

The Role of Women in the Antislavery Movement

Jane H. Pease et William H. Pease

Volume 2, numéro 1, 1967

Ottawa 1967

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030676ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030676ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Pease, J. H. & Pease, W. H. (1967). The Role of Women in the Antislavery Movement. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 2(1), 167–183.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/030676ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1967

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT

JANE H. PEASE AND WILLIAM H. PEASE
University of Maine

It is currently the fashion to probe the psyches of biographical subjects to their very depths in the quest of motivation. A useful technique, it provides insights under-developed in traditional historical investigation; yet, as some recent studies illustrate, it also creates dangers. Indeed, that scholar treads a perilous path who undertakes to explore fully why people of past eras acted as they did. A troublesome example is observed in the case of women abolitionists.

The motivation of all antislavery reformers has been the subject of diverse interpretations. Abolitionists turned to reform, according to David Donald, in response to the new industrialism of the 1830's, which dislocated these scions of the professional and commercial upper middle class. Their action is thus seen as an attempt to restore traditional values and to regain customary leadership. More recently Stanley Elkins identified antislavery enthusiasts as intellectuals who, in their rejection of contemporary institutions, were cut off from the seats of power. Ignored by the society around them, these abolitionists undertook to reform it radically.¹

Other writers, Merton Dillon, Dwight Dumond, and Gilbert Barnes among them, believed that antislavery enthusiasm was a variant of the religious revivalism of the Middle Period. Theodore Weld was another Charles G. Finney; slavery, the most heinous sin; antislavery, the mark of repentance. Most recent, yet also oldest of interpretations is Martin Duberman's assessment that abolitionists were bound primarily by an ethical commitment to uplift their fellow men and to purify the society in which they lived. If Irving Bartlett and Hazel Wolf are right in maintaining that abolitionists suffered from martyr complexes and other deep psychological problems, they illuminate only particular cases. In most instances, Duberman implies, they are largely irrelevant.²

* The authors wish to thank the American Council of Learned Societies and the American Philosophical Society for grants which have, in large part, made possible the research on which this paper is based.

¹ Avery Craven, "An Unorthodox Interpretation of the Abolition Movement," [summary of a paper read at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association] *Journal of Southern History*, VII (February 1941), 57-58 developed the theme of the new industrialism but without Donald's emphasis on Class. David Donald, "Toward a Reconsideration of Abolitionists," in *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 19-36; Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

² Merton L. Dillon, "The Failure of American Abolitionists," *Journal of Southern History*, XXV (May 1959), 159-177; Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery Origins of the Civil War in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,

Equally subject to various interpretation is the motivation of women in reform movements. Most familiar is that old stereotype, the spinster reformer. Frustrated or unable to manage a home, she could only devote herself to what David Donald called "socially useful but unrewarding spinster tasks." From another view, feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Eleanor Flexner have insisted that women reformers were simply pursuing self-evident truths and natural rights. Not surprisingly, men have, on the whole, been reluctant to accept this pure and pious view. In the nineteenth century male critics spoke of Jezebels and admonished the ladies with the teachings of St. Paul. In the mid-twentieth century Robert Riegel has asserted that women's feminism and their consequent participation in reform stemmed largely from their basic dislike and disdain of the male. To make their point, Riegel contended, they distorted women's actual position and exaggerated the number and kinds of rights actually denied them. And, working within a Freudian framework which Riegel largely rejected, Christopher Lasch has diagnosed in early twentieth century female reformers a penis envy made acute by confinement in a home whose meaningful responsibilities were severely limited by industrial society. Lacking the status they would have enjoyed in a more primitive society, women rejected their subordinate role, not only turning to reform activities but invading professional fields traditionally reserved to the male.³

The historian who would attempt to fathom the motivations of women in the antislavery movement is thus surrounded by two sets of conflicting interpretations which circle and collide about two foci. If he is to understand his subject, he must examine both sets simultaneously, striving for a stereopticon-like depth as the two approach a single focus.

His task is complicated, moreover, by problems not only of interpretation but also of method. Hundreds of women participated in the antislavery movement — joining societies, collecting signatures on petitions, raising money, holding fairs, sponsoring speakers, issuing publications. There is little doubt that almost all of them were motivated by some commitment to the dignity of human beings, that almost all were convinced that slavery was a sin to be repented and a crime to be abol-

1939, 1959), and *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961); Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Anti-Slavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1933); Martin B. Duberman, "The Abolitionists and Psychology," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVII (July 1962) 183-191; Hazel C. Wolf, *On Freedom's Altar: The Martyr Complex in the Abolition Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952); Irving H. Bartlett, *Wendell Phillips: Brahmin Radical* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 55.

³ Donald, "Toward a Reconstruction of Abolitionists," 35; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *History of Woman Suffrage, 1848-1861* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), I; Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1959); Robert Riegel, *American Feminists* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1963); Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

ished. Nor is there doubt that some of them at least suffered from psychological or personal problems. To attempt to study them all would lead to nothing but a shaky statistical summary of dubious value, for adequate biographical data are almost wholly lacking. The historian, then, is left an alternative course: a study in depth — here an investigation of four antislavery leaders; four women who rejected the role their time commonly assigned their sex and participated conspicuously in the unpopular crusade.

Of the four women in question, Lydia Maria Francis Child, Maria Weston Chapman, Abby Kelley Foster, and Sallie Holley, Maria Child was without doubt the most famous. Born in Medford, Massachusetts, in 1802, she was a daughter, not of the upper middle class, but of a solid artisan, Convers Francis, a baker. When her mother died, Maria, aged 15, went to live with a sister and subsequently spent a year at a seminary for young ladies. Stimulated intellectually by her brother, Convers, a Unitarian clergyman and Harvard professor, Maria asserted the economic and intellectual independence she sought by turning to teaching when she was eighteen and subsequently, in the mid 1820's, by conducting her own school. Her fame came, however, from her novels, her books on domestic economy, and her children's magazine, the *Juvenile Miscellany*. Neither fame nor independence, nor lack of beauty — she described herself as "dumpy" and "dwarfish" — lessened the appeal of her character; for in 1828 she was married to the promising young lawyer, David Lee Child, glamorous for having lived in Portugal and for having fought in Spain against the French. The knight in shining armor eventually turned out to be a Don Quixote, but not before both Childs had, in their disregard of popularity and their dedicated idealism, joined the antislavery cause in the early 1830's. For the next decade antislavery work — writing, lecturing, attempting to produce free-labor sugar — was the focus of their lives together.⁴

A sharp contrast to Maria Child, Maria Weston Chapman was known for her commanding beauty and aristocratic presence. Born in 1806, one of six daughters of the comfortably well-off but not affluent Weston family of Weymouth, Massachusetts, Maria was early sent to England where, under the guardianship of her uncle, Joshua Bates of Baring Brothers, she was educated. During her youthful years away from home, she was removed from the maternal shaping she might have received in Weymouth

⁴ For general biographical information see: Walter C. Johnson, "Lydia Maria Francis Child," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds. (New York: Scribners, 1928ff), IV, 67-69; Helene G. Baer, *The Heart is Like Heaven: The Life of Lydia Maria Child* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964); Milton Meltzer, *Tongue of Flame* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965). For physical descriptions: L. M. Child to Eliza [Scudder], October 15, 1863, L. M. Child Papers, Cornell; L. M. Child to Sarah Shaw, February 14, 1871, Houghton Collection, Harvard College; L. M. Child, [Manuscript on David Lee Child], L. M. Child Papers, Cornell.

and, at the same time, was thrown into a circle of wealth and society which few of her fellow abolitionists knew. When she was twenty-two, Maria returned to the United States to become the principal of a High School for Young Ladies in Boston. Her beauty, her regal bearing, her flashing blue eyes, her blonde hair, were ample insurance against her remaining a spinster schoolmarm. Henry G. Chapman, Harvard graduate and Boston merchant soon saw to that. Together, after their marriage and until his death from tuberculosis in 1842, they engaged in good causes; and after his death Maria continued uninterrupted her leading role in Boston abolitionism.⁵

Aside from their antislavery work, two people were scarcely less alike than Maria Weston Chapman and Abby Kelley Foster. Abby was four years Maria's junior, born of Irish Quaker parents of modest means in Pelham, Massachusetts. Nurtured in the Quaker faith and matured by a year's attendance at a Friends' school in Providence, she was early familiar with the Quaker fashion of speaking out in meeting, a fashion which distinguished her antislavery career. After her father's death, Abby, still a relatively young girl, had assumed full responsibility for her helpless mother and for the rest of the family. Like both Child and Chapman, she turned to school teaching to earn her way and like them established that independence which so distinguished all these reformers. Neither beautiful nor homely, Abby Kelley was a "pleasant looking Quakerish woman" whom the testy Boston Brahmin, Edmund Quincy, found "one of the most charming women" of his acquaintance. No lioness, as one detractor had expected, she nonetheless mounted the antislavery lecture platform in 1837 and continued her exertions after her marriage in 1845 to her co-worker Stephen Foster. Together they became one of the most famous reform couples of the period.⁶

The fourth and youngest of this quartet was Sallie Holley, distinguished from her colleagues both by being a second generation reformer and by remaining a spinster. Born in 1818 in Canandaigua, New York, Sallie was the daughter of Myron Holley. Myron Holley admirably fitted the reformer pattern of the upper-middle-class man who had failed in the new industrial society. A graduate of Williams College and a lawyer, he had served as New York State Canal Commissioner, participated in

⁵ Marie A. Kasten, "Maria Weston Chapman," *Dictionary of American Biography*, IV, 19; "M. W. Chapman," *Englishwoman's Review*, CXLIX (September 15, 1885), 399-402; Weston Papers, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library; Harriet Martineau, "The Martyr Age of the United States," *The London and Westminster Review*, XXXII (1838-1839), 1-59.

⁶ For general biographical information see: William A. Robinson, "Abigail Kelley Foster," *Dictionary of American Biography*, VI, 542-543; Alla W. Foster, "Reminiscences of Mrs. Abby Kelley Foster," *The Woman's Journal*, February 7, 1891, 42-43; Riegel, *American Feminists*, 34. For personal appearance: Edmund Quincy to Caroline Weston, February 9, 1841, Weston Papers; John Neal in "Brother Jonathan" quoted in *Liberator*, May 19, 1843; *Detroit Democrat* n.d. copied in *Liberator*, November 18, 1853.

Anti-Masonic politics, and after his legal and political failure he had run a truck farm and become an abolitionist and an organizer of the Liberty party. In contrast, her mother was a colorless cypher, burdened by bearing twelve children and by persisting in the orthodox religion which her daughter scorned. Predictably Sallie was educated at a school for young ladies in Lyons, New York; predictably she then turned to teaching. Subsequently she exceeded the educational experience of her seniors when, in the years following 1847, she attended Oberlin College, "the grandest event" of her life. At Oberlin she was moved to become a reform activist. At Oberlin, too, she met Caroline Putnam, who became her lifelong friend and companion. It is difficult to attribute her failure to marry to any one cause — her dedication to a career, her relationship with Putnam, her appearance which, attractive enough in her youth, became increasingly hatchet-faced, or her extraordinary devotion to her father. But certainly it was her father's friends or men most like him whose company she sought, and it was to the memory of his reform work that she and Miss Putnam devoted their entire careers — for the slave before the Civil War, for the freedman after.⁷

* * *

Close study of these four very different women reveals that they had a number of characteristics in common. All were well educated, all had been financially independent as young women, none was subject to the strong influence of a mother's molding in the pattern of true womanhood: maternal, passive, dependent. When they were married, they were older than was customary for the era and chose husbands who also participated in reform activities. And Sallie Holley, who remained single, brought to reform the constant services of Caroline Putnam.

Despite their similarities, however, these four pursued markedly different courses in their antislavery work. The most acceptable and genteel vehicle for reform was the pen; best prepared to use it was Maria Child, who was, by 1830, a markedly successful writer. Considerably influenced by David's antislavery enthusiasm, Maria began to pour out antislavery tracts and books. Following her widely read *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans called Africans*, published in 1833, came, in the next four years, four other antislavery tracts.⁸ Subsequently, from 1841 to 1843, she edited the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Once freed

⁷ John White Chadwick, ed., *A Life for Liberty; Anti-slavery and other Letters of Sallie Holley* (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1899); Elizur Wright, *Myron Holley; and What He Did for Liberty and True Religion* (Boston: for the author, 1852); Sallie Holley to Gerrit Smith, May 20, 1863, Gerrit Smith Miller Papers, Syracuse University.

⁸ *The Oasis* (1834), a collection of articles by Child and others; *The Evils of Slavery, and the Cure of Slavery. The First Proved by the Opinions of Southerners Themselves, the Last Shown by Historical Evidence* (1836); *Anti-Slavery Catechism* (1836); *Authentic Anecdotes of American Slavery* (1838), a series of examples of the ills of slavery.

from this task, which she found distasteful, she turned to more satisfying and remunerative writing until John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry made further silence on slavery impossible. Admittedly "fanatical," she once again counted the day lost on which she had not "done *something* for the extermination of slavery," and proved her devotion by publishing four new antislavery tracts within a year.⁹ Even the Civil War did not end her efforts for she edited a *Freedmen's Book*, dedicated to building race pride, the proceeds of which went to aid the freedmen.

Not long after Maria Child had made her first literary contribution to antislavery, Maria Chapman joined the crusade. Active in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, she made of the annual reports of that Society, which she wrote with pen dipped in venom, telling propaganda. Literarily more bland was her editing of the money-raising gift book, the *Liberty Bell*, issued annually from 1839 to 1855. However willing she was to edit an annual and to contribute poetry and articles to the antislavery press, Chapman refused to take on full-time editing of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* when asked to do so after Child's resignation in 1843 and again in the late 1850's.¹⁰ Nonetheless she did serve on its editorial committee and contributed regularly to its columns. And, on occasion, she did, with Edmund Quincy, edit the *Liberator* when Garrison was away or incapacitated. If the printed word furthered antislavery enthusiasm, neither Mrs. Child nor Mrs. Chapman was remiss in her contributions.

Though writing was an acceptable undertaking for women, speaking in public before mixed audiences was not. It was on the lecture platform, nevertheless, that Abby Kelley Foster and Sallie Holley gained their fame. Holley, inspired by Mrs. Foster when the latter visited Oberlin in 1850, devoted herself to broadcasting the antislavery message from Maine to Michigan. Though always fearful of audiences and taut with "nervous excitement," she was still successful enough to be a regularly paid lecturer on five major tours. Gentle in manner, sentimental, religious, and refined, she served the cause, wrote William Lloyd Garrison, by probing audiences "to the quick."¹¹

There was nothing nervous, retiring, or sentimental about Abby Kelley however. She began her speaking career modestly enough — be-

⁹ L. M. Child to Anna Loring, February 27, 1860, Loring Papers, Women's Archives, Radcliffe College. The tracts embraced: *The Right Way the Safe Way, Proved by Emancipation in the British West Indies, and Elsewhere*; *Correspondence between Lydia Maria Child and Gov. Wise and Mrs. Mason of Virginia*; *The Duty of Disobedience to the Fugitive Slave Act: An Appeal to the Legislators of Massachusetts*; and *The Patriarchal Institution as Described by Members of its own Family* all published in 1860.

¹⁰ M. W. Chapman to A. W. Weston [1843], and Samuel May jr. to M. W. Chapman, January 25, 1858, Weston Papers.

¹¹ S. Holley to Caroline Putnam, January 12, 1854 and October 1, 1861 in Chadwick, ed., *Life for Liberty*, 134, 184; W. L. Garrison to H. E. Garrison, October 17, 1853, Garrison Papers, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.

fore women's antislavery meetings; but by 1838 she had joined Sarah and Angelina Grimké, affronting public opinion by braving mixed audiences — males as well as females. Damned as a Jezebel in Washington, Connecticut, and mobbed at Cornwall for being a "very bad woman," she learned to take cruel punishment. At Cornwall, the militia marched, played drums, and fired guns in front of her meeting place; and one rabble rouser intruded in loudly vocal search for "the nigger b . . . h that is going to lecture here this evening." The epithets were significant, for the next year it was charged that she "had repeatedly allowed herself to be placed on committees with men." In 1839, it was noted, she had served on a committee with two men, one married, the other not, and they had gone "off together, into an upper loft to examine the books of the Society . . ." ¹² Luckily the men, the Reverend John Frost and John Greenleaf Whittier, emerged unscathed.

Despite it all, even her critics had to admit that Abby Kelley was "an intelligent female lecturer" and a "lady of talent." Adept at the uses of revivalist technique, she was, according to one reporter, more impressive than the "posing scribes of the abolition sect" who weary their audiences. And, he admitted with backhanded praise, she was "no common piece of furniture." ¹³

Such was her persistence and energy that Kelley missed only four or five seasons in the twenty-five years before the Civil War. Her tours were exhausting campaigns lasting for weeks or months and packed with engagements. In one three-month tour in New York she attended no less than twenty-four conventions and in six weeks in Massachusetts, twenty-two. Nor did her marriage to Stephen Foster slow her pace. Rather she increased the tension by joining him in speaking out in the middle of church services unannounced and uninvited till, on occasion, both were bodily removed from the building. For this service Abby Kelley Foster accepted no salary; donating, on the contrary, a considerable portion of her own limited funds for the good of the antislavery cause. "Let us," she said, "even make ourselves beggars for the slave, who is denied the poor privilege of begging." ¹⁴

In addition to writing and speaking, these women also engaged in fund raising, in organizational activities, and, in some cases, in the inner politics of the movement. Holley, a late comer to the movement, avoided organizational entanglement for she feared even to speak in the presence of the antislavery greats. ¹⁵ Maria Child, on the other hand, like William

¹² Abby Kelley ["Reminiscences"] in *Liberty Bell*, 1858, 21; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 8, 1840, March 18, 1841, April 22, 1841.

¹³ *Portsmouth Journal* n.d. copied in *Liberator*, September 27, 1844; *Gazette Extraordinary*, n.d. copied in *Liberator*, August 5, 1842; *Liberator*, November 18, 1842.

¹⁴ [Maria W. Chapman], *Right and Wrong in Massachusetts* (Boston: Henry L. Devereux, 1840), 135.

¹⁵ Chadwick, ed., *Life for Liberty*, 76; Samuel May jr. to A. W. Weston, September 11, 1852, Weston Papers.

Ellery Channing, opposed associations and doubted the efficacy of much of their activity. And, although she did join antislavery societies when she entered the movement, her unpleasant experience on the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society while she edited the *Standard*, convinced her that she did "not easily act in the traces of societies and conventions."¹⁶

Abby Kelley, by contrast, thrived on associations. For five years following 1840, when her appointment to its business committee had been the immediate cause for the split in the American Anti-Slavery Society, she was reappointed to that central committee. A persistent money raiser for antislavery societies, a regular participant in the New England Anti-Slavery Conventions and the annual meetings of the American Anti-Slavery Society, a participant also in innumerable local conventions, Abby's milieu was organizational activity. It was all intensely important to her, and she justified it as she justified women's speaking in public. "Whatever ways and means are right for men to adopt in reforming the world," she said, "are right also for women to adopt in pursuing the same object."¹⁷

Most important of the four in organizational and fund raising activity was Maria Chapman. Though she seldom spoke before an audience and often wrote anonymously, she wielded a power among the Garrisonian abolitionists equalled only by that of Garrison and Wendell Phillips — and perhaps she shaped even their actions. Her first office as corresponding secretary for the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society was but a proving ground, for she subsequently served as a Counsellor for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society from 1841 to 1865 and was elected to the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society from 1845 to 1863. At least nine times she was a member of the business committee of the New England Anti-Slavery Convention. In addition, she ran the Anti-Slavery Bazaar in Boston from 1835 to 1848 and again on her return from a six year sojourn in Europe. And while abroad she pursued her activities by organizing an antislavery salon in Paris.

Impressive as these public posts and actions were, they were only the visible symbols of Chapman's importance within the movement. The private papers of its leading figures record the constant emission of advice, suggestion, and chastisement which flowed from her pen to shore up, straighten out, and direct antislavery affairs of state. Nor is it to be assumed that her words went unheeded. Samuel J. May, a leading Garrisonian, acknowledged her influence when he recalled that Maria Chapman had participated in antislavery from the very beginning by

¹⁶ L. M. Child to E. C. Stanton, April 28, 1866, E. C. Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷ *Connecticut Observer*, February 3, 1840 as copied in *Liberator*, March 27, 1840.

preparing resolutions and suggesting "pertinent thoughts, that one or another of the brethren uttered." And in criticism rather than praise, Lewis Tappan, antislavery but anti-Garrisonian to the core, observed dourly that Mrs. Chapman "manag[e]s W[illiam] L[loyd] G[arrison,] W[endell] Phillips, [Edmund] Quincy &c. as easily as she could 'untie a garter.'" ¹⁸

* * *

To the extent that Chapman, Child, Foster, and Holley supported reform they also affronted society's mores which dictated that woman's proper role was to manage the home, bear children, and grace a vapid social life. That each was rebelling against her expected role, denying the inherent inferiority of women, rejecting the assumption that she existed as a convenience for men, is a fair assumption. But it is equally fair and important to understand that these women were reformers, committed to the same benevolence, the same sense of urgency, the same humane dedication as were their male colleagues. To weigh these two major motivations is to confront the problem of assessing and interpreting women's position in the antislavery movement and, by extension, in other reform movements as well.

Abby Kelley Foster challenged social custom by a frontal assault. From the outset of her career she trumpeted her intention to pursue reform without regard to society's judgments. When Elizur Wright charged that the antislavery women were led by a "Clique of woman's rights men," Kelley retorted smartly to his assumption of male dominance. "I know," she admitted, "that most of women have been educated *to be* led by the great 'clique' of the arrogant 'lords of creation,' and how difficult it is for those so educated to 'slip the bridle. . .'" But she pulled Wright up short on his antifeminism when she compared the resentment of the Negro to that of the woman who "awakes to a realizing sense of her true position, as a responsible being, and sees herself fenced in by the iron prejudices of centuries, and debarred from appearing in that position." ¹⁹

No iron prejudice would fence in Abby Kelley. Her actions as well as her words testified to her slipping the bridle. Her anti-clerical attacks on slave-fellowshipping churches as "cages of unclean birds," and her journeys with male lecturers produced high scandal. When she travelled with Frederick Douglass, George Bradburn, and Samuel Lewis through Ohio, gossips referred to her and her older Quaker-bonnetted travelling companion as a "travelling seraglio," and denounced her for accompanying "a pack of men about the country." Even marriage could not put an

¹⁸ American Anti-Slavery Society, *Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at its Second Decade, Held in the City of Philadelphia, Dec. 3d, 4th and 5th, 1853* (New York: The Society, 1854); Lewis Tappan to Gamaliel Bailey, October 26, 1843, L. Tappan Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Abby Kelley to Elizur Wright, jr., August 28, 1839, *Liberator*, September 6, 1839.

end to such inuendo, for many questioned whether she was really married to Stephen, and some saw him as but a transitory successor to Frederick Douglass for her favors. Her domestic tranquillity was further suspect for the Fosters disagreed publicly, though amicably, on such issues as non-resistance and political action.²⁰

Insult, villification, physical drubbing, and obscene ridicule marked the course Abby Foster trod. But to say that a quest for martyrdom or a delight in shocking society were responsible for her career would be to miss the point. Her constant activity in the cause, her refusal to take pay for her labors, her insistence on giving, her willingness to labor at the humbler chores of the antislavery crusade all suggest something that goes beyond either martyr complex or notoreity seeking, but which does not stop with her very real dedication to antislavery. Quite consciously she was exercising the rights she claimed for women. At a Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester in 1851 she made perfectly clear this dedication of her life. "Bloody feet, sisters," she pointed out, "have worn smooth the paths by which you come up hither." And later she noted that "woman lacks her rights because she does not feel the full weight of her responsibilities." Careerism was woman's salvation. Girls, she admonished, should be trained to be self-supporting rather than be kept "like dolls in the parlor." There is, she concluded, a "necessity of toil, — earnest, and self-sacrificing toil," toil like that which she and other women and men had given to reform.²¹

The vigor, the unorthodoxy, the occasional violence of Abby Foster's defiance were not universal. Though they too offended the general community, neither Maria Chapman nor Maria Child challenged it so directly. But that did not spare them ostracism. From the day she and her husband openly embraced abolitionism Chapman was permanently excluded from proper Boston society. For her part, Maria Child not only sacrificed a literary reputation and financial comfort but became virtually a social recluse. After the early 1840's she lived almost completely within a small circle of intimate friends and family.

Though withdrawn from society, Child was, for a variety of reasons, the most independent of all the women. Having no children, burdened with the care of a querulous and demanding father, financially hard pressed by her husband's debts and eventual bankruptcy, she enjoyed few of the pleasures presumably a part of middle class life. In large measure Maria's willingness to edit the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* had rested on the hope that her salary would aid David. Yet her attempts

²⁰ *Liberator*, January 5, 1844; Abby Kelley to M. W. Chapman, August 12, 1843, Weston Papers; A. K. Foster to Samuel May, jr., November 9, 1853, Garrison Papers.

²¹ Harriet H. Robinson, *Massachusetts in the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 26-27; *Liberator*, March 12, 1852.

to salvage his finances were unavailing, and David continued to demonstrate "deficienc[i]es in business matters" which were "incurable." His prolonged attempts to grow sugar beets and produce free-labor sugar failed so disastrously, in fact, that Maria finally separated her financial affairs totally from his. Endure his lack of worldly success she did, but her affection was sorely tried as the knight in shining armor gave way to an earthy farmer who lived "in the woods [of Northampton], with animals and coarse men," while she, living alone in New York, grew "more refined and poetic . . . under the influences of music, pictures, and mystical contemplation."²²

Not surprisingly, Child was distinctly impatient with woman's lot. Quite able to manage her own home and even to write a book of household advice, *The Frugal Housewife*, she herself did not fancy the role. She found household and domestic chores a "million Lilliputian cords" which held women back from intellectual development. Like Abby Foster, she compared the plight of woman with that of the slave. While both Negroes and girls were, as young people, apt at learning and full of potential, the drudgery of their lot killed their incentive. Why try, Child asked, when there was no hope for success.²³

Women's antislavery activity was clearly, therefore, a double-edged campaign to free the slave and to free women. While Abby Kelley Foster triumphantly proclaimed the connection, Child preferred to "take [her] freedom without disputing about [her] claims to it." Notwithstanding, her letters reveal as much challenge to the established order as did Mrs. Foster's life. She urged a fuller sharing of all aspects of life between men and women, arguing that, if women were free to participate in the outside world and if men assumed responsibilities in the home for child-rearing, both would benefit from a richer relationship. "The more women become rational companions, partners in business and in thought, as well as in affection and amusement, the more highly will men appreciate *home* . . ." Both would benefit, indeed, and in the bargain women would gain their rights.²⁴

Child's concern for women's rights and her unorthodox views of home life tempt one to explain her abolitionism as a compensation for marital difficulties and childlessness. Yet during most of those years in which her personal problems were at their flood, her antislavery

²² L. M. Child to Louisa Loring, April 30, 1839, Loring Papers; L. M. Child to Mrs. E. C. Pierce, May 27, 1841, in L. M. Child, *Letters* . . . (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), 42; L. M. Child to E. G. Loring [September 21, 1841], Child Letters, New York Public Library; L. M. Child to F. G. Shaw, August 2, 1846, Houghton Collection.

²³ L. M. Child to Convers Francis, October 20, 1840, L. M. Child Papers, Cornell; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 6, 1842.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July 15, 1841; L. M. Child, *Letters from New York. First Series* (New York: C. S. Francis & Co., 1845), 245-252.

activity was at its ebb. More to the point was her constant commitment, in good times and bad, to humanitarianism. Her early efforts for the slave, her role in saving the Negro child Med from being returned to slavery after a stay in Boston, her support of the Negro orphan asylum in Boston, her attempts to aid New York slum dwellers — black or white, her dedication of most of her income to freedmen's aid after the Civil War all testify that her humane concern for the unfortunate shaped her reform career. She was convinced that "the restless search after truth" was better "than the quiet acceptance of error." Her antislavery activity was more significantly part of this search for truth than the reflection of a desire, as one biographer has asserted, to please or imitate her husband or later to compensate for his failures.²⁵

Yet how critical personal experiences could be is illustrated in the case of Maria Chapman. Moved by common experiences and concerns, she and her husband, Henry, had joined and worked in the antislavery ranks together. But after Henry's death in 1842, Maria, who had suffered brain fever or mental illness in 1838 and whose youngest child had died in 1841, consciously made antislavery work the major focus of her life to fill the emotional and social void of widowhood. She was, wrote Samuel J. May, "never so much in her element" as she was when running the annual Boston antislavery fair. Her very life, he thought, was identified with the cause of antislavery.²⁶

Essentially correct though May's inference was, it needs modification for in 1848, when the Mexican War had brought new life to antislavery agitation, Maria Chapman sailed for Europe. There she stayed for six years in seeming desertion of the cause. Similarly, she consistently refused to assume the total, active, professional commitments of a Child or a Foster. Able more than the others to operate from the nursery or the drawing room because her critical contribution was largely organizational manoeuvre, she nonetheless shared with them genuine reform zeal, humanitarian concern, and a fervent commitment to women's rights. Even before her husband died she had maintained that women must themselves determine their proper spheres and duties and defy the "absurd dogmas" of inferiority and subservience. She revered the stalwart Puritan women of the seventeenth century, for they stood with their men against the world's opinion. Like them, Boston women of her day should defend human freedom and for it accept even martyrdom. In that cause "we will live — in it, if it must be so, we will die." Resolutely, then, Chapman

²⁵ L. M. Child to [Miss Osgood], July 9, 1856, L. M. Child Papers, Cornell; Baer, *Heart is Like Heaven*, passim.

²⁶ Family letters in 1838 show deep concern for her recovery from brain fever and she spent most of June at the Stonington Hospital. Copy of letter from M. W. Chapman to Miss Hildreth [1845?], Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; M. W. Chapman to [J. R. Lowell], February 27, 1853], Houghton Collection; S. J. May to W. L. Garrison, February 3, 1846, in *Liberator*, February 13, 1846.

condemned the ladylike female, that victim of "domestic tyranny," incapable of doing the necessary work of reform, unable to exert herself for others. Chapman's argument against the super-refinement of the Victorian parlor was accompanied by denunciation of the women who, in accepting a place in it, became mere toys to "gratify the perverted tastes" of men. Independent women who "would possess the love of good men, or be mothers of a noble race," she argued, must cast aside such "harem notions" and exercise "self-denial and exertion for the good of others."²⁷

After Henry's death, Maria talked less and less about the equality of both sexes standing together against evil and more and more about the superiority of women reformers. Frequently viewing the antislavery cause as her own bailiwick, she never questioned her competence to run it. "When one is perfectly right," she wrote David Child just a year after Henry's death, "one neither asks nor needs sympathy." And, nearly twenty years later, she consoled her fellow reformer Caroline Dall, who had been charged with having a superior air, that "there is no one who has been obliged to wrestle & prevail who has not been accused of it, as if it were a crime, instead of being, as it is, a momentary necessity upon those who are born to set right the time that's out of Joint." Chapman had come, indeed, to assume not the equality but the superiority of women. Convinced that men accepted equal rights for women "whenever, in situations of peril and difficulty, they have looked up for aid to women superior to themselves in ability"; observing at the same time that men have generally preferred to marry inferior women, she finally decided that marriage was, for a woman of talent, an unfortunate choice.²⁸

Henry's untimely death, Maria's inherent snobbery, and the bitterness engendered by organizational infighting pressed Mrs. Chapman into the manner which grated on many of her colleagues. Ever ready to give pompous, overbearing, and self-assertive instructions, she chastized and advised the Childs, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and many lesser antislavery luminaries as well. Nor is there evidence — except self-righteous pique that anyone could doubt her infallibility — that Maria recognized the growing resentment which her directives produced.

²⁷ Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Fourth Annual Report* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), 75-76; Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Second Annual Report* (Boston: The Society, 1835), 24-27; [M. W. Chapman] to Editor of the *Courier*, October 2, 1835 as printed in *Liberator*, October 24, 1835; Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, *Third Annual Report* (Boston: The Society, 1836), 27-28, 77.

²⁸ M. W. Chapman to D. L. Child, October 12, 1843, Child Papers, Anti-slavery Collection, Boston Public Library; M. W. Chapman to C. H. Dall, June 9, 1860, C. H. Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; M. W. Chapman to W. L. Garrison, April 15, 1849, in *Liberator*, May 18, 1849; Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1877), I, 11-29.

Yet great as the impact of Henry's death was on Mrs. Chapman, one cannot attribute to it her involvement in antislavery work, for she had become an activist by 1835. And after Henry's death, she did not simply bury despair in frenetic activity, but acted rather to fulfil demands which her own conviction of superiority and her sense of mission had long since placed upon her. As for being a woman, she was inferior to no one — certainly not to men collectively. When the right of women to participate in the American Anti-Slavery Society's activities was raised at one of its annual meetings, Chapman expressed her hope that "the party uttering [such sentiments would] be called to order [,] this being not a question of *Woman's* rights . . . but *Members* rights — *persons* rights."²⁹ To have her rights as a human being denied her because she was a woman was, in all cases, intolerable.

Closest to stereotype, farthest from type, Sallie Holley, unlike Child, Foster, or Chapman, remained single and devoted herself exclusively to a reform career. In so doing, however, she eschewed Abby Foster's frontal assault on society, carving out for herself a career not unlike one she might have had as a school teacher.

Although, like her three colleagues, she was little influenced by her mother, Holley was unusually devoted to her antislavery father. Encouraged by him never to halt merely with good thoughts but to go on to perform "practical duty," she followed where his example led. Her first years of lecturing were a conscious tribute to him. Indeed, as long as she lectured, she was conscious of the goal and model her father and his antislavery friends set for her. "I thank God for teaching me these great truths," she wrote Gerrit Smith at the end of the Civil War, "thro' my sainted father — and thro' you, his honored friend. And thro' Mr. Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and all the glorious company and goodly fellowship of apostles, martyrs and confessors of this our most holy faith."³⁰

Such devotion led, not surprisingly, to high emotionalism and mysticism. "I love the antislavery cause more & more" she wrote in 1850 as she launched her career. And after four years on the lecture platform she happily noted in a letter to Caroline Putnam, "[H]ow much happier and richer my life has been than I ever expected it would be!" She found, she said, peace and satisfaction in her work. Later, when the trials of elevating the freedmen rather dampened her ardor, she converted sheer delight into a satisfying martyrdom. After twenty years of "trying to educate and elevate these poor, ignorant, low-lived slaves," she wrote in 1887, she felt that she had made progress; but she felt as well the

²⁹ Draft of letter M.W. Chapman to [?], [1839] Weston Papers.

³⁰ Myron Holley to Sallie Holley, January 26, 1839 in Wright, *Holley*, 204; Sallie Holley to Gerrit Smith, March 31, 1852, June 2, 1865, Gerrit Smith Miller Papers.

“awful isolation” of the work which had been “exile and martyrdom” to her.³¹

Similar yet different too was Holley’s interest in women’s rights. More self-consciously than her three fellow workers, she took an active part in the women’s rights movement proper. From her very first introduction to it at Oberlin, she lectured in its service, turning her graduation speech into a plea for the rights of her sex. This explicit concern notwithstanding, Sallie Holley often held back in a way Abby Kelley never would. She shunned audiences, she hesitated to press the cause too hard, she lacked self-assurance. Rather than act in a manner which might harm either the cause or her reputation, she often chose prudence and remained silent.³²

* * *

The careers of four persons provide no statistically valid sample; yet those of Maria Chapman, Abby Kelley Foster, Maria Child, and Sallie Holley do suggest useful insights into the nature of women’s participation in reform. Several interpretations, it seems safe to say, do not apply to these women. Although the rejection of the new industrialism was of importance to some reformers, it was largely irrelevant to the women here considered. They came from several social classes, though the families of two did fit the pattern of the displaced upper middle class. But for the women themselves their own reform action precipitated the major changes in their relation to the general society. Likewise, the close relationship between reform and evangelical religion is without significance here for they were all well removed from the substance of revivalism — three were Unitarians and one was a Quaker. Nor is the common identification of female activists with the spinster stereotype very meaningful. Only Sallie Holley conformed to this pattern: the other three successfully combined reform activity with the care of their homes. Two, in fact, were the effective financial heads of their households, and Abby Foster seems to have shared the responsibility with her husband.

On the other hand it is clear that each woman exhibited some personality aberration. Sallie Holley had a strong streak of the martyr complex in her, and her near worship of her father suggests an unusual relationship. Abby Kelley Foster was probably over-aggressive and had something of the martyr about her as well. Maria Chapman’s attitudes led her to real difficulty in relationships with others. And though Maria Child seems to have suffered no overwhelming personality difficulty, the modern scholar may be made uncomfortable by her transcendental

³¹ *Ibid.*, December 13, 1850; Sallie Holley to Caroline Putnam, January 18, 1854 and Sallie Holley to Maria Porter, September 30, 1887, in Chadwick, ed., *Life for Liberty*, 135, 252.

³² Sallie Holley to Caroline Putnam, January 25, 1853, in Chadwick, ed., *Life for Liberty*, 115.

effusiveness and, as she called it, her "adoption" of several young men when her marriage was most strained. Yet these aberrations are varied in their pattern and seem, in no way, unique to reformers.

To attempt an explanation of these women's dedication to the anti-slavery movement on the grounds of particular psychological maladjustment would appear, then, inadequate. There are, however, other characteristics which, common to them all, shed greater light on the motivations basic to their reforming zeal. Without exception each was educated well above the norm, and each had had the experience of being economically independent. It is further notable that none had, during her adolescent years, been under the influence of women who might have shaped her life in the socially acceptable pattern of *Kinder, Kuchen, und Kirke*. This combination, it seems safe to surmise, led all of them to reject the nineteenth century gilded cage in which middle and upper class women were supposed happily to dwell; and, particularly in the case of Maria Child, who was haunted by poverty, to rebel against the endless and pointless round of housekeeping tasks. Both she and Abby Foster, who almost never had domestic help, explicitly indentified the homey lot of women with the scarcely less tolerable position of the Negro slave.

That all four came from minor religious sects may also have had an important bearing on their mode of action. While it seems statistically demonstrable that the male leadership of the secular antislavery movement was predominantly Congregational and Presbyterian, these females were prepared to attack social orthodoxy as they had been brought up to challenge dominant religious orthodoxies.

Most important of all was the fact that these women were so morally committed to antislavery that they acted out their commitments. Their goal was to end the "sin and crime" of the peculiar institution, and the means to it was their common courage to come forward and to do the unpopular thing. If Elkins is correct in contending that nineteenth century American intellectuals were alienated from the power structure and could mold society only from outside the institutions they rejected, such exclusion was essentially true for all women, not just intellectuals or reformers. It was, therefore, their determination to correct social ills which differentiated them from their peers in the same way that it differentiated male reformers from other intellectuals as disparate as Emerson or Melville.

Basically then these women were unlike their male co-workers. Like them, they acted out their needs and aspirations in those ways that seemed most fruitful and toward those ends that seemed most urgent. If their defiance of society made them seem a bizarre and wondrous sub-species, the impression of uniqueness is misleading. They were, to a

large extent, what they saw themselves to be, individuals exercising those rights which society denied them toward ends of which society disapproved. This may betoken some great Freudian urge; but one suspects that Simone de Beauvoir was more correct in her challenge to the psychoanalysts that "when a little girl climbs trees it is, according to Adler, just to show her equality with boys; it does not occur to him that she likes to climb trees."³³

³³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H.M. Parshley tr. (New York: Knopf, 1953), 51.