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Lofty hopes and harsh reality: The nature of ante-bellum feminism in the United States, 1835-1860

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LOFTY HOPES AND HARSH REALITY:
The Nature of Ante-Bellum Feminism
in the United States, 1835-1860

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THIS PROJECT IS
APPRECIATIVELY DEDICATED
TO

all the strained eyes, sprained fingers, frayed nerves, sore backs, perseverance, and self-sacrifice that went into the completion of this work, with a special thanks to the following persons:

Karen, loyal friend, patient roommate, and principal typist without whose help the deadlines for this project would not have been met;

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INTRODUCTION

Feminism in the United States is nothing new. Writings expressing a concern for the social, political, and economic equality of women date from the colonial period. The current clamor for women's rights is but another manifestation of those earlier precedents, another challenge to the entrenched ideas, images, roles, and status associated with womanhood. Resistance to the ideas of feminism is also nothing new, and it is nothing to take lightly in terms of its ability to counter-often successfully-feminist advances. Moreover, both feminism and anti-feminism have strong roots in the sociocultural milieu of the United States, as evidenced by the periodic resurgence of feminist and anti-feminist debates throughout American history.

Of particular interest in the entire field of the history of women in the United States, an area largely ignored by many serious scholars, is the ante-bellum feminist movement. Between 1835 and 1860, feminism first attracted national attention and possessed the rudiments of being an organized social movement. By examining, therefore, the strengths and weaknesses of mid-nineteenth century feminism as an ideology and a movement, we can perhaps better understand the problems contemporary American feminists have had to face, particularly in terms of expounding their ideas and in organizing and mobilizing themselves toward constructive action. With this underlying intent in mind, i.e., of clarifying the roots of the problems of contemporary feminists, I shall attempt to create a feeling for nineteenth-century America,

specifically the old North and South, with regard to the development of feminism and its opposition.

In attempting to reconstruct that aspect of ante-bellum America, I shall endeavor to show how and why feminism developed as it did. To this end, I shall include considerations of the traditional nineteenth century attitudes toward women, the key ideas expressed by the feminists as a response to those socially accepted ideas, the way in which the movement operated in its social context, the negative reactions to feminists and feminist thought, and the Southern version of feminism which, as we shall see later cannot be accurately labeled "feminism" if we use (as I have indicated) the dominant Northern ideology and movement as a standard for defining the term in the first place.

The complexity of the topic further demands that a flexible methodology be employed, and for the purposes of this project, I shall attempt to synthesize the techniques and insights of historical, literary, and sociological analysis, hopefully without compromising the integrity of any single approach. I shall use historical techniques to describe events, people, and circumstances pertinent to the development of feminism; literary techniques to highlight the ideas about and attitudes toward women, ideas which were circulated on a large scale among the American reading public; and sociological techniques to clarify how the movement operated and why it operated as it did. Whenever possible, primary sources will be cited, frequently at considerable length, at the risk of being cumbersome for the reader (not to mention the typist) in order to present a broad view of ante-bellum society as those who lived in it actually viewed it. The subjective bias inherent in this approach may distort the "objective

realities" we seek to reconstruct of the two and one-half decades immediately prior to the Civil War, but since the perceptions one has of her or his social environment inevitably colors that person's reactions to that environment, it would be a serious mistake to overlook the personal reflections which have been recorded. We need to be able to appreciate the values and experiences of the people we are considering in order to have a balanced view of what any bygone era was actually like. Hopefully, this subjective emphasis will be borne out in the final analysis as it unfolds to give us a sense of the nineteenth century mind at work in its social context.

CHAPTER I

NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW

Ante-bellum America was a turbulent America. Reform movements were challenging the status quo, particularly from the well-educated segments of society. The North was industrializing and urbanizing at an accelerating pace while the idealized rural plantation life of the South was rigorously defended by those asserting the legitimacy of the peculiar institution of slavery. The Jacksonian era yielded to political upheaval and re-alignment along nativist and sectional lines. Protestant revivalism appeared once more, and divergent religious and philosophical systems such as Unitarianism and Transcendentalism made their presence felt. Manifest Destiny crept into political platforms and everyday speech as an affirmation of American nationalism and expansion. In short, early nineteenth century America was a society in conflict with itself--in conflict that eventually erupted into internal sectional war.

Into that society in conflict emerged feminism. It was a time both favorable and unfavorable to it as a social movement. Feminism was born in conjunction with other reform movements, most notably temperance and abolition, and met with formidable cultural opposition--including opposition from the reform movements in which women had been deeply involved. Feminism was clearly not a popular "ism" to advocate in the United States in the two and one-half decades before the Civil War and that fact shaped the thought of the feminists

to the extent that the feminists, both men and women, were prone to stereotyping women in accordance with the prevailing traditional attitudes and values. One author put the problem as follows:

The cult of delicacy was an extreme and transient expression of an enduring conviction that feminists had to deal with if they were to win equality. They could not admit that the differences between the sexes were so marked as to make women inherently and externally inferior; neither could they escape the fact that women everywhere were subordinate to men. Moreover, the weight of opinion against them was so great that it was hard for even the most talented women to free themselves of the invidious assumptions that kept them in their places.

In addition, the feminists were handicapped by their failure to appreciate the power of their opponents.² They tended to ignore the often vicious and ignorant propaganda of the anti-feminists they despised,³ and a number of those anti-feminists were influential and respected clergymen and journalists. Thus, despite the fact that feminist thought was essentially consistent with basic American values such as equality and democracy (or republicanism), feminist beliefs violated social conventions and placed the feminists "outside the national consensus by too literal an interpretation of its (the Constitution) sacred texts."⁴

The feminists who justified their beliefs on such democratic and egalitarian principles were, moreover, predominantly from the

¹William L. O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 8.

²Ibid., p. ix.

³Ibid., p. 55.

⁴Ibid., pp. 10-11.

North. The development of regional feminism, which will be explored more fully in succeeding chapters, is particularly important in considering the relative failure of feminism to achieve the social change implied by its ideas. There was no truly national feminist movement; sectional differences in terms of culture and social organization were too strong to permit it. In fact, feminism never developed strong support or organization in the South at all, and what might be very loosely termed feminist thought in the South had virtually no similarities to Northern versions, particularly in terms of the circumstances which encouraged the rise of feminine awareness beyond the requirements of predetermined social role.

The battlefield was in the Northeast. It was there that women had the greatest need of self-protection through the right to vote deemed by most feminists to be the first step toward total equality, if not the end in itself, and it was there that social resistance clashed most strongly with the efforts of those who were leading the crusade. The South had only hearsay knowledge of the controversy, since there women had neither motive nor desire to assume through suffrage the responsibilities of political life. The Midwest was more responsive but at the same time it did not have the industrial development that did so much⁵ to make evident to women the danger of their non-working status.

That even the Northern feminists could not maintain a concerted effort to reach their goals indicates something of the internal as well as external threats to success. The advent of the Civil War, moreover, drew feminists' attention away from the goals of women's

⁵Ernest R. Groves, The American Woman: The Feminine Side of a Masculine Civilization (New York: Greenberg, Publisher, Inc., 1937), p. 184.

Note: The Midwest is only considered incidentally throughout the paper.

rights and into the Union war effort. No conventions, which had been so characteristic of Northern feminism in the 1850's, were held between 1861 and 1866, and no feminist political action was taken. Abolitionism became the cause of the day, and the feminists, most of whom had been active in that movement from the start, lent their talents once more to that movement. During the war years, feminists encountered legal setbacks, such as the 1862 repeal of the New York laws recognizing a woman's legal guardianship rights for her children and a widow's right to control her late husband's property.⁶ The ultimate frustration for most feminists was the failure of the post-war Constitutional amendments to extend the right to vote to women as well as black men. The movement, frustrated by these developments on a national level, finally split into two factions: that of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in New York, and that of Henry Blackwell, Lucy Stone, Julia Ward Howe, and Thomas W. Higginson in Boston.⁷ From that point on, the movement lost its broad feminist concerns, as the Stanton-Anthony faction spear-headed a one-issue drive for the right to vote in much the same way as the Anti-Saloon League made Prohibition into law. By the 1920's, moreover, the movement had become socially exclusive, closed to non-middle class, non-native, non-white persons interested in the struggle.⁸

⁶Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. (eds.), The History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. I (Rochester, N.Y.: Charles Mann, 1889), p. 747.

⁷O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, pp. 18-19.

⁸Miriam Schneir (ed.), Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. xvii-xix.

This is not to say that feminism was a weak and ineffective movement, for indeed it was not, even if we consider its major success to be the growth of awareness among some women and men that arbitrary social roles are not always desirable in terms of their lack of ability to provide happiness and satisfaction for their players and in terms of their rigidity which cuts off other avenues of personal fulfillment. Such was one of the basic guidelines of feminism at the peak of its ideological maturity, and it is an idea that cuts across regional lines. What now remains to be explored is the core of feminist and anti-feminist thought and motivation in both the North and South, with the understanding that this investigation will necessarily involve more consideration of the North, as it was the locale of feminist activism.

CHAPTER II

TRADITIONAL NINETEENTH CENTURY ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN

It is not entirely in error to say that the resurfacing of feminist thought in the United States in the 1830's was an accident. The hostility of American society to feminine equality and self-determination, in effect the catalyst to the whole movement. The exclusion of women from the masculine world (including reform movements) led them to create their own organizations, organizations which provided some sense of group solidarity among the participants as well as a sense of their social limitations and potential. In addition, the spirit of reform was present, and discrimination against women by men only made that spirit more intense, as in the case of Susan B. Anthony.⁹

At the core of the issue of feminism, however, is the entire reality of what it meant to be female in American society at that time. What was an ideal woman? What was expected of a woman? How did women live up to those expectations--or could they? Indeed, what was a woman, and what station in life is best suited for her to occupy? George Fitzhugh offered this answer in 1854:

So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness. Woman naturally shrinks from public gaze, and from the struggle and competition of life...in truth,

⁹ William O'Neill (ed.), The Woman Movement: Feminism in the United States and England (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), pp. 18-20.

woman, like children, has but one right and that is the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey. A husband, a lord and master, whom she should love, honor and obey, nature designed for every woman....¹⁰ If she be obedient she stands little danger of maltreatment.

Such sentiment was not, moreover, confined to the South. A group of Massachusetts clergymen wrote in 1837 (regarding the Grimké sisters):

The appropriate duties and influence of woman are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties and that influence are unobtrusive and private, but the sources of mighty power... The power of woman is her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection, and which keeps her in those departments of life that form the character of individuals and of the nation.

...when she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defence against her; she yields the power which God has given her for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural. If the vine, whose strength and beauty is to lean upon the trellis work, and half conceal its clusters, thinks to assume the independence, and the overshadowing nature of the elm, it will not only cease to bear fruit, but fall in shame and dishonor in to the dust.¹¹

Even the medical profession substantiated the traditional ideas of feminine temperament. Consider the following remarks by a Dr. Jarvis from Boston:

The temperament of females is more ardent and more frequently nervous than that of males. Women are more under the influence of feelings, while men are more under the government of the intellect. Men have stronger passions and more powerful appetites and propensities. Women are more hopeful and confiding, especially

¹⁰ George Fitzhugh, excerpt from Sociology for the South in The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930, by Ann Firor Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 17.

¹¹ A letter by the General Association of Massachusetts in The History of Woman Suffrage, Vol. I by Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, p. 81.

in what regards the affections, but they are given to less sensual indulgence. Men are more cautious in regard to matters of a social nature. But in regard to the affairs that affect the intellect, they are more bold and less cautious. Their intellectual functions are often exercised without reference to the power of the physical organ. Their inclinations and propensities, of whatever nature, intellectual, moral, or physical are more powerful and uncontrollable, and they are more likely to overwork and disturb the brain than women.¹²

Thus, one of the key points regarding nineteenth century attitudes toward women is the idea of her "sphere" which, by strong implication if not outright affirmation, is inferior to that of man. She is depicted as submissive and unintelligent, ideas to which women were exposed from birth. In addition, she was thoroughly indoctrinated to live for marriage, and to that end, she was obligated to learn "pleasing conversation," accept her alleged intellectual inferiority, forgive a straying husband unquestioningly, bear silently any marital hardships, and refrain from leaving her husband lest she be made "responsible for his later vices."¹³ From this point of view, a woman had a noble calling from which only she could degrade herself.

Woman was made for duty, not for fame; and so soon as she forgets this great law of her being, which consigns her to a life of heroism if she will--but quiet, unobtrusive heroism--she throws herself from her position, and thus, of necessity, degrades herself.¹⁴

The important question now becomes a matter of how well these ideas were reinforced. The early nineteenth century was a heyday of the domestic novel, a literary form known primarily for its mass

¹²Editorial Miscellany, DeBow's Review of Southern and Western States, January, 1851, p. 372.

¹³Arthur W. Calhoun, A Social History of the American Family, Vol. 2 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1918), pp. 87-88.

¹⁴Louisa McCord, Review of Woman and Her Needs by Elizabeth Oakes Smith, DeBow's Review of Southern and Western States, August, 1852, p. 272.

popularity rather than literary qualities. The authors of these books were women, a group which included names unknown to modern readers: Maria Cummins, Mary Jane Holmes, Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, Caroline Lee Hentz, Fanny Fern, Emily Judson, and so on. By nineteenth century standards, domestic novels were best-sellers; The Lamplighter by Maria Cummins sold 5,000 copies per week during its first two months of availability in 1854, and even rated publication in England. People such as Abraham Lincoln and Charles Dickens were reportedly among the popular audience of these novels.¹⁵ The acceptance of the female writers and domestic novels was not, however, universal. A literary woman was sometimes considered "unsexed" and, therefore by virtue of their work, unsuitable for marriage.¹⁶ In addition, they were not generally accepted within the established literary circles of the day. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in a letter to his Boston publisher, William Ticknor, wrote:

America is now wholly given over to a d-----d mob of scribbling women, and I shall have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash--and should be ashamed of myself if I should succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the 'Lamplighter,' and other books neither better nor worse?--Worse they could not be and better they need not be when they sell by the 100,000...

The unkindest cut of all was the belief that the young woman's "morbid taste" for the light reading of domestic novels was responsible for her mental inferiority as well as any socially inappropriate

¹⁵ Donald A Koch (ed.), Tempest and Sunshine and The Lamplighter (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), pp. v-vii.

¹⁶ Calhoun, The American Family, p. 81.

¹⁷ Koch, Tempest and Lamplighter, p. vii.

behavior she may display.¹⁸ Thus, the domestic novels were regarded as scapegoats for "unwomanly" conduct (such as studious reading or taking an interest in political affairs) as well as sources of entertainment.

As the name implies, the domestic novels focused on female characters, generally to the extent that the heroine emerges as the strongest of the characters.¹⁹ In a novel like Tempest and Sunshine, moreover, there are two strong female characters nicknamed according to the title of the book. Typical of much weak literature, the characterizations in these stories are shallow. At the beginning of the book, one of the two is perfectly angelic and the other, perfectly devilish. The entire book is a tale of how the "evil" sister tries to take advantage of her "goodie two shoes" sister, particularly with regard to men. All Julia (Tempest) can think of is how to outdo her sister, by deception if necessary. Here is how the two were depicted early in the story after one of many minor schemes Julia has enacted: all the while Fanny (Sunshine) refuses to believe her sister could possibly do anything to harm her.

So Fanny lay down by her sister, and the two, purity and guilt, were soon fast asleep, side by side, and the angel of innocence spread his broad wing protectingly over the yellow locks of one [Sunshine], while a serpent lay coiled in the dark tresses of the other [Tempest].²⁰

The attempt at religious symbolism is unmistakable, but the important point to consider here is how the author (Mary Jane Holmes) intends to multiply the instability of the plot and resolve it in a way advantageous to both characters. The book goes on to describe how

¹⁸ Calhoun, The American Family, p. 73.

¹⁹ Koch, Tempest and Lamplighter, p. xi.

²⁰ Mary Jane Holmes, Tempest and Sunshine in Tempest and Sunshine and The Lamplighter, ed. by Donald Koch, p. 19.

how Julia almost marries Fanny's fiance, an event stopped by the timely arrival of a delirious co-conspirator of Julia's. Naturally during the whole ordeal of watching her sister prepare to marry her true love, Fanny remains chaste and confident in the essential goodness of her sister. To make a long story short, Julia eventually repents of her evil ways after making everyone believe she drowned herself when her impending marriage was never realized. The author in fact makes direct comments with regard to Julia's final confession:

Lest the reader think us guilty of exaggeration and so credit nothing we have written, we must tell them that Julia was not wholly and entirely changed. But that good influences were at work, no one would doubt who had seen her once and who saw her now.²¹

What we are left with in the end, therefore, is a novel in which the male characters are the pawns of female characters most obviously with regards to Julia's callous manipulation of her sister's fiance and the other she herself had and Fanny's never-failing influence over her cantankerous father. Despite the evilness of the character of Julia, she demonstrates an apt ability for cunning and intelligence in all her scheming while Fanny remains a captive of mindless-but benevolent--naiveté. Thus, although the book is by no means a work of art, it does approach the possibility of feminine dominance and triumph in a way that is no threat to social conventions. Neither Julia or Fanny are feminists, but Julia's stubbornness is an unacceptable characteristic which must be corrected by a religious-like conversion to a different way of life. Julia is not finally "reformed", but she does become acceptable to her society. Thus, the novel becomes nonthreatening to its audience in the sense that Julia is brought

²¹Ibid., p. 205.

into line, and one overriding appeal those novels had was the sense of security they provided in an age of turbulence.²² Religion and a religious approach appears to have been the pacifier for anything too controversial a woman may have recorded. As Donald Koch observed:

Seldom in the domestic novels did the authors overtly propagandize for equality of the sexes. After all, the stock perspective was that the woman's place was in the home; it was ~~brazen to be anything other than a clinging vine~~. Without resorting to the deliberate attacks and critical techniques of 'cause' or 'purpose' fiction, the feminine writers were highly effective as fomites, seemingly innocent instruments of contagion whose warmly sentimental stories leavened the popular mind to constructive action against a variety of social injustice. The apparent shallowness of these novels is deceptive; they were, in fact, marvels of persuasion all fraught with countless examples of the things society strove to reform, all charged with noble precepts,²³ all sharply tuned to the exciting emotional pitch of the times.

Thus, readers were at once presented with a very subtle critique of society as well as an affirmation of its basic organization and values. That resistance to feminism appears to have maintained a broad base of operation, however, undermines any contention that the domestic novels were an effective means of protest. The obscure elements of social critique may indeed have been related to the damaging impact such novels were deemed to have for young women, but the fact of the overwhelming popularity of those novels would lead one to believe that they served as escape fiction. Moreover, some readers may have given no thought to the fact that female authors were focusing on women characters; after all, had not male authors written primarily

²² Koch, Tempest and Lamplighter, p. viii.

²³ Ibid., p. xii.

provided a medium for reinforcing the previous pious conception of ideal womanhood in American society--womanhood based on marriage, family, male supremacy, and a special devotion to religious and moral values--complete with suggestions to women about how to cope with the everyday domestic situations the authors attempted to depict.²⁴

Keeping in mind the New England origins of many of these authors, we should not be surprised to find that the domestic setting of the novels is also regional. New England and Northern women in general assumed a difficult burden in their everyday lives. They were responsible for all housekeeping chores, home manufacturing, and childrearing along with participation in community affairs ranging from weddings and funerals to house raisings. Because families were quite large, there was a natural potential for physical and mental exhaustion which would be different from that experienced by the men working outside the home. Men controlled the family finances and undoubtedly used a substantial portion of them to invest in machinery which would increase farm production, and, on a larger scale, capital was directed to increasing industrial output.²⁵ The demanding lives led by men and women left little time for the cultivation of familial affection, according to some observers of Northern families who noted that women tended to be affectionate toward children, but respectful toward their husbands.²⁶ Yet, such realities were not expressed in the domestic novels. The following passage is from Maria Cummins' The Lamplighter; note the strong positive orientation

²⁴Edith H. Altbach, Women in America (Lexington, Ma.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974), p. 91.

²⁵Groves, The American Woman, pp. 116-118.

²⁶Calhoun, The American Family, pp. 131-133.

of the character to housework, the implied feeling that she was the ideal woman, and the implied sense that a male housekeeper is out of place in that role.

Now, Mrs. Sullivan was the soul of neatness. Her rooms were like waxwork. Her own dress was almost Quaker-like in its extreme simplicity, and freedom from the least speck or stain. No one could meet her old father, or her young son, even in their working dress, without perceiving at once the evidence of a careful daughter and mother's handiwork. It was to nurse Gerty [an orphan], and take care of her in True's [the lamplighter and Gerty's guardian] absence, that she first entered a room so much the reverse of her own; and it is not easy to appreciate the degree in which the virtue and charity of her were so enhanced, unless one can realize how painful the contrast was to her, and how excessively annoying she found it, to spend sometimes a whole afternoon in a room, which, as she expressed herself afterwards at home, it would have been a real pleasure to her to clear up and put up rights, if it were only to see how it would look, and whether anybody would recognize it. Mrs. Sullivan was a little bit of a woman, but had more capability and energy than could have been found in any one among twenty others twice her size. She really pitied those whose home was such a mass of confusion; felt sure that they could not be happy; and inwardly determined, as soon as Gerty got well, to exert herself in the cause of cleanliness and order, which was in her eyes the cause of virtue and happiness, so completely did she identify outward neatness and purity with inward peace. She pondered in her own mind how she could broach the subject of a renovation in his affairs to True himself, without wounding his feelings; for she was herself so sensitive on a point of neatness that she imagined he must be somewhat the same,--and the little woman, being as tenderhearted as she was tidy, would not have mortified him for the world,--when a mode of action was suggested to her by Gerty herself.²⁷

There is little doubt that the author is trying to convey a positive picture of an ideal woman at work: a woman properly dedicated to housework and the principles of order, simplicity, and tidiness as well as deference to men. This is a literary expression of a social myth, expressions common to such novels. Consider the following description of another character in the same novel, a description which focuses on the religious role and alledged superior moral

Character of Susanna

²⁷ Maria Susanna Cummins, The Lamplighter in Tempest and Lamp-lighter, ed. by Koch, p. 232.

strength of woman; no man would ever have been characterized to this degree concerning those traits.

As may be supposed, the blind girl did not forget out little Gerty. Emily Graham never forgot the sufferings, the wants, the necessities of others. She could not see the world without, but there was a world of love and sympathy within her, which manifested itself in abundant benevolence and charity, both of heart and deed. She lived a life of love. She loved God with her whole heart, and her neighbor as herself. Her own great misfortunes and trials could not be helped, and were borne without repining, but the misfortunes and trials of others became her care, the alleviation of them her greatest delight. Emily was never weary of doing good. Many a blessing was called down upon her head, by young and old, for kindness past; many a call was made upon her for further aid; and to the call of none she was ever deaf.²⁸

It should not be too surprising that young Gerty grew up to adopt the values of Emily with all their unmarred purity, and, as in Tempest and Sunshine, the two leading female characters emerge triumphantly in the end, making the leading men look like moral weaklings in the process. Furthermore, the triumph of the women was accomplished through a realization of woman's place and her relative moral strength. There was nothing unfeminine or unacceptable about these characters, in terms of nineteenth century values, except perhaps for their dominance in the book itself. It is little wonder that feminist activists were a shock, to say the least, to a public deluged with such novels; public speaking by a woman proved sufficient in itself to offend the sensibilities of most Americans at that time.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 258.

CHAPTER III

THE EMERGENCE OF FEMINIST THOUGHT

Women in nineteenth century America were not a particularly privileged group. Women were not allowed to handle money for their own organizations. Married women in the North frequently worked in factories under assumed names to prevent their husbands from exercising their legal right to claim their wives' wages. Women had no custody rights over children, and fathers sometimes kidnaped their own children, never with any fear of legal reprisals against them for so doing.²⁹ But grievances such as these did not surface until after feminist thought had already appeared in the North. As mentioned earlier, had it not been for the discrimination female reformers experienced at the hands of men in other reform movements, the whole feminist movement might never have achieved the magnitude it did.

Among the first of the feminists to achieve some prominence were the Grimke sisters, Angelina and Sarah. The two were born into a slaveholding family in South Carolina, and they moved to Pennsylvania as adults. There they became Quakers and vocally supported the anti-slavery cause. In 1837 they made a speaking tour throughout Massachusetts, all the while drawing fire from Massachusetts clergymen who were convinced that the Grimkes were violating

²⁹ Calhoun, The American Family, pp. 91-92.

their own womanhood by daring to speak in public.³⁰ Nevertheless, Sarah collected a number of the letters she had written to clergymen in response to their charges printed in 1838.³¹ She answered the clergymen's to their charges printed in 1838.³¹ She answered the clergymen's charges on their own grounds: religion.

The influence of woman, says the Association (of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts), is to be private and unobtrusive; her light is not to shine before man like that of her brethren; but she is passively to let the lords of creation, as they call themselves, put the bushel over it lest...it might appear that the world has been benefited by the rays of her candle. So that her quenched light, according to their judgement, will be of more use than if it were set on a candlestick...This has been the flattering language of man since he laid aside the whip as a means to keep woman in subjection. He spares her body; but the war he has waged against her mind, her heart and her soul, has been no less destructive to her as a moral being. How monstrous, how anti-christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on man! Where in all the sacred Scriptures is this taught? Alas! she has too well learned the lesson which MAN has labored to teach her...This doctrine of dependence upon man is utterly at variance with the doctrine of the BIBLE. In that book I find nothing like the softness of woman, nor the sternness of man: both are equally commanded to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, love, meekness, gentleness, etc.³²

Or, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton put it in the 1850's: "How can we be sure that the forthcoming version of the Bible from the masculine revisors of our day will be more trustworthy than those which have been accepted as of Divine origin in the past?"³³

Furthermore, in order to more fully justify her claims, Sarah Grimke re-interpreted the male-oriented Bible and, particularly the myth of the fall, a text which has been traditionally been used to justify a belief in the inferiority of woman.

³⁰ See the quote cited in the eleventh footnote for an idea of how offensive public speaking by women was to the Massachusetts clergy.

³¹ Schneir, Feminism, pp. 35-36.

³² Ibid., pp. 40-41.

³³ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 799.

We...find Adam involved in the same sin as Eve, not through the instrumentality of a supernatural agent, but through that of his equal, a being whom he must have known was liable to transgress the divine command, because he felt that he himself was a free agent, and that he was restrained from disobedience only by the exercise of faith and love towards his Creator. Had Adam tenderly reproved his wife, and endeavored to lead her to repentance instead of sharing in her guilt, I should be much more ready to accord to man that superiority which he claims; but as the facts stand disclosed by the sacred historian, it appears to me that to say the least, there was as much weakness exhibited by Adam as by Eve. They both fell from innocence, and consequently from happiness, but not from equality.³⁴

Countering male theology was a major concern of early feminist thinkers. Elizabeth Stanton was convinced that the Church and its theology was more responsible than the civil code for the current state of feminine inequality, and she published the Women's Bible as a response, a book rejected for its radical implications by the feminist movement itself.³⁵ Lucretia Mott, herself a Quaker minister, who was probably one of the people instrumental in influencing Sarah Grimke's involvement with Quakerism,³⁶ was convinced that: "Instead of taking the truths of the Bible in corroboration of the right, the practice has been to turn over its pages to find example and authority for the wrong, for the existing abuses of society."³⁷ William Lloyd Garrison asked: "Why go to the Bible to settle this question of women's rights? As a nation, we have practically ignored the Bible...it has filled all Christendom with theological confusion."³⁸ Gerrit Smith, a cousin of Elizabeth Stanton, wrote in 1855 that

³⁴ Sarah M. Grimke, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman (Boston: Issac Knapp, 1838), pp. 6-7.

³⁵ O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave, p. 12.

³⁶ Gerda Lerner, The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 60.

³⁷ Schneir, Feminism, p. 101.

³⁸ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 382.

"The Bible is, this day, a hindrance rather than a help to civilization" because of Man's practice of using the Bible "to testify against his conscience and in favor of his sins."³⁹

Where the Bible was criticized so were the church and its personnel. Sarah Grimke gently prodded pro-slavery ministers by saying that "whenever a minister sincerely repents of having, either by his apathy or his efforts, countenanced the fearful sin of slavery, he will need no inducement to come into our ranks."⁴⁰ On the other hand, the rebuttal could be highly inflammatory and rhetorical, as was Rev. William Henry Channing's verbal public attack on his colleague, Rev. John Chambers, a minister who had refused to allow Rev. Antoinette Brown to be seated as a delegate at the World's Temperance Convention in New York City in 1853.

The Reverend John Chambers! Reverend for what? For his piety; manifested in the fact that he, a professed minister of the gospel could by rowdy tumult drown the voice of another minister of the gospel while she was asserting the religious character of the Temperance Reform! Reverend for what? For his charity; manifested by low cries and insulting gestures to a gentlewoman who stood there yet meek before him! Strange that he, of all, should thus seek a vain eminence in outraging the decencies of social life; for unless report is false, John Chambers owes whatever position he may have to woman. It is said--I believe on good authority--that he was educated for the ministry by the contributions of women; that he preaches on a church built and endowed by a woman; that his salary is chiefly paid by hard-working needle-woman; finally, that he married a rich wife! Now what a sight was there! A man whose brain had been fed with books by woman, whose body had been fattened with bread by woman, every fragment and stitch of whose ministerial garb, from his collar to his boot-heels had been paid for by woman, could find no better way to discharge his mission as minister of the gospel than to point his finger and shout, 'Shame on the woman!'⁴¹

Why such adamant criticism rose against the church and its

³⁹ Ibid., p. 839.

⁴⁰ Grimke, Letters, p. 124

⁴¹ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, pp. 508-509.

teachings can be understood partially in terms of the centrality of the church in nineteenth century life. Ministers were influential people in their respective locales, and their views were quite visible to their parishoners. The theological justifications for woman's second class rating in society permeated the value system of the whole society. The exclusion of intelligent and sensitive women from church leadership and the rejection of women--on religious grounds--as participants in religiously affiliated movements such as temperance and abolitionism undoubtedly led these women to question the grounds upon which they were rejected and search for answers that would speak more effectively to their needs and sense of morality.

Religion, however, was not the sole focus of feminist thought. The feminists, in turn, dealt with the issues of slavery and economic dependence, their legal status, and marriage and family. It is important to note that in all of these considerations, women were constantly re-evaluating the self-image that society had conferred upon them. It is also important to remember, as mentioned earlier, that even the most dedicated feminists were guilty of stereotyping women. Given the prevalence of traditional sentiments, this is not an indictment of their work, but merely an illustration of how difficult it was (is?) to be a feminist in American society.

In the 1840's in New England, women and children, who had hitherto been considered unproductive, filled the labor shortage that occurred with the advent of the factory and employment of most men in agriculture. To unmarried women, in particular, however, the factory was a godsend, an opportunity for them to move out of relatives' homes, in which they may have been unwanted in the first place, and be independent. The factory, because women had no property rights at that time, was indeed about the only way for an unmarried woman

to achieve any independence. Wages were \$2.00 per week, after room and board deductions--six times higher than pay for domestic work.⁴² Even though, according to Harriet Robinson, a mill operator in Lowell, Massachusetts, "help was too valuable to be ill-treated,"⁴³ factory life was far from idyllic. Wage strikes occurred in 1834 and later in 1836, the latter being the time of the first public speech ever by a woman in Lowell.⁴⁴ The Lowell Female Labor Association was founded in 1844, and delegates were sent to the state legislature to press for an investigation of working conditions. No action had been taken by 1845, and by 1850, the use of cheap immigrant labor and technical improvements made the work more competitive and the conditions worse for those who worked there for any length of time.⁴⁵ For women the chief benefit was the acquisition of self-reliance, perseverance, and industry,⁴⁶ for there was little material gain to which they could point. Their plight, however, was not taken lightly. Harriet Robinson became increasingly critical of the whole situation as the problems increased exponentially from the original hopes of what factory life would provide. In writing about the years between 1832 and 1848, she wrote, in 1883:

The most prevailing incentive to labor was to secure the means of education for some male member of the family. To make a gentleman of a brother or son, to give him a college education, was the dominant thought in the minds of the mill-girls.

⁴² Schneir, Feminism, pp. 49-50, 55.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

(These men, educated by the labor and self-sacrifice of others, sometimes acquired just enough learning to make them look down upon the social position in which their women friends and relatives were forced to remain...The average woman of 40 years ago was very humble in her notions of the sphere of woman. What if she did hunger and thirst after knowledge? She could do nothing with it even if she could get it. So she made a fetich of some male relative, and gave him the mental food for which she herself was starving; and devoted all her energies towards helping him to become what she had felt, under better conditions, she herself might have been. It was⁴⁷ enough in those days to be the mother or sister of somebody.)

The element of despair thus seems to characterize the situation of the New England mill girls. Although their attempts to organize often met with failure, the women in their leisure did take some interest in public events.⁴⁸ Whether this development significantly aided the cause of feminism is difficult to say, but it did change the life styles of unmarried females and perhaps helped them cope with their socially unacceptable marital state. The situation in the factories did not go entirely unnoticed, however. The following plea was written by Thomas Hood in 1843 as part of a longer poem called "Song of the Shirt."

Oh men, with sisters dear!
 Oh men, with mothers and wives!
 It is not linen you're wearing out,
 But human creatures' lives!
 Stitch-stitch-stitch!
 In poverty, hunger, dirt,
 Sewing at once, with a double thread,
 A shroud as well as a shirt.⁴⁹

The inaction of the state legislatures with regard to the mill girls indicates the continued lack of legislative concern. Pleas such as Hood's were answered by the suggestion that the remedy "lay

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

in the mill owner's cultivation of 'less love for money, and a more ardent love of social happiness.'"⁵⁰ Naturally, those inclinations would be left to develop on a voluntary basis.

The absolute drudgery which feminists perceived in their lives lent itself well to the comparison of women to slaves, an analogy not limited to the fact of women's economic exploitation. The abolitionist fervor common to most feminists shows itself in statements such as the following one by Sarah Grimke:

We are much in the situation of the slave. Man has asserted and assumed authority over us. He has, by virtue of his power, deprived us of the advantages of improvement which he has lavishly bestowed upon himself, and then, after having done all he can to take from us the means of proving our equality, and our capability of mental cultivation, he throws upon us the burden of proof that God created man and woman equal, and endowed them, without any reference to sex, with intelligence and responsibilities, as rational and accountable beings.⁵¹

The analogy of slavery was indeed a powerful one, given the uproar that the abolitionist movement helped create, and the Grimke statement cited above could probably express the slaves' feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and injustice, with the minor substitution of the words "black" and "white" for "women" and "men," respectively. But the feminists who sprung from the abolitionist movement in the North did not use slavery as simply an analogy to further their own cause; slavery to them was an important issue, and, even more specifically, the slavery of black women. Sarah Grimke wrote this rather perceptive analysis of slavery as it pertained to black and white womanhood and the effects of slavery on the slaveholders:

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵¹ Grimke, Letters, pp. 33-34.

Nor does the colored woman suffer alone: the moral purity of the white woman is deeply contaminated. In the daily habit of seeing the virtue of her enslaved sister sacrificed without hesitancy or remorse, she looks upon the crimes of seduction and illicit intercourse without horror, and although not personally involved in the guilt, she loses that value for innocence in her own, as well as the other sex, which is one of the strongest safeguards of virtue. She lives in habitual intercourse with men, whom she knows to be polluted by licentiousness, and often she is compelled to witness in her own domestic circle, those disgusting and heart-sickening jealousies and strifes which disgraced and distracted the family of Abraham. In addition to this, the female slaves suffer every species of degradation and cruelty, which the most wanton barbarity can inflict; they are indecently divested of their clothing, sometimes tied up and severely whipped, sometimes prostrated on the earth while their naked bodies are torn by the scorpion lash.

Can any American woman look at these scenes of shocking licentiousness and cruelty, and fold her hands in apathy, and say, 'I have⁵² nothing to do with slavery?' She cannot and be guiltless.

Among the slaves, however, it is difficult to ascertain any definite feminist sentiments; for one thing, they were slaves and more likely to have a racial rather than sexual awareness since both black men and women were exploited, and, second, being illiterate, few documents are available that were written by slaves, let alone recorded. But among the few black women who took up the feminist cause was an ex-slave who called herself Sojourner Truth. She was freed in 1827 and became associated with the abolitionist movement. In 1851, she attended the feminist convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, a convention which adopted a resolution pertaining to slave women. In 1852, she appeared at the Akron, Ohio, feminist convention, where she defended feminism against the assertions of clergymen that the assumed superiority of the male intellect and the facts of Jesus'

⁵²Ibid., pp. 53-54. It should be remembered in connection with these sentiments that Sarah Grimke was raised in a slave-holding family and undoubtedly witnessed some of the tortures and events that took place involving the female slaves and their masters.

manhood and Eve's original sin were sufficient to merit a subordinate position for women in society. The fear that Sojourner's association with abolitionism would dilute the feminist cause proved unfounded as she delivered the following extemporaneous speech, which was recorded by the president of the convention, Frances Gage:⁵³

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man--when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?...

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.⁵⁴

It would indeed have been intriguing to note the reactions of Sojourner's audience as she got up to speak. Would it have more likely been astounded at the sight of a female speaking in public or a black person? Undoubtedly, the combination of the two traits must have generated some reaction! Whether or not sexism was/is more deeply rooted in American society than racism is perhaps an unsolvable dilemma, but Elizabeth Stanton met the issue head-on in 1860 before the New York state legislature and decided that women in general had the worse situation.

⁵³ Schneir, Feminism, pp. 93-94.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 94-95.

The few social privileges which the man gives to woman, he makes up to the negro in civil rights. The woman may sit at the same table and eat with the white man; the free negro may hold property and vote. The woman may sit in the same pew with the white man in church; the free negro may enter the pulpit and preach. Now, with the black man's right to suffrage, the right unquestioned, even by Paul, to minister at the altar, it is evident that the prejudice against sex is more deeply rooted and more unreasonably maintained than that against color.⁵⁵

Before Stanton was done addressing the issue, she had also returned to the feminist tendency to compare the state of slaves to that of women, citing such evidences as the legal non-existence of slaves and married women, the risk both have as to losing guardianship of their children, the assumption of a name not their own by birth, and the absence of legal protection from abuse by their "owners."⁵⁶

Indeed, it was the gradual realization of woman's total helplessness before the law that drove feminist protest beyond the church and the factory and back to the home. Marriage came under fire as a dead-end for women, a state in which a woman's personhood was violated by the very fact that a married woman legally assumed her husband's identity in what amounted to a legal master-slave relationship. When Lucy Stone married Henry Blackwell, she did so under protest, refusing to assume her husband's name and insisting along with her husband that the following document be read at their wedding:

While acknowledging our mutual affection by publicly assuming the relationship of husband and wife, yet in justice to ourselves and a great principle, we deem it a duty to declare that this act on our part implies no sanction of, nor promise of voluntary obedience to such of the present laws of marriage, and refuse to

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

recognize the wife as an independent, rational being, while they confer upon the husband an injurious and unnatural superiority, investing him with legal powers which no honorable man would exercise, and which no man should possess. We protest especially against the laws which give to the husband:

1. The custody of the wife's position.
2. The exclusive control and guardianship of their children.
3. The sole ownership of her personal, and use of her real estate, unless previously setted upon her, or placed in the hands of trustees, as in the case of morons, lunatics, and idiots.
5. Also against laws which give to the widower so much larger and more permanent an interest in the property of his deceased wife, than they give to the widow in that of her deceased husband.
4. The absolute right to the product of her industry.
6. Finally, against the whole system by which the legal existence of the wife is suspended during marriage, so that in most states she neither has a legal part in the choice of her residence, nor can she make a will, nor sue or be sued in her own name, nor inherit property.⁵⁷

Similarly, Robert Dale Owen propped, as early as 1832, at his marriage:

This ceremony involves not the necessity of making promises regarding thatover which we have no control, the state of human affections in the distant future, nor of respecting forms which we deem offensive, in as much as they outrage the principles of human liberty and equality, by conferring rights and imposing duties unequally on the sexes. The ceremony consists of a simply written contract in which we agree to take each other as husband and wife according to the laws of the State of New York.⁵⁸

Even while rejecting the traditional role structure of marriage and renouncing the laws and conventions that upheld them, the feminists had no intention of undermining the family as an institution. Owen's utopian dreams were not shared by mainstream feminists. The activities of women like Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, associated with spiritualism and free love, were out of step with the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

⁵⁸ Groves, The American Woman, p. 193.

essentially conservative reforms the feminists sought. In fact, the idealization of the woman in the home was not totally dead even among feminists, for there were those who asserted that suffrage would give women a chance to spread their "maternal and moral influence" to the world.⁵⁹ The goal of equality before the law, however, remained a central concern of the feminists, a goal which if accomplished might help liberate the feminine mind as well as protect her from physical abuse. "Brute force," wrote Sarah Grimke, "the law of violence, rules to a great extent in the poor man's domicile; and the woman's little more than his drudge."⁶⁰ But of feminine complacency for any abuse, particularly the intellectual suffocation in the middle class, Grimke wrote:

I have sometimes been astonished and grieved at the servitude of women, and at the little idea many of them seem to have of their own moral existence and responsibilities. A woman who is asked to sign a petition for...any...great reformation, not infrequently replies, 'My husband does not approve of it.' She merges her rights and her duties in her husband...I know some women are very glad of so convenient a pretext to shield themselves from the performance of duty; but there are others, who, under a mistaken view of their obligations as wives, submit conscientiously to this species of oppression, and go mourning in their way, for want of that hold fortitude, which would enable without reference to a poor fallen man.⁶¹

As marriage laws were under attack, so were divorce laws, insofar as they related to custody rights of women and alcoholic fathers. At this point, the feminists and temperance leaders--sometimes on in the same--combined forces. It was generally agreed.

⁵⁹ Altbach, Women in America, pp. 93-94.

⁶⁰ Grimke, Letters, p. 88.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

that a woman should be able to dissolve a marriage if her husband were a criminal and/or a drunk. Amelia Bloomer went so far as to say that "every woman who is tied to a confirmed drunkard should sunder the ties, and if she do it not...the law should compel it--especially if she have children."⁶² Divorce, however, remained a controversial issue in light of the romantic idea that marriage is forever. Few were willing to go as far as Ernestine Rose in advocating a liberalization of divorce laws.

...it is said that if divorce were easily granted, 'men and women would marry today and unmarry tomorrow.' Those who say that only prove that they have no confidence in themselves, and therefore have no confidence in others. But the assertion is false, it is a libel on human nature. It is the indissoluble chain that corrodes the flesh. Remove the indissolubility, and there would be less separation than now, for it would place the parties on their good behavior, the same as during courtship. Human nature is not quite so changeable; give it more freedom, and it will be less so. We are a good deal the creatures of habit but we will not be forced. We live...in uncomfortable houses for years rather than move, though we have the privilege to do so every year; but force anyone to live for life in one⁶³ house and he would run away from it, though it were a palace.

If woman's legal rights and status were important issues in marriage and divorce, they assumed even greater importance for feminists in the larger political realm. The question of suffrage was a long-standing and crucial one, for the feminists generally assumed that winning the right to vote would virtually insure the enactment of other broader social reforms. Among the arguments advanced was the familiar refrain of 1776 against taxation without representation, since a woman's property was, in effect, subject to taxation without her consent.⁶⁴ Against the contention that women were happy in their

⁶² Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 483.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 731.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 811.

lot came the reply that "the apathy, the helpless, the hopeless, resignation of a subjected class c nnot be called happiness. The more complete the despotism, the more smoothly all things move on the surface."⁶⁵ The fear that political rights would take women from the home was countered with a reminder of the short time required to cast a vote and the simple reality of political office such that if, for example, the Senate of the United States should be entirely composed of women, but two in each State would be withdrawn from the pursuit of domestic happiness."⁶⁶ Similarly, the belief that anyone class of society by nature tends to safeguard its own interests at the expense of those of the weak, contributed to the feeling that the vote was the key to power and that the current male-oriented power structure would never achieve the goals the fem nists had in mind.⁶⁷

But perhaps among the most eloquent of all the appeals was that which based on the concept of natural rights and illegitimate power. The following address was delivered by Frances D. Gage in Akron in May of 1851:

The rights of mankind emanate from their natural rights and emotions. Are not the natural want and emotions of humanity common to, and shared equ lly by, both sexes? Does man hunger and thirst, suffer cold and heat more than woman? Does his heart thrill with a deeper pleasure in doing good? Can his soul writhe in more bitter agony under the consciousness of evil or wrong? Is the sunshine m re glorious, the air more quiet, the sounds of harmony more soothing, the perfume of flowers more exquisite, or forms of beauty more soul-satisfying to his senses than to hers? To all these interrogations everyone will answer, No!

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 680.

Where then did man get the authority that he now claims over one-half of humanity? From what power the vested right to place woman--his partner, his companion, his helpmeet in life--in an inferior position? Came it from nature? Nature made woman his superior when she made her his mother; his equal when she fitted her to hold the sacred position of wife. Does he draw his authority from God, from the language of the holy writ? No! For it says that 'Male and female created he them, and gave them dominion.' Does he claim it under the law of the land? Did woman meet with him in council and voluntarily give up all her claim to be her own law-maker? Or did the majesty of might place this power in his hands?--the power of the strong over the weak makes man the master? Yes, there, and there only, does he gain his authority.⁶⁸

But, perhaps most intriguing of all is a statement of the desirability of equality which is based on a belief in the intellectual inferiority of women. Horace Greeley wrote in 1856:

I deem the intellectual, like the physical capacities of women unequal in the average to those of men; but I perceive no reason in this natural diversity for a factitious and super-induced legal inequality. On the contrary, it seems to me that the fact of a natural and marked discrepancy in the average mental as well as muscular powers of men and women ought to allay any apprehensions that the latter, in the absence of legal interdicts and circumscriptions, would usurp the functions and privileges of the former.⁶⁹

As noted earlier several times, that kind of stereotyping was not unknown within the feminist movement. In approaching the whole question of how feminism addressed the problem of feminine self-hood in male society, the way women regarded themselves cannot be ignored. Margaret Fuller Ossoli, the first female editor of a large newspaper,⁷⁰ was associated with the women of Bostonian intellectual circles and was often referred to as the "high priestess" of

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 653.

⁷⁰ She served as the literary editor for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune, beginning in 1844.

the New England Transcendentalist group."⁷¹ In some of her writing can be seen an affirmation of the stereotype of woman's moral superiority to man and woman's tendency to remain in the home as a function of her biological nature. She described teaching as a profession "for which women are peculiarly adapted by their nature, superiority in tact, quickness of sympathy, gentleness, patience, and a clear and animated manner in narration or description."⁷² After a plea to men to lift the restrictions under which women then lived, she proceeded to add the reassurance that: "Nature has pointed out her ordinary sphere by the circumstances of her physical existence. She cannot wander far."⁷³ She expressed her hope for American society as a whole as follows:

We trust that by the stress and emergencies of the present and coming time the minds of women will be formed to more reflection and higher purposes heretofore; their latent powers developed, their characters strengthened and eventually beautified and harmonized. Should the society then be such that each may remain, as Nature seems to have intended, women the tutelary genius of home, while Man manages the out-door business of life, both may be done with a wisdom, a mutual understanding and respect, unknown at present. Men will be no less gainers by this than women, finding in pure and more religious marriages the joys of friendship and love combined,--in their mothers and daughters better instruction, sweeter and nobler companionship, and in society at large, an excitement to their finer powers and feelings unknown at present, excepting the region of the fine arts.⁷⁴

⁷¹Schneir, Feminism, p. 62.

⁷²Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Woman in the Nineteenth Century (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1855), p. 222.

⁷³Groves, The American Woman, p. 335.

⁷⁴Ossoli, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, p. 220.

It should be noted, however, that statements such as those immediately cited are part of the thought of a woman committed to the goal of social equality, and it is interesting to consider whether or not the stereotypes presented in such a manner as to further the feminist cause represent attempts by women to challenge male arguments on their own terms. Even Stanton displayed such tendencies to accept and manipulate the standard anti-feminist arguments.

'The elements of sovereignty,' says Blackstone, 'are three: wisdom, goodness, and power.' Conceding to woman wisdom and goodness as they are not strictly masculine virtues, and substituting moral power for physical force, we have the necessary elements of government for most of life's emergencies.⁷⁵

Such sentiments may sound nice in theory, but they do not address the realities of everyday life for women, trained as they are to accept the goals of marriage and family as ends in themselves, the source of all fulfillment for women. What could be an alternative to this socially prescribed feminine identity?

Begin with the girls of today, and in twenty years we can revolutionize this nation. The childhood of woman must be free and untrammelled. The girl must be allowed to romp and play, climb, skate, and swim; her clothing must be more like that of the boy--strong, loose-fitting garments, thick boots etc., that she may be out at all times and enter freely into all kinds of sports. Teach her to go alone, by night and day, if need be, on the lonely highway, or through the busy street of the crowded metropolis. The manner in which all courage and self-reliance is educated out of the girl, her path portrayed with dangers and difficulties that never exist, is melancholy indeed. Better, far, suffer occasional insults or die outright, than live the life of a coward, or never move without a protector. The best protector any woman can have, one that will serve her at all times and places, is courage; this she must get by her own experience, and experience comes by exposure. Let the girl be thoroughly developed in body and soul, not modeled, like a piece of clay, after artificial specimen of humanity, with a body like some plate in Godey's book of fashion, and a mind after the type of Father Gregory's

⁷⁵ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 20.

pattern daughters, loaded down with traditions, properties, and sentimentalities of generations of silly mothers and grandmothers, but left free to be, to grow, to fell, to think, to act...Like the boy, she must be taught to look forward to a life of self-dependence, and early prepare entirely for her support upon the needle--that one eyed demon of destruction that slays its thousands annually; that evil genius of our sex, which, in spite of⁷⁶ all our devotion, will never make us healthy, wealthy, or wise.

Similarly, Gerrit Smith cited another source of feminine identity problems:

I am amazed that the intelligent women engaged in the 'Woman's Rights Movement' see not the relation between their dress and the oppressive evils which they are striving to throw off...I hazard nothing in saying, that an American woman will never have made her most effectual, nor, indeed, any serviceable protest against the treatment of her sex...so long as she consents to have her own parts clothed in ways so repugnant to reason and religion, and grateful only to^{77a} vitiated taste, be it in her own or in the other sex.

Needless to say, feminist thought of this nature perceived a societal dedication to the proposition that women were being used as male playthings, acting and dressing according to male dictates. That women were overlooked for their contributions to their homes, communities, and nation was, therefore, a serious issue to ardent feminists like Stanton, the woman who attempted to rewrite the Bible as well as American history. In, for example, noting the Boston Tea Party, Stanton cast the conventional interpretation into a new light when she wrote: "The men of Boston, in 1773, could with little loss to themselves, throw overboard a cargo of foreign tea, well knowing that for the last five years this drink had not been allowed in their houses by the women of their own families."⁷⁸

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 816.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 837.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 202.

The range of topics with which feminists were concerned thus covered a broad span. Its expression, however, was confined to the ranks of middle class women, and a select group at that. The conventions held to further women's rights provided a show of strength (see next chapter), but as the movement reached its post-war splintering point, the focus of the movement narrowed as did the activist constituency. It was a movement narrowed as did its activist constituency. It was a movement born in a spirit of reform, and it "died" in the confusion of war and the ascendance of the slavery issue and threats of Southern secession. The movement did, however, exist in more concrete ways than in the minds of a few men and women. With this vast amount of feminist thought in mind, therefore, we can turn to a consideration of the strategies and organization of the feminist movement.

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEST FOR FEMININE SOLIDARITY IN THE NORTH

The immediate association that is generally made with regard to organized feminism is the convention, and it is within this structure that much feminist strategy and awareness of the discrimination against women surfaced. Actually, the feminists early experiences were bitter ones insofar as conventions were concerned. In 1840, at a world anti-slavery convention in London, the American women who had come as delegates were not recognized as such and were refused their seats. With a biting resentment and bitterness, Stanton and her co-authors refrained from routine historical comment in their multi-volume history of the suffrage movement, as was their tendency to handle any situation involving discrimination against females. They lashed out asking pointedly:

Would there have been no unpleasant feelings in Wendell Phillips 'the American who finally conceded to the refusal to seat the women mind, had Frederick Douglass and Robert Purvis been refused their seats in a convention of reformers under similar circumstances? and, had they listened one entire day to debates on their peculiar fitness for plantation life, and unfitness for the forum and public assemblies, and been rejected as delegates on the ground of color, could Wendell Phillips have so far mistaken their real feelings, and been so insensible to the insult offered them, as to have told a convention of men who had just trampled on their most sacred rights, that they would no doubt sit with much interest behind the bar as in the convention'?... it is almost impossible for the most liberal of men to understand what liberty means, for women.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

That current of separatists thought i.e., that women must work independently of men to reach their goals, remained important to the feminists as they considered their strategy in confronting the situation. In fact, the feminists seemed to relish the idea of excluding men from their conventions, as they did in April of 1850 in Salem, Massachusetts. In so doing, the feminists in effect conferred their minority status temporarily upon men, and apparently men reacted to the situation.

This convention had one peculiar characteristic: it was officered entirely by women: not a man was allowed to sit on the platform, or to speak, or vote. Never did men so suffer. They implored just to say a word; but no; the President [Betsy M. Cowles] was inflexible--no man should be heard. If one meekly arose to make a suggestion he was at once ruled out of order. For the first time in the world's history, men learned how it felt to sit in silence when questions in which they were interested were under discussion. It would have been an admirable way of closing the Convention, had a rich banquet been provided, to which the men should have had the privilege of purchasing tickets to the gallery, there to enjoy the savory odors, and listen to the after-dinner speeches. However, the gentlemen in the Convention passed through the severe trial with calm resignation; at the close, organized an association of their own, and generously endorsed all the ladies had said and done.⁸⁰

The idea of women working together for common purpose persisted in idealistic and conservative expressions of how women's goals could be attained. Consider the very broad brand of feminism that Frances Gage advocated in 1851 at Akron, and the tenor of her argument.

Oh, if all women could be impressed with the importance of their own action, and with one united voice, speak out in their own behalf, in behalf of humanity, they would create a revolution without armies, without bloodshed, that would do more to ameliorate the condition of mankind, to purify, elevate, ennoble humanity, than all that has been done by reformers in the last century.⁸¹

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 110

⁸¹Ibid., p. 113.

Contrast Gage's broad sentiments to the strong sense of feminine solidarity that Lucy Stone felt and advocated to eliminate women's social inequality.

We must be true to each other. We must stand by the woman whose work of hand or brain removes her from the customary sphere. Employ the woman physician, dentist, and artist rather than a man of the same calling, and in time all professions and trades will be as free to us as to our brothers.⁸²

Likewise, Margaret Fuller stated bluntly, "Learn, women, what you should demand of men."⁸³ Echoing this separatist sentiments Horace Greeley conceded that "woman alone can, in the present state of the controversy, speak effectively for woman, since none others can speak with authority, or from the depths of personal experience."⁸⁴

But the exclusion of men from the movement itself was not the general rule. Even the Seneca Falls convention was presided over by a man.⁸⁵ In fact, the arbitrary exclusion of men from a temperance meeting in 1853 was opposed by a number of women, opposition strong enough to push for the admission of men.⁸⁶ Henry Blackwell, husband of Lucy Stone and brother of Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, addressed the issue of cooperation between the sexes with calm eloquence in 1853:

It is suggested that woman's cause be advocated by women only, The writer of that letter is a true friend of this reform, and yet I feel that I owe no apology for standing on this platform. But if I do so; this is sufficient, that I am the son of a woman, and the brother of a woman. I know that this is their cause, but I feel that it is mine also. Their happiness is my happiness,

⁸² Ibid., pp. 531-532.

⁸³ Ossoli, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, p. 336.

⁸⁴ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 126.

⁸⁵ Schneir, Feminism, p. xiii.

⁸⁶ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 493.

their misery my misery.

The interests of the sexes are inseparably connected, and in the elevation of one lies the saluation of the other...I know but few movements in history which have gone on successfully without the aid of woman. One of these is war--the work of human slaughter. Another has been the digging for gold in California. I have yet to learn what advantages the world has derived from either. Whenever the sexes have been severed in politics, in business, in religion, the result has been demoralization.

Perhaps an even more serious handicap to the movement than the debate about the pros and cons of including men, however, was the repugnance of the feminists for organization. Organization was perceived as coercive and unnatural, destructive of spontaneity and the "duty" of agitation.⁸⁸ "We need no external bonds to bind us together, no cumbrous machinery to keep our minds and hearts in unity of purpose and effort," wrote Angelina Grimke. "We are not the lifeless staves of a barrel which can be held together only by the iron hoops of an artificial organization."⁸⁹ At the Syracuse convention in 1852, however, it was finally agreed to hold annual state conventions (New York) in the interest of promoting both individual initiative and group cooperation.⁹⁰

Had there been a more centralized organization, more specific reforms might have been won, but the movement would also have lost its broad base of interest and issues. The splintering of the movement into post-war factions present some idea of what is involved here, since one group (led by Stanton and Anthony) became a one-

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 126.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 541.

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 540-541.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 542.

issue suffrage movement and met with short-term success before its final demise, while the Boston group (Stone, Blackwell, Howe, Higginson) maintained a multi-issue focus and was lost in the shuffle. Thus, feminism faced one major problem common to all reform movements: how many issues, or causes, to pursue. And the failure to resolve that conflict weakened the effectiveness of the movement in its reform goals.

But, equally important to the function of the conventions was what the convention symbolized to its participants. It is evident that some leaders viewed the conventions as sites of radical activity, activity undertaken with a sense of mission. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, author of the controversial Woman and Her Needs, remarked at the 1852 Syracuse convention:

My friends, do we realize for what purpose we are concerned? Do we fully understand that we aim at nothing less than an entire subversion of the present order of society, a dissolution of the whole existing social compact? Do we see that it is not an error of today, nor of yesterday, against which we are lifting the voice of dissent, but that it is against the hoary-headed error of all times--error borne onward from the footprints of the first pair ejected from Paradise, down to our own time? In view of all this, it does seem to me that we should each and all feel as if annointed, sanctified, set apart as to a great mission. It seems to me that we who struggle to restore the divine order to the world, should feel as if under the very eye of the Eternal Searcher of all hearts⁹¹, who will reject any sacrifice other than a pure offering.

The implication which comes through loud and clear in such a statement is that the feminist movement was, in terms of values and ideology, perceived to be out of step with American society. The feminists themselves believed they were placing themselves outside the bounds

⁹¹Ibid., pp. 522-523.

of acceptable feminine behavior, and their critics, as we shall see in the succeeding chapter, agreed wholeheartedly on that point. The conventions undoubtedly served a supportive function to the activists in the movement; to defy society by oneself is an impossible emotional and psychological burden to bear. The fact that New York and Massachusetts took the lead in sponsoring conventions was probably no accident in terms of the large number of participants in the movement in those states. There is a sense of strength in numbers, and a gathering of people branded as rebels was bound to have strong psychological as well as the unintended political implications.

The first convention of all, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in July of 1848, is probably among the most famous for the resolutions that were passed. The gathering itself was representative of feminine grievances, and the statements which came from it provided a landmark rallying point for future conventions. The most well-known of all the resolutions which were passed was the declaration of female independence patterned after the Jeffersonian document adopted by the Continental Congress in 1776.

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one portion of the family of man to assume among the people of the earth a position different from that which they have hitherto occupied, but one to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to such a course...

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal...but when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of women under this government, and such is now the necessity which constrains them to demand the equal station to which they are entitled...

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having indirect object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world...

He has compelled her to submit to laws in the formation of which she has had no voice...

He allows her in church, as well as State, but in a subordinate position, charming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church.

He has created a false public sentiment by giving to the world a different code of morals for men and women, by which moral delinquencies which exclude women from society, are not only tolerated, but deemed of little account in man.

He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.⁹²

Need they have said more?

⁹² Karen DeCrow, The Young Woman's Guide to Liberation: Alternatives to the Half-Life While the Choice Is Still Yours (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 120-121.

CHAPTER V

NEGATIVE REACTIONS TO FEMINISM

The resistance to feminism varied in form and expression, but it all centered on one key point: the feminists were unfeminine women. Susan B. Anthony, after speaking on the status of women teachers, received the following reactions from other women: "Did you ever see anything like this performance?"; "I was actually ashamed of my sex."; "I felt so mortified I really wished the floor would open and swallow me up."; "Who can that creature be?"; "She must be a dreadful woman to get up that way and speak in public."; and "I was so mad at those three men making such a point to shake hands with her; that will just encourage her to speak again."⁹³ Commented Stanton:

These ladies had probably all been to theatres, concerts, operas, and gone into ecstasies over Fanny Kemble, Rachel, and Jenny Lind; and Fanny Elser, balanced on one toe, the other foot in the air without having their delicacy shocked in the least. But a simple Quaker girl rising in a teacher's convention to make a commonsense remark, modestly dressed, making no display of her neck, or arms, or legs, so tried their delicate sensibilities that they were almost afraid to attend the next session.⁹⁴

Likewise, the speech of Antoinette Brown, the female minister in front of a temperance convention (see Chapter III), at which

⁹³ Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, Woman Suffrage, p. 514.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 514-515.

the participants were predominantly clergymen, stirred the following controversy: "I know you are acting conscientiously; but now that you have made your protest, do, for your own sake, withdrew from this disgraceful scene."; "Do you love the Temperance cause? Can you continue here and see all this confusion prevailing around you? Why not with draw, and then the Convention will be Quiet."; "Shame on the woman!"; "She shan't be heard!"; "In the confusion I hear something like swearing, but not swearing, for most of those men are 'holy men,' who do not think of swearing."⁹⁵ Brown described the tense incident as follows:

There were angry men confronting me, and I caught the flashing of defiant eyes; but above me, and within me, and all around me, there was a spirit stronger than they all. At that moment not the combined powers of earth and hell could have tempted me to do otherwise than to stand firm. Moral and physical cowardice were subdued, thanks to the Washington delegate for the sublime strength roused by his question: 'Would Christ have done so?'⁹⁶

In some respects, however, the feminists enjoyed this heckling by their opponents. Horace Greeley, for example, seemed to enjoy commenting on the whole Brown incident. On September 7, 1853, he summarized that convention as follows in his Tribune:

First Day-crowding a woman off the platform.

Second Day-gagging her.

Third Day-voting that she shall stay gagged. Having thus disposed of the main question, we presume the incidentals will be finished this morning.⁹⁷

But the verbal warfare between the feminists and their opponents was not limited to heckling. It became a favorite topic of newspaper editorials, vicious ones at that. A stereotype still common

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 507.

in the twentieth century was handled by the New York Herald on September 12, 1852, i. e., the belief that feminism and equal rights were ludicrous ideas because of woman's childbearing function, which would inevitably get in the way if the women in effect, tried to be male.

What do the leaders of the Woman's Rights Convention want? They want to vote, and to hustle with the rowdies at the polls. They want to be members of Congress, and in the heat of debate to subject themselves to coarse jests and indecent language... They want to fill all other posts which men are ambitious to occupy...How funny it would sound in the newspapers, that Lucy Stone, pleading cause, suddenly took ill in the pains of parturition, and perhaps gave birth to a fine bouncing boy in court! Or that Rev. Antoinette Brown was arrested in the middle of her sermon in the pulpit from the same cause, and presented a 'pledge' to her husband and the congregation; or, that Dr. Harriet K. Hunt, while attending a gentleman patient for a fit of the gout...found it necessary to send for a doctor, there and then, and to be delivered of a man or woman child--perhaps twins. A similar event might happen on the floor of Congress, in a storm at sea, or in the raging tempest⁹⁸ of battle, and then what is to become of the woman legislator?

That same editorial went on to characterize the feminists--both male and female--in such a way as to border on character assassination.

Some of them are old maids, whose personal charms were never very attractive, and who have been sadly slighted by the masculine gender in general; some of them women who have been badly mated, whose own temper or their husband's has made life anything but agreeable to them, and they are therefore down upon the whole of the opposite sex; some, having so much virago in their disposition, that nature appears to have made a mistake in their gender--mannish women, like hens that crow; some of boundless vanity and egotism, who believe that they are superior in intellectual ability to all the world and the rest of mankind; and delight to see their speeches and addresses in print; and man shall be consigned to his proper sphere--nursing the babies, washing the dishes, mending stockings, and sweeping the house... there is also a class of wild enthusiasts and visionaries--very sincere, but very mad, having the same vein as the fanatical Abolitionists...of the male sex who attend those Conventions

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 854.

for the purpose of taking a part in them; the majority are hen-pecked husbands, and all of them ought to wear petticoats.⁹⁹

The conventions were viewed as circuses full of mindless participants that merely took up valuable editorial space. The Albany Register of March 7, 1854, stated that the public should cease tolerating the antics of these "unsexed women" who were bent on overturning "all the social relations of life."¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, another paper, the Daily Star, contended September 11, 1852, that reporting the eccentric novelty of the women's conventions would turn the tide of public opinion against the participants in them and, therefore, check any "mischief" the feminists might otherwise do.¹⁰¹

Another train of anti-feminist thought included currents of that brand of rampant American nationalism known as nativism. One of the principal targets of this type of attack was Ernestine Rose, a Polish and Jewish immigrant, who became a central figure in the feminist movement. She was accused of taking advantage of American political freedom to further efforts to "obliterate from the world the religion of the Cross" and overthrow "social institutions which have existed...from the remotest time." Moreover, she had the audacity to petition "our legislators" (emphasis added) and enlist the help of "restless old maids and visionary wives who chanced to be unevenly tempered, as well as unevenly yoked," and "weak-minded restless men who think in their vanity that they have been marked out for great things, and failed to be appreciated by the world!"¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 853-854.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 608.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 853.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 608-609.

Such characterizations understandably upset the feminists.

Once again Stanton and her collaborators tried to set the record straight.

The actors in this new movement were not, as the London and New York journals said, 'sour old maids,' but happy wives and faithful mothers, who, in a higher development, demanded the knowledge of parliamentary tactics they manifested in their conventions, the world must accord them rare common-sense, good judgement, great dignity of character,¹⁰³ and a clear comprehension of the principles of government.

Not all the anti-feminist literature was confined to editorial rhetoric, however, some very articulate thoughts on the subject can be found, many of them drawing upon the social myths of womanhood and women's place discussed in Chapter II. One of these critics was Louisa McCord, who expressed a strong sense of the proper roles of the sexes when she wrote:

Each [sex] is inferior, when attempting to fulfill a part destined to the other. A horse or an ass is certainly not the superior of man; and yet man, or woman either, attempt to fulfill the duties of the poor brute, and how immeasurably inferior is he to the quadruped he rivals. We assume our feminist sisters, that they are ill qualified to perform the part of man as the ass, and would advise them to attempt neither.¹⁰⁴

Thus, she interpreted the feminist drive as a drive for "notoriety" rather than "elevation." Her apparent dislike of the strife of political life lead her to ask: "Can civilized, Christianized women covet such a right?" [to vote]¹⁰⁵ She made her point more clearly when she penned:

Woman's mind is made for improvement, and her duty would lead her to seek that improvement, according to the inclination and capacities of her intellect. But that improvement must be gained and used, in a manner consistent and in harmony

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 102.

¹⁰⁴ McCord, Review of Woman and Her Needs, p. 289.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 273.

with her nature. Her art and science are not for the public schools. Her theology is not for the pulpit; nor are her politics for those arenas of strife where the rougher man is soiled by the polluting struggle, and shrinks often in disgust from the stifling contamination. She may counsel, she may teach, she may unhold the weary arm of manhood--of the husband, the brother, or the son--and rouse him to the struggle for which nature never designed her; but she may not (without foregoing her nature) rush into the combat of blood, shouting man's war-cry and the victim's death...Woman, we believe is designed by nature to be the conservative power of the world.¹⁰⁶

She, too, held onto the belief that feminists were a threat to family in that they were against children and assuming marital responsibility.¹⁰⁷ The plausibility of such an interpretation of feminism need not strike us as strange, however, if we momentarily consider the prevalence of that some misconception of feminism in the United States in 1974.

McCord did not, however, let men get totally "off the hook," by allowing them to appear guiltless. In her own way, she put forth something of a challenge to him, even though she also fully expected him to stay within his sphere.

If we have pointed out her [woman's] aberrations from duty and blamed or ridiculed her short-comings, it is not that we would make her the butt of man's ridicule, who has sinned both with her and against her, but because we consider her as more than him disinterested, more than him swayable by purer instincts, and more than him excelled above the passions of our common nature...Man the oppressor, man the tempter, will he dare to strike? or rather, checked by the holy word of reproof spoken to the repentant Magdalen, will he not take to his bosom the lesson intended for her? Happy would it indeed be for both could each in the holy fulfillment of their differing sphere, 'go and sin no more,'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 289.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 277-278.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 290-291.

Perhaps the best-known representative of anti-feminist sentiment was Catherine Beecher, a well-educated woman with a conservative approach to social questions in general. She saw the increasing wealth in America society as a source of hardship for women--because of the growing shortage of domestic help.¹⁰⁹ Beecher was inclined to believe that a woman's problems stemmed from inadequate training of girls to assume the roles of wife and mother which they would naturally assume. Thus, she was active in establishing girls' schools for that very purpose. She did not view women as being in a state of degraded subordination, citing the customs of courtesy which prevail toward woman; "through every class of society, precedence is given to woman in all the comforts, conveniences, and courtesies of life."¹¹⁰ The feminists she accused of inventing "fancied wrongs and injuries"¹¹¹ and failing to see American society as it really is. She cited Alexis de Tocqueville's observations from Democracy in America to back her claim of the basic contentment of American women.

I have never observed, that the women of America considered conjugal authority as a fortunate usurpation of their rights, nor that they thought themselves degraded by submitting to it. It appears to me, on the contrary, that they attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will, and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke, not to shake it off. Such, at least, is the feeling expressed by the most virtuous of the sex; the others are silent; and in the United States, it is not the practice for a guilty wife to clamor for the rights of woman, while she is trampling on her holiest duties.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Catherine E. Beecher, A Treatise on Domestic Economy (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841), pp. 18-20.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 6-7.

Ironically, de Tocqueville's argument could just have easily been cited by feminists as evidence for the oppression of women, if indeed women were as "happy" to submit to their husbands as de Tocqueville claims they were. As mentioned earlier, the surface tranquility of a given situation can just as easily be evidence for total oppression as it can be for total contentment.

Beecher believed wholeheartedly that women occupied a situation different from, but equal to that of men and that the superior-subordinate aspect of the husband-wife relationship was merely an extension of a need for order in social life.

The tendencies of democratic institutions, in reference to the rights and interests of the female sex, have been fully developed in the United States...In this Country, it is established, both by opinion and by practice, that women have an equal interest in all social and civil concerns; and that no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, that sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex. But in order to secure her the more firmly in all these privileges (emphasis added), it is decided, that, in domestic relation, she take a subordinate station, and that, in civil and political concerns, her interests be intrusted to the other sex, without her taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws.

...it is in America, alone, that women are raised to an equality with the other sex...They are made subordinate in station, only, where a regard to their best interests demands it, while, as if in compensation for this, by custom and courtesy, they are always treated as superiors.

...there is nothing reasonable which American women would unite in asking, that would not be readily bestowed.¹¹³

Perhaps it is not entirely accurate to categorize Beecher as an anti-feminist in that she firmly believed in the essential equality of the sexes. She reacted against the feminists because she believed women already enjoyed equality with men, thanks to the democratic nature of American society as she appraised it. Indeed, it would be

¹¹³ Beecher, Domestic Economy, pp. 4,9,10.

fascinating to probe this woman's thoughts further because her ideas would undoubtedly strike any modern feminist as naive--just as they probably struck her feminists contemporaries. Beecher is probably unique in being what we might call an egalitarian anti-feminist.

In effect, however, what Beecher and other anti-feminists did was to set up a belief system consistent with the American value system with regard to women. They laid out plans for a life style essentially separate and unequal between males and females by dividing sex roles into arbitrary categories. Then, too, the anti-feminists reaffirmed broader cultural ideals concerning women, i.e., what their attributes are, and how they compare to those of men. In short, the anti-feminist thought perpetuated the traditional nineteenth century concepts of women (discussed earlier), and at the same time, contributed to the solidarity within, and growth, of feminism simply because of the ever-present threat it presented to block feminist goals.

CHAPTER VI

FEMINISM IN THE SOUTH

That "feminist" thought should emerge in the South is perhaps a startling discovery. Indeed, the discontent of southern women did not reach the overt scale which it did in the North, and southern feminism nowhere assumes the political implications that were implicit in the actions and thought of Northern feminists. Perhaps to call this southern discontent "feminism" is a misnomer, but the important point here is the fact that there was discontent among women in the South--and not overtly among men--that was related to the roles of women within southern society. It was a personal kind of feminism, rather than a social one. Feminism in the South cannot be accurately referred to as an organized movement for social change; it was, instead, an awakening among a few fairly well-to-do women about the problems inherent in the woman's role as defined by Southern society.

The slave economy of the South perpetuated a patriarchal and aristocratic family organization,¹¹⁴ a system which defined the status of a woman in terms of her husband and/or father.¹¹⁵ The Southern ideal of womanhood was, therefore, an ideal of submissiveness, which was essential to the maintenance of the Southern aristocracy.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Scott, The Southern Lady, p. 16.

¹¹⁵ Groves, The American Woman, p. 40.

¹¹⁶ Scott, The Southern Lady, p. 21.

This marvelous creation was described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, and obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. (emphasis added) Physically weak... she depended upon male protection.

Part of her charm lay in her innocence... Her mind was not logical, but in the absence of reasoning capacity, her sensibility and intuition were highly developed... It was her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men. Less endearing, perhaps, but no less natural, was her piety, and her tendency to restrain man's natural vice and immorality.¹¹⁷

A well-to-do Southern woman was by no means idle. Married women were expected to be skilled in spinning, weaving, sewing, gardening, poultry raising, nursing, food preparation, and supervising others, particularly slaves. Her average day began at five or six o'clock in the morning,¹¹⁸ and she was confined to the home most of the time. Time out for correspondance, visiting, or religious activities was a welcome relief to the routine busy-ness of everyday life. It should not be surprising that making the adjustment from the romantic longing of marriage to the realities of marital responsibility was difficult for Southern girls.¹¹⁹

In addition to these chores was the job of supervising the house slaves, and that job entailed being able to ration the slaves' clothing, act as chief medical officer to them, record all births to all slave women, and settling slave disputes.¹²⁰ Thus, despite the fact that there may have been genuine affection between the mistress of the house and her slaves, she, as supervisor, was under a constant psychological strain; privacy was a rare commodity.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 36-37.

¹²¹ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

This discontent, along with the jealousy aroused by a husband's infidelity with his female slaves, was the basis of the southern version of abolitionism: the emancipation of slaves was a source of relief to a southern woman who was faced with the burden of supervising them each day in addition to completing her other duties.¹²²

Still another major concern of these women was motherhood. Glorified in myth and dreaded in reality, the existence of a large family was still another emotional burden for the wife to bear. Isolated in a rural society with little other contact and bound by social and religious customs to accept children as the will of God, these women were too often party to a marriage which was, at best,¹²³ strained. Divorce was not an acceptable practice, although some wives were sometimes sent abroad on permanent vacations by their husbands.¹²⁴

It would seem that such wide discrepancies in Southern lifestyles would undermine the stability of the aristocracy, but ~~this~~, in fact, did not happen.

The continuous and intimate contact of leaders of thought and fashion with the Negroes, especially the field workers who made up the baseline from which gradations of poverty and wealth were measured, unconsciously and irresistibly, led to a realistic, even fatalistic, acceptance of differences in standards of living. This prevailing social philosophy discouraged ambition even among whites born into poverty or low middle-class standards, and all but paralyzed the hopes of Negroes. Perhaps what was more important, it nourished in the well-to-do the disposition of non-interference. The aristocracy did not fail in practical benevolence, but its good will was chiefly expressed in personal relationships. The philosophy of life did not stimulate organizations designed for the self-improvement of the poor and underprivileged.¹²⁵

¹²² Ibid., p. 48.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 37-39.

¹²⁴ Calhoun, The American Family, p. 330.

¹²⁵ Groves, The American Woman, p. 147.

In a closed functional system such as this, militant protest could hardly be expected to develop on a scale comparable to that of the North where the social system was more open and in a current state of flux, given the rise of urbanization and industrialization which brought latent problems to the surface. The Northern aristocracy was submerged by rapid social change, in the West there was no comparable aristocracy in the first place, and Southern life, even with the large portion of people not directly involved in the plantation, was bound to aristocratic codes.¹²⁶

Life undoubtedly took on the appearance of frustration for the aristocratic female who found herself in a position which could not possibly live up to the ideals it demanded. An anonymous writer wrote the following in 1849 in the Southern Ladies Companion:

Much is always expected of her, in all spheres of life where she is found. And particularly as a matron, where the functions of wife, mother, and mistress are all blended, she is expected to perform duties so complicated and important in character, and so far-reaching in their ultimate consequences, as would require all the tact of the diplomatist, the wisdom of the sage, and the graces of the perfect Christian. In a word, she is expected to be a living encyclopedia of human endowments and perfections...

And yet these very sticklers for perfection...on woman's part, are not infrequently found to hold surprising opinions as to her natural inferiority to the other sex...A singular phenomenon this, for which¹²⁷ a satisfactory explanation would be thankfully received.

Caroline Gilman, a novelist, wrote her Recollections of a Southern Matron:

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

¹²⁷ Scott, The Southern Lady, pp. 60-61.

To repress a harsh answer, to confess a fault, and to stop (right or wrong) in the midst of self-defense, in gentle submission, sometimes requires a struggle like life and death; but these three efforts are the golden threads with which domestic happiness is woven...

Men are not often unreasonable; their difficulties lie in not understanding the moral and physical structure of our sex... How clear it is then that woman loses by petulance and recrimination! Her first study must be self-control, almost hypocrisy. A good wife must smile amid a thousand perplexities, and clear her voice to tones of cheerfulness when her frame is drooping with disease or else languish alone.¹²⁸

The Southern cult of romanticism was thus a source of frustration for some women. Women were not to leave the domain of the home and were, at the same time, to be happy within its confines. The grievances of women remained personal matters, often recorded in diaries, as was the following entry by Mary Boykin Chestnut:

It is an odd thing. In all my life how many persons have I seen in love? Not a half-dozen, and yet I am a tolerably close observer, a faithful watcher of men and manners. Society has been for me only an enlarged field for character study. Flirtation is the business of society. That is play at love-making: it begins in vanity, it ends in vanity. It is spurred on by idleness and a want of other excitement... it is a pleasant but very foolish game.¹²⁹

The overall impression of Southern feminism is necessarily vague. Little is known of how the non-elite reacted to their society and if the women felt any particular common reactions as women to that society. Slave women were undoubtedly more concerned with their situation as slaves than as women; they obviously did not have access to the feminine experiences of the larger society since their whole existence was bound up with slavery. Among those women who did develop what we might loosely call a feminist conscience, however, we can see the frustrations created by a social system whose ideals

¹²⁸Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹²⁹Ibid., pp. 24-25.

were humanly impossible to realize. Southern feminists did not appeal to democratic principles in what they had to say, nor did they challenge the hotbeds of sexism in Southern society. These women, insofar as this research has gone, proposed no remedies to their problems and perhaps never voiced their grievances publicly, perhaps fearing to be taken off the pedestal of ideal woman to be associated in any way with the "unsexed" females of the North. These women were part of an aristocratic society and undoubtedly accepted at least a substantial portion of the prevailing value system. In addition, as the Civil War drew nearer, there was little chance that a movement with such a weak base of support could suddenly arise and thrive in competition with an issue much more dear to Southern lifestyles: slavery. Thus, on the whole, Southern feminism is a synonym for a vague discontent of an aristocratic women's lot--a beginning of feminine awareness, to be sure--but hardly a driving force in Southern society.

CONCLUSION

Ante-bellum feminism was a complex phenomenon. It manifested itself in both rhetorical speech and sentimental novels. It was advocated as well as opposed by both men and women. Femininists were excluded from and associated with other reform movements. The movement was born in the urbanizing and industrializing North, and faint rumblings of it appeared in the South. It succeeded and failed, united and split. It was praised and condemned, welcomed and feared. It could be both open-minded and narrowly fanatical.

Primary among the actors in the feminist movement were middle and upper class women who reacted, according to Gerda Lerner, to "actual and fantasied status deprivation."¹³⁰ These women felt the brunt of being excluded from the expanded franchise, an expansion which had been based on a gradual elimination of property restrictions.¹³¹ Lower class women were not in mind when the Seneca Falls declaration was adopted, for while the feminists were busy pressing for legal and property rights, the lower class women were adapting to the rigors of industrial life and becoming more alert to what the labor movement could offer.¹³² Professionalization of fields such as law and medicine systematically excluded women who had once been active in them, with the notable exception of teaching for which there was a

¹³⁰ Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," The Bobbs-Merrill Reprint Series in American History (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 13.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹³² Ibid., p. 13.

strong demand for an economic (i.e., cheap) means of staffing the public schools to which the nation had committed itself, and women were the cheapest labor source to be found.¹³³ Women who aspired to higher education in the restricted for-men-only professions were among the most vocal of the feminists, while lower class women remained industrial workers and a sizeable number of middle and upper class women became ladies of leisure.¹³⁴ Indeed, work by women outside the home, which had been so essential to the survival of frontier colonial America, was scorned, and idleness, once the epitome of disgrace in Puritan society, became a symbol of high status and respectability.¹³⁵ That same ideal of leisure and genteel womanhood, although springing from different historical roots, was also the foundation of Southern womanhood. Feminism, then, in terms of the activism associated with it, was clearly a minority movement. But that small group of feminists was an intelligent and articulate one. As we have seen in examining some of the representative samples of feminist thought (presented in Chapter III), the feminists were aware of their inferior political, social, and economic status as women in American society, and they lashed out against both the ideas and the laws that were largely responsible for that inferiority.

In evaluating what feminism as a movement accomplished, it is easy to write it off as a failure in that it failed to win suffrage and failed to move to a grass roots level. But for every failure

¹³³ Ibid., pp. 8-10.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 11

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 5-6, 11-12.

in the public arena, feminism provided a means for some people to see their personal realities in a social context, an understanding of oneself and one's society. In this sense, feminism did not fail. It met needs of the persons involved, and its current resurgence is indicative of more than just a fad. Feminism, like most other controversial social movements, is difficult--perhaps impossible--to evaluate objectively, but in attempting to present a substantial portion of feminist thinking in a sociocultural context, I hope that the material has not been lost in a sea of subjective bias. It is too important a topic for that.

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