Striking a Historical Pose: 
Antebellum Tableaux Vivants, Godey’s Illustrations, and Margaret Fuller’s Heroines

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In most eras, adult women have reluctantly had to forego the girlish pleasures of playing dress-up, but in the antebellum period maids and matrons alike could indulge their fancies in a widely enjoyed parlor entertainment, the tableau vivant (or living picture). Hauling out trunks full of clothes, consulting with sisters and friends, sewing new outfits, and crafting accessories, women turned their creativity toward displaying themselves as goddesses, shepherdesses, queens, and sprites. In elaborately staged freeze-frames, they submitted themselves to the (hopefully approving) gaze of their peers. Unquestionably, men in the audience received a rare opportunity to observe women in dress and postures generally more provocative than those customarily allowed in polite company. Fixing on that moment, many scholars of the nineteenth-century tableau vivant have seen in it one more instance of the era’s exploitation of women.¹ Certainly the tableaux vivants that emerged in cheap theaters later in the century exhibited women as sexual objects intended

simply for the pleasure of men's viewing. The parlor entertainments of the antebellum period, however, offered middle-class women more than the momentary thrill of stirring a comparatively chaste admiration; they encouraged women to try on a variety of personae. That project of self-fashioning, dramatically illustrated in tableaux vivants, was not however unique to them. In such popular vehicles as the periodical *Godey's Lady's Book* and in such highly intellectual pursuits as Margaret Fuller's *Conversations* (her much lauded lecture-discussions) and her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* can be found the same compelling impulse. Women were being invited to envision themselves in idealized roles, and as they did so, they were learning how to integrate their identities as public and private figures. It was a lesson that would not be lost on future generations of women.

Although its emblematic and allegorical characteristics recall medieval drama, Elizabethan dumb shows and pantomime, and Renaissance masques and pageantry, the "tableau" emerged as a true art form on the Continent and in England in the eighteenth century. The French playwright Denis Diderot developed a theory of dramaturgy that promoted the use of tableaux sequences. As Martin Meisel has noted, "Diderot insists on the essentiality of the spectacular, pictorial dimension in drama, and he envisages pictorial action brought to such perfection as to render words unnecessary." Itinerant acting troupes adopted Diderot's visual theater by engaging in "an agreeable game: imitating the compositions of well-known paintings with living figures." This form of the tableau vivant, all the rage in the early nineteenth century, "apparently took hold as a widespread genteel social en-

"Women were sexualized in theatrical tableaux vivants by about 1847, when "model artists," or women "clad only in close-fitting tights or leotards," were instructed to stand "motionless in imitation of classical statuary" (Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790–1870* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994], p. 116). For more on the "tableaux vivants" and "pose plastiques" of the theater, see Jack W. McCullough's *Living Pictures on the New York Stage* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1981)."
tertainment on the order of charades after Goethe published *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [Elective Affinities] (1809), but it had its predecessor in Lady Hamilton's 'attitudes.'” In these parlor entertainments, the participants elicited an emotional response from the audience by impersonating historical and classical personages, often drawing their subjects from paintings or statuary. The grand spectacles staged in public theaters, which shared many features with the parlor entertainments, often presented a series of historical or allegorical tableaux. For example, an English theater in 1837 presented “a program delineating the Passions, each set in its appropriate scene: Despair in the Dungeon; Hope at the Sea Shore; Revenge and Pity—the Sacked and Burning City; Jealousy—the Garden; Melancholy—the Convent Garden; ending with the Grand Allegorical Groupe—St. Cecilia Surrounded by the Passions.”

The European craze for parlor tableaux and stage tableaux spread to America in the nineteenth century, with subjects taken from mythology, allegory, history, and even contemporary literature. The angelic Eva of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a popular tableau, later developed into a play by George Aiken. With its insistence upon moral truth and emotional intensity, or pathos, the tableau rather naturally followed the route toward melodrama, but those same characteristics made it eminently suitable for the parlor as well. Tableaux were also especially intriguing to women, for they exhibited the contradictions between what was acceptable and what was real, as they “pointed up the emphasis on display and disguise of the female body in social life, and the habit of hypocrisy. Ladies, gender-bound to role-playing, were obliged to present smooth, objectified public selves, concealing and misrepresenting—and broadly hinting at—their hidden selves.”

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One mid-nineteenth-century American commentator, Sarah Annie Frost, offered a definition of the entertainment for her time:

There is scarcely any way of passing a social evening more delightful and popular than that offered by the performers of Tableaux Vivantes [sic] to the audience. . . . The first thing to be remembered is the fact that the representations are living pictures, and, therefore, must resemble, as closely as possible, painted pictures. To ensure this appearance, regarde [sic] must be paid to artistic effect in grouping, attitude, light and color.6

The tableau could involve as few as one or as many as forty participants, generally women. Behind a curtain, an actress would strike a pose. Once the curtain rose, she would hold her position for thirty seconds before the curtain dropped. This process would then be repeated two more times. In between viewings, the audience maintained silence, which heightened suspense and intensified the experience for actress as well as observers. As Robert Lewis has written about parlor theatricals in nineteenth-century America, they “highlighted the peculiarly nineteenth-century perception: the climactic moment, the extreme emotion, the graphic portrayal of a single melodramatic incident or episode.”7 William F. Gill, writing at the end of the third quarter of the century, suggested how an entire evening might be constructed around tableaux vivants.

A programme for an evening’s entertainment should consist of from five to ten designs, including varied selections of classical and domestic, serious and comic tableaux. Music, both vocal and instrumental if possible, should be given between the different representations, to afford time for the necessary preparations and prevent any delay, which

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too frequently occurs, and detracts from the interest of the performance by wearing the audience.8

One of the most interesting and popular nineteenth-century handbooks offering instructions for staging and producing tableaux is James Head's 1859 *Home Pastimes, Or Tableaux Vivants*, reissued five times before 1867. In his preface, Head asserts that he had been studying tableaux vivants for the last decade, that is, during the 1850s, when the tableau was at the height of its popularity.9 In Head's how-to text, which reflects his years-long research, the staging and themes are clearly woman-centered, the tableaux are geared toward female actors, and the relationship between the male and female actors favors the woman's role. Cast as admirers, male actors model a behavior intended to be adopted by the males in the audience, whether the female portrayed be of noble rank (e.g., in the tableau entitled “Coronation of Queen Victoria”), of biblical stature (“Portrait of the Madonna”), of mythological proportion (“Venus Rising from the Sea,” “The Three Graces,” or “Bust of Proserpine”), from the spiritual world (“The Guardian Angel” or “Flora and the Fairies”), from the dark spirit world (“The Gypsy Fortune-Teller”), from the historical realm (“Florence Nightingale in the Crimea” or “Joan of Arc at the Siege of Orléans”), from Native American lore (“The Death of Minnehaha”), or from the ordinary, everyday realm of the common or working woman (“The Bridal Prayer,” “The Flower Girl,” or the harvesting woman in “The Return from the Vintage” and the peasant girl in “Lovers Going to the Well”). Tableaux vivants, it would seem, were the great equalizers. Both royal women and women from the underclass were represented with the same spectacle and sentiment, so that royal women became more humanized (in this sentimental art) and women from


everyday life became majestic (through the emphasis on their regal bearing).

While women's roles were democratized, men's, on the other hand, were subordinated. Appearing alongside women in the tableaux, men seemed less significant, less powerful. For example, the Goddess of Liberty, as Head recommended staging her, is depicted in virginal white, with six maidens in attendance and six men gazing upon her admiringly. She poses against a backdrop that is incongruously male, militaristic, and heavy, with its gilt eagle, American shield, and various American flags, and the "Star-Spangled Banner" playing as the curtain rises. Even in tableaux of allegorized virtues and abstract ideas—tableaux with titles like "Fame," "Faith," "Spirit of Chivalry," "Peace," "Hope, Faith, Charity, and Love," "Spirit of Religion," and "War"—women took center stage. Men in the audience, like the men on the stage, were little more than inconsequential onlookers. Women's eyes were not focused on the audience but, if it were a multi-female tableau, on each other; if a single-female tableau, the woman would be staged as looking up or reflecting with an inward look or averted glance, as if aware of her self alone.

In that pose, James Head claimed, was the essence of beauty. Using language reminiscent of Hawthorne and other American romantics, he declared that

Art should not be confined entirely to the studio of the artist. . . . Beauty of form is still beautiful, be it found in the humble cottage or in the magnificent palace. . . . The delineation of the natural and poetical, its realization upon canvas, or upon paper, or in the living picture, tends to improve the mind, assimilates the real with the ideal.

His own responsibility, articulated in the manner of a mission statement, was to assure that everything was in place to allow that beauty to reveal itself in the specific form of the tableau. He possessed, he declared,

a sincere desire to extend the influence of a pure and ornamental art, to promote and extend a perfect system of what is really beautiful in the forming of the Tableau, to awaken in the minds of many a quicker
sense of the grace and elegance which familiar objects are capable of affording, and to encourage all to cherish a taste for the beautiful.\textsuperscript{10}

Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of \textit{Godey's Lady's Book} from 1837 to 1877, embarked on a similar project to fuse the real with the ideal. Intent on pushing women's special claim to morality, she nonetheless located their power to wield influence not so much in their religious or intellectual qualities as in their physical attributes. As an essay in the magazine articulated,

The paramount influence of women on the character, morals, and destiny of a nation, cannot be too often insisted on, or its importance too fully developed. . . . Pliant and winning in her manners; in her motions as in her speech, persuasive and seductive, she succeeds in making an impression, where men would fail. . . . Her grace and beauty win their way to the heart, and throw a fascinating attraction over every thing she says or does.\textsuperscript{11}

Seduction, however, could prove a slippery foundation for morality. Just as Head's tableaux at times seemed to sacrifice statement to image, so too did the frontispieces and sketches for \textit{Godey's Lady's Book}, which found their way onto the walls of many a middle-class home.

\textit{Godey's} illustrations celebrate the healthy woman's exuberance and zest for living. Whether showcasing European-based fashions (fig. 1) or more modest, locally influenced attire (fig. 2), woman's body is the site of interest. Likewise, in the parlor tableaux, the physical attributes of women—and their costumes—are on display. The most celebrated tableau, "Venus Rising from the Sea," which later became a notorious show-girl act when it moved from parlor to theater, called for rather sexy attire considering the bourgeois setting of a drawing room. Head's manual instructed, "This tableau is represented by one beautiful lady, whose costume consists of a flesh-colored dress,

\textsuperscript{10} Head, \textit{Home Pastimes}, pp. 7–8.
THE SNOWDROP.

OUR PRACTICAL DRESS INSTRUCTOR.

MORNING WRAPPER

fitting tightly to the body, so as to show the form of the person.” A tableau entitled “The Three Graces”—or Faith, Hope, and Love—also calls for a sensual treatment. A long white robe should be “worn with few skirts, and cut extremely low at the neck,” to be complemented with a “mantle of white tarleton muslin worn across the breast” and the hair “ornamented with large beads . . . and allowed to hang in short curls in the neck.”12

A Godey’s frontispiece of the Pleiades is reminiscent of the tableau. In that allegorical representation, the seven daughters of Atlas wear flowing, diaphanous dresses, and one woman’s gown has carelessly fallen over her shoulder to expose her breast (fig. 3). Even in “Madonna,” a tableau that would seem to dictate a restrained treatment, the sensual impinges upon the spiritual. “The lady who personates the Madonna should be of good figure, fine, regular features, eyes large and expressive, a full face and dark hair,” Head noted. “Costume consists of white dress open slightly in front, sleeves long and flowing, a velvet cape thrown negligently over the shoulders, a large cross suspended from the neck by a necklace of wax beads, the hair puffed slightly at the side, and arranged in a neat coil at the back.”13

If sensuality is to be the handmaiden of virtue, however, and seduction the enticement to morality, then one would expect evil thinking and evil doing to be imaged as ugly, even grotesque. In plates accompanying an allegorical story about good and evil in Godey’s (November 1851), though, that plan is complicated. The woman urging wrongdoing is far more appealing in the fullness of her Byronic beauty (fig. 4) than the Griselda-like preacheress of “Good Counsel” (fig. 5). In the sensual imagery of “Evil Counsel,” a moon hangs in the background, the temptress’s shoulders are bare, and flowers are strewn through her windswept hair, which is long and luxurious. A book has been carelessly thrown into the foreground, as if to suggest that words cannot compete with the pleasures of the flesh; indeed, in the story that follows, the book is identi-

12Head, Home Pastimes, pp. 31, 190.
13Head, Home Pastimes, p. 237.
fied, predictably enough, as God’s book, or the “psalter.” In “Good Counsel,” a humble and modest-looking woman, her gaze averted, is obviously planning to take the “correct” path recommended to her by her somber companion. Both women have their hair tightly braided and pinned up. The danger of passion has been averted, as symbolized by the calmed ocean, the church up the hill to the right, and the faithful dog at hand to offer protection.

Although the official message of the illustrations is not difficult to understand, the sensual and demonic remain strikingly more attractive than the sacred and virtuous. As Isabelle Lehuu has commented, “Godey’s epitomized the nineteenth-century shift from a primarily devotional to an increasingly secular literature, blurring in a single medium the sacred and the profane.” Lehuu also focuses on the sensory appeal of the images, concluding that they had “almost a fetishistic character and cult value”; they incorporated “sensual language [that] represented an open door to idolatry and potential deviance from the moral crusade.” Indeed—and again I agree with Lehuu—the impact of the illustrations in Godey’s was so overwhelming that the text receded or, in some cases, served to complement the images even as it continued to stress the putative moral.14

Accompanying the images of “Evil Counsel” and “Good Counsel” in Godey’s is a story by Alice B. Neal, entitled “Counsel—The Evil and the Good.” Given Hale’s agenda to promulgate woman’s moral authority, one would expect the story to dramatize the virtue of domestic simplicity and goodness. However, the images of woman’s desire are so overwhelmingly seductive—and reminiscent of Godey’s fashion plates—that the reader is hard pressed to resist the “wrong” image. The protagonist, Meeta, is blessed with beauty, not just spiritual but delicately physical beauty. The evil spirit advises Meeta to give up her work at the spinning wheel and to revel in her beauty. At that moment of confidence in her own splendor, Meeta is transformed: “the silken tresses broke from their fastening,

falling over throat and waist, and adding tenfold to her delicate beauty.” Not only does Meeta possess the type of beauty favored in the period’s tableaux vivants, but she also manifests the consumer desires of *Godey’s* readers. The evil spirit promises that she will replace Meeta’s “coarse garments” with silken gowns, dainty sandals, and diamonds for her flowing hair. Thus attired, Meeta will attract the notice of the prince, who will offer her roses for further adornment.¹⁵

Even though the story ends with the good guide teaching Meeta a lesson—that she should avoid the snares of Pride—the story is in truth, just like the journal, subversively anti-domestic in its celebration of woman’s body. The reader remains far more intrigued by the vision of what Meeta does not have (a sumptuous life of fashionable clothes and parties with wine and revelry) than by the everyday world of work to which she returns, under the duress of her good spirit. The romantic vision of princes, diamonds, and roses is not forgotten, and the domestic toils as evoked by the evil spirit are far from appealing: “To wake wearily with the day’s dawn, every limb aching with the labor of yesterday. To go about household tasks, disdaining even the lightest, because of the servitude of which it is a badge.”¹⁶ Though the majority of *Godey’s* readers were above the class of girls Meeta represents, most likely felt the burden of domestic responsibilities and would have found some release in the “evil” dream of glamour and sensuality. Though the goodness of woman is finally safeguarded in the story, waking up on a bed of straw does not erase the dream of luxury. Desire lingers. The restoration of peace of mind is small consolation to the woman who is encouraged, if only subliminally, to covet all the baubles and gowns that *Godey’s* fashion plates show. Elsewhere in *Godey’s*, the image of the pure, upright working woman is even further complicated in the process of being romanticized. The “fair haymaker,” though hard at work in the

field, is dressed sumptuously and has leisure to attend to her baby (fig. 6).

Just as in Godey’s illustrations and texts, tableaux vivants offer signs promoting what is acceptable or conventional at the same time as they conjure up feelings that are unacceptable or unconventional. The sensuous Madonna previously referenced is one example in which alternative modes compete. A tableau entitled “Paganism and Christianity” is remarkably similar to the images of contradictory advice set forth in Godey’s. The pagan woman, her hair flowing, is splendidly adorned; the Christian woman is blandly dressed in white muslin, and white flowers decorate her hair, which is restrained except for a few loose curls. In this “double tableau,” as Head describes it, Paganism is to be depicted in the first scene and Christianity in the second, with Paganism arranged on the dark side and Christianity on the light side of the stage. The props, also signs of right reading, reflect the ethnocentric biases of the time. Pagans, who worship the sun and moon and an Egyptian-looking idol, are surrounded by “Indian war clubs, spears, shields, and other curiosities.” The “good” Christians worship the Bible and cross, and the pulpit and altar sharing the stage are bathed in lamplight. While no one would dispute which image is to be modeled, the exoticism of the pagan, whether Egyptian or Indian, is undeniably more alluring than the familiar Christian.

Another tableau, Head’s “Dressing the Bride,” also plays off the tensions between civilized and exotic, good and evil. Based on the Thomas Bailey Aldrich poem “The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smoothly,” the tableau displays a princess, betrothed to a Turkish vizier, being adorned for her wedding day by two female attendants. Her dress of pink satin is hemmed with frilly white lace, she wears a purple velvet mantle and a bracelet on her arm, and her hair is bedazzled with pearls, all of which, including the stage furnishings, are described in painstaking detail. Female spectators (as well as participants) might well be seduced by the setting: “stands of colognes, per-

17Head, Home Pastimes, p. 94.
fumes, mirrors, combs, brushes, pin-cushions, and cases of jewelry” as well as “a large showy lamp . . . ; showy pictures . . . in rich gilt frames . . . ; cages containing singing birds . . . ; large globes, containing gold fish; richly ornamented vases; . . . marble or plaster pedestals, supporting pieces of statuary.”

Although a story such as Neal’s “Counsel—The Evil and the Good” suggests that women ought to shun the pleasures of the material world, “Dressing the Bride,” like Godey’s fashion plates of parlor and ball scenes (fig. 7), promotes a desire for the sensual and the material that reinforced an emerging consumer culture.

Patricia Okker has commented on the “polyphonic” quality of texts published in Godey’s: “Like a bouquet, a quilt, or a scrapbook, periodicals edited by and for women collected different pieces and voices, without insisting on one dominant voice”; certainly, as much can be said of Godey’s illustrations as well as of the tableaux vivants they so closely resemble. To be sure, there were numerous images that fulfilled the usual expectations of women’s roles. In one engraving, “Our Father, Who Art in Heaven,” a mother, hands folded in prayer, looks on as her young daughter recites her nightly devotions (fig. 8). It is reminiscent of a traditional tableau glorifying woman in her role as moral mother and religious guide. In a tableau from later in the century, “Hallowed Be Thy Name,” “A mother in dark dress, and child in white, [are] kneeling upon crimson cushion with hands folded in attitude of prayer.” Elsewhere, however, such roles are questioned and subverted. In a rather comical Godey’s frontispiece, a woman, possibly a mother, covers her ears against the noisy Fourth of July celebrations of a group of children, who are obviously annoying her (fig. 9), and in “These Are My Jewels,” a mother, ignoring the children playing around her, stares vacantly into a painting of them, perhaps indicating

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18Head, Home Pastimes, p. 129.
that the ideal is more appealing to her than the actual (fig. 10). Against such images of irritated and distracted mothers, Head’s collection and Godey’s issues pose alternative views of women, such as the buxom Siren (fig. 11) (reminiscent of the tableau “Venus Rising from the Sea”) and the self-reliant Pilgrim (fig. 12) (reminiscent of “The Gypsy Fortune-Teller”).

In presenting numerous voices and poses as alternatives to women, Hale and Head complicated notions of gender conformity and gave latitude to a self-empowerment capable of extending from the domestic to the public realms. As Isabelle Lehuu has shown, “women’s pictorial representations shared in the construction of sentimentality and domestic fiction,” but they “effected a significant change in the American public sphere as well, thus complicating the binary of the separate spheres.”

The tableaux, whether staged in the parlor or in print, did not simply celebrate true womanhood or inspired motherhood; rather, they presented a kaleidoscopic vision of woman in the splendid variety of her being—daring, impulsive, rebellious, heroic, introspective.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the pictorial and verbal cataloguing of famous women complemented the similar activity earlier initiated for American men. Elizabeth Ellet, who wrote a series of vignettes on “Heroic Women of the Revolution” for Godey’s in 1847–48, went on to produce a landmark study in three volumes entitled Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence (1848–50) as well as collections of biographical sketches such as Pioneer Women of the West (1852). As one recent critic has noted, “Mrs. Ellet unabashedly re-created an onstage female role in a historical pageant that had always been presented from a masculine perspective.” And

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21 Lehuu, Carnival on the Page, p. 124.
Fig. 11. "The Siren," January 1846, p. 1.
Fig. 12. "The Pilgrim," August 1840, p. 49.
just as Hale juxtaposed the domestic and the heroic in her *Godey's* engravings, so did Ellet in her biographies. In her 1848 preface, Ellet described the difficulty of her project:

The actions of men stand out in prominent relief and are a safe guide in forming a judgment of them; a woman’s sphere, on the other hand, is secluded, and in very few instances does her personal history, even though she may fill a conspicuous position, afford sufficient incident to throw a strong light upon her character.  

With her biographies of famous Revolutionary women, Ellet locates the inspiration for their heroic feats in their moral superiority, gentle demeanor, kind heart, charitable nature, or excellent schooling. Occasionally, her verbal portraits also contain physical descriptions, which middle-class consumers of *Godey’s* and parlor tableaux would have eagerly anticipated in their quest for heroic models.  

Edgar Allan Poe, in his “The Literati of New York City,” serialized in various 1846 issues of *Godey’s*, mocks such hero hunting as vigorously as he pursues it. In his sketch of Margaret Fuller, for example, Poe extols *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* for its originality, but he then goes on to attack her methodology. By infusing her seemingly objective accounts with personal feelings and by universalizing or essentializing woman’s nature, “She judges woman by the heart and intellect of Miss Fuller, but there are not more than one or two dozen Miss Fullers on the whole face of the earth.” Poe praises Fuller for her “graphicality” and “picturesque” writing and for her conversational style, but he unappealingly depicts her manner as sneering, with nervous tics; she draws out her words “as long


24For more on Ellet’s role as one of the first women historians, see Nina Baym’s *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790–1860* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 233–39. Like other women historians of her time, Ellet was “far from conforming to any sequestered, submissive, passive domesticity” (p. 239).
as possible, nearly closing her eyes,” he adds. Famous for his many “tableaux morts” of idealized women, Poe evidently is not comfortable with a “tableau vivant” that derives its energy from a vital, active presence.

Hale, of course, well understood the literary and pictorial predilections of her era. One striking illustration in Godey’s, accompanied by a historical account, displayed five tableaux of “Heroic Women of the Revolution” (fig. 13), at least some of whom appear to be ordinary women simply rising to the needs of the moment. The seriousness with which Hale embraced the essential task of documenting women’s historic contributions is evident in her ambitious study entitled Woman’s Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women from the Creation to A.D. 1854. Published in 1855, Hale’s encyclopedia of famous women, from biblical times to the mid-nineteenth century, is 912 pages long and contains 230 portraits. Although Hale dedicates her study to “The Men of America; Who Show, In Their Laws and Customs, Respecting WOMEN, Ideas More Just and Feelings More Noble than Were Ever Evinced by Men of Any Other Nation,” she multiplies the possibilities open to women by celebrating and defending their activities in a vast number of spheres. Prominent among those Hale seeks to defend is Margaret Fuller. Fuller’s theories may have “led to mazes and wanderings,” Hale acknowledges, and her work may have been too “visionary and impracticable,” but “Woman in the Nineteenth Century’ contain[ed] many useful hints and noble sentiments.” Moreover, in deflecting the charge that Fuller longed to be masculine, Hale notes that “her mind was honest in its search for truth,” thereby claiming intellectual inquiry as a legitimate activity for women. Like Fuller, Hale does not imagine herself as disempowered but as a central figure in a quiet revolution to

Fig. 13. “Heroic Women of the Revolution,” September 1859, p. 193.
elevate the status of women even as she continues to valorize their special role as moral arbiters.²⁶

Another comprehensive study, *Eminent Women of the Age; Being Narratives of the Lives and Deeds of the Most Prominent Women of the Present Generation* (1869), articulated a mission similar to Hale’s: to “develop and strengthen correct ideas respecting the influence of woman, and her share in the privileges and responsibilities of human life.” Contemporary authorities, among them Horace Greeley, T. W. Higginson, J. S. C. Abbott, Fanny Fern, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were asked to write sketches for the study, and the book brags that it is “richly illustrated with fourteen steel engravings.” The content as well as the engravings appealed to readers’ visual appetites. For example, preceding Thomas W. Higginson’s sketch of her is an engraving of a serene, mystical Margaret Fuller Ossoli. Higginson tries to recapture her passionate essence and dramatic presence by alluding to her oratorical powers and tableauesque poses: “I have always fancied that the best impression now to be obtained of the way she talked when her classes called her ‘inspired,’ must be got by reading her sketch of the Roman and Greek characters, in her autobiographic fragment.” In Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s account of Abby Kelley, the Quaker abolitionist and woman’s rights activist whom Fuller also depicted in her tableaux of women, Kelley is portrayed much like one of James Head’s tableau vivant women: “She was a tall, fine-looking girl, with a large, well-shaped head, regular features, dark hair, blue eyes, and a sweet, expressive countenance. She was a person of clear moral perceptions, and deep feeling.” In these sketches, one senses the authors’ allegorizing impulse to ally beauty with morality and to reconcile emotion with wisdom.²⁷

Another activity drawing on the tableauesque was Margaret Fuller’s series of Conversations, or discussion groups, held be-


tween 1839 and 1844 at her literary salon in Boston, which frequently met at Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s bookshop. We have a sense of what passed in the Conversations from reports by some of the participants, but Fuller’s methodology is also obvious in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), to which she transferred her oratorical and pictorial style. Initially published as “The Great Law Suit. Man versus Men: Woman versus Women” in the July 1843 *Dial*, Fuller’s compendium presents verbal sketches, or tableaux, of queens, dead and alive (Elizabeth, Isabella, Catherine the Great, and Victoria, among others); goddesses Egyptian, Greek, and Norse (among them, the “thinking” goddesses Minerva, Diana, and Vesta); heroines of Greek mythology (Cassandra, Iphigenia, Antigone, and other “Sibylline priestesses”); holy women from the Bible (above all, Mary, who encompasses the wise and fertile archetypes of the original Isis) or saints (St. Theresa); women from history (Joan of Arc, Anne Hutchinson); famous women writers (George Sand, Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, and, a regular in *Godey’s*, Catharine Maria Sedgwick); famous fictional women (often drawn from Shakespeare or from Goethe, e.g., Cordelia, Gretchen, Leonora); and pioneering women of her own day (Harriet Martineau, the Grimké sisters, Lydia Maria Child, Abby Kelley)—all designed to inspire a female audience and to lead them along the path toward self-reliance. Many of the historical, biblical, and mythological personages Fuller introduces in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* were, in fact, popular inspirations for tableaux vivants.

Just as James Head characterizes art as feminine and ubiquitous, even when encountered in humble circumstances, so too Fuller equates all that is noble in life with woman. Moreover, again mimicking the tableaux of her popular culture, she allegorizes values and abstractions with feminine forms: “The names of nations are feminine—Religion, Virtue, and Victory are feminine,”* Fuller declared, much as Head had embodied Liberty,

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*Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845; New York: Norton, 1971), p. 108. Fuller’s interest in the pictorial and dramatic is evident in her critique of an exhibition of the paintings of Washington Allston, held in the summer of 1839. “The calm and meditative cast of these pictures, the ideal beauty that shone through them rather than in them, and the harmony of colouring were as unlike anything else I saw,”
Faith, Fame, Poetry, and the Spirit of Religion as women. Indeed, the topics Fuller covered in her five years of Conversations focused on Greek mythology and on allegories such as Faith, Wisdom, Purity, Beauty, Truth, Vanity, Prudence, Patience, and Health. And like many of the Godey's editorials, Fuller's Conversations often addressed gender differences (instinct versus reason) and the questions of good, evil, and temptation.

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's transcription of Fuller's Fifth Conversation, about Psyche's temptation, has the intensity and emotional tone of one of Head's classic tableaux. When Psyche's sisters, who envy her her wealth and marriage, convince her to open the forbidden "box full of divine beauty" and to discover the identity of her mysterious husband, she learns the hard lesson that Fuller explains allegorically and psychologically: "To look for divine beauty in the infernal regions—to derive it . . . from the lowest principles of our nature—was a false quest—Its effect was to involve the higher faculties in a sleep—from which only the celestial influence can awaken them." But unlike the moralizing author of "Counsel—The Evil and the Good" in Godey's, Fuller does not consider evil to be a necessarily constant or even deleterious state, and therefore she opens to women tempting vistas associated with the material realm: "Miss Fuller was asked whether with her views she could be said to believe in any evil—for if evil was but a condition of a necessary & desirable development—it was a good—She
replied that evil was temporary, but it was real while it lasted.”30 The Conversations, like the tableaux vivants or the illustrations in *Godey’s*, in effect sanctioned a momentary transgression, a release that produced an exhilarating, if brief, sense of freedom.

In their efforts to appeal to a female audience, Sarah Josepha Hale and Margaret Fuller drew on similar notions of the iconographic, the visual, the pictorial, and the statuesque to offer women both a private and public sense of self that was empowering and liberating. An image that gathers into itself that entire plan is the mirror. It receives a strong visual representation in a *Godey’s* illustration titled, simply, “Reflection” (fig. 14). The engraving depicts a woman standing in front of a mirror. Her face, evident to the reader only as it appears in the glass, shows her dreamily peering into it. She is herself “reflecting,” trying to discover in her own reflected image something she has not noticed or understood before. This “mirroring” is a central device of the tableau vivant, the *Godey’s* illustration, and Fuller’s Conversations alike. Beholding herself in the mirror, which could offer back both the ideal and the all-too-real, could prompt woman’s introspection, even her own refashioning of self. The tableaux functioned in a similar manner; like modern-day stills, they capture moments of interiority from woman’s private sphere and then iconographically translate that personal experience out into the public arena, so that the relationship between the female actor and the female spectator becomes reciprocal.

Jenijoy La Belle, in her fascinating study of mirrors, offers insights applicable to the tableau. The mirror, La Belle notes, is a “tool of self-exploration and self-discovery,” which sets in motion a “continual process” that allows woman to “distinguish herself from others” and to “situate herself in relation to these other selves.” It encompasses and questions “dichotomies between self and reflected image, between spirit and flesh, be-

tween psychological presence and physical body." Just like the reflections offered in Fuller’s Conversations, Hale’s illustrations, and Head’s tableaux, “the image in the glass” is “at once an otherness she [woman] can study and an intrinsic part of the ego as it comes into being.”

This reciprocity between female actor and female spectator and between public and private was symbolized not only by the mirror but by the conversation as well. Indeed, as Nicole Tonkovich has recognized, Hale was able to “claim . . . a lady-like social role as hostess by calling her editorials ‘Conversazioni.’” While Tonkovich believes that that pose of equality between editor and reader was merely strategic, Patricia Okker argues that “Hale’s work within a public female space was not simply self-serving. On the contrary, her editorial columns consistently reveal both the power of the sisterly editorial voice and the flexibility of Victorian ideologies of separate spheres.” Hale’s legacy is the public forum provided by women’s magazines, which “function[ed] as an intimate place for women to come together, listening to and speaking to one another and valuing each other’s experiences.” Hale used the “editorial ‘we’” to represent the commonality she felt with her readers: this royal “we” was perceived as female and “invited women readers to share the authority of [the magazine’s] woman editor.” That communal “we,” once embraced by readers, in turn strengthened a mutual, empowering relationship: “By accepting Hale’s authority as editor, the readers assumed some of that power for themselves, for they shared her perspective as a white, middle-class, literate woman.” Certainly, that same methodology was evident in Fuller’s Conversations, in which she struck the pose of “Woman Thinking” (to superimpose Emerson’s phrase of

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33Tonkovich, Domesticity with a Difference, pp. 124–25; Okker, Our Sister Editors, p. 166.
34Okker, Our Sister Editors, pp. 164–65, 132.
“Man Thinking” in “The American Scholar”), an individual persona she then worked to extend to the collective group of participants.

Fuller understood that important truths defied description and could be apprehended only partially, through brief, intuitive glimpses. As she remarked in her journal, “The best part of life is too spiritual to bear recording.”\(^3^5\) The character sketches she enacted, Fuller believed, were an effective means for providing those flashes of truth, for spotlighting female accomplishment. Even though, by all accounts, she had a tendency to monopolize the Conversations, Fuller was genuinely concerned that women find their own voices. Mercurial speaker/actor that she was, she could project the qualities of the classical goddess she was describing; in essence, Fuller performed a series of tableaux vivants designed to inspire her female followers, to encourage them to strike new poses and to try on the personae of strong female role models. Acting the sibyl, as Julia Ward Howe noted, Fuller did not so much impose her own view of Woman as she drew it from those around her. “Such a speaker,” Howe remarked,

consciously or unconsciously, draws much of her inspiration from the minds of those around her. . . . She divines what each most purely wishes, most deeply hopes; and so her words reveal to those present not only their own unuttered thoughts, but also the higher significance and completeness which she is able to give to these thoughts under the seal of her own conviction.\(^3^6\)

Charles Capper, in his biography of Fuller, captures that evanescence when he describes her as giving of herself, Minerva-like, so that women could share her empowerment: “she offered them a way by which they might achieve privately some of the same intellectual benefits that the sphere of public activity denied to them supposedly conferred,”\(^3^7\) just as the


\(^{3^6}\)Julia Ward Howe, *Margaret Fuller (Marchesa Ossoli)* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883; reprinted, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1970), p. 93.

\(^{3^7}\)Capper, *Fuller: An American Romantic Life*, p. 296.
woman gazing at a parlor tableau or a *Godey's* engraving might momentarily feel an authority she did not normally possess.

Not one to shy away from her own authority, Fuller habitually raised Woman to the level of goddess, and her observers consistently described her in those terms. Sophia Dana Ripley fondly referred to Fuller as “the brilliant sibyl of the plains” after she had moved to Jamaica Plain.

Julia Ward Howe characterized Fuller as “A priestess of life-glories,” a woman larger than life: “she magnified her office, and in its grandeur sometimes grew grandiloquent.” After leaving the United States, Fuller used similar language to express the Italians’ view of her. She wrote Emerson, “I am to them a divine visitant, an instructive Ceres telling them wonderful tales of foreign customs and even legends of their own saints.”

While women drew on mythology to celebrate Fuller’s special qualities, male commentators turned those same images against her. One anti-transcendentalist referred to her “as a Minerva driving a team of the new *illuminati*.”

Men who failed to understand the feminine vocabulary of tableaux vivants or *Godey’s* engravings would hardly have been likely to appreciate Fuller’s Conversations. We know that Ralph Waldo Emerson attended one of the ten sessions Fuller had opened to men, but, calling her Conversations “Parlatorio” and alluding to the “Aulic Council of Wednesday noons,” he considered her a shallow imitation of a prophetess. Channing, supposedly her good friend, accused her of taking on the “role

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39Howe, *Margaret Fuller*, p. 85.

40Fuller to Emerson, 11 July 1848, *Letters of Fuller*, p. 86.

41Quoted by Howe, in *Margaret Fuller*, p. 94.

42Though oriented primarily towards women, Conversations were attended by Emerson, George Ripley, and William Story when Fuller invited men to ten special evening sessions in 1841 (see Christina Zwarg, *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press], p. 165). According to his *Memoirs* of Fuller, Emerson only attended one Conversation (vol. 1, p. 348), which Dall records as 8 March 1841, in *Margaret and Her Friends, Or The Conversations With Margaret Fuller Upon the Mythology of the Greeks and Its Expression in Art* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895; reprinted, New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 43.

43Quoted by Von Mehren, in *A Life of Margaret Fuller*, p. 118.
of a Yankee Corinne”; according to Julia Ward Howe, he found her “intensity of temperament, unmeasured satire, and commanding air . . . repellent.” When Fuller rendered the Eleusinian mysteries with dramatic flair at the Conversations, Emerson reportedly believed “that it was impossible to detect an inner sense in all these stories.” He was also impatient with Fuller’s spiritualizing.44

In her essay on the goddess Leila, I cannot help but be convinced, Fuller faced such male criticisms head on. “Most men as they gazed on Leila were pained,” Fuller imagined; “they left her at last baffled and well-nigh angry. For most men are bound in sense, time, and thought. They shrink from the overflow of the infinite; they cannot a moment abide in the coldness of abstractions; the weight of an idea is too much for their lives.”45 Not until after her death did Emerson pay tribute to Fuller’s “invariable power over the minds of all” and her ability to open up hearts. Though at times hyperbolic, she could elicit sincere responses from her listeners and transform them, almost hypnotically, into deeper thinkers and more colorful personalities:

Whilst she embellished the moment, her conversation had the merit of being solid and true. She put her whole character into it, and had the power to inspire. The companion was made a thinker, and went away quite other than he came. The circle of friends who sat with her were not allowed to remain spectators or players, but she converted them into heroes, if she could.46

The transcriptions of Fuller’s Conversations are few, sparse, and imprecise: all that remains are some of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody’s rather (stylistically) dry accounts of the meetings and Caroline Healy Dall’s incomplete recollections. Still, as Julia Ward Howe expressed it, “While . . . it may well grieve us today that we cannot know exactly what Margaret said nor how

44Howe, Margaret Fuller, pp. 86, 55.
46Emerson et al., Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, 1:312.
she said it, we may believe that the inspiration which she felt and communicated to others remains, not the less, a permanent value in the community.” Recounting Conversations she had attended in 1841 from notes she had sketched out during that time, Dall confessed in her 1895 Ten Conversations with Margaret Fuller that she had failed to grasp all of Fuller’s points about the gods and goddesses she brought to life; still, Dall acknowledged Fuller’s lasting effect on her impressionable young mind: “In no way was Margaret’s supremacy so evident as in the impulse she gave to the minds of younger women.” In a recent essay, Judith Mattson Bean maintains that the public successes of many women who attended Fuller’s Conversations are proof enough that “women also heard in Fuller’s eloquence their own potential power to engage in public intellectual vocations.” Even so, there were some who were disappointed that aesthetics took priority over politics. Harriet Martineau, who never attended a Conversation, took her cue from abolitionist Mary Chapman, who wrote, “While Margaret Fuller and her adult pupils sat ‘gorgeously dressed,’ talking about Mars and Venus, Plato and Goethe, and fancying themselves the elect of the earth in intellect and refinement, the liberties of the republic were running out as fast as they could go.” In the context of the present essay, one cannot help but think of Godey’s and the tableaux vivants.

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47Howe, Margaret Fuller, p. 94.
48Dall, Margaret and Her Friends, p. 13.
50Quoted by Von Mehren, in Minerva and the Muse, p. 118. Emerson noted in volume 1 of the Memoirs that “Margaret used to come to the conversations very well dressed, and, altogether, looked sumptuously” (p. 336). He comments on her appearance as if she were the figure of a tableau vivant. In a rather unflattering picture, he states that “all deformity of features” was “dissolved in power of the expression” of her spirited delivery (p. 337). He attributes the look of grandeur to her mercurial nature and her display of genius: “I interpret this repeated story of sumptuousness of dress, that this appearance, like her reported beauty, was simply an effect of a general expression of magnificence made by her genius, and mistakenly attributed to some external elegance” (p. 337).
Fuller did not, however, neglect political and social activists, some of whom were loyal participants at her Conversations. Her tableauesque description of abolitionist lecturer Abby Kelley in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is particularly revealing of Fuller’s rhetorical strategy: “I saw her humanity in a gentleness and unpretension, tenderly open to the sphere [mob of angry men] around her.” Fuller maintains that Kelley “acted like a gentle hero, with her mild decision and womanly calmness. All heroism is mild, and quiet, and gentle, for it is life and possession; and combativeness and firmness show a want of actualness.” Thus does Fuller empower woman and demonstrate the superiority of female heroism by making the personal political: “I feel she [Kelley] did much good, more than the men in her place could do, for Woman feels more as being and reproducing—this brings the subject more into home relations.” Indeed, Sarah Josepha Hale had precisely that goal—to expand the influence of woman by making her heart and her conscience the motivating forces in a public world inappropriately governed according to male principles.

For Fuller, the ultimate figure capable of reconciling the contradictions of thinking and feeling is the “Virgin/Mother” type, or the Roman Catholic Madonna, who in Fuller’s imagination fuses the fruitful, maternal qualities of the mother goddess Ceres and the intellect and self-reliance of Minerva. The image is, of course, not unique to Fuller; in fact, the earthly Madonna was ubiquitous in mid-nineteenth-century American culture—in the parlor tableaux, in *Godey’s*, and in popular fiction. Daring to allow its spirituality to be intertwined with the profane, its private character to spill over into the public realm, the figure possessed a power that would not be fully grasped until Henry Adams brought it to bear on his critique of his age.

51 Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 111.
52 John Gatta has recently examined the iconographic importance of the Madonna in nineteenth-century American literature in his *American Madonna: Images of Divine Women in Literary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Gatta goes so far as to construct Fuller in the tableauesque terms of a regal figure: “Both in her own estimation and as tagged by detractors who mocked her claims to intellectual superiority, Margaret Fuller held sway as New England’s queen” (p. 33).
Indeed, the “American Madonna” would not be fully and publically understood until a man took her measure. Certainly Margaret Fuller had never underestimated the Madonna’s ability to fashion unity out of multiplicity. Fuller had tried to do as much herself. Anna C. Brackett (1836–1911), an important but, until recently, neglected American philosopher, found Fuller’s life so varied that it was difficult to “paint her picture.” Still, making the attempt, she classified Fuller’s wide variety of accomplishments:

the ardent and over-expressive maiden, the faithful teacher, the brilliant leader of conversation, . . . the reviewer and critic, the traveler, . . . the enthusiastic lover, and worker for, Italian independence, the tenderly cared-for wife, the careful and prudent mother, the unwearied nurse of the wounded soldiers in Italian hospitals, the quiet heroine, who could face death for twelve hours undaunted.53

In the end, Fuller became the heroine she had simply pretended to be in her intellectual imaginings.

The act of pretending should not, however, be seen as idle. By trying on multiple personalities, struggling to find the right fit, women began the arduous process of preparing themselves for a public role in a society not yet ready to allow them that freedom. Through the experience of acting in and viewing tableaux vivants and reading such popular media as Godey’s Lady’s Book, women began to locate a community of like-minded seekers. Although its strength would not be felt for almost another century, that community, drawing on the sympathies and activities of supportive males and aligning popular and intellectual modes, would eventually break free of the moment, frozen in time, into a form of action that would allow women’s voices to emerge loud and clear in all subsequent public debates.

53 Anna C. Brackett, “Margaret Fuller Ossoli,” The Radical 9 (December 1871): 356. Thanks to my colleague Dorothy Rogers, Assistant Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Montclair State, for informing me about Anna Brackett and bringing Brackett’s sketch of Fuller to my attention.
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