

“Azakia,” *Ouâbi*, and  
Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton  
*A ROMANCE OF THE EARLY AMERICAN  
REPUBLIC*

GORDON SAYRE

THE Rare Books Division of the Princeton University Library holds one of just forty surviving copies of *Ouâbi: or The Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos* (1790), one of the first long narrative poems published by an Anglo-American woman. A verse melodrama set on the early American frontier and starring highly idealized Native American characters, the book has never been reprinted, and it poorly suits the tastes and expectations of modern readers. However, three other rare texts from the period 1789–1795—*Ouâbi*’s source, its flattering imitator, and a scandalous exposé of the personal life of its author, Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton (1759–1846)—are also in the Princeton collection. Critical and historical assessment of these four works can reveal how literary production in the early American republic was constrained by gender and genre, and how Native American peoples were used as surrogates for elite Bostonians.



Poetry was enormously popular in eighteenth-century America, and remarkably versatile. From ballads and drinking songs to dignified elegies, from political satire to devotional verses and love lyrics, people wrote poetry for many purposes that today are nearly always expressed in prose. The spread of newspapers and periodicals throughout the colonies in the later 1700s made poetry accessible to nearly all literate Americans and opened the possibility of publication to thousands of versifiers with varying degrees of talent. For readers today, the prevailing neoclassical style of the period holds little appeal, compared with later Romantic poetry. The neo-Augustan couplets of Phillis Wheatley, a Boston contemporary of Sarah Morton’s and the first published African American poet in English, largely defy modern concepts of racial identity. Philip Freneau, probably the period’s

most popular poet, is today relegated to a few entries in American literature anthologies. "Beacon Hill," the first part of Morton's own grandest oeuvre, an epic poem on the American Revolution, met with a lukewarm reception in 1797, and she never completed it.

Aside from shifting poetic tastes, an additional barrier to Sarah Morton's literary canonization is that the class and gender values of the early republic militated against the formation of a powerful author function behind her. Morton published *Ouâbi* and nearly all of her other work under classical-sounding pseudonyms like "Philenia." As Michael Warner argues in his influential study *The Letters of the Republic*, many male authors used such *noms de plume* as a means for presenting political arguments under the guise of an impersonal *res publica*.<sup>1</sup> But women, who were denied participation in the political public sphere, used pseudonyms more often to preserve a sense of propriety. Morton and other upper-class female poets in the early American republic, such as Annis Boudinot Stockton, often circulated their work privately in manuscript within an elite social and literary circle for years before agreeing to any publication. In Morton's case, moreover, the boundaries of privacy in literary publication became a troublingly personal affair. In 1789, news of a sexual liaison between her husband, the prominent lawyer and patriot Perez Morton, and her sister Fanny Apthorp, which had already become scandalous gossip among Boston's elites, was publicly sensationalized by an episode in William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy*, a work that has often been called the first American novel.

*The Power of Sympathy* has been reprinted several times and discussed at length by critics of early American literature. Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton, too, has recently benefited from a revival of interest in early American women writers, but *Ouâbi* remains little read.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the ultimate sign of its neglect is that the biographical

<sup>1</sup>Warner refers to this effect as the "universalizing mediation of publicity" but emphasizes that such a universal stance was "available only to those participants whose social role allows such self-negation (that is, persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital)." *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 40–42.

<sup>2</sup>Editions of *The Power of Sympathy* include one from Ohio State University Press (1969), edited by William S. Kable, and two bound together with Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797): one from New College and University Press (1970), edited by William S. Osbourne; and the other from Penguin Classics (1996), edited by Carla Mulford. Another melodramatic sex scandal furnished the inspiration for Foster's



*Portrait of Mrs. Perez Morton*, by Gilbert Stuart. Oil on canvas, 1802–1820. Courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Gift from the grandchildren of Joseph Tuckerman.

headnote on Morton in the fifth and sixth editions of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* spells the title “Quâbi.” In this essay, in an effort to bring this work the attention it deserves, I will describe the evolution of *Ouâbi* from its source through its adaptation in 1795 as a drama for the English stage. In publishing *Ouâbi*, I will argue, Morton issued a cleverly disguised response to the scandal and to Brown’s novel, a response that both defended her honor and reaffirmed the codes of neoclassical poetics, notably the value of anonymity, in part by using Native American characters as surrogate figures for herself and the other players in her family tragedy.



In the September 1789 issue of the *American Museum*, an ambitious but short-lived (1787–1792) periodical published in Philadelphia by the Irish-American printer and editor Matthew Carey, there appeared “Azakia; a Canadian story.” The brief tale was published anonymously—as were *The Power of Sympathy* and *Ouâbi*—and its author has never been identified. The story begins with comments about the French colonial fur trade in Canada and the sexual alliances that traders carry on with Indian women, who “have a strong propensity to love; a propensity, which a maiden, in this country [indigenous Canada], may yield to, and always indulges without scruple” (194).<sup>3</sup> A Huron Indian woman is then introduced and finds herself the victim of an attempted rape by a French soldier. Luckily, she is rescued by “the baron of St. Castins, an officer in the troops of Canada” (194), who nonetheless finds the soldier’s actions “excusable” because of the

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novel and for a separate episode in Brown’s. This concerned Elizabeth Whitman, who gave birth to an illegitimate child and then died in a Danvers, Massachusetts, tavern in 1788. For a bibliography of studies of *The Power of Sympathy*, see Mulford’s introduction, lvi–vlii. The first ninety lines of *Ouâbi* are reprinted in *American Women Writers to 1800*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 337–40.

<sup>3</sup>*American Museum; or, Repository of Ancient and Modern Fugitive Pieces, etc. Prose and Poetical* 6 (July–December 1789): 193–98 (subsequent page citations in parentheses). For the self-serving manner in which colonial writers represented Native American sexual customs, see my “Native American Sexuality in the Eyes of the Beholders, 1535–1710,” in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Merrill D. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 35–54. Note also that the title and the name of the character in Morton’s poem are spelled with a circumflex over the *a*, whereas the original short story did not use that orthography.

“many engaging charms” of this woman, Azakia (194). Soon afterward, St. Castins kills another officer in a duel and is forced to flee the colony. He seeks “safe asylum among the Huron” (194), where he is welcomed by Azakia and her husband, Ouabi, and accepts the chief’s offer to become a Huron and join their warriors in battles against the enemy Iroquois. He also takes a new name, Celario. On his first war party, Celario is wounded, and Azakia tends to him. “His desires and his hopes revived with his strength,” but Azakia demurred: “I cannot quit Ouabi” (195). When St. Castins decides to flee the cause of his temptation, Azakia implores him to stay and tries to set him up with a young virgin, Zisma. The author discreetly observes that “it is not known if he profited from this discovery: at least it did not make him forget Azakia” (196). News then arrives that Ouabi has been captured by the Iroquois. Azakia, following “a superstitious custom, sacred from time immemorial among these people” (196), must commit suicide if she twice dreams of her absent husband. Celario is elected as the new chief of the tribe and plans an expedition to rescue or avenge Ouabi. Under his leadership, the Hurons ransack the Iroquois village and find Ouabi tied to a stake, about to be tortured. They rescue him, and the two heroes return just after Azakia has dreamed of Ouabi for a second time, but before she drinks a fatal draught of poison. In gratitude to Celario for saving his life, Ouabi insists on yielding his wife to him. As “divorces were very frequent among the savages” (198), the transfer is effected. A missionary marries the former St. Castins to Azakia, and Ouabi weds Zisma.

This short story resembles the Pocahontas legend, insofar as Azakia is smitten by a European colonial officer and sacrifices herself and her culture for him. But it more closely follows a pattern seen in eighteenth-century literature, where a European man is welcomed into a primitive culture, earns a position of power, and then enjoys sexual freedom facilitated by the rationalized, enlightenment attitudes attributed to these people and experiments with customs as much pornographic as ethnographic.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the episode set among the Abaqui Indians in Abbé Prévost’s *Le philosophe anglais, ou Histoire de Monsieur Cleveland* (1731–1739), the Mme. Duclos episode in Alain René Lesage’s *Aventures de Beauchêne* (1732), and Claude Lebeau’s *Aventures de Sr. C. Le Beau, avocat en Parlement, ou Voyage curieux et nouveaux parmi les sauvages de l’Amérique Septentrionale* (1738). A better-known text in this vein, though not a novel, is Diderot’s *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1772).

However fanciful the tale, Jean Vincent d'Abbadie de Saint-Castin was a real person, a French officer who in 1667 left his post and went to live among the Abenaki on Penobscot Bay.<sup>5</sup> The Maine Abenaki were feared enemies of Puritan New England from King Philip's War (1675–1676) through the mid-eighteenth century. Saint-Castin married the chief's daughter, who bore him at least six children. One son, Anselme, was captured by the English in 1721 and held in Boston as a prisoner of war. To the Boston patriarchate, Saint-Castin and his mixed-blood offspring were fearsome bogeymen, combining Catholicism, savagery, and a frontier renegade's repudiation of all that was pious and respectable. The Reverend John Williams, who was captured by Indians at Deerfield in 1704, noted in his *Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*: "They say that an Englishman had killed one of St. Casteen's relations, which occasioned this war."<sup>6</sup> New England historian Samuel Gardner Drake referred to the battles of the late 1690s as "Castine's War."<sup>7</sup> That Morton, a doyenne of polite Boston society, could in 1790 write a poem with Celario/Saint-Castin as its hero shows just how much New England's mores had changed since Increase and Cotton Mather had set the tone a century earlier.

In her introduction to *Ouâbi*, Morton acknowledges the short story and Saint-Castin as her inspirations. But she also claims another model for her male protagonist: "[t]here is now a living instance of a like propensity. A gentleman of fortune, born in America, and edu-

<sup>5</sup>Gilbert Chinard, *L'exotisme américain dans l'oeuvre de Chateaubriand* (Paris: Hachette, 1918), 127–39. Chinard's is still, to my knowledge, the only critical study of the original Azakia story and its adaptation by Morton. His analysis is much more detailed than Roy Harvey Pearce's in *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (1953; rev. ed., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 185–87. Chinard was concerned with this tale as a possible influence on Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801). He noted that a French translation of the tale appeared in Geneva and Paris in 1798 and 1799, and that at least one scholar had attributed these versions to Chateaubriand. Chinard doubted this attribution, but suggested that Chateaubriand, who was in the United States in 1790–1791, may have read the *American Museum* story and/or Morton's *Ouâbi*.

<sup>6</sup>Williams's narrative is reprinted in *Puritans Among the Indians: Accounts of Captivity and Redemption 1676–1724*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Edward W. Clark (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 183.

<sup>7</sup>Benjamin Church, *The History of Philip's War, Commonly Called the Great Indian War, of 1675 and 1676*, ed. Samuel G. Drake (1829; rpt. Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1989), 315.

cated in all the refinements and luxuries of Great Britain, has lately attached himself to a female savage . . . relinquished his own country and connections, incorporated himself into the society, and adopted the manners of the virtuous, though uncultivated Indian.”<sup>8</sup> The fact that Morton shifted the setting of her version from Canada to Illinois may have motivated her to allude to this additional source. Trying to identify the man is pointless, however, for such cases were common in the Great Lakes and the southeastern colonies in the eighteenth century, though they were virtually unknown in New England.

Even as she updated and documented the setting of “Azakia,” Morton added epic and romantic trappings that give her poem an air of fantasy. Ouâbi’s tribe is now the Illinois, implying a frontier locale that was still exotic to Anglo-Americans in 1790, and the foes who capture him become the Hurons. Because Morton found that “the opening scene of [“Azakia”] was rather deficient in decency” (vi), the rapist is not a colonial soldier but a Huron. Likewise, the cause of Celario’s exile is a murder committed in Europe, not in the colonies.

Morton’s iambic quatrains and couplets employ classical and epic devices to strive for an Augustan poetic style.<sup>9</sup> Eighteenth-century literature frequently imbued American Indians with Roman or Spartan martial virtues, and so Ouâbi and Celario set out on their first war party with allusions to classical epic:

On the far field the adverse heroes join  
 No dread artill’ry guards the coward side;  
 But dauntless strength, and courage half divine,  
 Command the war, and form the conq’ror’s pride.

<sup>8</sup>Morton, *Ouâbi: or The Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale* (Boston: I. Thomas and E. T. Andrews, 1790), vi (subsequent page citations in parentheses).

<sup>9</sup>Critical efforts to rediscover women writers in early American literature have generally emphasized the cultivation of a female “voice” and have foregrounded these women’s domestic and family concerns as a challenge to patriarchal politics. Thus Morton’s antislavery poem, “The African Chief,” is her most-often anthologized work. Although Morton and her contemporary Phillis Wheatley did write political poetry, both generally chose the most elevated, polite genres for their work, such as elegy, epic, and history. To achieve publication, early women writers had to imitate the high-prestige forms of a male-dominated literary world. Similarly, Anne Bradstreet is best-known today for poems about her family, but “was most admired by her contemporaries for her didactic verse: long rhymed disquisitions on physics, astronomy, and natural philosophy that imitated Quarles and DuBartas.” Larzer Ziff, *Puritanism in America: New Culture in a New World* (New York: Viking, 1973), 124.

Thus before *Iliou's* heav'n-defended tow'rs,  
Her godlike *Hector* rais'd his crimson'd arm;  
Thus great *Atrides* led the Grecian pow'rs,  
And stern *Achilles* spread the loud alarm. (19)

Morton had an ear for romance as well. While the wounded Celario enjoys Azakia's care, he courts her with praise of "that bosom's gentle swell, / And those lips, where raptures dwell" (23).

Morton's major revision to the plot of "Azakia" was to make the ending more heroic and tragic. After the double wedding, Ouâbi is suddenly and fatally wounded. The bouleversement happens in just three lines, without any reference to a Huron attack:

Thro' the wide plain the shrieks of fright arise;  
The gentle *Zisma* swells the loud alarm,  
Her great, her loved *Ouâbi* falls—he dies! (47)

The chief's dying words suggest that he welcomes death in battle to erase the shame of his earlier captivity:

*Ouâbi* has no glory here;  
Unfit the *Illinois* to guide,  
No more the dauntless warriors' pride—  
Since as a hapless captive led,  
Rack'd like a slave, he basely bled,  
No haughty *Huron* e'er shall boast  
He deign'd to live, when fame was lost. (48)

The revised plot seems contrived to affirm a stereotype that became pervasive in the United States during the next century, the "melancholy fact" of the Vanishing Indian.<sup>10</sup>

Like many romantic melodramas, *Ouâbi* depends for its plot on scenes of life-saving heroism and the debts of gratitude incurred thereby. Celario saves Azakia's life (or virtue, which of course amounts to the same thing), Azakia saves Celario's life by healing his wounds, and finally Celario saves Ouâbi's life when he is captured and tied to the stake by the Hurons. Significantly, after Celario is injured in battle, the Hurons suddenly retreat; thus, credit for the European's survival belongs not to Ouâbi and his heroics but to other, unnamed

<sup>10</sup>Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilization* is still the best survey of the large corpus of poems and plays about Indians, but he criticizes *Ouâbi* for its excessively "noble" savages (185–88).



Indians: “By *slaves* supported thro the mazy wood, / *Celario* gains the sachem’s distant home” (20). Therefore, although Azakia later claims that Ouâbi did save his life, Celario owes his Indian rival little beyond respect for his authority and for his tribe’s marriage customs. Without the honor of such a debt of gratitude, Ouâbi apparently finds his life insupportable.

These customs of honor and of divorce, which facilitate a happy ending for the colonial hero, may seem like fantasies of a colonialist imagination, but in Morton’s eyes they were authentic. Azakia explains that her marriage to Ouâbi is symbolized by “shivers from the tree” (24), the fragments of a stick that the couple held at their wedding and that was subsequently broken into pieces and distributed among the guests. The detail matches the account of Huron marriage customs recorded by Baron de Lahontan in his *Nouveaux voyages dans l’Amérique Septentrionale* (1703), as does the provision for a no-fault divorce, symbolized by the burning of these fragments of the stick or “baguette.” Lahontan’s text was also the source for the notion that if an Indian “Widow or Widower dreams of their deceas’d bedfellow, they Poyson themselves in cold Blood with all the Contentment imaginable.”<sup>11</sup>

It was the unknown author of “Azakia” who appears to have read Lahontan, but Morton refers to other ethnographic sources in her footnotes. For instance, Ouâbi is buried in an upright posture, and surviving members of his tribe visit the gravesite to add stones to his monument. For these details Morton cites Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) and a series of articles by Noah Webster about the Ohio Valley burial mounds, the focus of great interest among American scientists and literati in the 1780s and 1790s. She also frequently refers to the letters of General Benjamin Lincoln and William Penn. Many popular eighteenth-century poems on natural history topics, such as James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane* (1764) and Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1790) contained lengthy notes explaining the scholarly sources of the information in the verses.



<sup>11</sup>Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce, baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North-America* (1703; rpt. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1905), 457–59. For the French original, see Lahontan, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Réal Ouellet and Alain Beaulieu, 2 vols. (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1990), 1:674–78.

A measure of the success of *Ouâbi* can be gleaned from the flattery of its imitation. In 1795 James Bacon, an Englishman who had four years earlier published *The Libertine: A Novel in a Series of Letters*, came out with a stage version of Morton's poem, which he titled *The American Indian; or, Virtues of Nature*. Bacon was forthright about his source and his enthusiasm for it. He explains in the preface that he read a synopsis of Morton's poem in the *Monthly Review* (September 1795) and began writing his play from that. Only when he was half finished did he finally obtain the book—the only copy, he says, to cross the Atlantic from Boston. Bacon was a first-time amateur dramatist, and he admits that his attempt to get the play produced at the Drury Lane Theatre was flatly rejected. He himself, by the time he published the drama at his own expense, realized it was not very good.

Bacon's decision to turn the verse romance into a play was a natural one. *Ouâbi* includes many long speeches by the main characters, which could be stitched together without the intervening authorial voice. Furthermore, American Indian characters and settings had been popular on the English stage since John Dryden's *The Indian Queen* and *The Indian Emperour* in the 1660s. Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter* (1689) dramatized the history of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, ahistorically attributing to rebel Nathaniel Bacon a liaison with an Indian princess. Closer to James Bacon's time, frontiersman Robert Rogers's *Ponteach; or, The Savages of America*, although it received harsh reviews in London in 1766, marked the first play by an American about American Indians.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the love triangle that forms the core of the plot of *Ouâbi* is quite similar to that in two of the biggest hits on Europe's stages later in the decade: August Kotzebue's *Die Spanier in Peru oder Rollas Tod* (1796), and its English adaptation by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *Pizarro* (1799). In those plays Alonzo, a Spanish soldier who rebels against the atrocities of his commander Pizarro, champions the native cause and marries Cora, the former wife of the Inca prince Rolla.<sup>13</sup>

The stage also offered Bacon the opportunity to enhance the romantic pathos of the characters. The Huron attacker who threatens

<sup>12</sup> Eugene H. Jones, *Native Americans as Shown on the Stage, 1753–1916* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 1–8.

<sup>13</sup> On Sheridan's *Pizarro*, see Astrid Wind, "Irish Legislative Independence and the Politics of Staging American Indians in the 1790s," *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 5, no. 1 (April 2001): 1–16.

*Boston*

THE  
AMERICAN INDIAN;

OR,  
VIRTUES OF NATURE.

A PLAY.

IN THREE ACTS.

WITH  
NOTES.

FOUNDED ON AN INDIAN TALE.

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BY JAMES BACON.

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FIERCE WARS, AND FAITHFUL LOVES, SHALL MORALIZE MY SONG.  
SPENSER'S FAIRY QUEEN.

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LONDON:

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR, BY MESSRS. HARRISON AND CO.  
NO. 13, PATERNOSTER ROW.

MDCCLXXV.

Title page of James Bacon, *The American Indian; or, Virtues of Nature* (London: Printed for the author, 1795). Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Azakia's virtue is part of a full-scale assault on the village. Azakia flees, suggesting that she lacks her husband's sense of chivalric honor—and perhaps that her love for him is weak. Later she admits to Celario that “thy presence alone can make me blessed.”<sup>14</sup> Zisma, like Azakia, is allowed to express her love more freely than in Morton's poem, and her preference for Ouâbi facilitates his change in affections. The conclusion, surprisingly, is comedic rather than tragic. Ouâbi does not die in a final attack by the Hurons, and a Chorus celebrates the double marriage with a dance and a ditty: “Fondly mutual love caressing; / Each possess'd, and each possessing” (III.iv). This ending matches the original story from the *American Museum*, but Bacon seems not to have read that version, for in his preface he apologizes for the change: “The only alteration I have made in the story, is that of leaving Ouâbi in the arms of his youthful bride, rather than consign him to the cold embraces of the ghastly tyrant; which, as it offers no violence to the moral tendency of the work, will not, I trust, be deemed a deviation of much materiality” (xi). Bacon nevertheless copied into his work Morton's twenty-line “Ouâbi's Death Song,” which had become a popular hit when set to music and published in 1791. In the altered circumstances, however, most of the poem's tragic pathos is lost.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>James Bacon, *The American Indian; or, Virtues of Nature* (London: for the author, 1795), II.3 (subsequent citations by act and scene). Bacon, unlike the patriotic American Sarah Morton, faced a political quandary in representing Celario's background. He has Ouâbi ask the refuge-seeker Celario, “Hast thou been driven from thy native land, by some loved nymph, who heard unmoved thy tender vows? Or, has some powerful and rapacious chief seized on thy fortune?” (I.2). Celario denies the former, and—because his author was a loyal British subject—the latter too: “The land that gave me birth, feels not the misery of tyrannick sway. Our king governs with mildness and humanity: the father of his people is he” (I.2).

<sup>15</sup>“The Death Song of an Indian Chief (Taken from Ouâbi, an Indian Tale, in Four Cantos, by Philenia, a Lady of Boston),” score by Hans Gram, *Massachusetts Magazine* (March 1791), supplement. Library catalogs claim that this is the first orchestral score published in the United States.

Bacon's comedic ending appears truly unusual compared with the genre of Indian tragedies that developed in the United States from the 1820s to the 1850s. Those works emphasized the archetype of the vanishing Indian or “Last of His Race” by having the Indian chief and all his family die in the final scenes. However, the earliest of these nineteenth-century Indian dramas, Joseph Crowell's *A New World Planted* (1802), has a happy ending: the heroine, “Pocahonta,” marries a colonist, and several colonial couples get hitched at the same time. It seems that the noble image of the “vanishing Indian” was imposed upon the stage only beginning in the 1820s, as the policy of Indian removal began.

In the 1790s the literature of sensibility was at its height, and, unlike its nineteenth-century American version, this form of sentimentality was largely a male preserve. Passions of love, pity, and melancholy characterized a virtuous, cultivated man just as strongly as did honor and military prowess in earlier literature. Bacon uses this model to sharpen the contrast between Celario and Ouâbi. In defiance of prevailing racial stereotypes, the European man is a slave to his passions, while the American Indian woman is guided by rational reason. Not only does Celario's passion for Azakia overcome his sense of honor and duty toward the Illinois chief, his host and protector; it also defies Azakia's good sense and advice. When she learns of Celario's love, she admonishes him not to be "deaf to reason" and not to tell Ouâbi. Celario admires Azakia's forbearance but cannot match it. He even admits to Ouâbi, "Thy superior virtue awes my licentious passions; which . . . sought even to seduce thy spotless bride" (III.iv).<sup>16</sup>

Modern critics read Indian dramas like Bacon's as silly caricatures of Native Americans, but there is reason to believe that audiences two centuries ago took them more seriously. During the proto-Romantic period of Rousseau's influence, the "virtues of nature" were regarded as genuine, even if these virtues in the play appear self-serving from the point of view of a man like Bacon, who probably imagined himself in the role of Celario. Ouâbi's virtues of gratitude and honor led him to surrender his wife to a European at a time when such colonized people were expected to surrender their land as well.



Bacon apparently never traveled to America and did not study the ethnographic literature, but he did copy into his text all the supporting notes that Morton had assembled, so he must have considered the information important. In the 1790s readers of verse romance and drama may have expected verisimilitude from those texts as much as they did from novels. And herein lies the next turn in my reading of *Ouâbi*.

<sup>16</sup>My reading of these relationships differs from that offered by Julie Ellison in one of only two recent published discussions of *Ouâbi* that I have found. In *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 136–42, Ellison detects "a relationship between cross-racial guilt and homosocial bonding" (140), and she regards Celario's guilt over his adulterous love for Azakia as forgiven due to his bond with Ouâbi. I find instead a contrast between the ways the two men's emotional states are represented.

When Morton published her verse romance under the pseudonym “Philenia, a lady of Boston,” her identity as author was widely known in the city’s elite social and artistic circles, where she had also been singled out as a character in a novel published the year before, *The Power of Sympathy: The Triumph of Nature Founded in Truth*.<sup>17</sup> This tale of seduction and incest featured as a subplot the story of Ophelia, a young woman seduced by Mr. Martin, the husband of her sister. This “incestuous connexion” produced “a child, at once the son and nephew of Martin” (38). Ophelia hoped “to obtain a divorcement of Martin from her sister” (39), but when her father learned of the affair, he reproved his daughter and planned to confront his son-in-law. Ophelia then poisoned herself.

This episode blatantly exploited events in Sarah Morton’s family. Her sister, Fanny Apthorp, had carried on an affair with Sarah’s husband, Perez Morton, had given birth to a daughter, and had committed suicide in August 1788. The story of Ophelia was one of several didactic digressions in Brown’s novel, but it was given special prominence as the subject of the book’s frontispiece, which shows Ophelia dying from the poison just as her father enters the room.

News of the scandal had spread quickly through Boston, a jury of inquest had concluded that Perez Morton was the father of Fanny’s child, and a satirical pamphlet about the affair had already been published before *The Power of Sympathy* appeared.<sup>18</sup> The Apthorp family attempted to put the affair to rest by publishing a letter signed by family friend James Bowdoin (the former governor of Massachusetts, to whom *Ouâbi* is dedicated) and by future president John Adams, declaring that they had looked into the charges and concluded “that the said accusations ‘are not in any degree supported.’”<sup>19</sup> Yet their inquiry appears to have been a cover-up. As Cathy Davidson reveals, a journal of Fanny Apthorp’s preserved in the Massachusetts Historical

<sup>17</sup>The novel was published by Isaiah Thomas and E. T. Andrews, as was Morton’s work in the following year. My page citations are to the Penguin Classics edition. For the most detailed and critical analysis of the novel, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 83–109.

<sup>18</sup>For the most detailed treatment of these events, see Emily Pendleton and Milton Ellis, *Philenia: The Life and Works of Sarah Wentworth Morton (1759–1846)* (Orono: Maine University Press, 1931). For the pamphlet, see page 32.

<sup>19</sup>*Herald of Freedom* (Boston), October 9, 1788, quoted in Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 101.

The STORY of OPHELIA.



Saml. Fell. sculpsit

"O Fatal! Fatal Poison!"

Frontispiece of William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy, or, The Triumph of Nature Founded in Truth* (Boston: Printed by Isaiah Thomas and Company, 1789). Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Society tells of her affair with Perez Morton. Moreover, Fanny and Sarah's brother challenged Perez Morton to a duel, though there is evidence that he did not wish it to go forward, and it was in fact halted by the local sheriff.

Because *The Power of Sympathy* was published anonymously just six months after Fanny's suicide, it was read as a *roman à clef*. Publisher Isaiah Thomas promoted the book as the first American novel, and the title page and preface declared that it was "Founded on Truth" and intended to "Expose the fatal Consequences of SEDUCTION." In 1850 Boston journalist Joseph Tinker Buckingham named the recently deceased Morton as its author, as unlikely as that attribution might seem.<sup>20</sup> Given that she remained the wife of Perez Morton and raised their children with him, Sarah would have been the last person to wish to publicize or exploit her husband's infidelity. In 1894, as the novel was being republished in serial form in the *Bostonian*, a descendant of William Hill Brown wrote to that magazine and presented evidence supporting his authorship, which subsequent scholarship has confirmed.

In 1789 it is unlikely that Boston readers believed Morton to be the author of *The Power of Sympathy*. But when *Ouâbi* appeared the following year, with a letter from James Bowdoin referring to the author's previously published poems, many people would have known that "Philenia" was Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton and may have read the poem for signs of her response to the scandal and to its exposé in the novel. Such a reading seems warranted, but the precise interpretation of the poem is nonetheless elusive.

The plot of *Ouâbi*, like the scandal in Morton's marriage, derives from a romantic love triangle. But as Renée Bergland has observed, "The parallels to the Apthorp-Morton story are not exact; in the poem, two men love the same woman, while in the scandal, one man was involved with a pair of sisters."<sup>21</sup> Hence, unlocking the *poème à clef* cannot be so simple as connecting each character to a real-life model. Celario might represent Sarah's sister Fanny, who arrived in the Morton household as an honored guest, only to destroy its conjugal

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Tinker Buckingham, *Specimens of Newspaper Literature*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850), 1:323, quoted in Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2000), 45.



felicity. Azakia would then represent Perez, whose role as a solicitous host(ess) led to an act of adultery.

A more persuasive reading, however, has Celario standing for Perez, the outsider who was welcomed into the Apthorp family, only to abuse their love. His uncontrollable passions damaged the household's moral and social standing and indirectly cost Fanny her life. By this interpretation, the frontispiece to *Ouâbi* may be an ironic response to the frontispiece of *The Power of Sympathy*. It shows the three characters, the Illinois dressed in outlandishly feathered "Indian" costumes, at the moment when Ouâbi welcomes Celario into the tribe and its brotherhood of warriors.<sup>22</sup> Four lines from that scene are engraved beneath:

Then amidst yon Chiefs retire,  
Seated round the sacred fire,  
Waiting for the warrior-feast,  
Let them hail thee as their guest. (16)

The "sacred fire" refers to a custom of many southeastern Indians, who maintained a perpetual flame in their temples. For the less ethnographically minded, the lines imply a cooking fire, part of the feminine domestic sphere that Celario will enter and corrupt. The similarity in the hairstyles and ornaments of Azakia and Ouâbi reflects descriptions of the latter—"High from his head the painted plumes arose. . . . Adown his ears the glist'ning rings descend" (14)—but also hints at how their gender difference would be erased if they represented the sisters Frances Apthorp and Sarah Morton.

As Julie Ellison points out, "*Ouâbi* is in some ways the pointed antithesis of the novel of seduction"; here, the American Indian setting "make[s] possible the honorable negotiation of extramarital love."<sup>23</sup> In spite of the happy ending for Celario, however, the poem does not

<sup>22</sup> Such feathered headresses, though of a different style than those featured in popular images of Indian chiefs today, were a common costume for Native American characters on the eighteenth-century English stage. See Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 119–78.

<sup>23</sup> Ellison, *Cato's Tears*, 136–37. Ellison's book is a fine study of the figure of male stoic emotion, the origins of which she locates in the character of Cato in Joseph Addison's play by that title, and in the political mores of the Exclusion Crisis in England in the 1680s. It is surprising that she did not perceive how the stoic suffering of Ouâbi expresses not only his homosocial bond with Celario but also Sarah Morton's own suffering.



Frontispiece of Sarah Wentworth Apthorp Morton, *Ouâbi: or, The Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale in Four Cantos* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1790). Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

fully excuse his behavior. Just prior to the lines quoted in the frontispiece, he tells Ouâbi how happy he is to have fled Europe:

Tir'd of scenes, where crimes beguile,  
Fond of virtue's honest smile,  
From perfidious vice I flee,  
And devote my life to thee. (15)

He goes on to list all those vices, including “*Base* DUPLICITY deceiving, / *Cruel* SLANDER, still believing” (17). At the end, Ouâbi does deliver to him Azakia, in gratitude for saving his life, but he does not forget or forgive Celario’s deceit, and sees it as characteristic of Europeans: “Yes! in thy guilty deeds I trace / The crimes which still thy realms disgrace” (44).

By looking beyond the poem’s ending and its resemblance to colonial literary fantasies written by men, we can begin to see that Morton offers a feminist response to those texts. We should consider her plot against the background of contemporary works, such as Chateaubriand’s *Atala*, where the American Indian culture is used in very different ways. In the original version of the tale of Azakia, and in many other eighteenth-century romances of exotic primitives, the allure of the setting was in large part predicated on the supposed absence of the laws and taboos that constrained sex and romance among Europeans. The promiscuous freedom of unmarried native women, the possibility of incestuous or extramarital sex, and the easy availability of divorce were all powerful attractions for male colonial characters and authors who imagined a liberated, rationalized sexual life among primitives, and often wanted to take advantage of it.

Morton, on the other hand, uses her Native American characters not to indulge in the potential transgression of sexual taboos, but to reprove it. I read the marital bond between Azakia and Ouâbi to represent the sisterly bond between Sarah and Fanny. The “primitive” tribal customs in her poem do not facilitate a mating between siblings (as Paul and Virginie marry in Bernardin de St. Pierre’s novel, and as Chactas and Atala in Chateaubriand’s work are figurative siblings); instead, an American Indian married couple represents a pair of Euro-American sisters. Azakia threatens to commit suicide, as Fanny in fact did. Ouâbi’s stoic fortitude in the face of suffering, as in the Death Song, and his passive resignation toward Celario are, in my view, the only public expressions of Sarah’s suffering over her

husband's adulterous act with his sister-in-law, which, according to eighteenth-century kinship customs, was considered incestuous. The taboos against incest and adultery exist for good reasons, Morton implies, for these are what distinguish Christian civil societies from those of the American Indians, however brave they may be.

The ethnographic, documentary nature of the poem, however naive it may seem in light of modern anthropology, may actually contain another subtle sign of Morton's analysis of her husband's affair and her response to the exposé contained in *The Power of Sympathy*. In her introduction, after acknowledging William Penn and the Revolutionary War hero General Benjamin Lincoln as sources, she writes that "deficient as the poetry is, it will convey some information, from the collection of many particulars that are not generally known" (vi). Such self-deprecating comments were formulaic in literary prefaces, especially those by women. And the final words could refer to the fact that the information from General Lincoln came not from published works but from letters, most likely sent from his assignment as envoy to the Creek Nation in 1789. However, might not the "collection of many particulars" be a reference to her relationship to her husband and late sister? Her response to the scandal of her husband's affair with her sister was carefully coded into her portrayal of Native American customs of marriage and of emotional display. The preface contains this additional apology: "It may perhaps be objected, that I have given my favourite Ouâbi, a degree of insensibility, with respect to the love of Celario, incompatible with the greatness and superiority of his character. To this I reply, that the mind, unpractised in deception, can never be capable of suspicion . . ." (v). Celario possesses sensibility, as many upper-class men of the time were proud to display, but Sarah Morton represents it as a vice. Ouâbi embodies the virtues of innocence and trust of Sarah herself, which explains why she did not suspect, and was not able to prevent, her husband's adultery. Ouâbi must also check the anger at Celario's behavior that he might have been expected to show. Likewise, Sarah had to suppress any more direct display of her anger toward her husband.

Sarah remained Perez Morton's wife until his death in 1837, and when Sarah herself died in 1846, she had also outlived all their five children. Her long poem deserves to be better known, for it is much more than a hackneyed Indian romance. It is an anguished analysis of her marriage and her shattered sense of privacy and dignity.