorrento* and George Eliot's *Romola*', *Clio*, 26.3 (1997), 323-346 (p. 326); *Agnes of Sorrento* was serialised in the *Cornhill* from April 1861 to May 1862 (simultaneously to its run in the *Atlantic Monthly*), and *Romola* was

What I suggest, however, is that while Stowe does depict heroines who are saintly, history does not so much 'give way to hagiography' as invite the reader to interpret history from within the horizon that the two heroines enter in prayer: the horizon where the transcendent converges with the everyday. From the perspective of this horizon, 'all things [become] sacred' and the prayers of the women who are silenced by the historical record are shown to be powerful tools of transformation.⁸

The Minister's Wooing

In *The Minister's Wooing* (1858-9), Stowe uses her female characters to critique the legacies of Calvinism and to convey the kind of theological messages that her sister Catherine had put into her 3-volume work of systematic theology, *Common Sense Applied to Religion, or the Bible and the People* (1857). As Hedrick explains (quoting from Kathryn Sklar's 1976 study of Catherine Beecher), this work 'attacked the Calvinist notions of original sin, conversion, and God's grace as aberrations introduced by Saint Augustine'.⁹ I argue that while in *The Minister's Wooing* Stowe takes a less combative approach than her sister, she does raise more radical theological challenges in her reflections on the significance of women's ministry and her critique of disinterested and abstract systems of theology. Rather than rejecting Augustine's theology, I suggest that she reframes it in a way that is empowering for women. As such, she offers a more compassionate vision of God than that offered by 'the clear logic and intense individualism of New England', which she critiques for '[deepening] the problems of the Augustinian faith' while '[sweeping] away all those softening provisions so earnestly clasped to the throbbing heart of that great poet of theology' (p. 341).

After describing the theological difficulties that the small New England Puritan community of the 1790s were working through following the presumed death at sea of the heroine Mary Scudder's cousin and beloved, the sailor James Marvyn, Stowe compares the rigid Calvinism practised by the minister Samuel Hopkins (based on a real figure who was a student of Jonathan Edwards) with the 'softening provisions' Augustine gives in his discussion on the prayers for the dead (p. 340). Through the novel, it is the female characters who express the value in the prayers and intercessions that Augustine recommends. As they do so, they embody the convergence of the 'Church above and on earth' and undercut the 'systems' of the 'hard old New England divines' with their sympathetic responses (p. 25). 'Where theorists and philosophers tread with sublime assurance,' Stowe writes, 'woman often follows with bleeding footsteps; – women are always turning from the abstract to the individual, and feeling where the philosopher only thinks' (ibid). Through their informal ministry and their prayers, the women she represents embody Christ in the way in which they touch the sacred in the seeds of ordinary things and respond to the revealed truth that is about love rather than about doctrines.

Although James notices a similarity between Mary and 'a picture he had once seen in a European cathedral, where the youthful Mother of Sorrows is represented' (p. 36), it is Mary who is shown to be the true artist. Stowe describes her as among the 'soul-artists' who

serialised from 1862 to August 1863),

⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* [1859], Boston, James R. Osgood & co, 1875, p. 110.

⁹ Hedrick, p. 278.

go through this world, looking among their fellows with reverence, as one looks amid the dust and rubbish of old shops for hidden works of Titian and Leonardo; and, finding them, however cracked or torn, or painted over with tawdry daubs of pretenders, immediately recognise the divine original, and set themselves to cleanse and restore. (p. 131)

Such 'soul-artists', she reasons, are 'God's real priests' because their 'ordination and anointing are from the Holy Spirit' (ibid.).

The power of Mary's intercessory prayers for James – which come from her recognition of the latent but 'divine original' person he has been created to be – are expressed when he unexpectedly returns and declares himself a Christian the day before the planned marriage between Mary and the minister Hopkins. In the letter James wrote to Mary which was delayed and arrived when he returned, he describes his experience of encountering God after identifying with Jacob:

[Jacob] saw a ladder in his sleep between him and heaven, and angels going up and down ... he saw that there was a way between him and God, and that there were those above who did care for him, and who could come to him to help him. (p. 517)

Ladder imagery runs through the novel and, as Kristin Wilkes comments, Stowe revises the ladder metaphor in Plato's *Symposium* to argue against the disinterested benevolence of Hopkins, and to indicate how 'a person moves upward from natural, earthly loves to selfless love of God'.¹⁰ In comparing the solace that Mary and James find in recognising the social and communal aspect of the spiritual journal to the individualist approach taken by Hopkins, Stowe comments:

There is a ladder to heaven, whose base God has placed in human affections, tender instincts, symbolic feelings, sacraments of love, through which the soul rises higher and higher, refining as she goes ... This highest step ... had been seized upon by our sage as the *all* of religion. He knocked out every round of the ladder but the highest, and then, pointing to its hopeless splendour, said to the world, 'Go up thither and be saved!' (p. 87)

Although Wilkes does not mention Augustine in her discussion of how Stowe repairs the ladder by presenting 'romantic and familial love as rungs that can be ascended toward a loving God', I suggest that her engagement with his theology and complex legacy is helpful in understanding the way in which she repairs the ladder and refutes the traditions of Platonic Christianity and Calvinism.¹¹ Central to this in both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento* is her appropriation of the prayers of Augustine's mother Monica.

We only know Monica's name because Augustine gives it in the prayer which concludes Book 9 of the *Confessions* when he asks that those who read his words may, 'at Thy Altar remember Monica Thy handmaid'.¹² Her death comes just days after she had shared with Augustine an experience of spiritual ascent. In spite of the negative attitude he expresses towards women elsewhere in his writings, Augustine

¹⁰ Kristin Wilkes, 'Repairing the Ladder to Heaven: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The Minister's Wooing* as a Secular Novel', *Christianity & Literature*, 67.3 (2018), 436-453 (p. 443).

¹¹ Wilkes, p. 443.

¹² *The Confessions of St Augustine Revised from a Former Translation*, trans. Edward Pusey, Oxford, John Henry Parker; London, J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1843, 9.13.37. All subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text including book, part, and section.

shows in his recollection of this ascent how an ordinary uneducated woman can attain the same intellectual and spiritual insights about divinity as an educated man.¹³ Directly afterwards, Monica tells Augustine that her work in life is done and that her hope in this world – that she might see her son a Catholic Christian – has been fulfilled (9.10.26). Her reflections demonstrate that the vision she had thirty years previously had been fulfilled. This vision is recounted in Book 3 of the *Confessions*:

For she saw herself standing on a certain wooden rule, and a shining youth coming towards her, cheerful and smiling upon her, herself grieving, and overwhelmed with grief ... answering that she was bewailing my perdition, he bade her rest contented, and told her to look and observe, 'That where she was, there was I also.' And when she looked, she saw me standing by her in the same rule. (3.11.19)

When Augustine haughtily dismissed Monica's rendering of the vision so as to excuse his behaviour, and said that its true meaning was that she would convert to his religion of Manichaeism, she was quick to reply: 'No; for it was not told me that, "where he, there thou also"; but "where thou, there he also"' (3.11.20). It is only in Book 9 that, having worked through his frustration, Augustine comes to the recognition that in her pursuit of him, it was God who was speaking to him and revealing to him the possibility of his redemption. Rather than see – as many commentators have done – Monica's declaration that her work in life was to see her son a Christian as indicative of her lack of independent identity and of Augustine's 'self-absorption', Stowe models an approach that involves finding in Monica's prayers and vision a basis for an understanding of female empowerment.¹⁴

The Minister's Wooing is the first of three novels in which Stowe alludes to the vision that Monica had of her son sharing the same wooden rule.¹⁵ We are told that it is because of Mary's love for James and her gifting as a 'soul-artist' that she is able to see him standing – as Monica saw Augustine – on the rule of faith and she indicates how Monica's vision offers a challenge to the Platonic tradition that finds expression in the Puritan beliefs in New England:

Once, in an age, God sends to some of us a friend who loves in us, not a false imagining, an unreal character, but, looking through all the rubbish of our imperfections, loves in us the divine ideal of our nature, – loves, not the man that we are, but the angel that we may be. Such friends seem inspired by a divine gift of prophecy, – like the mother of St. Augustine, who, in the midst of the wayward, reckless youth of her son, beheld him in a vision, standing, clothed in white, a ministering priest at the right hand of God – as he has stood for long ages since. (p. 130)

As a result of constant prayer, Mary exemplifies – and is able to maintain – the transformative and prophetic vision of the 'soul-artist' that Monica models in the *Confessions*.

¹³ As Kim Power explains, Augustine uses his characterization of Monica to chart an alternative route to wisdom and holiness to that of educated men. See Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, p. 88.

¹⁴ Clarissa Atkinson, "'Your Servant, My Mother": The Figure of Saint Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood', in C. Atkinson, C. Buchanan, and M. Miles (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female Image and Reality*, Crucible, 1987, pp. 139-72 (141).

¹⁵ In addition to *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, Stowe alludes to Monica's vision in *Oldtown Folks* (1869).

Agnes of Sorrento

Stowe began writing *Agnes of Sorrento* (1861-2) when she was on a holiday in Italy during her trip to Europe to secure copyright for *The Minister's Wooing*. As in *The Minister's Wooing*, a historical male clergyman (this time Savonarola) is shown to hold a faulty theology by a female lay character who foregrounds the spiritual significance of romantic and familial love.

Since the novel is set in the Middle Ages when Catholicism was the Church, one of the issues that Stowe addresses is the identity and place of the True Church. Throughout, she invites Protestant readers to balance a right critique of the corruptions of the Catholic Church with an appreciation of the context of the religious practices of the time. 'Let us not,' she reasons, 'with the better appliances which a universal press gives us, sneer at the homely rounds of the ladder by which the first multitudes of the Lord's flock climbed heavenward' (p. 97). She asks readers to appreciate that whereas 'in our times a conversion is signalized by few outward changes', in the Middle Ages, life was 'profoundly symbolical, and always required the help of material images in its expression' (p. 33). While the heroine Agnes is described throughout as a work of art and likened to 'some of the Madonna faces of Fra Angelico' (p. 18), it is in her role as a 'soul-artist' that she, like Monica of Hippo, glimpses the sacred in the ordinary and sees Christ in others.

From the start of the novel, Agnes is linked to the Virgin Mary. The narrator accounts for her prayers to the Virgin by a recognition of the fact that the holy dead were not gone from the earth but were in close and constant sympathy. Agnes's prayers are therefore not seen as idolatrous; instead her connection with the Virgin and the saints is perceived as truly sympathetic and indicative of the connection between the church Triumphant and Militant. For Agnes, the painting of the Virgin was representative of a 'dear friend who smiled upon her, and was watching to lead her up the path to heaven' (p. 72).

When Agnes's uncle, Father Antonio, an artist, monk and disciple of Fra Angelico, finds in Agnes the inner and outward spiritual beauty and meekness of the Virgin Mary, he expresses a desire to depict her as the Hail Mary in his Breviary (p. 91). The connection he makes between Agnes and the Virgin means that when she describes her dream of an angelic visitation, he is quick to identify him as Gabriel, 'the angel that came to our blessed Mother' (p. 114). However, when Agnes explains that the angel had the features of the cavalier who had asked for her prayers, he suggests that the dream might be interpreted through the frame of Monica's vision of Augustine sharing the same wooden rule. He tells her:

It may be that the holy angel took on him in part this likeness to show how glorious a redeemed soul might become, that you might be encouraged to pray. The holy Saint Monica thus saw the blessed Augustine standing clothed in white among the angels while he was yet a worldling and unbeliever, and thereby received the grace to continue her prayers for thirty years, till she saw him a holy bishop. This is a sure sign that this young man, whoever he may be, shall attain Paradise through your prayers. (p. 115)

Following this association between Agnes's dream and Monica's vision, Father Antonio then asks Agnes whether this is the first angel she has seen. As they discuss angelic visitations, he suggests that she 'should see the pictures of our holy Father Angelico, to whom the angels appeared constantly' (ibid.). Later in the novel, when

Angelico and Agostino (the cavalier) meet Savonarola in Rome, they find him in 'pensive contemplation before a picture of the Crucifixion by Fra Angelico' (p. 264). Such paintings, we are told, 'were painted by the simple artist on his knees, weeping and praying as he worked, and the sight of them was accepted by like simple-hearted Christians as a perpetual sacrament' (ibid.). While Father Angelico takes on a dual role of artist who paints sacraments for the eye, and monk, who distributes the sacrament of the Eucharist, I want to suggest that by framing Agnes's vision of and prayers for Agostino in terms of Monica's vision of Augustine, we are invited to recognize her as a fellow artist and a participant in revealing the sacramental and in embodying the presence of the divine.

By having Agnes marry Agostino at the end of the novel, rather than entering the convent as both she and her uncle had initially intended, Stowe stresses the value of the Protestant marriage plot and further consolidates Agnes's association with Monica, who lives an ordinary life compared to the other holy women of antiquity whose lives have been recorded. Moreover, the marriage affirms the spiritual value of 'human affections' that, in *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe had argued form a rung on the 'ladder to heaven', and in her *Earthly Care a Heavenly Discipline*, she described as links in the 'bright chain that is to draw you upward to the skies'.

To conclude, in both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Agnes of Sorrento*, Stowe emphasises the power that her heroines have as 'soul-artists' in praying for the men who shape the course of history and in revealing – in a sacramental and Christ-like sense – the sacredness of the earthly. Coinciding with her recognition of the shaping power of Monica's prayers for Augustine, Stowe uses both novels to show how a re-visioning of women who have been sidelined by the historical record can be key to the revelation of how God's Providence through history is worked out in the daily incidents of life.

Notes on Contributors

David Barratt with Roger Pooley and Leland Ryken edited *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory*, Apollos/Baker Books, 1995. The second edition of his *C. S. Lewis and his World*, retitled: *Narnia: C. S. Lewis and his World* appeared in 2005.

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The Revd Dr Arabella Milbank is currently the assistant curate of the Team Parish of Louth. She has just completed her doctorate in the English Faculty at the University of Cambridge on religious fear in Middle English, and is studying towards a further degree through the Divinity Faculty, working under Rowan Williams on seventeenth-century literature and angelology. Her most recent article is on Julian of Norwich's eucharistic theology.

Dr David Parry is a Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. He is currently writing a monograph entitled *Puritanism and Persuasion: The Rhetoric of Conversion and the Conversion of Rhetoric*, and has published several articles on sixteenth and seventeenth century topics. Until recently he has been a member of the committee of the CLSG and Associate Editor of *The Glass*.

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