

# LOUISA S. MCCORD'S *CAIUS GRACCHUS*: A TRANSATLANTIC SOUTHERN LITERARY RESPONSE TO 1848 EUROPEAN REVOLUTIONS<sup>1</sup>

CARME MANUEL  
*Universitat de València*  
*Carmen.Manuel@uv.es*

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## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Louisa S. McCord is the most important female intellectual in the antebellum South and one of its most recognized voices, even if her name rarely appears in studies not directly related to her region. McCord has a parallel, according to Mary Kelley, in Margaret Fuller, the relevant prewar Northern intellectual and essayist. From contrasting ideological positions, both left testimony of their interest in constructing a model of womanhood, capable of facing the contingencies of their times. Born in one of the most influential families of South Carolina, McCord produced a phenomenal synthesis of the conservative political, economic and religious arguments accepted in her times and managed to transform them into a coherent philosophy that stood as a firm foundation for a society based on slave labor and a rigid social hierarchy. With her political writings and especially with her tragedy *Caius Gracchus*, McCord shows that she was not only interested in Southern politics but, most important, in the possible consequences of European political upheavals, and specifically in the influence that the European Revolutions of 1848 could exert in American territories.

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Her play is then a revealing testimony of the involvement of Southern women in post-1848 transnational political debates.

### **RESUMEN**

Louisa S. McCord es la intelectual más destacada del sur de preguerra y una de sus voces más reconocidas, a pesar de que su nombre raras veces aparezca en estudios que no traten directamente de su región. Como explica la historiadora Mary Kelley, a McCord bien se la puede comparar con la otra gran intelectual y ensayista norteaña de preguerra, Margaret Fuller. Desde posiciones antagónicas, ambas dejarían constancia en sus escritos de sus preocupaciones por construir un modelo de feminidad que hiciera frente a las contingencias históricas de su época. Nacida en una de las familias más influyentes de Carolina del Sur, McCord logró con sus escritos llegar a una síntesis de los argumentos políticos, económicos y religiosos aceptados en su época y transformarlos en una filosofía coherente, capaz de sustentar una sociedad basada en el trabajo de los esclavos y en una rígida jerarquía social. Con sus escritos y especialmente con su tragedia *Caius Gracchus*, McCord demuestra no solo haberse interesado por la vida política sureña sino también por las consecuencias que los sucesos europeos, en concreto, las revoluciones burguesas de 1848, ejercieron en los territorios norteamericanos. Su obra es, pues, un testimonio revelador de la participación de las mujeres sureñas en los debates transnacionales que se sucedieron después de 1848.

Louisa S. McCord was the daughter of Langdon Cheves, a planter, lawyer, politician and the president of the Bank of the United States, for whom she felt a reverential love all her life. A South Carolinian, Cheves was elected congressman in 1810. With the protests of his state against the federal government in the Nullification doctrine during the 1830s, the beginning of the abolitionist movement and the threats of slave insurrections, Cheves became one of the most outstanding defenders of the Southern proslavery ideology. According to Mary Kelley, McCord—“her father’s daughter,” as she defined herself to William Gilmore Simms—“more than equaled her father in fiercely partisan defenses of a system that held millions of African Americans in bondage” (225). Contrary to what might be expected from such a conservative father, Cheves always encouraged his daughter’s intellectual ambitions and, instead of channeling her education towards nineteenth-century models of femininity, backed her intellectual ambitions and pushed her to study mathematics, which ultimately led to her passionate interest in political economics.

Between 1848 and 1856, McCord composed and published poems, reviews, a tragedy and a great number of political essays. In 1848 Caroline May published two of McCord's poems, "Spirit of the Storm" and "'Tis but Thee, Love only Thee," in her anthology *The American Female Poets: With Biographical and Critical Notes*.<sup>3</sup> These two pieces were accompanied by a brief introduction containing some biographical data. May highlighted that McCord's "talents and attainments are of a superior order; her mind, by nature strong, has been richly cultivated by extensive reading of the best authors" (420). Besides her admiration, May added some thoughts about McCord's recently published book of poems, *My Dreams* (1848): "She has a vivid imagination and warm feeling, but they are not well disciplined by good taste and correct judgment" (420).

Following this poetic period, McCord engaged in political writing, "an anomaly as a woman," as Michael O'Brien maintains, "who spoke forthrightly on slavery, political economy, secession" (*Conjectures* 716). In 1848 she also published *Sophisms of the Protective Policy*, the translation into English of *Sophismes économiques* by French economist Claude-Frédéric Bastiat. Lounsbury explains that this volume foreshadows elements in her late production, and that is an incongruity since women were not thought to devote themselves to political or economic writing. From 1849 to 1856 McCord published fourteen articles about economy, slavery and women's rights, among other themes. These pieces appeared in such prestigious journals and magazines as *Southern Quarterly Review*, *De Bow's Southern and Western Review* and *Southern Literary Messenger* and, according to critic Alfred L. Brophy, can "serve as a window into late antebellum Southern thought" (49). For Lounsbury, although the subjects and vision adopted by McCord are those traditionally adopted by Southern intellectual elites, the complexity of their arguments, their style and their diversity of tone make them unique ("Louisa S. McCord" in *The History*, 80).

McCord never signed these articles with her full name but only with her initials—L.S.M.—, evidence, according to her critics, of

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline May's volume is one of the three anthologies about women poets, published in the United States between 1848-1849. It is the shortest one, including only seventy-eight authors and around three hundred compositions. The other two titles are *The Female Poets of America*, by Thomas Buchanan, and *The Female Poets of America*, by Rufus W. Griswold.

her conservative ideas about the role of women. Erasing her full name, and consequently readers' potential identification of the writer as a woman, the South Carolinian seems to have dodged her scruples about female authorship and her own intrusion into a field forbidden or, at least, not sufficiently appropriate for women (D. Roberts 204).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Fox-Genovese thinks that, contrary to Margaret Fuller, McCord does not seem to have made any effort to be included in the female intellectual tradition, even if, like her Northern contemporary Fuller, she was convinced that her intellect matched the highest standards of her time, masculine or feminine. Consequently, she never publicly vindicated women's right to write. The ideological lines that defined Louisa S. McCord's life and thought exhibit themselves in the work that "made her famous" (Fought 1)—*Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, published in 1851.

For Fox-Genovese, McCord tried to "inscribe herself in a common culture by abstracting from, rather than insisting upon, her female identity" (245). And for her latest biographer, Leigh Fought, these articles together with her tragedy constitute, on the one hand, "an eloquent statement of her belief system and demonstrate the extent to which she absorbed the intellectual styles of her time and place," and on the other, "the most dramatic illustration of the contradiction between her ideal of society and the way that society actually functioned" (101). Mary Kelley interprets McCord as a victim of an inner struggle between her aspirations for notoriety and her declarations of female subordination. Yet, in truth, that struggle does not seem to have taken place. Like most Southerners, McCord "firmly believed in a hierarchical world, one dictated by nature and by God, in which every person has a place according to his or her gender and race" (Fought 101). She was fully aware of the harmonious coexistence of both attitudes in herself since the protection of the Southern patriarchal society also enforced the subordination of women and blacks. Southern intellectual elites *in totum* safeguarded this position since the moment when radical abolitionism equated the freedom of slaves with the freedom of women.

In "The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina," Stephanie McCurry explains

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<sup>4</sup> Leigh Fought highlights a moment in which McCord takes her rejection of being read as a woman to an extreme. In "The Right to Labor," the reader discovers that the first person narrator of the text appears as a masculine voice: "The last I do for my wife or children..." (122).

that “by equating the subordination of women and that of the slaves, proslavery ideologues and politicians attempted to endow slavery with the legitimacy of the family and especially marriage and, not incidentally, to invest the defense of slavery with the survival of customary gender relations” (1251). McCord’s positions in this respect are shown in a long poem (161 lines) in blank verse, “Woman’s Progress” (1853), one of her attempts to render into poetry her 1852 essay titled “Enfranchisement of Woman.” McCord qualifies this piece as “one of the most powerful and coherent proslavery tracts to come out of South Carolina, a virtual model of conservative reasoning” (1257), the purpose of which was to question the movement of women’s rights as a whole.<sup>5</sup> McCord insists that her society requires some of its components—women and blacks—to give up some of their rights in exchange for the advantages granted to them by that same society. In “Enfranchisement of Woman,”<sup>6</sup> she connects abolitionism with feminism and atheism: “*Justicia*, shouts Cuffee, means that I am a sun-burned white man. *Justicia*, responds Harriet Martineau, means that I may discard decency and my petticoats at my own convenience; and, *Justicia*, echo her Worcester Convention sisters, means extinction to all laws, human and divine” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 107). Women defending equality are, for McCord, women who become men, “moral monsters,” “things which nature disclaims” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 110), and she issues a call for them to accomplish their fate as women: “Fulfill thy destiny, oppose it not” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 110). Women’s equality with men would then bring about the destruction of social relations based on a hierarchy, and it would have the same consequences as the emancipation of slaves.

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<sup>5</sup> Eight years before, in 1845, Margaret Fuller had published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, a series of essays in which she questioned the traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity. Among the most relevant women she included in the struggle for social reform, she mentioned Angelina Grimké and Abby Kelly, abolitionists belonging to the movement initiated by William Lloyd Garrison, who had established their vindications through moral suasion. The decade following 1848 and the Seneca Falls Convention, when American women started to claim equality between sexes, McCord, the Southern contemporary of Fuller, defended a contrary position since, as an intellectual and political commentator, she felt endowed with the mission of safeguarding her Southern patriarchal society. For Mary Kelley, the essays that McCord published “read as if she were responding directly to Fuller” (226).

<sup>6</sup> “Enfranchisement of Woman,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 5 (April 1852): 322-341.

The stability of Southern patriarchal society was founded on the safeguard of its three pillars: the social hierarchy of classes, racial differentiation and the subordination of women. If one of these pillars crumbled, Southern society would crumble too (Kelley 227). To question slavery meant to question divine authority, the authority of nature that had decreed an inferior place for women and blacks.<sup>7</sup> Like Mary H. Eastman, Caroline Gilman or Mary Chesnut, among other women who participated in the race debate, McCord believed that color was the category of absolute differentiation and “[t]hey defined their position as elevated because they firmly believed that blackness was a *class*, carrying degradation, dirt, savagery, stupidity and vice within it like a virus” (D. Roberts 9). For McCord as well as for her proslavery contemporaries, Leigh Fought explains, the defense of slavery hinged on three arguments. The first declared that slavery elevated the status of whites, allowing them to devote themselves to prestigious activities separated from manual labor; the second insisted that slavery permitted a desirable control of society, given the state of savagism of blacks; and the third claimed that slavery improved the life of these blacks (102). For his part, Alfred L. Brophy sums up McCord’s proslavery thought, by explaining that, for her, freedom was the most valuable gift when enjoyed by those for whom it had been created. However, as evinced in the Bible, ethnography and history, blacks had not been created for freedom but for slavery. In consequence, slavery was the best system to ensure the stability and maintenance of the Southern society. Even if in some cases masters did not comply with their duties toward slaves, the most sensible thing was to let slavery be regulated by their sentiments and not by legal rules (50). In “Negro and White Slavery—Wherein Do they Differ?,”<sup>8</sup> McCord asserts that “Negro

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<sup>7</sup> Diane Roberts thinks that behind McCord’s criticism of Harriet Martineau or Frances Wright, defenders of women’s emancipation, lurks the fear of miscegenation (63), a fear symbolized in her essay by the image of a white woman riding on a black man’s shoulders. Miscegenation and women’s emancipation go hand in hand. For McCord, the equality between sexes would inevitably lead to racial equality and, therefore, to the corruption of white femininity: “Imagine the lovely Miss Caroline, the fascinating Miss Martha, elbowing Sambo for the stump! All being equals, and no respect for persons to be expected, the natural conclusion is, that Miss Caroline or Martha, being indisputably (even the Worcester conventionalists will allow that) corporeally weaker than Sambo, would be thrust into the mud” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 115).

<sup>8</sup> “Negro and White Slavery—Wherein Do they Differ?,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 4 (July 1851): 118-132.

emancipation would be inevitably the death-blow of our civilization. By *ours*, we meant not ours of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi or Carolina—nay, nor of these Southern United States—nay, nor of this whole great empire, this young giant, whose infant strength startles its European forefathers with its newborn might; but *ours*—our civilization of this world of the nineteenth century, *must fall* with negro emancipation” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 198). Slavery is, thus, the essential element of Western civilization and race constitutes the most visible distinction existing among persons that, by definition, are not equals.

These ideas were far from unique, since she echoed the arguments embedded in the antebellum debates both in America and Europe about the new modes of capitalist production. If the abolitionists criticized the miserable conditions of the life of Southern slaves, the proslavery representatives replied by attacking the hardship under which the British working classes lived. In fact, the novels that tried to reply to Harriet Beecher Stowe's theses in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) made use of these same premises, criticizing the British system of social classes and arguing that abolitionism, the origins of which could be traced to the last decades of the eighteenth century, was built upon a conspiracy aimed at the destruction of American republicanism. Many proslavery American women writers, both in the South and North, censured Stowe; but McCord stands apart for the fierceness of her disgust towards Stowe's writing. In her review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>9</sup> McCord accused Stowe of an abject and sickening literary taste, of vulgarity, of socializing with blacks, mulattoes and abolitionists, of lack of knowledge of the authentic Southern reality of the plantation, of dangerously fictionalizing and unconsciously manipulating a historical truth, of lying and of being loyal to only the minimum requisites of decency and truth. McCord attacked the abolitionist and women's rights movements as perversions of the natural order that governed Southern patriarchal society.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” *Southern Quarterly Review* (January 1853): 81-120.

<sup>10</sup> “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is indecent, a gothic fable of horrors without any trace of Christian virtue, written to satisfy the sickening taste of readers fed for a long time with the nauseous diet, still with a constant craving, like that of the diseased palate of the opium eater, for its accustomed drug. For such tastes, Mrs. Stowe has catered well” (“Uncle Tom's Cabin” 247-248). McCord published a number of articles in Southern journals against the British abolitionists who had welcome Stowe's antislavery fiction enthusiastically and an open letter against Stowe's benefactress in

Besides these articles defending slavery, McCord also wrote a review of Henry Charles Carey's *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign: Why It Exists, and How it May Be Extinguished* (Philadelphia, 1853), published in *Southern Quarterly Review* with the title "Carey on the Slave Trade." Carey answered her and McCord replied with a letter dated January 18, 1854. Carey—"the only American economist of importance," according to Karl Marx (cit. Dawson 465)—was a relevant representative of the American school of political economy as well as author of *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (1835), *Principles of Political Economy* (1837-40) and *The Principles of Social Science* (1858-1859). In *The Slave Trade*, Carey shows himself to be a defender of protectionism and a detractor of free commerce, and declares that slavery was an inhuman economic system, encouraged by free exchange, that could only be abolished by state economic intervention that would entail freedom and, with it, social equality. For McCord, Carey's volume was so perverse that she felt obliged to question its many arguments, since they were more damaging than the most violent abolitionist attacks. Every line that Carey writes,

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England, "Letter to the Duchess of Sutherland from a Lady of South Carolina" (1853), in which she echoed Edmund Burke's *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796). For McCord, Stowe was a sensationalist writer who, even if she struggled to describe the horrors of what she imagined to be the atrocities committed by the slavery system, was unable to deem the real nightmarish America that would result in the case of the abolition of the system that she so harshly condemned. In order to illustrate this frightening landscape, McCord turned to a traditional theme in proslavery thought: the Haiti revolution, which took place between 1791 and 1804, with its bloody slave insurrection against slaveholders. Slavery obeyed the natural and divine orders, and its disappearance would automatically imply the drastic change of both and, as a result, political, social, cultural and even sexual anarchy for the nation. McCord accuses Stowe of ruthless cruelty and a lack of humanity since the slave "cannot see nor conceive the 'liberty' which you would thrust upon him, and it is a cruel task to disturb [the slave] in the enjoyment of that life to which God has destined him. He basks in the sunshine, and is happy. Christian slavery, in its full development, free from fretting arrogance and galling bitterness of abolition interference, is the brightest sunbeam which Omniscience has destined for his existence" (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 280). McCord deploys what Joy Jordan-Lake calls "the theology of whiteness," that is to say, "a framework that manipulates religious language and ideology to support the economic interests of a white patriarchal culture, including the creation of a deity in its own image: white, male, indifferent to injustice and zealous in punishing transgressions across the racial, gender and class lines it has drawn" (xvi). For Jordan-Lake, making God the ultimate creator and defender of slavery, and consequently depriving slaveholders of any responsibility, McCord understands that "whites do not oppress enslaved blacks; they are not pursuing economic profit but merely obeying what 'Omniscience' has 'destined' for slaves 'enjoyment'" (xvi). Thus, to oppose slavery is to oppose divine authority.



says McCord, shows his ignorance of the theme he condemns and his lack of awareness that blacks, rather than belonging to an oppressed race, are unprotected creatures whose only safeguard against disappearance is their custody by whites.

McCord's worldview came under threat in 1848, and she tried to dissipate the menace with the composition of her first and only drama, *Caius Gracchus: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. Published in 1851, it was a piece belonging to the genre of the closet drama.<sup>11</sup> Fought believes that with this title McCord was trying to imitate Byron and Keats, the romantic poets who composed such dramatic pieces with no intention of having them staged (72).<sup>12</sup> Susan Brown explains that traditional literary criticism, despite mentioning Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Drama of Exile* (1844), has not considered that women writers, specifically the romantics, were deeply enthusiastic about this genre. Pieces composed by women differ from those written by men because they are an attempt to dramatize not so much the inner dilemmas of their protagonists but the social contradictions of their genderized lives inside the Victorian patriarchal world (90). For Brown, texts such as Browning's *Drama of Exile* stand as antecedents of late nineteenth-century suffragist drama and show the strategies of female representation explored by these romantic women writers (90).

Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account that this type of play written by nineteenth-century women poets and women novelists works in two apparently contradictory directions. On the one hand, their "dramatic form presents women as speakers, as actors, as agents, in a way that lyric or third-person narrative poetry cannot." But on the other, the drama "portrays the constraints imposed by social context and the way that women's actions are shaped by such forces; women are thus also clearly reactors, social

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<sup>11</sup> McCord dedicated this tragedy in five acts to her only son, Langdon Cheves McCord, the man destined to replace, in some sense, the two other men of her life: her father and her husband. What she could not imagine at the time of writing this piece, in 1851, was that ten years later and coinciding with the outbreak of the Civil War, she herself was destined to suffer the same fate as her female protagonist, Cornelia, in that she would lose her son in battle.

<sup>12</sup> According to Caroline Winterer "The choice of the venerable form of the Roman play signaled McCord's literary and political ambitions. While her contemporaries were choosing the increasingly acceptable form of the historical novel, McCord seems to have chosen the now rather antiquarian form of a Roman play as a vehicle because it looked inward to the domestic world even while taking on larger political themes," though Winterer does not explain what these political themes are (79-80).

creatures rather than unfettered subjects.” These two tendencies combine to create “representations of women which embody the contradicted position of women attempting to attain a measure of autonomy within the Victorian gender system” (104).

*Caius Gracchus*, however, distances itself from the matrix traced by Susan Brown for these closet dramas written by nineteenth-century women authors. More than representing “middle-class Victorian women as split subjects, divided against themselves in their conflicting desires and in the differences between their self-representations and the actions that are possible to them” (Brown 104), McCord dramatizes in her female protagonist, Cornelia, the precepts that shaped the ideal of conservative femininity. She therefore transforms her play into a powerful ode to heroic republican motherhood. Yet, even though McCord was a spokeswoman for Southern patriarchal doctrines, she was not free from criticism for daring to delve into spaces forbidden to a woman.

In an enlightening letter to William Porcher Miles, dated June 12, 1848—a date that reveals the exact moment of the composition of her tragedy—McCord replies to Miles’s objections to her first draft of the play. Firstly, she responds to his dislike of the chosen genre: “As to my productions being *closet dramas*, what else can a Woman write? The *world of action* must to her be almost entirely a closed book” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S. McCord: Poems* 275). Secondly, she thanks him for his corrections of her anachronisms (“You show me some historical blunders which I have fallen into. Livius Drusus for instance I might just as well have made a young man, as an old one, but was really ignorant enough not to know anything about him”). And finally she defends her choice of the subject: “I must stand up for the Gracchi. They are among my *bona fide* heroes” (Lounsbury *Louisa S. McCord: Poems*: 274).<sup>13</sup>

Yet, even if she seems to support the Gracchi as the defenders of the people, in the same letter, she criticizes some of the radical defenders of the people of her own times: “I confess to being a thorough upholder of the people’s rights and in present scenes,

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<sup>13</sup> And she concludes by thanking him for his trouble and time reading the manuscript and for his notes that she will keep “as a commentary upon their defects, and will try to drag, coax, or push them, into perhaps a somewhat better shape” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S. McCord: Poems*: 275). Years later, in his biographical sketch on McCord, Miles declared, nonetheless, that the tragedy was alive with “striking passages, full of noble thought, aptly expressed. Though not written for the stage, it has many flashes of dramatic power” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S. McCord: Poems* 155-156).

although I cannot quite go with Louis Blanc and M. Albert, much less can I sympathize with fallen dynasties, however much I may deem beggar-kings an object of pity” (Lounsbury, *Louisa S. McCord: Poems*: 275). With these declarations, McCord shows herself contrary to King Louis Philippe of France, who had abdicated on February 24, 1848, and gone into exile in England, and to the doctrines of two socialist politicians of the Second French Republic of 1848. The first politician she refers to is Jean-Joseph Charles-Louis Blanc (1811-1882), author of *L'Organisation du travail* (1840), who, as a member of the French Provisional Government (1848), tried to guarantee employment to workers until he was obliged to accept his exile in England (1848-1870). The second statesman she refers to is Albert-Alexandre Martin (1815-1895), known as “L'ouvrier Albert,” who was a member of the Provisional Government and of the National Assembly, but who was imprisoned for his participation in the insurrections of May and June 1848.

McCord's declarations to her friend Miles verge on the confessional and reveal the political projection underlying her *Caius Gracchus*. Inspiring herself with a well-known theme, amply celebrated by contemporary Southern political rhetoric, *Caius Gracchus* can be considered McCord's response to a series of historical events in the late 1840s and early 1850s that might well have ended up destroying the social network on which the South rested as a conglomerate of states. Firstly, *Caius Gracchus* is her reply to the American distribution of free lands in the late 1840s, and secondly, to the European bourgeois revolutions that first broke out in 1848. Both issues were linked by her attempt to elevate the character of the Roman matron, whose characteristics contrasted with those of the American women protesting on behalf of women's rights, and whose opposition challenged women's potential as guardians of the Southern social and political orders.

McCord reinterprets the history of the Gracchi not merely because she is interested in praising Roman matrons, as pointed out by a substantial number of her scholars, but for more direct political purposes. She is concerned with the incontestable defense of the patriarchal slavery system that coincides with Southerners' interpretation of the Gracchi as proslavery Republicans during the 1850s. Hence her tragedy is a political allegation involving a defense of feminine domesticity. Furthermore, *Caius Gracchus* is her dramatic appropriation of Northern rhetoric about these historical

figures at a moment of a significantly entrenched political transatlantic crisis.<sup>14</sup>

According to Margaret Malamud, “[the] vision of Rome as a virtuous Republic undermined by imperial corruption haunts the American imagination” (3). During these prewar years, specifically between the 1830s and 1850s, the economic and ideological differences between the North and the South were increasing and the distance between social classes grew. Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and his brother Caius Sempronius Gracchus, two Romans devoted to the protection of the oppressed plebeians, became important figures in the American political consciousness. Malamud explains that in the North the two brothers were objects of praise by the working classes because of their efforts on behalf of land reforms and the plebeians, and they became a model for the agrarian aspirations of these Americans. The National Reform Association, the most relevant labor movement throughout this period, established a number of analogies between the fights of the Gracchi in Rome and their own struggles to obtain homesteads from the nation’s public lands. The Gracchi brothers exemplified, therefore, the ideal representatives of an America composed of Jeffersonian small landowners. As Malamud clarifies, “In this reading and writing of Roman history, the Roman working man’s enemy was an entrenched and rapacious landholding oligarchy that had destroyed Rome’s ‘yeoman’ republic” (34).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The article “The French Republic,” published in *Southern Quarterly Review*, the magazine where McCord often collaborated, in July 1848, signed by C (Milton Clapp, perhaps, according to E.N. Curtis), is evidence of the Southern opinion of the French revolution in 1848. In it, the author denounces Louis Philippe and, although he recognizes the good intentions of the provisional government, he censures some of the measures taken—control of the railways, the abolition of slavery—and manifests little hope of a stable Republic (cit. Curtis 262).

<sup>15</sup> The Gracchi were mainly remembered for their agrarian reforms. Romans had established the custom of auctioning a part of the lands acquired after wars, whereas another part became public land (*ager publicus*), a land that was cheaply rented to the poor classes in exchange for a small fee to the government. Over the years, the wealthy classes started to offer higher rents for these public lands, thereby excluding the participation of the lower classes. As a measure of restraint the *Lex Licinia* (367 BC) was decreed. This law prohibited the possession of more than 500 *iugera* of public lands by one individual. Corruption facilitated the enrichment of the wealthy and undermined the power of small farmers who, obliged to fight in wars far from their homes, saw their lands occupied by slaves and themselves condemned to poverty. The Gracchi tried to remedy this unbalanced situation. In 133 BC Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus tried to reestablish the *Lex Licinia*. In that same year the *Lex Sempronia Agraria* was passed, obliging many patrician landowners to give up their public lands in favor of small farmers. The opposition of many members of the Senate was not long

If, for the Free Soil movement, the lands of the West were considered to be territory where it was possible to construct an egalitarian republic governed by white farmers free from the slavery of the industrial capitalist North, in the South, this expansion towards the West was seen from another perspective. The West was imagined as a land populated by black slaves owned and protected by their white masters. Consequently, in the South, the slaveholding and landowning elites admired the Gracchi for their powerful oratorical skills and for their attempts to reform a corrupt Senate, even if at the same time they rejected their land reforms. Thus, “over the course of the 1840s and 1850s debates over the Gracchi’s

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in coming and in 131 BC Tiberius was murdered with more than two hundred of his followers by his opponents, headed by Scipio Nasica, as a consequence of his land reform plans. Ten years later these plans were retaken by his brother Caius Sempronius Gracchus, an excellent orator, who would also be murdered in 121 BC and whose history became the plot around which McCord constructs her tragedy. Caius Gracchus took the same office as his brother, a tribune for the plebeians, and tried to reestablish the *Lex Sempronia* and also defended the creation of commercial colonies in Tarento and Capua to lighten the congestion suffered by Rome, since in the capital the great number of slaves hindered the possibilities of employment for the lower classes. Moreover, among other reforms, Caius Gracchus pressed to have the *Lex Iunonia* passed and around six thousand men were sent to a new Carthage—the original Carthage having been destroyed twenty five years before, and reduced the price of grain for the urban population. The Senate then established the decree called *Senatus Consultum Ultimum*, that allowed the suspension of republican rights in defense of the Republic and granted Roman magistrates full power. Caius Gracchus and his followers protested and consul Lucius Opimius crushed them on the Aventine hill, one of the seven hills on which Rome had been built. More than three thousand of his supporters died and Caius was killed and beheaded. His skull was filled with lead since a reward in gold had been offered according to its weight. Erased from official history, the heroic memory of the Gracchi and their followers survived only in popular memory.

In the United States the history of the Gracchi, made popular by English historiography, had been reinterpreted since the times of the American Revolution. Thus, for example, like Cicero, John Adams, far from praising the reformist role of the Roman brothers, interpreted them from a conservative position and found fault with them because their projects, if successful, would have irrevocably eroded the distinctions between patricians and plebeians, challenging the security established by social hierarchies and property rights, fundamental elements of good government (Malamud 51). From the 1830s onwards, new approaches to the Gracchi appeared, coinciding with the translation into English in 1828 of *Römische Geschichte* by Niebuhr, one of the most relevant texts on the subject in the nineteenth century. Niebuhr’s vision would influence Samuel Goodrich’s interpretation of the brothers in his *A Pictorial History of Ancient Rome* (1849), a text that went through many editions during these years and in which the Gracchi become popular heroes destroyed by the ambition of the aristocracy.

agrarian reforms, Roman slavery, and Roman decline were linked together in support of both pro- and antislavery arguments” (Malamud 5). At a time of escalating tensions between the two regions, “the South also turned to the classical world for exemplars to challenge the rhetoric of the North,” and among the examples they found, that of the Gracchi was “the most outstanding and paradoxically the same one that Northern workers mentioned to illustrate how the lands of the West could be settled and appropriated by free white workers” (Malamud 61). Yet, as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argue, “the slaveholders’ affection for the Gracchi stemmed in large part from their sense that a slave society required a strong and loyal yeomanry to bolster it. [...] Southern slaveholders had mixed feelings about the Roman aristocrats’ reaction to Tiberius Gracchi’s self-righteousness and skirting of legality. As ardent admirers of Cicero, they knew of his defense of the murder of the Gracchi as ‘justifiable.’ Reviewing the history of Sparta and Rome, Cicero concluded that tyrannical regimes rose in the wake of the demagogic agitation of ‘the agrarian issue’” (299-300).<sup>16</sup>

This is the background against which McCord constructs her tragedy that dramatizes her anxieties about the national and European political upheavals of 1848 and their consequences in Southern politics, and to explain her profound objections to Caius’s reformist ambitions. In *Caius Gracchus*, she describes Caius as a Roman model of the most excellent virtues embodied by the Republican statesman. His figure transcends the limits of the Southern slavery oligarchy and, far from limiting himself to the safeguard of black slavery—an implicit motif for McCord in her

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<sup>16</sup> In *The Golden Age of the Classics in America*, Carl J. Richard explains how proslavery Southerners, such as Thomas Dew or Hugh Swinton Legaré, among others, turned to Aristotle and other classical thinkers of antiquity who believed that slavery was consubstantial to freedom. Together with these Southern spokesmen, McCord “sought to emphasize that the success of a slaveholding republic depended on a broad base of landowners. Poor freemen had to have access to land and the protection of aristocratic oppression it afforded or else they would rise up, overthrow both slavery and republican government, and turn to a dictatorship of Caesar. For this reason, most Southerners, despite having misgivings about some of the ‘demagogic’ methods employed by the Gracchi, applauded their ill-fated effort to restore the yeoman class of the Roman republic through land redistribution. George Frederick Holmes astutely noted that the Gracchi had never intended to undermine slavery. The antebellum South must avoid the fatal mistake of the Roman republic in resting itself on too narrow an economic base” (184).

play—he defends the Southern way of life by being both an exemplary patriot and citizen. “Resistance to oppression is the main theme of McCord’s *Caius Gracchus*, and its Roman hero embodies American republican patriotism: the willingness to fight to death for liberty,” Malamud believes (86). For this critic, “he acts like a man shaped by Cicero’s *De Officiis*, a text written for the Roman political elite that discusses the ideal relationship between virtue and duty, and a text widely read by educated Americans from the Revolutionary era on” (82).<sup>17</sup>

Confronted by threats of Northern interference and the influence of European revolutions, McCord transforms her Caius Gracchus into a Southern spokesman for the authentic ideology on which the Republic rests. He becomes a leader of the cause of liberty against tyranny, a liberty to be reestablished without altering the basic pillars of his society. Caius struggles to remind free Romans and governing patrician of the responsibilities defining Republicanism. Stephanie McCurry explains that for McCord, as for Southern political elites, Republicanism distinguished itself by an intrinsic trait—the difference between independent men who were dignified depositories of the trust of the people, and dependent ones who were unsuitable to receive this same consideration. This defining principle excluded women, slaves and workers who did not own property (1264). For McCord’s Caius Gracchus, the corruption of the Senate could be solved through the opposition of free citizens to their oppression, but never through the destruction of the social order, as was happening in Europe in 1848. Consequently, Caius Gracchus declares:

Ye are Rome’s masters—her true governors  
At once, and truest servants  
[...].  
Romans, the fathers of this Senate were  
Rome’s noblest citizens; the country’s prop,  
And every way her boast. They won them rights,

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<sup>17</sup> Cicero’s works, among other classical texts, were used as manuals of conduct by statesmen and interpreted by Southern elites to justify and ennoble the power that they exerted on poor whites and slaves. McCord was fully cognizant of the vision offered by German historian Barthold Georg Niebuhr of the Gracchi in his *Römische Geschichte* (1811-1832) and these are the ideas that inspired her to mold the character of her Caius Gracchus: a statesman described by his virtue and his sense of patriotic duty.

From which, with all their vices, still their sons  
 Ought not to be cast down. Leave them the dues  
 Their fathers' virtues won. Revere in them  
 The noble legacy of by-gone deeds;  
 But rouse ye 'neath oppression! (Act III, scene IV, lines 8-9, 33-40)

Likewise he addresses the senators reminding them of their true duties to govern with honor and justice, and exhorts them to change, but never to engage in insurrections:

One word to you, ye noble Senators;  
 Though you misdoubt me, as a friend I speak,  
 Of Rome and of no party.  
 Conscript fathers,  
 I plead to you, with filial duty bending,  
 As son to a harsh parent. Let us end  
 This so unnatural struggle. Be but just,  
 We ask no more. This quarrel once removed,  
 Our rights acknowledge, and our privileges  
 Laid open fairly, to the strengthening 'tis  
 At once of you and us. (Act III, scene IV, lines 114-123)

For Malamud, McCord's Caius Gracchus "is careful to acknowledge and respect the social order and political hierarchy" (84) because, for her, the elongated shadow of the European revolutionary insurrections darkens her American South. In *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance*, Larry J. Reynolds studies how some of the most relevant authors of the American Renaissance—Fuller, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Thoreau—were influenced by these transatlantic events and how they projected their anxieties onto these cataclysmic changes in their works. Reynolds explains that there existed two groups of Americans who expressed their objections towards the 1848 French Revolution—"the defenders of slavery and the wealthy, both of whom saw in the revolution a frightening threat to property" (16). Proslavery groups were troubled by the way the provisional government had abolished slavery in the French colonies (Curtis 258), and the wealthy classes were concerned by the possibility of establishing a system of national production, national workshops, which they believed could initiate a socialist state (Reynolds 16). Whereas the vast majority of Americans supported the revolution openly, these two groups opposed it, although often surreptitiously.



Among the Southerners who voiced a significant response to the 1848 European insurrections was John C. Calhoun, the well-known proslavery South Carolina Senator and a decisive influence on McCord's political thought.<sup>18</sup> Calhoun congratulated the French promptly but without making any reference to slavery. The Southerner declared that the revolution was "a wonderful event—the most striking, in my opinion, in history" (cit. Reynolds 16). Yet, he went on to classify these praises as "premature" since the event could eventually result in "a mighty evil" (cit. Reynolds 17; Curtis 260). In fact, like many other observers, Calhoun was afraid that the example that Europe was presenting could become a pernicious model for the United States (Morrison 120). Richard C. Rohrs explains how Calhoun was extremely critical in his private correspondence, condemning the revolution and questioning the ability of the French people for self-government. He insisted that any attempt to fuse the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity in practice would end up in "anarchy, and finally absolute power, in the hand of one man" (cit. Rohrs 363). Charles M. Wiltse observes that, for Calhoun, the domestic and foreign scenes "were one and the same; or rather they were related aspects of a world-wide canvas" ("A Critical Southerner" 300). "Like the communist prophets," explains Wiltse, Calhoun

saw the masses struggling for control—the proletariat emerging to make its bid for power. But to him it was not the dawn of a new and noble age. It was a threat to order, to stability, to civilization. [...] to reverse the classes themselves was anarchy and stupid folly [...] reform in Calhoun's view was slow and gradual change, to be effected by controlled and orderly processes" ("A Critical Southerner" 300).

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<sup>18</sup> Yet Margaret Malamud is the only critic who suggests that importance. In an 1848 speech against the Wilmot Proviso—the clause which, in the Mexican War, made it possible to ban slavery from all territories annexed to Mexico except Texas, but which was rejected by the Senate—Calhoun inveighed against the advance of Northern antislavery factions in a language that reverberates with revolutionary tones: "I turn now to my friends of the South and ask, what are you prepared to do?... are you prepared to sink down into a state of acknowledged inferiority; to be stripped of your dignity of equals among equals, and be deprived of your equality of rights in this federal partnership of States?... If so, you are woefully degenerated from your sires, and will well deserve to change condition with your slaves... The South must rise up and bravely defend herself, or sink down into base and acknowledged inferiority" (cit. Malamud 84).

In fact, “the overthrow of a constitutionally established government was a dangerous precedent for Southerners who depended upon their nation’s Constitution to guarantee and protect slavery” (Rohrs 369). This use of violence as a suitable measure to implement social change drastically transformed the initial euphoria that Southerners like Calhoun had felt for the European bourgeois revolutions into a growing anxiety over the consequences that these circumstances might eventually entail on their own society.<sup>19</sup>

In *Caius Gracchus*, McCord reinterprets the Southern traditional vision of classical history and adapts it to the contemporary frame of transnational political changes. Like Calhoun, McCord shows her fears of what Timothy M. Roberts calls “the specter of bloody revolution” (275) and the possibility that the European scenes of violence and destruction of the established order might have replicas in her Southern slavery society. Hence, as a conservative and an ardent proslavery theorist, McCord also “cautiously approved of the Gracchi” (Genovese and Fox-Genovese 296).<sup>20</sup>

In fact, some years later and with the escalating sectional crisis, her enthusiastic and fierce support of Secession appears phrased as “a revolution” in some of the essays and letters she wrote at this time. In “Separate Secession”<sup>21</sup> she explains: “A *revolution* effected by mere animal excitement is inevitably a failure. *Revolutions* ought not to be made too easily: they are fierce remedies, for fiercer ills, when rashly applied, they become, like the knife of the surgeon in the hands of the quack, instruments not of healing, but of death”

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<sup>19</sup> In *Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict*, Andre M. Fleche also believes that “[w]hite southerners took away very different lessons regarding the changing meaning of democratic revolution. John C. Calhoun and other defenders of the institution of slavery distrusted revolutions that had resulted in slave emancipation in the French West Indies. Their fears were exacerbated by the emergence of the Free Soil Party in 1848, the radical democratic disturbances at home, such as Rhode Island’s Dorr Rebellion, which sought to eliminate property qualifications for voting” (18).

<sup>20</sup> As Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explain, “Although no less horrified, knowledgeable Southerners had long expected the insurrection of the unemployed and exploited free workers and the collapse of the free-labor system into anarchy and despotism. John Randolph, Thomas Cooper, Thomas Roderick Dew, and John C. Calhoun had identified the destructive implications of the great upheavals in Europe and predicted mounting ferocity. [...] The slaveholders remained committed to social order at all cost” (53).

<sup>21</sup> Published in *Southern Quarterly Review* 4 (October 1851): 298-317. See Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 203-221.

(Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 216, my italics). If in her public writings she shows herself to be an ardent champion of restraint, in her private correspondence at the end of the 1850s and with the threat of Northern republican politics, she exhibits a different spirit. In a July 29, 1859, letter addressed to the famous sculptor Hiram Powers, then living in Italy, McCord states that: "I look forward to a general 'smash up' as the only regenerating hope of our country. You perceive I am a thorough disunionist" (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Poems* 359). In another letter to Powers, dated December 24, 1860, she declares:

But, *now, we are in the midst of a revolution*. Our spirited little State has declared its independence. On the 20th Inst. she threw down the gauntlet by an ordinance of secession from the United States government, and now waits the result. *A bloodless revolution* (an unheard of event in history) can scarcely be expected; and yet some of us hope that such may be. Our example will, we firmly believe be in a few weeks followed by Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Other States we hope will (although not yet so fully compromised to action) soon fall in with us, and a Southern Confederacy be constructed.— You have been so long away from America that you will probably know little of the cause of complaint and sympathize not greatly with the throbbing spirit of our now fully roused country. Besides, we, of the Southern United States, have been constantly so misrepresented, loud mouthed fanaticism has so cried down our institutions, and pretended philanthropy so covered us with slander and falsehood, that it would be asking too much of a far-off spectator to understand and appreciate our action. *I wish I could show you how right we are*; but it would require a perfect volume of a letter, to give the history of almost half a century of slowly encroaching injustice. (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Poems* 361, my italics)

She ends by apologizing for the length of her missive, still taking the opportunity to justify herself by saying that "*even a Woman has the right to wake up when the revolution is afoot*, and when our Sons (even boys) throw aside their Greek, Latin and mathematics to practice rifles and study military tactics" (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Poems*: 364, my italics).

McCord's choice of the historical moment in which she decides to place her drama could be surprising if the profound influence of republican political language and the way it pervades

classical ideals are not taken into account. Margaret Malamud explains that Southern prewar political oratory constructed the North as a corrupt Rome exerting imperial power over Southern states (89). Among the numerous figures of public life who systematically established this comparison, Malamud cites Isaac E. Holmes, a senator from South Carolina, who in 1850 declared: “The North has become like unto Rome and from the same causes. She has subjected provinces more productive than the Egyptian or African.”<sup>22</sup> For his part, J.D.B. De Bow, editor of the well-known New Orleans *De Bow’s Review*, manifested around the same time that “The Roman Empire, in its most debauched and basest times, never sunk half so low in venality, corruption, and vulgarity, as our federal government has sunk” (cit. Malamud 89-90). Thus, many Southern politicians and political commentators compared the North with Rome and the South with Carthage, destroyed by Roman ambition. Hence, McCord makes ample use of a nearly hackneyed theme at the time of her writing *Caius Gracchus*, a fact that inserts her in the long list of Southerners who, fascinated by classical history, find in it opportunity to criticize the process of abuse and deterioration suffered by their own way of life.

Together with her fascination for the classical Gracchi, another contemporary influence common among nineteenth-century women writers, must also be considered: the search for models of female heroism in the history of the classical world, from Greece to Rome, and earlier Biblical times. As Mary Kelley explains, during this period many women writers tried to vindicate the history of women’s achievements through the past. Margaret Fuller contributed with her manifesto *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and McCord chose a historical drama “as the site through which she articulated models of womanhood” (221). Both intellectuals included representations of women who symbolized Republican classical ideals, even though their objectives were radically different. As mentioned above, Fuller defended women’s equality and racial emancipation, while McCord opposed women’s rights and the abolition of slavery. Yet, both attempted to legitimize the importance of women throughout history, and expand “the influence of women like themselves,” since “publicized as both model and medium, the female exemplars from the past embodied subjectivities and social ideals for Americans in

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<sup>22</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 31st Cong. 1st Session, 1850, Appendix 1281. Cit. in Malamud 89.

the present” (Kelley 221). Among these historical models one who had attracted Western attention since the late eighteenth century was that of the Roman, Cornelia.<sup>23</sup> As Malamud explains, admiration for Cornelia was general during the first half of the nineteenth century, especially in the American South where “she exemplified a Southern ideal of motherhood” (81), and she constituted a traditional reference both in speeches and journalistic articles.<sup>24</sup>

In *Caius Gracchus*, McCord highlights Cornelia’s role as a restraining force for her son’s revolutionary ambitions. As Richard C. Lounsbury asserts, although Shakespeare’s tragedies were her inspiration, McCord attempts to give priority to the roles of the wife and, above all, to that of the mother, Cornelia, in an attempt to explore dramatically the debate that occupied her society at the time: the role of women (*Louisa S McCord: Poems* 79).<sup>25</sup> She did so because Caius’s struggle against the corruption of the Senate, as opposed to

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<sup>23</sup> Cornelia was the daughter of Publius Cornelius Scipio, who had defeated Hannibal in the Second Punic War, and who had adopted the name of “Africanus” to immortalize his victories. She married Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus but, when she became a widow, she rejected an offer of marriage by king Ptolomeus of Egypt and preferred to stay in Rome taking care of her children and educating them in the ideals of honoring and serving Rome. Valerius Maximus tells us that Cornelia felt so proud of her children that on one occasion a woman from Campania, staying at her house, showed Cornelia her jewels and the Roman matron entertained her until her children arrived and then, while pointing at them, Cornelia declared: “Haec ornamenta sunt mea” (These are my jewels). Cornelia survived the murder of her two sons, Tiberius and Caius, and when she died, Rome honored her memory with a statue. This sculpture was discovered in 1878, and at its base the inscription *Cornelia Africanae m. Gracchorum* (Cornelia, daughter of the African, mother of the Gracchi), could be read. Martha Patricia Irigoyen Troconis explains that these words honor Cornelia as a “mother generator of heroes” and “exemplary matron” (168).

<sup>24</sup> The character of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, is also a relevant theme in the pictorial world, as shown by the numerous representations of this Roman lady by European and American painters. Among the former, the late eighteenth-century neoclassical paintings by Giuseppe Cades (Musée du Louvre), Noël Hallé (1779, Musée Fabre, Montpellier), Jean-François Peyron (1781, The National Gallery, London), Angelica Kauffman (1785, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond), Philipp Friedrich von Hetsch (1794), Joseph Benoit Suvée (1795, Musée du Louvre), and the marble sculpture by Jules Cavalier (1861, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) can be mentioned. Among the American artists, mention must be made of Benjamin West’s engraving (1783, Royal Academy of Arts).

<sup>25</sup> This reading is corroborated by her friend, the writer Mary Chesnut, when the latter refers to McCord in her diaries and retitles the tragedy as *The Mother of the Gracchi* (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Poems* 80). The curious and perhaps perverse fact of this story is that, some years later, as mentioned above, fate would confirm the autobiographical reading that the play might contain when McCord’s son died defending the Secessionist cause.

the European revolutions, must not result in a drastic change that entails a submission of power to the majority, to the people, but a moral and political remodeling of the governing minority. Caius and his supporters, as free Romans, react against the aggression of the degraded Senate in order to show that they are worthy of freedom or, otherwise, they will deserve to be submitted to the same slavery suffered by their black slaves. Resistance to Roman tyranny, standing for Yankee tyranny is described here as “the choice between freedom and (white) slavery,” an attractive theme both for “Southern planter elites *and* Southern whites who would never own slaves” (Malamud 86).

As Stephanie McCurry explains, for Southerners, “the only true republic was a slave republic, for only a slave republic maintained the public sphere as a realm of perfect equality” (1260). McCord connects the South with the Rome of the Gracchi “through paternalism” (Richard 186). As Caius declares before a crowd of Roman citizens:

Man has, in every station, rights his due.  
 Our slaves look to their masters for support.  
 The very claims we hold upon their labor  
 Make us a rule to tender them again  
 What comforts we can furnish to their lot.  
 If placed by circumstance, necessity,  
 Beneath our rule, protection thence we owe:  
 And he evading basely these, degrades  
 Himself below the thus defrauded slave. (Act II, scene VI, lines 24-32)

In fact, the review of *Caius Gracchus* in *De Bow's Review* corroborates the relevance of McCord's subject and confirms that the tragedy exemplifies the situation of the South in general, and South Carolina in particular: “In the agitated state of public feeling which has prevailed in South Carolina for some years past, exist important requisites for the nourishment and development of the poetic faculty in its greatest vigor. The idea of external oppression, exciting personal feeling, and turning the mind to the contemplation of examples of heroic resistance, has, in past times, produced the noblest specimens of eloquence, and plumed the wings of poesy to her most sustained flight.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Review published in 1852. Cit. Lounsbury, “Louisa S. McCord” in *The History* 80.

Caius is a tragic hero who decides to face his inexorable fate alone, even if, in the dramatic action, he is supported by his mother Cornelia, a figure who, from the private space of the home, tries to guide his steps, although without success. Faced with the excitement produced by Caius's attacks on the Senate, Cornelia does not hesitate to declare:

By reason led, and peaceful wisdom nursed,  
 All progress is for good. But the deep curse  
 Of bleeding nations follows in the track  
 Of mad ambition, which doth cheat itself  
 To find a glory in its lust of rule;  
 Which, piling private ill on public wrong,  
 Beneath the garb of patriotism hides  
 Its large-mawed cravings; and would thoughtless plunge  
 To every change. However riot waits,  
 With feud intestine, by mad uproar driven,  
 And red-eyed murder, to reproach the deed.  
 Death in its direct forms doth wait on such. (Act III, scene I, lines  
 21-31)

A man at war against tyranny, Caius responds to this without heeding the consequences his mother points to:

Man lives to die, and there's no better way  
 To let the shackled spirit find its freedom  
 Than in a glorious combat 'gainst oppression.  
 I would not grudge the breath lost in the struggle. (Act III, scene I,  
 lines 32-35)

Michael O'Brien observes that the plot of this play implies that "the state is man's realm, that woman can only act secondarily through sons and husbands to limit its brutality or to make it move" (*Conjectures* 717). Cornelia, in an attempt to oblige Caius to question his own conduct, later declares:

I tremble at the spirit you have raised,  
 And anxious watch its full development  
 [...]  
 You argue well. And yet in purposes  
 Well reasoned even, oft to evil leads

Too rash precipitance. As half-spent torch,  
 From a child's hand, the mighty forest fires,  
 Thus human passions, easily aroused,  
 Storm forth their angry blaze. The frightened thing  
 That waked the crashing storm, bewildered shrinks  
 From fierce destruction, in its raging might,  
 Which, hissing, roars alternate; and doth gaze,  
 In terror stupefied, at its own work.  
 You drop the spark, but can you rule the flame  
 Of unchained passion's might? (Act III, scene 4, lines 60-61, 85-96)

Caius ignores his mother's words of admonition and, in light of the impossibility of changing his fate, Cornelia opts for resignation. Her aspect contrasts with the attitude adopted by the other important feminine character in the play, Licinia, Caius's wife. When Licinia, desperate before the destruction that awaits her husband, reproaches his mother for her passivity, Cornelia responds by exalting his sacrifice for the sake of the dignity and nobility expected in a son:

Hear me, ye Gods!  
 My supplications are to you for this  
 My last, best hope in my life; my *only one!*  
 I pray ye now to give him strength to bear  
 This heavy trial; parting, worse than death,  
 From the heart-stricken loved ones! Go, my son.  
 I have no word to stop you. (Act V, scene I, lines 196-202)

As a mother, Cornelia is confined to the domestic space outside its boundaries when Caius looks for refuge considers suicide in the temple. There Cornelia powerfully reminds him of his obligations:

For life and duty strive; nor be the coward  
 Who, shrinking, dreads on his own heart to look  
 And dies, to shun responsibility.  
 My son, I know, can never thus be brought  
 By fear to shirk his manhood. (Act V, scene 5, lines 78-82)

Caius himself credits Cornelia for his noble character, answering: "Mother, I go./ May heaven so bless you, as your son shall strive/ To prove the honor and the love he bears you/ By working out the noble thoughts you teach" (Act V, scene 5, lines 83-



86). Cornelia is, then, the only one to remind him that fulfilling his duty is his most important responsibility, even if this results in his own death. For McCord, the good functioning of society depends on its men's exemplary conduct, a conduct supervised and dictated by women. For their part, women must necessarily remain in a position of subordination so that the social utopia, Roman or Southern, may exist. As she writes in her 1852 article "Enfranchisement of Woman," the role that women must play in their society, a role mirrored by Cornelia in *Caius Gracchus*, is the following:

Her mission is, to our seeming, even nobler than man's, and she is, in the true fulfillment of that mission, certainly the higher being... Pure and holy, self-devoted and suffering, woman's love is the breath of that God of love, who, loving and pitying, has bid her learn to love and to suffer, implanting in her bosom the one single comfort that she is the watching spirit, the guardian angel of those she loves. (Lounsbury, *Louisa S McCord: Political* 109)

Her declaration of principles constitutes an ideal recreation of her contemporary doctrine of true womanhood. Like her contemporary Northern women writers, McCord elevates women as morally superior to men. They are, therefore, endowed with the responsibility to exert authority in questions of spiritual leadership but, and in apparent contradiction, without abandoning their natural domestic sphere, a territory that becomes a political space from which to defend the Southern slavery republic. As Barbara Welter clarifies, "the very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For if woman was so very less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world especially since men were making such a hash of things" (41).

Caius Gracchus's death, in the arms of his loyal slave and at the hands of the corrupt Senate, brings about the crumbling of the Republic. However heroic and admirable, his cause fails and, no matter how many undesirable elements have disappeared from the senatorial elite, the final triumph of his enemies represents the victory of anarchy, for "heedlessly, he has mobilized the lower ranks of the citizenry and unleashed on Rome the irresponsibility of the landless mob" (Fox-Genovese 287). For McCord and for southern slaveholders, determined to defend their slavery republic, "the aftermath of the fall of the Gracchi carried a special omen. The

efforts of the tribunes to protect the people against aggrandizement and oppression had driven Roman conservatives to support dictatorships” (Genovese and Fox Genovese 301). *Caius Gracchus* stands ultimately as McCord’s drama foreshadowing political disaster, written to vindicate the neoclassical nuances of Republican motherhood that characterized Southern women, guardian angels not of the home, but of the peculiar institution of slavery, against national and international threats posed by the post-1848 American and European transatlantic crisis.

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