

Colby



Colby College  
Digital Commons @ Colby

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

2010

## Ties that Bind: Hiram Powers' "Greek Slave" and Nineteenth-Century Marriage

Lauren K. Lessing

Colby College, llessing@colby.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty\\_scholarship](https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty_scholarship)



Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lessing, Lauren K., "Ties that Bind: Hiram Powers' "Greek Slave" and Nineteenth-Century Marriage" (2010).  
*Faculty Scholarship*. 65.

[https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/65](https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty_scholarship/65)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.



# Ties That Bind

## *Hiram Powers's Greek Slave and Nineteenth-Century Marriage*

Lauren Lessing

On an April evening in 1859, Louise Corcoran, the only child of fabulously wealthy banker, philanthropist, and art collector William Wilson Corcoran, married George Eustis Jr., a United States congressman from Louisiana, in her father's Washington, D.C., mansion. A "select circle" of more than one thousand guests witnessed the ceremony, which took place in Corcoran's private art gallery. Writing of the wedding for *Harper's Weekly*, George Washington Jenkins noted that one of the original versions of Hiram Powers's celebrated marble statue *The Greek Slave* (frontispiece) stood at one end of the gallery, "in a bay window which forms a fitting shrine." He went on to describe the "impressive and beautiful tableau" that greeted the wedding guests as they entered the space:

*At the far end of the gallery, as a presiding divinity, was the exquisite chef d'oeuvre of Powers, surrounded by the rarest exotics, pure and white as the eloquent marble itself. Before the pedestal, however, were dense clusters of scarlet azelias, which formed an effective background for the bride, who was, of course, the "observed of all observers." Never was there a more lovely victim at the altar of Hymen and never did she appear more beautiful.*

Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, 1846. Marble, 65 in. high. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of William Wilson Corcoran

Jenkins wrote of the bride's white silk and point lace gown, the handsome groom, and the artfully grouped wedding attendants before briefly describing the ceremony.

*[The Rev.] Dr. Pyne stopped a few paces in front of the couple about to be wedded, Mr. Corcoran standing at his right hand, just in his rear, the attendants being on either side. . . . Never was the ritual of the church more impressively read. Mr. Corcoran gave the bride away; the wedded couple knelt upon two prayer cushions placed before them; and no sooner had the clergyman said "Amen!" than they sealed the rite with a kiss.<sup>1</sup>*

The gowns worn by Louise Corcoran and her bridesmaids, the flowers, and the arrangement of the wedding party followed, almost to the letter, the recommendations for a tasteful wedding proposed in *Godey's Lady's Book* the previous November. However, the Corcoran family substituted its private art gallery for a church and reversed the usual order of the wedding procession, in that the guests and the minister, not Louise, entered with Corcoran, the father of the bride. The bride, the groom, and their attendants stood posed and motionless—like works of art themselves—before an ideal marble

statue, Powers's *Greek Slave*, which took the place of a traditional Christian altar.<sup>2</sup> The Corcoran-Eustis wedding allows us to reconsider *The Greek Slave* in the light of mid-nineteenth-century views of marriage in the United States—in particular, debates about the relation between marriage and slavery, reactions to the marriage practices of the Latter-Day Saints and other utopian movements that sought to redefine the institution, and sentimental narratives that stressed the painful separation of brides from their parents.<sup>3</sup>

### American Marriage

The Corcoran nuptials took place at a crucial juncture in the visual culture of American marriage. Through their wedding Louise Corcoran and George Eustis enacted a sentimental ideal of marriage that had been popular for the past two decades. In innumerable decorative prints, fashion plates, and other illustrations produced during the 1840s and '50s, brides and grooms—like those in Sarony & Major's *The Marriage*

(fig. 1)—stand or kneel side by side, their heads inclined toward each other, their wide-eyed faces suffused with love and religious reverence. Newly married husbands and wives—such as those depicted in Currier & Ives's print *The Young Housekeepers: The Day after Marriage* (fig. 2)—lean into one another, smiling and gazing into each other's faces. In both these prints, the married pair are positioned and framed as if occupying a world of their own, oblivious to the gazes of others. This romantic image of marriage, which a flood of illustrated gift books and ladies' magazines helped to popularize for a broad American middle- and upper-class audience, is reflected in Jenkins's description of the "rather petite" bride, "with a full face, expressive eyes, and graceful carriage," and the "slender, gallant-looking young bridegroom," who kneels with her, then leans in for a kiss. It also can be seen in a portrait of Louise Corcoran, by French-trained painter Louis Mathieu Didier Guillaume, which depicts the young woman in her wedding gown, gazing dewily upward and out of the picture, as if into the eyes of her

- 1 Sarony & Major, *The Marriage*, 1846. Hand-colored lithograph, 12 x 8 ½ in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- 2 Currier & Ives, *The Young Housekeepers: The Day after Marriage*, 1848. Hand-colored lithograph, 14 x 10 ¼ in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



beloved (fig. 3). Against her breast, she presses a violet, symbolic of modesty and calm submission.

It could hardly be said, however, that the bride and groom were, in this case, oblivious to the gazes of others. Jenkins's description of the carefully arranged bridal party as a "tableau"—a word that recalls the popular parlor theatricals known as tableaux vivants—shows his awareness that the Corcoran-Eustis wedding was an elaborately staged performance. Mrs. Jefferson Davis's ironic

comment in a letter to her husband that the wedding was to be "a small Rothschild's affair" is equally telling. She was no doubt referring to the 1857 marriage of cousins Leonora and Baron Alphonse de Rothschild, which was described and depicted by a host of illustrated magazines, including *Harper's Weekly*, *Godey's Lady's Book*, and the *Illustrated London News* (fig. 4). This European, Jewish wedding—which, according to the reporter for *Harper's Weekly*, could only have escaped the notice of those "in Oregon, and the Sandwich Islands; every body else knows the Rothschilds by heart"—probably served as a model for the Corcoran ceremony.<sup>4</sup> Like Leonora Rothschild, Louise Corcoran was a wealthy banker's daughter, and, like the Rothschilds, Mr. and Mrs. Eustis were married in the spring before a large crowd in a splendid domestic interior decked out with chefs d'oeuvre including white marble statuary, with the press in attendance. As historian Karen Halttunen has argued, American

- 3 Louis Mathieu Didier Guillaume, *Louise Corcoran Eustis*, ca. 1859. Oil, 35 1/2 x 28 in. Lisner-Louise-Dickson-Hurt Home, Washington, D.C. Photo, Amelia Goerlitz
- 4 "Marriage Ceremonial of the Baron Alphonse de Rothschild and Miss Leonora Rothschild: The Bridegroom Breaking the Wine-Cup," *Illustrated London News*, March 1857, 237



domestic culture in the 1850s witnessed a shift away from sentimental sincerity toward self-conscious display.<sup>5</sup> This shift is certainly evident in the Corcoran-Eustis wedding, where the ceremony was conceived from start to finish as a public presentation of the prominent family's wealth and social ideals. The central position of Hiram Powers's *The Greek Slave* within this display is an index to the sculpture's importance at this historical moment.

By 1859 *The Greek Slave* (see frontispiece, fig. 5) had achieved iconic status in both the United States and Britain. Everyone at the Corcoran-Eustis wedding would have been familiar with its subject.<sup>6</sup> It depicts a young, Greek Christian woman captured by Turks during the Greek War of Independence (1821–29). Stripped and chained at the wrists, she stands on the auction block stoically awaiting her imminent sale into

sexual slavery. The short chain that binds her wrists prevents her from covering both her genitals and her breasts at the same time. In any case, her languidly lowered arms, like her expressionless, averted face, convey her resignation in front of the invasive gazes of the Turks. As cultural historian Joy Kasson has rightly noted, *The Greek Slave* tapped into a profound anxiety about the safety and integrity of the domestic sphere. In fact, viewers conflated the slave's body with the fraught barrier between the private and public realms, contrasting the corruption, exposure, and ruin that oppressed her from without with the comfort, faith, and love she sheltered within her heart.<sup>7</sup> The drama of Powers's narrative came from the threat that her body—her last domestic barrier—might be violated. As the sculptor's friend and promoter Miner Kellogg noted, the slave's discarded clothing, draped on a pillar behind her, offers crucial information about her life: "The cross and the locket, visible amid the drapery, indicate that she is Christian and beloved."<sup>8</sup> Sentimental writer Grace Greenwood also read in these items an indication of class:

*By the embroidered cap and robe at her side, as well as by the exquisite delicacy of her hands, we may know that the maiden is noble, and that luxury and homage have waited upon her steps from infancy. Then how fearful this bondage, this exposure! Manacles on those soft, fair hands, and the gaze of vulgar eyes upon that unrobed, patrician form!*<sup>9</sup>

As such reactions indicate, *The Greek Slave* could be read as a young woman not unlike Louise Corcoran herself, but one who—through a twist of fate—will become a concubine rather than a bride.

In light of its subject matter, *The Greek Slave* might seem a bizarre choice for a wedding altar. Nevertheless, at a time when a growing number of Americans were protesting the legal, political,



5 Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave* (detail)

and economic disenfranchisement of married women, it created a vision of domesticity that many of the wedding guests in Washington must have found compelling. *The Greek Slave* embodied the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of “true womanhood,” which meant, according to Barbara Welter, that women should be passive, pious, pure, and domestic. As one American observer noted, the statue combined “all that is beautiful in the ideal—that glows in the fancy—and all that is cheerful and home-like in the fair beings who cluster around our own firesides and live in our hearts.”<sup>10</sup> Even in the less emotionally and symbolically charged settings of public exhibition halls, nineteenth-century viewers often contrasted the slave’s “distant, happy cottage home in Greece,” where she had been cherished and adored, with the polygamous, lustful, and pecuniary union about to be imposed on her. From this comparison emerged a vision of Christian domestic life characterized by “love, trust, hope and joy,” an ideal that obscured the actual second-class status of married women throughout the Western world at this time.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the Corcoran-Eustis wedding, the placement of Powers’s sculpture so close to the happy, willing bride celebrated the Western model of marriage by contrasting it with a fantasy of the dissolute East.

Many scholars have discussed the complex connections between Powers’s *Greek Slave* and the fraught, contemporaneous dialogues about gender, race, and slavery. Overlooked has been the fact that the sculpture and its reception are also deeply enmeshed in nineteenth-century American debates about marriage, in which gender, race, and slavery were intricately intertwined.<sup>12</sup> Women’s rights advocates compared a wife’s position within a traditional marriage to slavery. Abolitionists (some of whom supported women’s rights and some of whom did not) decried the fact that slaves were denied legal marriages and pointed to

slavery’s deleterious effects on the marriages of white slave owners. Proslavery apologists, by contrast, presented white wives and black slaves as occupying separate, subordinate rungs within a divinely ordained patriarchy. Slavery protected marriage, they argued, by shielding white women from the lust of dark-skinned men. Finally, defenders of a conservative definition of marriage (some of whom supported slavery, while others did not) compared the various utopian and reformist communities seeking to redefine marriage at this time to Turkish harems, which they imagined as alluring but dangerous places, where the boundaries between slave and wife melted away entirely.<sup>13</sup> With *The Greek Slave*, Powers created a figure that could stand calmly in the eye of this rhetorical storm, eliciting viewers’ sympathy while seeming to affirm their various, contradictory, and overlapping ideas about slavery and marriage.

### **The Crisis in Marriage**

During the years surrounding Powers’s creation of *The Greek Slave*, many Americans perceived a crisis in the legal and social definitions of marriage that threatened, in their minds, the foundations of Western civilization. As early as 1836, a writer for the *New York Evangelist* published “A Plea for the Institution of Marriage,” in which he defended, against “every attack of infidel philosophy, licentious taste, reckless legislation, and thoughtless levity,” a definition of marriage as the monogamous, permanent union of one dominant man and one submissive woman. For the writer, not only was this form of marriage natural, unchanging, and God-given, it was also essential for “the safety of individuals and communities, nations and the church.”<sup>14</sup> Nor was he alone in his fears about the state of marriage in the United States. In 1841 Rev. Robert Hall extolled “The Advantages of the

6 J. Maze Burbank, *A Camp Meeting, or Religious Revival in America, from a Sketch Taken on the Spot*, 1839. Watercolor on paper, 27 x 37 in. Old Dartmouth Historical Society–New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford, Massachusetts, Gift of William F. Havemeyer. Photo, New Bedford Whaling Museum



Marriage Institution to Communities.” Describing “traditional Christian marriage” as “the great civilizer of nations,” he condemned “the advocates of infidelity [who] invert this eternal order of nature.” The same year, an author for the *Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository* decried the evils of polygamy in particular as the cause of the “voluptuousness . . . indolence, and imbecility both of mind and body, which have long characterized the nations of the East” and which now also threatened the United States. In 1845 former President John Quincy Adams argued, “Of all human institutions, the most indispensable to the social happiness of man is the unity and permanence of the marriage contract.”<sup>15</sup>

This outpouring of support for a single, supposedly eternal and divinely ordained definition of marriage was, in part, a reaction to the many groups seeking to redefine American marriage in the wake of the Second Great Awakening. Caused in part by a swell in the numbers of American children born in the early nineteenth

century, this period of intense Christian evangelism afforded thousands of young men and women the opportunity to participate in tent revivals like the one depicted in a watercolor of 1839 (fig. 6). Not only did such gatherings allow participants to experience ecstatic revelations, but they also brought young people together in new communities outside the normal boundaries of families, villages, and conventional churches—institutions whose authority many began to question. Large numbers of men and women who took part in revivals during their youth remained receptive to new ideas about the organization of the family and society as they settled down, married, and raised families of their own.

One of the earliest utopian communities to be founded during this period was Nashoba plantation, established in 1825 by Scottish immigrant and freethinker Frances Wright, who purchased a tract of land near Nashville, Tennessee, where she hoped to promote equality in terms of both race and gender. Her community



7 “Oneida Community Beastliness! The Obscene Orgies and Pernicious Teachings of the Patriarch Noyes among the Novices of His Saintly Sect,” *National Police Gazette*, February 4, 1882, 9



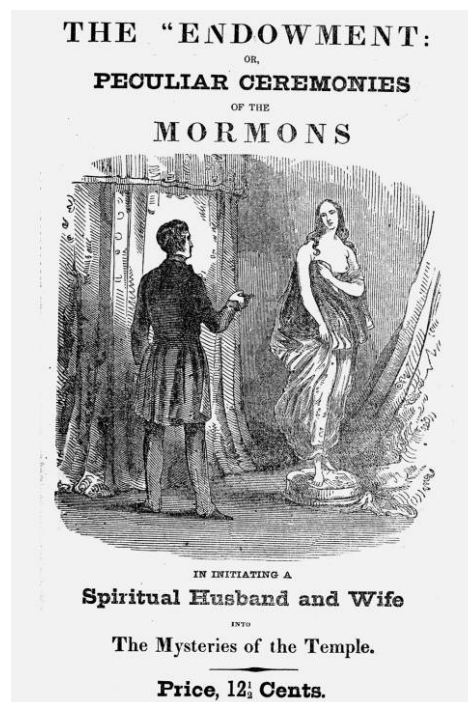
consisted of a group of white, liberal men and women and fifteen freed slaves. While Wright was in England recovering from an illness in the late 1820s, rumors of free love at Nashoba eroded support for her project—rumors made all the more explosive by the racial heterogeneity within the community. Although Nashoba dissolved in 1830, criticisms of Wright continued to fly for decades. As late as 1855, an article in the *New York Times* listed Wright as one of many “infidels” who sought “the overthrow of the Marriage institution.”<sup>16</sup> The author of this article likewise condemned Wright’s friend Robert Owen, who had founded the utopian community of New Harmony in Indiana, also in 1825. Like Wright, Owen sought to erase social inequalities based on race and gender as well as on class. Although Owen’s original plan for New Harmony lasted no longer than Nashoba, Owen and his son, Robert Dale Owen, remained powerful presences in American life, arguing eloquently for both abolition and women’s rights

from the 1830s through the 1850s. When Robert Dale Owen married Mary Jane Robinson in 1832, the couple signed (then published) a marriage contract in which the groom renounced his legal but “barbarous . . . feudal, despotic” claim to his wife’s property and person. As a member of the Indiana state legislature in the late 1830s, Owen championed birth control and worked to liberalize the state’s divorce laws, prompting Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, to describe Indiana as a “paradise for free lovers.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1848 one of the longest-lived attempts to redefine the American family began in Oneida, New York, under the guidance of eccentric visionary John Humphrey Noyes. The Oneida Community announced its presence to the public in 1850 with a manifesto titled *Slavery and Marriage: A Dialogue*. In it Noyes declared, “The truth is Marriage gives man the power of ownership over woman, and such power is as wrong and prolific of wrong in the case of Marriage, as in that of Slavery.”<sup>18</sup> Noyes’s solution was to do away with marriage entirely and encourage sexual relations between all willing, adult, heterosexual couples within his socialist community—with the use of birth control a strict requirement. Although their neighbors tolerated members of the Oneida Community, the word “Oneida” became synonymous with sexual depravity and antimarriage sentiment in nineteenth-century American parlance. As late as 1882 an illustration in the tabloid *National Police Gazette* (fig. 7) depicts Noyes whipping naked captive girls as he forces them to join his community at the lower left, while a large, central vignette shows their fate—to become a harem of nude water nymphs surrounding the satanic Noyes in a mysterious woodland pool. Like

the illustrator of this scene, critics of the Oneida Community in the 1840s and '50s flipped Noyes's conflation of conventional marriage with chattel slavery on its head, arguing that it was Noyes—an “infidel”—who enslaved women in his personal seraglio through a combination of coercion and trickery.<sup>19</sup>

As threatening as these various utopian movements may have seemed to American defenders of conventional marriage, the anxieties they created paled beside the fear and loathing inspired by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which was founded by Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1830. By the early 1840s the church's adherents—commonly known as Mormons—numbered nearly eighteen thousand. From early on, the Latter-Day Saints were dogged by rumors of polygamy.<sup>20</sup> In 1832 Smith had received a divine revelation that “plural marriage” was necessary for the highest form of salvation, and when he personally put this doctrine into practice in the mid-1830s, he aroused the ire of foes and followers alike. Nevertheless, Smith and his closest disciples—including Brigham Young—persisted in marrying numerous wives. After being ousted from the site of their first temple in Kirtland, Ohio, and being driven violently from their second temple near Independence, Missouri, in 1838, the church's members settled in Nauvoo, Illinois. There they prospered, and the unconventional marriage practices of the church's leaders began to draw more attention. Though the Saints themselves did not acknowledge their polygamous marriages to outsiders before 1852, several tawdry exposés published in the early 1840s sparked a public outcry. As a writer for the *Quincy Whig* declared in 1842: “The holy city of Nauvoo . . . is no better than an extended seraglio, where [Joseph] Smith, like Solomon of old, or the Grand Turk himself, can roam up and down, and satisfy his lustful desires at pleasure.”<sup>21</sup>



When tensions with their anti-Mormon neighbors flared into violence yet again, leading to Smith's assassination in 1844 and their forcible expulsion from Nauvoo two years later, the church's members followed the retreating western frontier and settled in the territory surrounding the Great Salt Lake, in what would become Utah. There, beyond the easy reach of federal authority, they grew rapidly in numbers and practiced polygamy openly until nearly the turn of the century.

In 1840, when Hiram Powers first conceived of sculpting a captive Greek girl forced into a Turkish harem, he was probably aware of the rumors concerning irregular marriage practices by the Latter-Day Saints. Until 1836 he had lived in Cincinnati, Ohio—a thoroughfare for Mormon missionaries traveling between Kirtland, Ohio, and Jackson County, Missouri—and he remained in close contact with family and friends there after moving to Italy.<sup>22</sup> By the time Powers was modeling *The Greek Slave* in clay, preparatory to its being carved in marble, the polygamy of the Saints had



LIZZIE MONROE IN HER PRISON.—BRIGHAM YOUNG MAKING INSULTING PROPOSALS.

- 8 Increase McGee Van Dusen and Maria Van Dusen, *Startling Disclosures of the Wonderful Ceremonies of the Mormon Spiritual-Wife System, Being the Celebrated "Endowment"* (privately published pamphlet, 1852), cover
- 9 Frontispiece, Orvilla S. Belisle, *The Prophets; or Mormonism Unveiled* (W. W. Smith, 1855)

become common knowledge. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, when more than one hundred thousand Americans viewed two versions of *The Greek Slave* in various exhibition venues across the United States, a veritable firestorm was raging over Mormon polygamy that continued to burn for decades. In a lascivious critique of Mormon marriage published in 1852, Increase and Maria Van Dusen claimed that virginal girls were coercively prepared for “the harem” by the Mormon Temple Ceremony. The cover illustration of their pamphlet depicts a properly dressed man pointing, like a buyer, at a seminude young woman, standing mournfully on a pedestal in an attitude reminiscent of an ideal sculpture (fig. 8). Orvilla S. Belisle’s 1855 book, *The Prophets; or Mormonism Unveiled*, is a veritable catalogue of tales describing the kidnappings and rapes of Mormon “brides,” illustrated with scenes of pitiful, captive women attempting to fend off the sexual assaults of the church’s leaders (fig. 9). Greeley declared in 1859, “The spirit with regard to woman, of the entire Mormon, as of all other polygamic systems, is fairly

displayed [by Brigham Young]. Let any such system become established and prevalent, and woman will soon be confined to the harem.”<sup>23</sup>

The Mormons’ challenge to the mainstream, mid-nineteenth-century American definition of marriage was a serious one. While seemingly defying both God’s will and the natural order of existence, they nevertheless prospered. In fact, their difficult but ultimately triumphant journey from New York through the westernmost states of the union and finally to the far edges of the frontier seemed to affirm the popular doctrine of Manifest Destiny—the belief that white Americans, as God’s favored people, had a divine mandate to settle all the lands separating the eastern states from the Pacific Ocean. Why, many Americans wondered, would God so favor a sinful and heretical sect? And what would become of the institution of marriage in the United States if the territory settled by the Latter-Day Saints were admitted into the union as a state, as Mormon settlers petitioned in 1849? Public fear and frustration over the Latter-Day Saints reached a high point in the years surrounding the disastrous Utah War of 1857–58, when the federal government—led by Democratic President James Buchanan—deployed nearly one-third of its armed forces in a failed attempt to quell Mormon control over Utah territory. Delegates of the new Republican Party also sought to eradicate Mormon polygamy. At their 1856 convention in Philadelphia, they adopted as the key plank of their platform “to prohibit in the territories those twin relics of barbarism, polygamy and slavery.” In July 1862, six months before signing the Emancipation Proclamation, President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, which created the first federally mandated definition of marriage and aimed “to punish and prevent the practice of polygamy in the Territories of the United States.”<sup>24</sup>

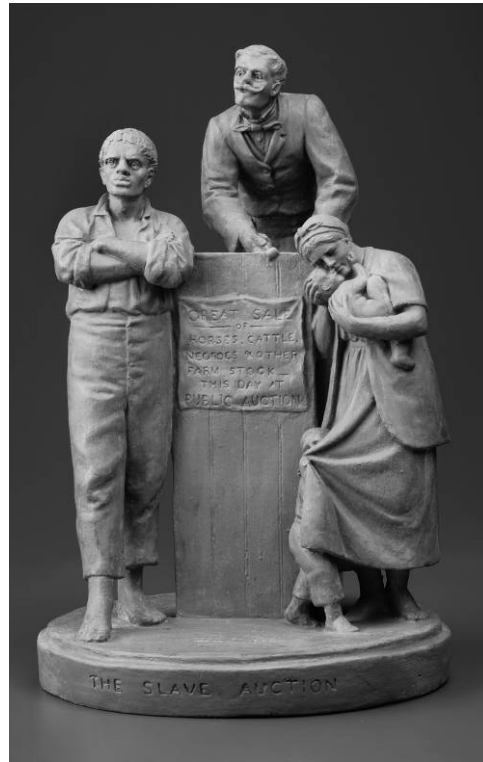
10 Unidentified artist, *Slave Market*, ca. 1850–60. Oil, 29 ¾ x 39 ½ in. Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Gift of Mrs. W. Firch Ingersoll. Photo © 2010 Carnegie Museum of Art



The “twin relics of barbarism” were conflated in innumerable nineteenth-century abolitionist sermons, tracts, and images, reminding readers that polygamy was not a practice confined to the Latter-Day Saints but an integral part of the American slave system, a system that constituted yet another threat to marriage in the United States. Artists often presented slave auctions as un-weddings, where young men and women were separated forever rather than being joined in matrimony. In a painting of a slave sale by an unknown artist dating from the 1850s, a beautiful, fair-skinned slave woman in a pale pink gown stands at the center of a turbulent sea of human misery (fig. 10). A mother at the lower left is being whipped as she is separated from her children, but it is the calm young woman who is the center of attention. As her lover, who sits helplessly in the lower right foreground, gazes longingly at her, she is ogled by lascivious white men.

Their intentions are clear. Like Powers’s *Greek Slave*, this woman is destined to become a concubine rather than a bride. Similarly, in his *Slave Auction* of 1859, popular sculptor John Rogers turned the sentimental imagery of a wedding on its head (fig. 11). The man and woman of his young couple are turned outward, toward the viewer, rather than inward, toward an altar or one another. Rogers replaced the minister at his lectern with an auctioneer who leans forward over his podium, hammer (rather than Bible) in hand. The baby the slave woman caresses and the child who hides behind her skirt make it clear that this couple are husband and wife in fact if not in name, and their forced separation is a crass, unholy violation of their matrimonial bond. Like all Rogers’s sculptures, *The Slave Auction* was scaled to tabletop size. In the parlors of middle-class abolitionist families, it was a constant reminder of what was denied less fortunate families enslaved in the South.

- 11 John Rogers, *The Slave Auction*, 1859. Painted plaster, 13 3/8 x 8 x 8 3/4 in. The New-York Historical Society



The creators of abolitionist images such as these evoked a sentimental ideal of companionate marriage for political ends. This notion, with its emphasis on fidelity, free choice, and the centrality of romantic love, had emerged only in the late eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, responding to the cultural anxieties surrounding marriage, American history painters in the 1840s and '50s hammered home the point that consensual, companionate marriage was natural and unchanging by projecting it onto foundational narratives. For instance, in *The Marriage of Washington* (fig. 12), Junius Brutus Stearns depicted the 1759 wedding of Washington and the wealthy widow Martha Custis. Although the wedding actually took place in the Custis home and the bride wore yellow silk, Stearns placed the couple in an elegant Episcopal church and painted Martha in a white gown—a Victorian convention signifying purity. Framed by the gallant groom and a group of pretty bridesmaids (including her young daughter in an

anachronistic short, pink frock), Martha stands demurely, looking modestly down and away from her future husband as she places her hand in his. A print version of the painting was published as the frontispiece to “The Odd-Fellows’ Offering for 1851,” where, according to a reviewer, it “appeals forcibly to the national sentiment” by celebrating “our free institutions.”<sup>26</sup> In *The Marriage of Pocahontas*, Henry Brueckner portrayed a bride whose body language similarly conveys love, modesty, and submission. An engraving after the painting by John C. McRae (fig. 13) was accompanied by a text describing the wedding as taking place “in charming April,” in “the new and pretty chapel at Jamestown.” Standing in a seventeenth-century Puritan church bizarrely decked with garlands of flowers, the bride blushes as she voluntarily places both hands in the left hand of her handsome young groom, while he points upward to heaven with his right. Like Martha Custis in Stearns’s painting, Pocahontas looks down and away. Her white veil and chemise are supplemented by a bright red scarf and blue underskirt, making the nationalist ideology in the image explicit. Not only is this form of marriage divinely ordained, Brueckner implies, it is also a cornerstone of American culture.

The subject of Powers’s *Greek Slave*—a helpless female victim of sexual profligacy and polygamy—is a less fortunate sister to the brides in Stearns’s and Brueckner’s paintings. Like them, she stands demurely, looking down and away—a paragon of modesty and submission. Yet, unlike a bride, she has no strong man to love her, protect her, or support her in her tribulation. Viewers often noted this absence. As one critic mused, “she is recalling the struggling country she has left behind her, the friends she has lost, the blackened and desecrated home she may never see again, the lover of whose fate on the battlefield she is still ignorant.”<sup>27</sup> Henry



12 Junius Brutus Stearns, *The Marriage of Washington*, 1849. Oil, 40 x 55 in. The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, Museum purchase

Tuckerman wrote, as if addressing himself to the slave:

*Earnest words I hear thee breathing  
To thy distant lover now;—  
Words of comfort, not of wailing,  
For the cheer of hope is thine,  
And, immortal in thy beauty,  
Sorrow grows with thee divine.*<sup>28</sup>

Grace Greenwood imagined the slave’s “thoughts with him, the best beloved; who, with his young life darkened by despair, his heart riven by grief and maddened by wrong, yet battles for his lost Greece, or sighs his soul out in weary captivity.”<sup>29</sup> Like the helpless young women depicted in abolitionist

and anti-Mormon images, the Greek slave has been reduced from an object of veneration to an object for sale, and—bereft of proper male protection—she is vulnerable to insult and attack. For conservative viewers, Powers’s sculpture of a young woman deprived of her lover, and thus her chance to become a wife, also offered a rebuke to those “infidels” like Fanny Wright, Robert Owen, John Humphrey Noyes, and Joseph Smith, who sought to redefine the sacred institution of marriage.

Yet *The Greek Slave* could also be read as a critique of the unequal power relations within American marriage. Take, for example, the experience of Lucy Stone. Raised in a strict patriarchal

- 13 John C. McRae, *The Marriage of Pocahontas*, 1855. Hand-colored engraving after an oil painting by Henry Brueckner. From Benson John Lossing, *Description of the Marriage of Pocahontas (with Key Plate) at Jamestown, Va., April 1613* (Joseph Laing, n.d.), frontispiece



household, Stone supported herself by teaching and cleaning houses in order to attend Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, in South Hadley, Massachusetts, and, later, Oberlin College, in Oberlin, Ohio. When she left Oberlin, she threw herself into the abolitionist cause. An eloquent and sought-after speaker, in 1848 she was asked to lecture at a meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. While in the city, she went to see *The Greek Slave* at the Horticultural Hall.

*No other person was present. There it stood in the silence, with fettered hands and half-averted face—so emblematic of women. I remember how the hot tears came to my eyes at the thought of the millions of women who must be freed. At the evening meeting I poured all my heart out about it. At the close, Reverend Samuel May, General Agent of the Anti-Slavery Society, came to me and, with kind words for what I had said, he admonished me that, however true, it was out of place at an anti-slavery meeting; of course he was*

*right, but the “Greek Slave” took hold of me like Samson upon the gates of Gaza. After thinking a little, I said, “Well, Mr. May, I was a woman before I was an abolitionist. I must speak for the women. I will not lecture anymore for the Anti-Slavery Society, but will work wholly for woman’s rights.”*<sup>30</sup>

Stone’s response to *The Greek Slave* was typically sentimental. That is, like most nineteenth-century viewers, she lost herself in empathy for the young woman depicted and shed “hot tears” over her tragic predicament. A reporter for the *National Era* observed many such reactions to the sculpture in a Washington, D.C., exhibition hall in 1847, but lamented: “There were fair breasts, that heaved with genuine sympathy beneath the magic power of the great artist, that have never yet breathed a sigh for the sable sisterhood of the South!”<sup>31</sup> Stone’s emotional reaction to the work, by contrast, galvanized her political beliefs and spurred her to take action. However, while the writer for

the abolitionist *National Era* hoped the sculpture would arouse empathy for American slaves, Stone's epiphany before it led her to work instead for the rights of free married women in the United States.

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, fierce debates were raging about married women's rights to own property and to sue for legal divorce. Until the 1850s (and in most parts of the country much later) all American wives were defined under common law as "covered" by their husbands' identities. They thus lacked any legal control of their own property, income, or persons. Nor, in most cases, could they legally end their marriages by any means short of committing adultery—a crime that stripped them of children, home, and status. Not surprisingly, defenders of women's rights were quick to seize on the parallels between the trapped and disenfranchised positions of American wives and black slaves in the United States as well as the denizens of Eastern harems. In 1840 a writer for the conservative *Christian Review* protested: "The public ear has been filled with declamation upon the wrongs of woman,—her political and legal non-existence,—her natural equality,—her inalienable rights, and her degrading servitude; as though the sex, at some early period, had been conquered and subjugated by man, and were still held in a state of bondage." Despite this author's assertion that American wives were neither slaves nor concubines but, rather, willing participants in the free institution of Christian marriage, women's rights advocates like Stone continued to make such comparisons. "Marriage is to woman a state of slavery," she declared in 1854, "It takes from her the right to her own property, and makes her submissive in all things to her husband."<sup>32</sup> In *The Greek Slave*, the subject of which stands stripped of her possessions and helplessly awaiting sexual violation,

Stone saw a metaphor for conventional American marriage.

Stone's fellow women's rights advocate Robert Dale Owen must have had a similarly affecting experience in front of *The Greek Slave*, which he saw in New York in the summer of 1847. In a description written six months later, he called it "one of the finest statues that has ever been produced in ancient or modern times."<sup>33</sup> Powers's figure made such a deep impression on Owen that he subsequently worked for more than a year to create a permanent, public home for it in the new Smithsonian Institution, which he served as one of twelve organizing regents. Unlike his conservative counterparts on the Board of Regents, who wanted the Smithsonian to be a university for the nation's elites, Owen hoped that the institution could be a democratic educational body to further the social and intellectual progress of the nation as a whole. His plan for *The Greek Slave* is revealed in a letter he wrote to Powers's agent, Miner Kellogg, in December 1847:

*I hope the proposal will meet [with] your appreciation, and Mr. Powers'. This beautiful statue could not, anywhere, attain a more honorable place, nor, I imagine, one more in accordance with Powers' wishes, than in our Institution. Placed in a separate tribune in what will be one of the most beautiful—if not the most beautiful—building in the United States; at the seat of government; guarded from accident by fire; and forever open freely, not to artists only but to the entire public; everything desirable in its location is consulted.*

Owen ended his letter with a plea for Powers's speedy reply, noting that the foundation for the fireproof "special tower" that would house *The Greek Slave* would have to be laid the following summer.<sup>34</sup> Owen likely hoped that, in such a prominent setting, the



*Slave* would exert a powerful moral influence on “the entire public” of the nation, making people conscious of the plight of both enslaved and free married women.

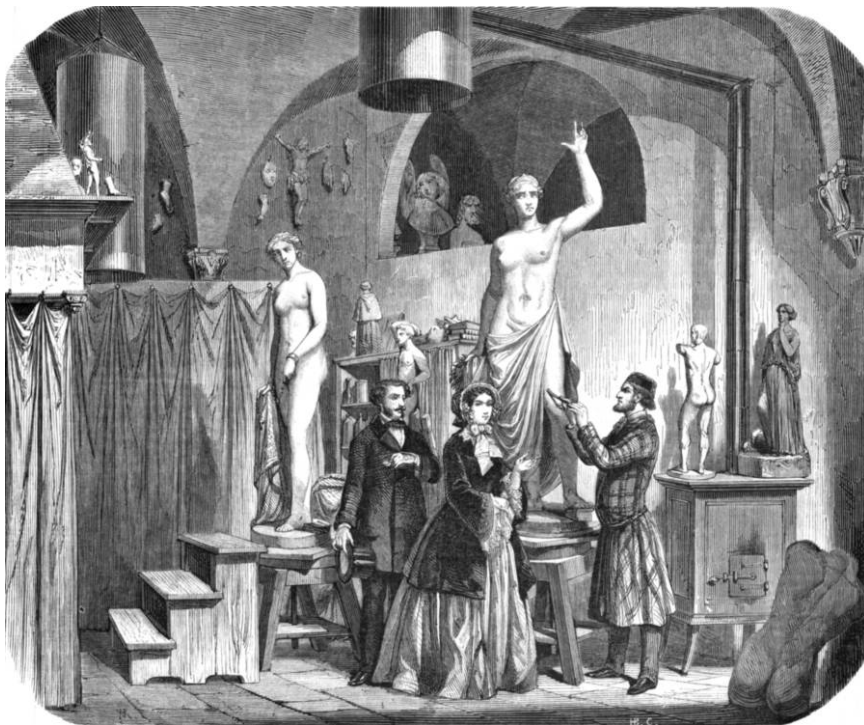
In his proposal, Owen suggested that the Smithsonian rent the sculpture for a period of time. Kellogg was initially favorably disposed to Owen’s proposal that the public be charged a modest admission to see it. These proceeds would be sent to Powers for three years, after which time the sculpture would become the institution’s property. Powers, however, rejected this plan in favor of simply selling the artwork to James Robb of New Orleans, who paid the sculptor a lump sum of cash.<sup>35</sup> When Corcoran acquired this same version of *The Greek Slave* three years later, in 1851, he changed the way viewers interpreted the sculpture by placing it in a domestic setting—his private art gallery—which was accessible only to his family and those members of the public whose “genteel and respectable appearance” gained them entry into his

home as guests.<sup>36</sup> In public halls, many of which also served as meeting places for abolitionists and women’s rights advocates, *The Greek Slave* could easily be read polemically as a protest against slavery or against married women’s disenfranchised position. In a private home, the figure was far more likely to be viewed in ways that bolstered and sentimentalized the conventions of genteel marriage.

### “Parlor Statues”

Although published sources generally describe ideal sculptures in public settings, the vast majority of such objects produced during the nineteenth century were destined for private homes, leading American art critic James Jackson Jarves to refer to them in his 1869 book *Art Thoughts* as “ordinary parlor statues, Eves, Greek Slaves, Judiths and their like.”<sup>37</sup> As Jarves’s comment suggests, most buyers of Powers’s sculptures were wealthy Americans seeking works of art to decorate their parlors, libraries, conservatories, or front halls. An 1853 illustration in the French magazine *L’Illustration* depicts a fashionably dressed young couple—presumably a married pair—visiting Powers in his Florence studio, which was by then a standard stop for Americans making a grand tour of Europe (fig. 14). Wearing a velvet robe and cap, the sculptor proudly presents a new statue, *America*, to his prospective buyers while *The Greek Slave* seems to look on enviously from the background. Significantly, it is the woman who steps forward to ask Powers a question while her husband hangs back. As this engraving implies, women played an important role in selecting ideal sculptures for their homes. In 1882, looking back on the middle decades of the nineteenth century, F. Marion Crawford, son of American sculptor Thomas Crawford,

14 “The Florentine Studio of the American Phidias,” from “La Sculpture en Amérique,” *L’Illustration*, June 25, 1853, 405



recalled that American men “soon found out . . . as it became easier to cross the ocean, that what they wanted was art, or, to speak accurately, the sensations produced by objects of art; and with scant time but unlimited money at their command, they handed over to wives and daughters, by tacit and very willing consent, the task of supplying the deficiency.”<sup>38</sup> Sculptors like Powers were well aware that their success rested on pleasing the tastes and addressing the interests of wealthy American women, many of whom were drawn to tragic melodramas surrounding the central events of domestic life—marriage, birth, and death. Not only did ideal sculptures help viewers extract meaning from such events, they also—as the Corcoran-Eustis wedding attests—played active roles in the rituals surrounding them.

No nineteenth-century American sculptor was more successful at meeting the needs of his buyers than Hiram Powers. He never modeled a heroic male nude. He never bothered with a recumbent figure or a sculptural group. He knew where his sculptures were going—into private homes—and he made sure that they would fit those spaces both physically and thematically. For the most part, his marble women celebrated the family values of the mid-nineteenth century: self-restraint, modesty, deference, compassion, filial love, and Christian faith. As slender, solitary figures, they could be fitted into even the cramped front parlors of urban row houses. However, buyers who lacked the space or the means to purchase a full-length statue could purchase one of Powers’s many ideal busts, including a version of *The Greek Slave*, of which Powers sold forty-eight copies (fig. 15).<sup>39</sup> Although lacking the many narrative details of the full figure, the pretty, averted face and downcast head—together with the well-known narrative of the slave’s predicament—were sufficient to create the sentimental

aura that buyers demanded. As a bust, *The Greek Slave* could also be paired with one of two roughly contemporaneous, similarly themed ideal busts by Powers: *Ginevra* and *Proserpine* (figs. 16, 17). Both of these works associate the theme of marriage with bondage, isolation, and death.

*Ginevra* was a character in Englishman Samuel Rogers’s popular 1823 poem *Italy*, in which she is a playful young woman who accidentally locks herself in an empty chest on her wedding night, only to be found there—a skeleton still wearing her wedding clothes—many years later. Powers’s first version of the bust depicts a plump-cheeked girl gazing down and to one side with a wistful expression. His patron Nicholas Longworth, who received the first marble version in 1842, noted with disappointment that *Ginevra*’s classical hairstyle and drapery seemed ill suited for Rogers’s quattrocento heroine. In addition, the *Ginevra* in the poem was a laughing, merry girl, whereas Powers’s bust was solemn to the point of appearing morose. Nevertheless, Powers sold at least six copies of the sculpture before reworking it in 1863.<sup>40</sup> Powers drew his subject for *Proserpine* from the first-century B.C.E. Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, in which the daughter of the harvest goddess, Ceres, is abducted by Pluto, the lustful god of the underworld. After Ceres desperately searches for Proserpine, neglecting her agricultural duties and thereby rendering the earth barren, Jupiter—the ruler of the gods and Proserpine’s father—decrees that Proserpine may return to her mother periodically but must remain in the underworld as Pluto’s wife for six months of every year. Numerous sentimental retellings of this myth published in England and the United States between 1820 and 1870 stress the anguish of mother and daughter in the wake of their forced separation.<sup>41</sup>

15 Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*,  
1858. Marble, 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x  
8 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (including base). Cincinnati  
Art Museum, Gift of W. G. Hosea





16 Hiram Powers, *Ginevra*, modeled 1838. Plaster, 24 x 16½ x 12 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase in memory of Ralph Cross Johnson



17 Hiram Powers, *Proserpine*, 1844. Marble, 25 x 20 x 11 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. George Cabot Lodge

Although Powers is today best known for *The Greek Slave*, during his lifetime he sold more copies of *Proserpine*—at least 105—than any other sculpture. Indeed, it was probably the most popular ideal sculpture anywhere in the Western world in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas other painters and sculptors typically depicted the moment of Proserpine’s abduction, Powers rendered the myth in a more ambiguous fashion. Only *Proserpine’s* crown of wheat sheaves and (in the original version) her floral base allude to her identity. Her face, like that of *The Greek Slave*, is expressionless. Nevertheless, *Proserpine* elicited strong emotional responses from viewers. A reviewer for *Godey’s Lady’s Book* character-

ized Proserpine’s face as “tremulous with emotion.” Sentimental poet Margaret Preston described “the smile that lingers round the curving mouth, with mournful meaning filled; the pensive brow, so beautifully calm and passionless,” and “the chaste’d woman’s look of tenderness, that pleads in every line, and longs to break the trembling silence of those breathing lips!” Greenwood noted that the bust “weighs on the heart, and fills the eyes with tears.”<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Powers depicted at least two newly married young women in portrait busts in the guise of *Proserpine*.<sup>43</sup>

In light of the mournful views of marriage presented by *Ginevra* and *Proserpine*, it is tempting to see Powers as one of the many mid-nineteenth-century

critics of married American women's disenfranchised position. In Cincinnati in the 1820s and '30s, Powers had been immersed in a culture where radical ideas were openly and avidly debated—and frequently embraced. One of his earliest supporters was Englishwoman Frances Trollope, who had come to the United States with her children in 1828 to join Fanny Wright's Nashoba community. After deserting Nashoba for Cincinnati—where she met and befriended Powers—Trollope enrolled her son Henry in school at the utopian community of New Harmony in nearby Indiana. Though she concluded a few years later that Nashoba was an utter failure and that the elder Robert Owen was “so utterly benighted in the mists of his own theories” that he could not “get a peep at the world as it really exists around him,” Trollope clearly admired both Owen and Wright during her time in Cincinnati. In her published account of her years in the United States, Trollope praised Wright's “splendour,” “brilliance,” and “overwhelming eloquence” and applauded her for daring to speak publicly in a society where “women are guarded by a sevenfold shield of habitual insignificance.”<sup>44</sup> Powers may have attended Wright's lecture at the Cincinnati courthouse in 1828 or seen Robert Owen debate evangelical preacher Alexander Campbell there the following year. However, despite Powers's exposure to radical ideas about marriage, his views on the subject remained moderate and conventional.

In an 1853 letter to his cousin and childhood teacher John Powers Richardson, Powers responded to both Richardson's fervent abolitionism and his critique of marriage laws in the United States. Before noting defensively, “I know several slave owners, and better men I do not know,” Powers dealt with the topic of women's rights, saying:

*I hardly know what to say about the women's rights movement. That women*

*have not as many legal rights as men have is most true, but they manage the hardest heads among us with wonderful power. . . . How would it do to elect a young, married lady to a judgeship?—being far advanced in a family way and weighing evidence in a trial for rape. Her sensibilities might be so shocked as to bring on a crisis in open court. Think of a judge being taken in labor upon the bench!*

On a conciliatory note, Powers added, “Much can be done and ought to be done no doubt, and I hope it will be done to place womankind upon proper footing with us.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, his letter makes clear his view that a married woman's maternal role made her unsuitable for public life, and that her true and rightful power was the influence she wielded over father, husband, and sons within the domestic sphere. This is borne out by Powers's own marriage. Elizabeth Gibson Powers, mother of his nine children, accompanied her husband to Florence in 1837 and remained there—essentially trapped and separated from her natal family and friends in Cincinnati—until her husband's death in 1873. Mrs. Powers's letters to her mother, written over a span of many years, are filled with expressions of homesickness and longing for reunion. “How often I dream of walking along this street or that and wake up to find myself still in this plagued place,” she wrote in 1848. “Give me a comfortable log cabin in Cincinnati with you all about me in preference to their finest palace here.”<sup>46</sup>

In her discussion of Powers's sculptures in Cincinnati, art historian Wendy Katz notes that his ideal busts, including *Proserpine*, *Ginevra*, and the truncated version of *The Greek Slave*, were sometimes given as gifts to young married women. As part of a system of domestic exchange, such gifts strengthened social and familial bonds. Katz further contends that, by virtue of their display

18 Hiram Powers, *Martha Endicott Peabody Rogers*, 1845. Marble, 24 in. high. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. Photo, Peabody Essex Museum



(fig. 18), they made a concrete connection between their daughter and the daughter of the grief-stricken Roman goddess, and thereby expressed their feelings of loss when she left their home for her husband's. *The Greek Slave's* embedded sentimental narrative of ruptured domestic bonds similarly addressed a bride's painful separation from her home and family. Even in the undomestic setting of a public exhibition hall, viewers sometimes imagined themselves as the slave's lost mother or as the slave herself longing for her distant family.<sup>48</sup> When given as a marriage gift or displayed at a wedding, the sculpture would have conveyed this sentimental message still more powerfully.

in private homes, they acted as stand-ins for the women who "arranged the moral order of the home," modeling the restraint and polite submission to others required of genteel women. *The Greek Slave*, in particular, models the bodily and emotional self-control that was an essential component of genteel behavior. Writing for *Godey's* in 1853, one woman recommended that every young lady desirous of making a good impression in society have a small parian copy of *The Greek Slave* on her dressing table to serve as an example.<sup>47</sup> Beyond cementing social ties and modeling correct feminine behavior, though, Powers's images of young, captive women also expressed the distress felt by parents and daughters separated by marriage—a pain intimately familiar to Powers from his wife's experience. Thus, when Martha Peabody's parents gave her a portrait bust of herself in the guise of *Proserpine* on the eve of her wedding

### Harem Imagery

It is not hard to see why the Corcoran family chose to use Powers's *Greek Slave* as an altarpiece for Louise Corcoran's wedding. The sculpture not only idealized traditional Christian marriage by contrasting it with infidel decadence, but it also expressed the pain felt by William Corcoran—a widowed father—and his only child contemplating their separation. Furthermore, the sculpture encouraged proper domestic behavior among its viewers. A reporter for the *Courier and Enquirer* noted,

*It is extremely interesting to watch the effect which the statue has upon all who come before it. Its presence is a magic circle within whose precincts all are held spell-bound and almost speechless. The grey-headed man, the youth, the matron, and the maid alike, yield themselves to the magic of its power, and gaze upon it in*

reverential admiration, and so pure an atmosphere breathes round it, that the eye of man beams only with reverent delight, and the cheek of woman glows with the fullness of emotion.<sup>49</sup>

According to this and many other accounts, the *Slave* created a religious space around itself, subduing its audience and evoking emotional, gendered responses. The assembled wedding guests in Corcoran's gallery might well have found the sculpture's spectacle of exposed (and commercially available) female flesh erotic—an eroticism that was surely heightened by its proximity to the blushing young bride; thus, unless women responded with sympathetic modesty and men with flawless gallantry, they risked identifying themselves with the barbarous Turks in the slave's fictional audience.<sup>50</sup> As one visitor to William Corcoran's art gallery later reflected:

*I have never witnessed anything so perfectly unexceptionable—though standing before you in all the simplicity of primitive nature—as this piece of statuary. I am no stoic, no anchorite,—my imagination is probably no more pure than that of thousands of my fellow-men around me, but I*

*assure you that (whatever may be his professions) I envy not the man who can look upon this lovely creation and have excited in his mind a single unholy thought.<sup>51</sup>*

Unlike contemporary images of harem girls produced in Europe (fig. 19), which are generally fantasies of enticing pleasure, *The Greek Slave* appealed to more prudish audiences in the United States and England by pairing sexual desire with shame.<sup>52</sup>

Like other ideal sculptures displayed in innumerable American domestic interiors in the mid-nineteenth century, *The Greek Slave* cemented social bonds, elicited love and sympathy, and encouraged genteel behavior. As William Corcoran was no doubt aware, however, Powers's statue was more than merely an object of private devotion. Other American sculptors modeled similar white marble figures that toured the United States and drew large audiences, but none garnered as much reverence or attention. The *Slave* owed its political and emotional charge to its combination of a young, white, erotically and sentimentally engaging female subject with the imagery of the Turkish harem. In the American public imagination, the harem had emerged by the 1840s as a site where fervent debates about race, gender, slavery, and marriage intertwined. In 1857 widespread fear of the threat posed to public morals by polygamous groups like the Latter-Day Saints prompted writer and orator George William Curtis to exclaim, "It seems hard that we must have pashas and harems among us because we believe religious liberty to be Christian. Is having two wives Christian? Are the proceedings in Utah Christian?" Exasperated and fearful Americans like Curtis could not have viewed *The Greek Slave* without thinking of "pashas and harems" within the borders of their own country. Abolitionists also deployed the imagery of the harem in support of their cause, frequently conjuring images

19 Félix Bracquemond, *Odalisque couchée dans un harem (La plainte de la captive)*, 1857. Etching, 4½ x 6¾ in. Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations



of young, female slaves—particularly fair-skinned octoroons—sold into the seraglios of libidinous Southern masters. As early as 1837, Presbyterian minister George Bourne referred to the South as a “vast harem,” where “domestic relations [are] abolished at the impulse of lascivious desires and pecuniary demands.”<sup>53</sup> Many such activists also supported the liberalization of marriage laws and giving married women in the United States more power over their lives and property. Through the image of the harem, they not only condemned the institution of slavery, they also criticized the patriarchal culture that supported it.

On the other side of the debate, for supporters of conventional marriage, the harem provided a ready symbol for the sexual chaos resulting from polygamy, amalgamation (as interracial marriage was then termed), and legal divorce. In an 1853 debate with women’s rights advocate Stephen Pearl Andrews, Horace Greeley linked the growing prevalence of divorce in the United States with both Mormon and Muslim polygamy. Polygamy, he said, “is not an experiment to be first tried in our day; it is some thousands of years old; its condemnation is inscribed on the tablets of Oriental history; it is manifest in the comparative debasement of Asia and Africa.” Continued Greeley, “The sentiment of chastity becomes ridiculous where a woman is transferred from husband to husband, as caprice or satiety may dictate.” Furthermore, as Timothy Marr has argued, for Christians who supported slavery, the image of a white woman in a Turkish seraglio masked—through a fantasy of racially reversed positions—the sexual bondage suffered by thousands of American slaves at the hands of their white owners.<sup>54</sup>

The choice made by William and Louise Corcoran and George Eustis Jr. to employ Hiram Powers’s image of a nude prisoner of the seraglio as a wedding altar must be considered in light of these con-

tradictory understandings of the harem. It seems almost certain that the Corcoran family viewed *The Greek Slave* conservatively as an apology for conventional marriage rather than as an abolitionist or feminist symbol. William Corcoran had himself been a slave owner, and—just two years after his daughter’s wedding—he actively supported the Confederacy.<sup>55</sup> Although his views on slavery were apparently ambivalent by the late 1850s, he rejected any comparison between the subject of *The Greek Slave* and the plight of American slaves. In his personal scrapbooks, he interspersed humorous jabs at those who presumed to make such connections with glowing reviews of the sculpture and newspaper articles describing Louise’s various social engagements and her wedding. One clipping, titled “Slave Case Extraordinary,” pillories abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher for supposedly mistaking Corcoran’s version of *The Greek Slave*, which had been distributed in the lottery of the Western Art Union in Cincinnati in 1850, for a beautiful octoroon on the auction block. Another, from the *Southern Literary Gazette*, tells a tale of an old black woman who, when seeing *The Greek Slave* for the first time, exclaims disappointedly to her daughter, “La, Jemima, it ain’t a nigger after all.”<sup>56</sup> Eustis, who served as a diplomatic envoy of the Confederacy, recorded his views on slavery before his death in 1872. The institution of slavery might have been preserved, he wistfully reflected, if a more “humane system of servitude” had been legislated. “And here it may be noted,” Eustis added, “that the actual practice and mode of treating and dealing with the slaves was much in advance of the legislation. In fact, the harsh and odious features therein were much softened and modified—and in many instances never enforced.”<sup>57</sup>

The two men who most loved Louise Corcoran were clearly not abolitionists. Both William Corcoran and George Eustis were enmeshed in a Southern



culture that sanctioned slavery and that was both hierarchical and patriarchal—a culture that Louise Corcoran herself apparently embraced. “Have you seen Loulou Eustis since she spent a winter with the Eustises in New Orleans?” one family friend, Mrs. Smith Lee, remarked in 1861. “She is as soft and sweet and faint-voiced and languid as any Eustis of them all.” Even her father’s arrest and imprisonment by Union forces in August 1861 failed to rouse her, for (as Lee noted) “fine ladies don’t fret or make any disturbance.”<sup>58</sup> In this observer’s

opinion, Louise sealed her allegiance to Southern ideals of womanhood by adopting the very sweetness and passivity in the face of adversity that *The Greek Slave* also displays. Indeed, as an integral part of Louise Corcoran’s genteel wedding, Powers’s sculpture was a model of “true womanhood” and—by extension—a call for chivalrous male behavior. It did not function there as a universal image of human bondage but, rather, as a fearsome warning of what might befall a beautiful white female unprotected by a strong, loving man.

## Notes

- 1 George Washington Jenkins, “The Corcoran Wedding,” *Harper’s Weekly* 3 (April 16, 1859): 241–42.
- 2 “Centre-Table Gossip, Bridal Etiquette,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* 57 (November 1858): 475. I have taken my definition of “ideal” sculpture from Joy Kasson, who described these works as “three-dimensional, figurative works, usually marble, life-sized or slightly smaller, portraying (usually female) subjects drawn from literature, history, the Bible or mythology.” Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), 24–25.
- 3 Powers ostensibly chose his subject because “the history of [the Greek Revolution] is familiar to all.” C. Edwards Lester, *The Artist, the Merchant, and the Statesman* (New York: Paine and Burgess, 1845), 1:88. As Amilia Buturović and Irvin Cemil Schick have observed, the sculpture’s popularity attests to the lasting impression the war made on sympathetic Americans. Buturović and Schick, *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture and History* (New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2007), 285.
- 4 Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis to Jefferson Finis Davis, April 3, 1859, in *Jefferson Davis, Private Letters, 1823–1889*, ed. Hudson Strode (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1966), 580. “Miss Rothschild’s Wedding,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 18, 1857, 252–53.
- 5 See Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).
- 6 In 1847–49 Corcoran’s version of the sculpture was publicly exhibited, with much fanfare, in New York, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. Another, identical, version was exhibited during the same years in Boston, Cincinnati, Louisville, New Orleans, and New York. More than one hundred thousand Americans saw the sculpture. Richard P. Wunder, *Hiram Powers: Vermont Sculptor, 1805–1873*, 2 vols. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1989–91), 2:158–67. On *The Greek Slave*’s tour of the United States, see *ibid.*, 1:217–21; Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 46–72; Nancie Clow Farrell, “The Slave that Captivated America,” *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 22, no. 4 (1969): 221–39; and Samuel A. Robertson and William H. Gerds, “Greek Slave,” *Newark Museum Quarterly* 17 (Winter–Spring 1965): 1–30.
- 7 Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 65. In her celebrated poem about Powers’s sculpture, Elizabeth Barrett Browning located the figure in the liminal space between the interior and the exterior of a metaphoric house: “They say that ideal beauty cannot enter / The house of anguish. On the threshold stands / an alien image, with enshackled hands, called the Greek Slave!” Browning, “Hiram Powers’ ‘Greek Slave,’” *International Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art* 2 (December 1, 1850): 88. This poem was first printed in the October 26, 1850, issue of Charles Dickens’s journal *Household Words*.
- 8 Quoted in the promotional pamphlet *Powers’ Statue of the Greek Slave* (Boston: Eastburn’s Press, 1848).
- 9 Grace Greenwood, letter, July 4, 1848, in *Greenwood Leaves: A Collection of Sketches and Letters* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1853), 346.
- 10 “The Genius and Sculptures of Powers,” *American Whig Review* 2 (August 1845): 202. Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1966): 151–74. In the last thirty years, a number of scholars have questioned the degree to which women actually conformed to the ideal Welter described. However, it is precisely because there was no consensus about women’s nature and proper role that the ideal of “true womanhood” was a powerful cultural tool: it presented the viewpoint of the white bourgeois elite as natural and universal.
- 11 W. H. Coyle, “Powers’ Greek Slave,” undated excerpt from the *Detroit Advertiser*, and James Freeman Clarke, “The Greek Slave,” quoted in *Powers’ Statue of the Greek Slave*. The rhetorical use of the Orient as a foil against which Westerners define themselves and their culture has been discussed at length by Edward Said in his seminal book *Orientalism* (New

- York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Recently, Timothy Marr has considered *The Greek Slave* as an orientalist (or Islamicist) image in *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 273–79.
- 12 See, for example, Lynne D. Ambrosini, “‘Pure White Radiance’: The Ideology of Marble in the Nineteenth Century,” in Ambrosini and Rebecca A. G. Reynolds, *Hiram Powers: Genius in Marble* (Cincinnati: Taft Museum of Art, 2007), 10–27; Charmaine Nelson, “Hiram Powers’s *America*: Shackles, Slaves, and the Racial Limits of Nineteenth-Century Identity,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34, no. 2 (2004): 167–83; Wendy Jean Katz, *Regionalism and Reform: Art and Class Formation in Antebellum Cincinnati* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2004), 137–71; and Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives*, 46–72. For the “rhetorical crossings” of woman and slave, slavery and marriage, see Karen Sanchez-Eppler, “Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 92–114.
  - 13 For American visions of harems, see “The Crescent and the Cross,” *Living Age* 33 (December 28, 1844): 565–68; John Quincy Adams, “Society and Civilization,” *American Whig Review* 2 (July 1845): 85–86; and “Adventures in a Turkish Harem,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, August 1850, 321–24.
  - 14 N. E. J., “A Plea for the Institution of Marriage,” *New York Evangelist*, July 2, 1836, 1.
  - 15 Rev. Robert Hall, “The Advantages of the Marriage Institution to Communities,” *Western Christian Advocate*, July 23, 1841, 53. T., “On Polygamy,” *Religious Monitor and Evangelical Repository*, November 1841, 246. John Quincy Adams, “Society and Civilization,” *American Whig Review*, July 1845, 88. Adams served in the House of Representatives from 1830 to 1848.
  - 16 “The Free Love System: Origin, Progress and Position of the Anti-Marriage Movement,” *New York Times*, September 8, 1855, 2.
  - 17 Robert Dale Owen, “Marriage Contract with Mary Jane Robinson,” *New Harmony Gazette*, April 2, 1832, quoted in *Against the Tide: Pro-feminist Men in the United States, 1776–1990*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 75. Greeley quoted in Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 91–92.
  - 18 [John Humphrey Noyes], *Slavery and Marriage: A Dialogue* (Oneida, N.Y.: privately published, 1850).
  - 19 See Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 72, 128–30; and Rev. Hubbard Eastman, *Noyesism Unveiled: A History of the Self-Styled Perfectionists, with a Summary View of Their Leading Doctrines* (Brattleboro, Vt.: published by the author, 1849).
  - 20 For a discussion of the history of marriage among adherents of the Latter-Day Saints, see Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives than One: The Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana-Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001). As the wealth of primary sources uncovered recently by Mormon historian Dale R. Broadhurst shows, Daynes underestimated public awareness of, and anger over, Mormon polygamy before 1852. See Broadhurst’s website, [www.sidney-rigdon.com/dbroadhu/artindex.htm](http://www.sidney-rigdon.com/dbroadhu/artindex.htm). In response to early rumors of polygamy, the church published an official denial of this practice in its *Doctrines and Covenants* in 1835. *Doctrines and Covenants of the Church of the Latter-day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God and Compiled by Joseph Smith Junior, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Frederick G. Williams* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams, & Co., 1835), section 101, verse 4. Joseph Smith reversed this denial in the *Doctrines and Covenants* of 1843.
  - 21 “The Difficulties at Nauvoo,” *Quincy (Ill.) Whig*, July 16, 1842. See also John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: An Exposé* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), which was excerpted and reprinted in newspapers across the nation. In his pamphlet, Bennett cites the experiences of several young girls whom Brigham Young purportedly attempted to coerce into polygamous marriages. On constructions of Mormonism as “an American Islam,” see Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, 185–218.
  - 22 According to David Bitton, “Kirtland as a Center of Missionary Activity, 1830–1838,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 11 (Summer 1971): 499, “From 1831 to 1837 no state received the ‘saturation’ treatment Ohio did. Over and over again, it was crisscrossed by Mormon elders on their way to or returning from other states.”
  - 23 Horace Greeley, “An Interview with Brigham Young, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 13, 1859,” *New York Tribune*, August 20, 1859.
  - 24 “Party Platforms in 1856,” *The Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1856* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1856), 42. “Thirty-Seventh Congress, Second Session, 1862,” in *The Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America from December 5, 1859 to March 3, 1863* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1863), 501–2.
  - 25 See Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2006).
  - 26 “The Odd-Fellows’ Offering for 1851,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, September 1850, 571.
  - 27 “The Greek Slave,” *New York Daily Tribune*, September 15, 1847.
  - 28 Henry T. Tuckerman, “The Greek Slave,” *New York Daily Tribune*, September 9, 1847.
  - 29 Greenwood, *Greenwood Leaves*, 346.
  - 30 Quoted in Alice Stone Blackwell’s biography of her mother, first published in 1930 and reissued as *Lucy Stone: Pioneer of Woman’s Rights* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2001), 89.
  - 31 “Powers’ Statue of the Greek Slave,” *National Era* (Washington, D.C.), September 2, 1847.
  - 32 “Article VIII: On the Legal Rights of Woman,” *Christian Review*, June 1, 1840, 5, 9–10. Stone quoted in Cott, *Public Vows*, 64.

- 33 Robert Dale Owen, Report to the Building Committee, Smithsonian Institution, November 26, 1847, reprinted in *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1880), 18:695.
- 34 Robert Dale Owen to Miner Kellogg, December 20, 1847, Owen Family Papers, Indiana Historical Society. See also Owen's second letter to Kellogg, May 17, 1848, in the same collection. As Richard William Leopold has argued (*Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940], 219), Owen used his position on the Smithsonian's board to create policies that furthered his social ideals during his years serving as a U.S. representative from Indiana.
- 35 See Miner Kellogg to W. W. Seaton, July 17, 1848, reprinted in *Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections*, 18:461. Wunder, *Powers*, 2:161. Powers's decision was doubtless affected by the fact that he had promised the sculpture to Robb in July 1847.
- 36 Undated clipping, "From Washington, a Special Correspondent of the Philadelphia Inquirer," in William Wilson Corcoran's scrapbooks, 1:13, Corcoran Museum of Art.
- 37 James Jackson Jarves, *Art Thoughts: The Experience and Observation of an American Amateur in Europe* (New York: Hurd & Houghton; Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1869), 306.
- 38 F. M. Crawford, "False Taste in Art," *North American Review* 135 (July 1882): 95.
- 39 Wunder, *Powers*, 1:383, 169–77 and 2:168–76. For middle-class consumers, affordable parian figurines of *The Greek Slave* were also available.
- 40 Nicholas Longworth to Hiram Powers, May 21, 1842, Cincinnati Historical Society, cited in *ibid.*, 1:132. For the number of *Ginevras*, see *ibid.*, 2:154–55. Samuel Rogers, *Italy, a Poem* (London: J. Murray, 1823).
- 41 For the many iterations of this myth in nineteenth-century literature, see Janet Headley, "English Literary and Aesthetic Influences on American Sculptors in Italy" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Maryland, 1988), 190–97.
- 42 "Notices of the Fine Arts," *Godey's Lady's Book* 39 (September 1849): 219. For the known versions of Powers's *Proserpine*, see Wunder, *Powers*, 1:383 and 2:187–202. M. J. [Margaret Junkin Preston], "Thoughts, Suggested by Powers' *Proserpine*," *Southern Literary Messenger* 15 (February 1849): 100. Greenwood, *Greenwood Leaves*, 263.
- 43 Wunder, *Powers*, 2:88–89, 106.
- 44 Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; New York: Penguin, 1997), 56, 115.
- 45 Hiram Powers to John Powers Richardson, December 14, 1853, Powers Family Papers, Archives of American Art, reel 1136.
- 46 Elizabeth Gibson Powers to Anna Riley Gibson, September 4, 1848, quoted in Wunder, *Powers*, 1:159–60.
- 47 Katz, *Regionalism and Reform*, 167–71. Mrs. Merrifield, "Dress as a Fine Art," *Godey's Lady's Book* 47 (1853): 20.
- 48 One viewer imagined herself as the slave's mother, confronting a vision of her child, "naked, forlorn, gazed at by pitiless eyes—a thing of scorn!" "Powers' Greek Slave," *Putnam's Monthly* 4 (December 1854): 666.
- 49 "Powers' Greek Slave," *New York Courier and Enquirer*, August 31, 1847, quoted in *Powers' Statue of the Greek Slave*. Powers and his promoters used such descriptions of viewer behavior to counter any accusation of lewdness inherent in the work.
- 50 As Timothy Marr has argued (*The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, 274), Powers's sculpture "gave viewers the means of containing the challenge of oriental libidinousness" through "the sentimentalism of virtuous indignation." At least one nineteenth-century author attributed a (fictional) young woman's failure to show reverence for *The Greek Slave* to a lack of proper religious and domestic education. See Mrs. H. C. Gardner, "The Ill-Bred Girl," *Ladies' Repository* 15 (April 1855): 205–6.
- 51 Clipping, "From Our Washington Correspondent," dated March 13, 1853, Corcoran Scrapbooks, 1:7.
- 52 For a discussion of harem imagery in nineteenth-century European art, see Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800–1875* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 2002).
- 53 [George William Curtis], "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June 1857, 129. George Bourne, *Slavery Illustrated in its Effects Upon Woman and Domestic Society* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 24.
- 54 Greeley quote from Stephen Pearl Andrews, ed., *Love, Marriage and Divorce* (1853; reprint, Providence, R.I.: M & S Press, 1975), 35. Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, 280–81.
- 55 Corcoran manumitted five slaves—a woman and her four children—in 1845. Records of Manumissions, vol. 3, Records of the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Columbia, Record Group 60, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. I am grateful to Marisa Bourgoïn, Richard Manoogian Chief of Reference Services, Archives of American Art, for providing this information. Sources of biographical information about William Wilson Corcoran include Henry Cohen, *Business and Politics in America from the Age of Jackson to the Civil War: The Career Biography of W. W. Corcoran* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corp., 1971); *Corcoran* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1976); and Holly Tank, "William Wilson Corcoran: Washington Philanthropist," *Washington History* 17 (Fall–Winter 2005): 52–65.
- 56 Corcoran scrapbooks, 1:7, 21.
- 57 Quoted in Joseph G. Tregle Jr., "George Eustis Jr., Non-Mythic Southerner," *Louisiana History* 16 (Fall 1975): 387.
- 58 Quoted in C. Van Woodward, ed., *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 165.