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Memoranda and Documents

“WHIMSICAL CONTRASTS”:
LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN *THE MINISTER’S WOOING*
AND *OUR NIG*

TESS CHAKKALAKAL

THE 1983 republication of Harriet Wilson’s fictionalized autobiography, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There*, a work first published on 5 September 1859 that went virtually unnoticed in its own time, has been heralded as having “enormous significance” for our understanding of nineteenth-century America’s literary culture. In particular, Wilson’s text, “the first novel by an African American author to be published in the United States,” has been taken to serve as a black response to white nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, especially Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.¹ Elizabeth Ammons, for example, argues that Wilson draws upon Stowe’s “myth of the mother-savior” only to absent this figure from her own text and thus to mock it as an impossible ideal. Similarly, Julia Stern notes that “[u]nlike *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, . . . *Our Nig* raises important questions about what [Henry Louis] Gates has called ‘the innocence of the mother-daughter relationship’ through its critique of both biological and surrogate maternity across the lines of color and class.”²

I would like to thank Beth Lueck for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay and my students in the “Fictions of Freedom” seminar at Bowdoin College, whose insights have proven invaluable.

¹Alice Walker, quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr., preface to Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2002), pp. vii, xi.

²Elizabeth Ammons, “Stowe’s Dream of the Mother-Savior: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and American Women Writers before the 1920s,” in *New Essays on “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,”* ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 155–90, and Julia Stern, “Excavating Genre in *Our Nig*,” *American Literature* 67 (September 1995):

Although Wilson may have had *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in mind as she wrote her novel, comparisons between the two texts have more to do with James Baldwin's infamous reading of Richard Wright's *Native Son* than they do with *Our Nig*. Denouncing Wright's novel in 1955, Baldwin argued that Wright's protagonist, "Bigger [Thomas,] is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle."³ In similar fashion, although certainly not sharing Baldwin's animus, critics have limited readings of *Our Nig* by viewing it almost exclusively as a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even though the two works actually have very little in common. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is about the moral problem of the South's legalized institution of slavery; *Our Nig* is about the plight of a free black woman in New England.

This is not to say, however, that Wilson's novel was not engaged with the literary culture of its contemporary moment. In fact Wilson's novel reveals, as Ralph Ellison explains, that there was a closer connection between the sentimental conventions of popular nineteenth-century fiction and African American fiction than was assumed prior to *Our Nig's* discovery.⁴ Still, even as *Our Nig* remains an essential tool in shaping our present-day conception of the difference between African American and white American literature, I believe that we may discover some of its additional, pent-up potential if we unhinge it from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stepping outside of the twentieth-century critical paradigm that informs most readings of *Our Nig's* relationship to nineteenth-century literary forms, I intend to question that model by upending it. In what follows, I will engage in a creative, speculative enterprise: I will imagine ways in which the highly successful white New England novelist may have been responding to and have been influenced by the obscure black New England novelist.

440. For other readings of the intertextual relationship between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Our Nig*, see Haryette Mullen, "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Our Nig*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Beloved*," in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), and Phyllis Cole, "Stowe, Jacobs, Wilson: White Plots and Black Counterplots," in *New Perspectives on Gender, Race, and Class in Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

³James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," (1955), rpt. in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 155.

⁴Ralph Ellison, quoted in Gates, preface to *Our Nig*, p. viii.

My exercise may be speculative, but it is not without basis. Although Stowe does not mention *Our Nig*, we do know from both her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* and her involvement with well-known free black literary figures like Frank and Mary Webb that she was concerned about the condition of free blacks, particularly the "intense form of opposition to the free coloured people" living in the North.⁵ Thanking those "who have kindly furnished materials for her use" in the preface to the *Key*, Stowe explains how "many more have been supplied than could possibly be used." Drawing upon a "mountain" of documents, from slave narratives, legal texts, letters, diary entries, and personal observations, Stowe's *Key* manifests an engagement both deep and wide with stories by and about blacks.⁶ It seems likely that Stowe's capacious reading would have led her to encounter the author of *Our Nig* and the experiences her novel recounts. Reimagining the relationship between the two authors in this way leads us to turn away from Stowe's most popular novel and toward her third, *The Minister's Wooing*, a New England romance published the same year as *Our Nig* (1859).

The Minister's Wooing departs in important ways from Stowe's previous, overtly antislavery novels, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). Set within a Puritan circle in slave-trading Newport, Rhode Island, at the close of the eighteenth century, the novel's antislavery sentiments are woven so tightly into the fabric of its domestic plot that they are barely recognizable. Most critical discussion about the book has centered on the intersection between religion and romance that is dramatized through Mary Scudder's struggle to decide between her Calvinist heritage, as preached by the Reverend Hopkins and embodied by her mother, the Widow Scudder, and the "gospel of Love," as preached by the slave Candace and embodied by James Marvyn.⁷ In the end, Mary marries James and passes into what Stowe calls "that appointed shrine for woman, more holy than cloister, more saintly and pure than church

⁵See Harriet Beecher Stowe, preface to Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁶Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin; Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story is Founded. Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1853), p. iv.

⁷Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1859; rpt. New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), p. 202. All further citations to *The Minister's Wooing* will appear in text.

or altar,—a *Christian home*” (p. 326). The happy New England home with which Stowe’s novel concludes speaks directly to the broken and deeply unhappy New England home in which Wilson’s protagonist lives. By placing these two fictional New England homes side by side, we are able to discern the way in which Stowe deployed romance not only as a means of loosening the constraints of the theological orthodoxy to which Mary Scudder nearly succumbs but also as a liberating force that challenges the particular form of domestic slavery that prevails in both *The Minister’s Wooing* and *Our Nig*.⁸

Wilson’s narrative is set in Milford, New Hampshire, geographically and culturally distant from the thriving, slave-trading world of eighteenth-century Newport. Though Milford, reputedly the center of New Hampshire’s mid-nineteenth-century abolitionist sentiment, may well have been alive “with radical ideas,” Wilson presents this New England community as far from idyllic in the eyes of its poor, hapless townspeople.⁹ As *Our Nig* begins, Mag Smith, a white woman who has fallen prey to an upper-class seducer, is left to fend for herself. Alienated from society, she finds some comfort in the arms of “a kind-hearted African,” Jim, whom she eventually marries.¹⁰ After Jim dies, Mag takes up with another black man, Seth Shipley. When they can no longer care for the children Jim had fathered with Mag, she and Seth give over Frado, who at six years of age is already considered to be “pretty” and “a prize somewhere” (p. 17), to a white New Hampshire family, the Bellmonts, who claim her as “our nig,” a domestic servant. Abused by Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary, Frado is relatively well treated by Mary’s siblings, James and Jane. However, both James and Jane eventually leave the Bellmont household when they marry, against Mrs. Bellmont’s wishes, for love rather than economic gain. In time, Frado also leaves the Bellmont household “to work for a family a mile distant” (p. 65); she is left “alone in the world” (p. 65) until she meets and marries a black sailor who claims to be a fugitive slave and subsequently dies of yellow fever in

⁸For a particularly illuminating account of how Stowe employs the term “romance” in *The Minister’s Wooing*, see Christopher P. Wilson, “Tempests and Teapots: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The Minister’s Wooing*,” *New England Quarterly* 58 (December 1985): 554–77.

⁹See P. Gabrielle Foreman, *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 45.

¹⁰All further citations to *Our Nig* will be to the 2005 Penguin Classics edition, edited with an introduction and notes by P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts.

New Orleans, leaving her with a child. Despite her own profoundly negative experience of it, Frado remains, however, earnestly committed to the institution of marriage and the ideal of mutual love it represents.

Frado's ideas of marriage are summed up in the novel's penultimate chapter, "Marriage Again," when she intervenes to thwart Mrs. Bellmont's efforts to separate her son, Jack, from his wife, Jenny, an orphan like Frado. Because Jenny is "not worth a copper," Mrs. Bellmont berates her son for "bringing such a poor being into the family" (p. 62). Despite his mother's insistence that he "let [his] wife go," Jack brings her and their child to the Bellmont home so that he may look for work to support them. When he is called to assist his brother living in the South, Mrs. Bellmont watches Jenny "incessantly, to catch at some act of [hers] which might be construed into conjugal unfaithfulness" (p. 63). Realizing the effects of Mrs. Bellmont's actions, Frado decides to take matters into her own hands. "Stealing into Jenny's room, when she knew she was tortured by her mistress' malignity," Frado divulges her own encounters with Mrs. Bellmont and orchestrates the situation "so that Jack soon came to the rescue [of his wife], angry, wounded, and forever after alienated from his early home and his mother" (p. 64). Faithful and devoted, Jack Bellmont is the very image of Frado's model husband. Like her mother, Frado wants desperately to love and be loved, but she finds herself alone and abused. The failure of both women to find a good spouse is crucial not only to understanding their destitute circumstances but also to comprehending the novel's ideal of marriage.

Like her mother, who "merged into womanhood unprotected, uncherished, uncared for," Frado is offered little guidance when she attracts the attention of a "dark brother" (pp. 5, 70). With no responsible relative present to question the man's intentions, when he proposes marriage, Frado accepts, lacking the foresight to object or, at least, to wait until she knows more about her suitor. She learns too late of her mistake, a mistake that might have been avoided if she had had the benefit of proper "guardianship" (p. 5).

In *The Minister's Wooing*, Stowe explores the question of "proper guardianship," and she locates it, surprisingly, in one African American's experience of love and marriage and the wisdom it yields about free choice, commitment, and self-determination. Serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* from December 1858 through January 1860, *The Minister's Wooing* was deeply engaged, as Dorothy Baker points

out, with literature of the period, particularly, but not solely, with fiction and nonfiction that also ran in the *Atlantic* at the time.¹¹ Whereas scholars like Jeannine DeLombard have begun to position *The Minister's Wooing* alongside the popular legal and literary "slaver narratives" that appeared in late antebellum newspapers as well as periodicals like *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art* and *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, where Melville's "Benito Cereno" was first published three years earlier, little light has been shed on how antislavery politics figures in Stowe's third novel, so far removed from the Southern plantations and swamps of her previous fiction.¹² The book's chief black character, Candace, is key to understanding Stowe's critique of Northern social and religious institutions.

Building on Edmund Wilson's assessment of the character, Susan Harris contends that Candace is a strategically important, extremely positive figure who articulates the author's own beliefs about the most salient moral and theological issues covered within the story. "It is on Candace," Harris declares, "that the turn in the novel's theological plot depends."¹³ Similarly, in drawing upon the work of Alexander Kinmont and other mid-nineteenth-century commentators, George Fredrickson argues that for individuals he labels romantic racialists (as opposed to racists, on the one hand, and antiracists, on the other), "the Negro was a symbol of something that seemed tragically lacking in white American civilization." Fredrickson identifies *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "the classic expression of romantic racialism," but the "natural black docility" he identifies as exemplifying that novel does not, I believe, adequately account for Stowe's presentation of race in *The Minister's Wooing*.¹⁴ To appreciate Candace's role in *The Minister's Wooing*, one must position her within the complex matrix Stowe refers to as romance.

¹¹Dorothy Baker, "Harriet Beecher Stowe's Conversation with the *Atlantic Monthly*: The Construction of *The Minister's Wooing*," *Studies in American Fiction* 28 (2000): 27–38.

¹²Jeannine DeLombard, "After *Dred*: Law, *The Minister's Wooing*, and Future Directions for Stowe Studies," paper presented at the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, Philadelphia, October 2009.

¹³Susan K. Harris, introduction to *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), p. xv. See also Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), pp. 40–41.

¹⁴George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), pp. 97, 108, 109.

Candace, like Frado, works for a white family, the Marvyns, first as a slave and then, after she is granted her freedom, as a servant. Against the harsh reality of Frado's experience of servitude in New England, Stowe presents an idealized alternative. "In those days, when domestic slavery prevailed in New England, it was quite a different thing in its aspects from the same institution in more southern latitudes. The hard soil, unyielding to any but the most considerate culture, the thrifty, close, shrewd habits of the people, and their untiring activity and industry, prevented, among the mass of the people, any great reliance on slave labor" (p. 66). Such perceived distinctions between life in the North and South give slavery a different form in Stowe's New England novel. Whereas that perceived difference is, as Joanne Pope Melish explains in her history of slavery in New England, only a fiction, it is a fiction that serves a particular function within *The Minister's Wooing*.¹⁵ In that world, the former black slave introduces an ideal of love that diverges from the "cold, naked utility" of Calvinism that separates Mary and James, and in so doing, Candace is nothing short of essential to bringing about the novel's happy ending.¹⁶ Candace, in effect, becomes the couple's guardian angel; just as Frado protects and defends the marriage between Jenny and Jack, so too does Candace guard Mary and James Marvyn's union against hostile forces.

Candace offers both Mr. and Mrs. Marvyn spiritual aid, and she is devoted to their son James. Nonetheless, although she is treated as one of the family, there can be no mistaking her difference. James, for instance, manifests his affection in the gifts he presents to her: "a flaming red and yellow turban of Moorish stuff, from Mogadore, together with a pair of gorgeous yellow morocco slippers with peaked toes" (p. 69). These colorful, exotic items situate Candace outside the sober New England household in which she lives. Unlike the "Africanist presence" Toni Morrison describes in her account of nineteenth-century American literature, there is little about Candace that goes, in Morrison's terms, unnoticed.¹⁷ Candace's outsiderly status, however, allows her to view the family's actions from a certain distance

¹⁵Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹⁶Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1854), 2:250.

¹⁷Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 6.

and to arrive at insights that the novel's major—by which I mean white—characters lack:

Candace watched the light in Mary's eyes with the instinctive shrewdness by which her race seem to divine the thoughts and feelings of their superiors, and chuckled to herself internally. Without ever having been made a *confidante* by any party, or having a word said to or before her, still the whole position of affairs was as clear to her as if she had seen it on a map. She had appreciated at once Mrs. Scudder's coolness, James's devotion, and Mary's perplexity,—and inly resolved, that, if the little maiden did not think of James in his absence, it should not be her fault. [P. 84]

However much Candace looks and sounds like one of Stowe's exemplary slaves (like the earlier Uncle Tom, or Uncle Tiff of *Dred*, both of whom epitomize a natural Christianity), Stowe deepens and complicates Candace's role by granting her a clairvoyant sensibility.

What is it that Candace—who, like Frado, intervenes to protect the marriage of her white patron—is able to “divine” in the thoughts and feelings of her superiors? Stowe offers something of a response in her chapter “Which Treats of Romance.” Placed immediately after the chapter that introduces Candace, “Which Treats of Romance” begins in a schoolmarmish tone, its narrator aiming to correct misguided notions concerning the meaning of romance. She informs her readers that “[t]here is no word in the English language more unceremoniously and indefinitely kicked and cuffed about, by what are called sensible people, than the word *romance*” (p. 70). The narrator sets out to provide a proper definition of the term. What people think is romance, we are told, is not romance at all but just fiction.

For the narrator, and presumably Stowe, romance takes on a kind of spiritual force that permeates all our actions. Quoting, as she so often does, from the Bible, Stowe fashions a definition of romance that is far removed from literature. It lies instead “around us in the daily walk of life, written not with ink, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (p. 73). Although set amidst the customs and institutions of eighteenth-century New England, *The Minister's Wooing* is, as Stowe coyly tells us, not just history; it is also, and more importantly, a love story. However, this is a love story that goes well beyond the stuff that people read about in poetry and novels. Her love story, she tells us, is “more intense” than ever before was written in story or sung in poem because it is one that relies not on the form of fiction but

on the existence of God. Admonishing writers of romances, those preoccupied with trifling matters such as “French laces, opera-boxes, and even Madame Roget’s best gowns,” Stowe suggests that we “look up in fear and reverence and say, ‘God is the great maker of romance’” (p. 72). Only by setting aside our investment in material possessions and aesthetic objects for something holier and worthier might we be capable of accessing true love.

Removed from what Nancy Cott calls the period’s and the region’s distinctive “bonds of womanhood,” *The Minister’s Wooing’s* singular black woman embodies the freedom that those women who own “that much-coveted property which the New Englander denominates ‘faculty’” lack (p. 3).¹⁸ Candace’s experience and her theory of marriage depart in conspicuous ways from legal and religious convention. Marriage, for Candace, is more than romance; it is a matter of living virtuously. We learn of Candace’s own marriage to the slave Cato, and her views on the subject more generally, just after Mr. Marvyn grants her her freedom. “I intend,” said Mr. Marvyn, “to make the same offer to your husband, when he returns from work to-night.” Having fully recovered from the frenzied state the news of her own freedom produces in her, Candace informs her former master that there is simply no need to ask her husband whether or not he wants his freedom: “Course he will” (p. 105). With those three small words, Stowe overturns a common nineteenth-century view—as embodied in Mr. Marvyn’s belief that his slaves “do not desire liberty and would not take it if it were offered” (p. 102)—that slavery in the eighteenth-century North was a benevolent institution. As it turns out, however, Mr. Marvyn’s question and Candace’s response have less to do with slavery’s evils and freedom’s virtues than with the peculiar nature of Candace’s slave marriage and, more to the point, the narrator’s assessment of it.

The narrator comments:

[b]etween Candace and her husband there existed one of those whimsical contrasts which one sometimes sees in married life. Cato was a small-built, thin, softly-spoken negro, addicted to a gentle chronic cough; and, though a faithful and skilful servant, seemed, in relation to his better half, much like a hill of potatoes under a spreading apple-tree. Candace held to him with a vehement and patronizing fondness, so devoid of conjugal reverence as to excite the comments of her friends. [P. 105]

¹⁸Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

Although the narrator describes the contrast between Candace and Cato as “whimsical,” the religious men of New England, she quickly acknowledges, were hardly amused. “‘You must remember, Candace,’ said a good deacon to her one day, when she was ordering her husband about at a catechizing, ‘you ought to give honor to your husband; the wife is the weaker vessel.’” Candace replies in her typical, logical manner: “‘*I de weaker vessel?*’” she asks rhetorically, “looking down from the tower of her ample corpulence on the small, quiet man whom she had been fledging with the ample folds of a worsted comforter, out of which his little head and shining bead-eyes looked, much like a blackbird in a nest,—‘*I de weaker vessel? Umph!*’” (p. 105).

The deacon is silenced, but the narrator goes on:

A whole woman’s-rights’ convention could not have expressed more in a day than was given in that single look and word. Candace considered a husband as a thing to be taken care of,—a rather inconsequent and somewhat troublesome species of pet, to be humored, nursed, fed, clothed, and guided in the way that he was to go,—an animal that was always losing off buttons, catching colds, wearing his best coat every day, and getting on his Sunday hat in a surreptitious manner for week-day occasions; but she often condescended to express it as her opinion that he was a blessing, and that she didn’t know what she should do, if it wasn’t for Cato. In fact, he seemed to supply her that which we are told is the great want in woman’s situation,—an object in life. She sometimes was heard expressing herself very energetically in disapprobation of the conduct of one of her sable friends, named Jinny Stiles, who, after being presented with her own freedom, worked several years to buy that of her husband, but became afterwards so disgusted with her acquisition that she declared she would “neber buy anoder nigger.”

“Now Jinny don’t know what she’s talkin’ about,” [Candace] would say, “S’pose he does cough and keep her awake nights, and take a little too much sometimes, an’n’t he better’n no husband at all? A body wouldn’t seem to hab nuffin to lib for, ef dey hand’t an old man to look arter. Men is nate’lly foolish about some tings,—but dey’s good deal better’n nuffin.” [Pp. 105–6]

Candace, as both a slave and free black woman, provides a radical defense of marriage on the basis that it provides women—black and white—a space within which to be free, by which she (and Stowe) means self-ownership. Unlike the Widow Scudder, whose beliefs are based solely on her husband’s, Candace the slave claims a kind of ownership of her husband that enables her, even before she is freed by Mr. Marvyn, the opportunity, in her words, to *feel free*.

Stowe's conception of bondage in eighteenth-century New England turns out, then, to be not about slavery at all but about the freedom enjoyed within marriage, a position that we might read as Stowe's response to those proponents of the radical "free love" movement who called for the abolition of marriage.¹⁹ Candace enables Stowe to present, for lack of a better term, a *more* radical defense of marriage. The mutual commitment that marriage entails, Stowe insists, is the only means by which true freedom, a freedom spawned of love, can be realized.

Wilson's experience of New England differed markedly from Stowe's. Whereas in *The Minister's Wooing*, Candace is welcomed as a member of the family and freed by Mr. Marvyn, thanks to Dr. Hopkins's powers of persuasion, according to Wilson white abolitionists "didn't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh! To lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next to one; awful!" (p. 71). However, like Stowe, Wilson is also preoccupied with the conventions of marriage and their role in shaping the lives of the novel's female characters. But the marriages of Wilson's novel do not end, nor begin for that matter, happily, nor do they offer freedom; in fact, they produce their own miserable form of bondage. The marriage between Frado's mother and the "kind-hearted African," Jim, leaves Mag worse off. Her second marriage, to Seth Shipley, is worse, for it is "not the rite of civilization or Christianity" but an act of expedience. However much we, and the narrator, might sympathize with Mag's plight, there can be little doubt that Mag lacks not just virtue but proper guidance in matters of love and romance. Frado, too, is duped, and when her husband dies, she is forced to give up her daughter and find a way to earn a living. We are left at the end of Wilson's novel assuming that the fate of Frado and her mother will also be met by Frado's daughter.

Abandoned by her mother, abused by her mistress, deceived by her husband, and bereft of her daughter, Frado is deprived of a

¹⁹Stowe was staunchly opposed to the takeover of woman's rights by the "free divorce and free love" movement headed by Victoria Woodhull. Stowe went so far as to describe the movement's call to abolish marriage as "a great blister to my spirit." As she moved away from writing antislavery fiction, Stowe turned increasingly to writing novels that extended the theory of romance she introduces in *The Minister's Wooing* in a more practical direction. In her own words, this later fiction was designed "to show the domestic oppression practiced by a gentle pretty pink & white doll on a strong minded generous gentleman who has married her in a fit of poetical romance because she looks pretty" (Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], p. 374).

life-sustaining love. Her only source of affection is Fido [literally, “I am faithful”], a dog who, “in her estimation, [is] a more valuable presence than the human beings who surrounded her” (p. 35). When Mrs. Belmont sells the dog, “as if to remove the last vestige of earthly joy” from Frado, Mr. Belmont “by great exertion obtained it again” and, by doing so, performs the one act of human loving-kindness Frado experiences, which proves a great “relief” to her (p. 35).

Although Frado never enjoys romantic love, she is presented as eminently “capable” of it. James Belmont observes that “no one has a kinder heart, one capable of loving more devotedly,” a direct reference to Frado’s “spiritual condition” (p. 41). We are, ultimately, led to believe that there is a connection between her capacity to love and the fact that “she is black” (p. 41), for Frado takes after her black father, who loved her mother “to the last” and “toiled for her sustenance” even though “[s]he cared for him only as a means to subserve her own comfort” (p. 10). Doubting that “there [is] a heaven for the black,” Frado nonetheless turns to religion—Christ and the Bible—for comfort. Frado’s religion departs, of course, in crucial ways from that of Mrs. Belmont, who also attends church. Put simply, Frado practices a religion of love embodied by her black father, while Mag and Mrs. Belmont (her white mothers) abandon love for the sake of their material comfort.

After daring to write a book that is both the first black woman’s novel and an important autobiography of an indentured servant, Wilson gave up novel writing to pursue her second calling as an “earnest colored trance medium.”²⁰ Known as a clairvoyant physician who possessed powers of insight that might offer succor to those afflicted by spiritual or emotional illness, Wilson traveled throughout New England. Making eloquent pleas for the recognition of her race and the sentiment and philosophy of universal brotherhood, Wilson advocated a Christianity that accommodated the faithful without regard to race. And so, even though Frado is deprived of love within the confines of *Our Nig*, its author calls for a radical rethinking of romance to achieve a form that will imagine a deeper, truer concept of love.

The Minister’s Wooing answers that call. A historical romance, it relies on a free black woman to bring love and a happy marriage—“something higher, sweeter, purer” (p. 72)—into an austere white New England household. It is an institution no less desired within, but wholly absent from, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*. Through the

²⁰Foreman and Pitts, intro. to *Our Nig*, p. xl.

character of Candace in *The Minister's Wooing*, Harriet Beecher Stowe demonstrated wisdom in her understanding that the goals of blacks and whites regarding love and marriage are essentially the same; she demonstrated her ignorance by failing to account for the social and political conditions that produced individuals as lowly and lonely as those we encounter in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*.

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