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### A Courage Untempered by Prudence : The Writings, Reforms, and Lectures of Frances Wright

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## A Courage Untempered by Prudence : The Writings, Reforms, and Lectures of Frances Wright

### Abstract

Wright was careful in her approach to slavery, saying it “is not for a young and inexperienced foreigner to suggest remedies for an evil which has engaged the attention of native philanthropists and statesmen and hitherto baffled their efforts.” This changed and eventually she would have no problem asserting her views as well as the accompanying remedies, as is evidenced in *Nashoba*. She spoke briefly on emancipation and colonization, but only to say that unless they became programs of national concern, they would never be implemented successfully. She also, while still disapproving of slavery, credited slave owners for stoically bearing the burden set upon them by British slave-holders in colonial America. She called slave-owners “unfortunate masters of unfortunate slaves” who shouldered the jabs from the Northern states. Morris speculates that some of her sympathy for Southern slave-holders, which was always part of her nature, came from extended conversation with Thomas Jefferson, a proponent of education for freed-slaves, if only in the indefinite future.

**A Courage Untempered by Prudence:  
The Writings, Reforms, and Lectures of Frances Wright**

ERIN CRAWLEY

Most people are familiar with the image of a man such as the foreboding Charles Grandison Finney preaching from the pulpit about the second coming of Christ, the days of repentance, and the fires of Hell. The congregation before a man like Finney ceases to be a group of Sunday church goers, and becomes instead a rapturous, terrified audience of quaking sinners who came from miles around to hear a life-changing sermon and did not leave disappointed. Robert H. Abzug has taken Max Weber's term, "religious virtuoso," and shaped it into a term that fits men like Finney – men who looked to Heaven for the purpose of bringing it down to earth, connecting a cosmic plan to every-day matters through religion.

There were radicals, however, who did not fit this religious virtuoso image, and as such are less familiar figures. Francis Wright fits this deviation from the definition. The marked evolution in her thought leads her from an idealistic biographer of America, to a failed utopian reformer, to a vociferous advocate for the changes she saw necessary in American society. Her lectures were well attended, but occasionally, and admittedly, by angry, curious, or simply bored people who were looking for a show and spectacle. A woman preaching from a stage before a mixed audience was certainly bound to provide them that.<sup>1</sup> Instead of shouting at audiences, they sometimes shouted at her, heckling her until police were required to separate the stage from the mob. She even had to be rushed

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<sup>1</sup> Celia Morris, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 179.

to a waiting carriage, in a few instances, and was still trailed by men calling out derogatory sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

Why this need for police escorts? What could she have possibly spoken about that riled people to this extent? The matters Wright spoke on were less than conventional, even for a reformer, covering the gamut from enlightened knowledge in place of stifling religion, emancipation and education of slaves, women's rights, and the evils of unequal educational opportunities as a reflection of class. But it was the manner in which she spoke about such things that riled the American public. I argue that Francis Wright was never a religious virtuoso, mainly because she embraced secular morality over religious doctrine. Additionally, she was insensitive to the emotional attachment American people had to the systems of religion she spoke so logically against. It was this same insensitivity, combined with an uncompromising self-assurance on her radical ideas involving recognition of the American potential for equality among women, slaves, and educational systems, which kept her from being a virtuoso and left her as only notorious.

Francis Wright, for as well as she knew America, was not a citizen by birth. She was born in Scotland, orphaned at the age of two and a half, and sent to live with relatives. She formed little attachment to the family she had left, raising herself, forming opinions without the explicit instruction of parental care, and garnering eccentricities from an early age.<sup>3</sup> For example, she was highly susceptible to the liberal-minded thinking in Scotland and was particularly influenced by her observations of Robert Owen's mill town that proved success in industrialization did not necessarily have to be a

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 4-5.

detriment to the workers.<sup>4</sup> Leaving her large inheritance mainly untouched, Fanny vowed not to fall into the pomposity of the class she belonged to and instead cast her eyes upon Carlo Bocca's *Storia della Guerra dell' Indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America*. She was thrilled by the idea of a republic of hard-working, ethical people who never fell prone to idleness.<sup>5</sup> In 1818, she and her sister Camille Wright, who rarely left her side, traveled to America in order to see what she had idealized from the age of seventeen. The letters she wrote during this journey, she later collected into a volume entitled *Views of Society and Manners in America* and published the collection with the epitaph, "By an Englishwoman," emblazoned on the title page.<sup>6</sup>

In an introduction to *Views of Society and Manners in America*, Paul Baker asserts that these collected letters were penned far before her mind was set on social reform as her certain path through life; therefore, her "later concerns and her more mature social thoughts" were not quite solidified.<sup>7</sup> For example, throughout her flowery prose, she praised America for its ability to change, to reason, and to grow—all abilities she would later reprimand Americans for lacking—while at the same time she tempestuously wrote about anti-slavery, the unjust treatment of women, and the necessity of better educational systems. In either case, it is pertinent to explain her initial view of America in light of the future reforms she would make, as well as to draw points of comparison against her later lectures where her writing has a completely different voice.

As Baker said, there are many spots in Wright's book where her idealistic views clouded a true assessment of American society and these are the areas where she later

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 21. Mention of the book title, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Frances Wright, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, ed. Paul R. Baker (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), xxii.

contradicted herself in her lectures. To illustrate this point, in her lectures she stressed the disparities of wealth and poverty brought on by unequal educational opportunities. In her *Views on Society*, she stated that there seemed to be no poor, uneducated classes.<sup>8</sup> She praised Americans for their powerful command of facts and well-reasoned opinions, while she later disputed this very observation due to America's increasing reliance upon religious dictates over empiricism.<sup>9</sup> Taking a rather indifferent view towards religion in her initial journey through the country, which she would later furiously recant, she stated "American religion, of whatever sect...is of a quiet and unassuming character" and that it "really does seem possible for fanaticism, or something very like it, and liberality to go together."<sup>10</sup> She also had a certain level of patience with American society. Initially, she defended America's slow work in the building of a democracy and acquisition of knowledge because the fledgling country still held remembered their fight for independence.<sup>11</sup> In the future, she lamented America's progress in the way of a "social economy" exclaiming that the whole "part and parcel of that absurd, cruel, ignorant, inconsistent, incomprehensible jumble, styled the common law of England" still held America captive.<sup>12</sup> In a number of areas, however, her views were a direct precursor to the radical direction her ideals would move, most evidently in her opinions on the place of women in America and on slavery.

Her first mention of the subordinate role of women was made after observing the rights they lost upon marriage. Due to the young ages of women upon marriage, they did

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Views*, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Wright, *Life, Letters and Lectures*, American Women: Images and Realities, eds. Annette K. Baxter and Leon Stein, (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 105.

not have enough time to cement a substantial and useful education. Men, to the contrary, carried their educational pursuits past marriage. The husband's "stock of useful knowledge" was consistently added to, increasing his ability to formulate opinions and strengthen his independence—a quality which Wright exalted in her lecture series. Already, she saw a deficiency among women in acquiring the same sort of knowledge and independence to which men were privy. Were these same educational opportunities open to women, and the deficiencies corrected, the country would improve in all aspects nearly twice what it had since the Revolution.<sup>13</sup> She suggested that women enter into society much later than was then customary to allow for further schooling and accomplishments. She lauded women who already followed this course of action.<sup>14</sup> She also demanded a degree of liberty for women so that they controlled their own strengths and morals rather than depending on the approval and opinions of doting or dictating men.<sup>15</sup>

Wright was careful in her approach to slavery, saying it "is not for a young and inexperienced foreigner to suggest remedies for an evil which has engaged the attention of native philanthropists and statesmen and hitherto baffled their efforts."<sup>16</sup> This changed and eventually she would have no problem asserting her views as well as the accompanying remedies, as is evidenced in *Nashoba*. She spoke briefly on emancipation and colonization, but only to say that unless they became programs of national concern, they would never be implemented successfully.<sup>17</sup> She also, while still disapproving of slavery, credited slave owners for stoically bearing the burden set upon them by British

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<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Views*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

slave-holders in colonial America. She called slave-owners “unfortunate masters of unfortunate slaves” who shouldered the jabs from the Northern states.<sup>18</sup> Morris speculates that some of her sympathy for Southern slave-holders, which was always part of her nature, came from extended conversation with Thomas Jefferson, a proponent of education for freed-slaves, if only in the indefinite future.<sup>19</sup>

Even if slave owners were to free their slaves, she felt the misery of the blacks would not be immediately ameliorated, even though she wanted the barrier between blacks and whites removed in the future.<sup>20</sup> She did not think it would be prudent or beneficial to grant every liberty at once, affirming her position by saying to “their untutored minds, the gift of freedom is only a release from labour,” and to “give liberty to a slave before he understands its value is, perhaps, rather to impose a penalty than to bestow a blessing.”<sup>21</sup> Despite her misgivings on the ability of slaves to instantaneously adapt to a free life, she held from the first that slavery was so horrible that “to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that the imagination can conceive.”<sup>22</sup>

These first writings were her initial attempts at recognizing, absorbing, and analyzing the state of American thought in regards to equality. Her effusive praise did not yet address large scale reforms, systems which needed change, or how to change them, or inconsistencies within society. The idealized image of America that she took on her travels kept her from making sound judgments on the problems which existed. This image also gained her a popular reputation among the American people which would

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Views*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., quotations from pp. 269 and 268 respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 267.



help her in later endeavors. Overall, the book functioned as her first extended statement of opinion.

Upon her return to England and the consequent publication of her book, she was subjected to both an onslaught of anger from conservative Tories and praise from liberal Whigs. For example, the Tory Quarterly Review felt that an “Englishwoman with the proper spirit and feeling attached to that proud title would blush to be thought the author of such a work”—a work which commended America for its break with the mother country.<sup>23</sup> However, Whig reviews, such as the one from Charles Maclaran in the *Scotsman*, proclaimed how the interesting and eloquent writing provoked curiosity about America.<sup>24</sup> More important than the reviews in journals and newspapers, was her reception by Jeremy Bentham, a well-known liberal thinker. Bentham would come to have a lasting effect on her religious views, or, more equitably, on her distrust of religion in general.<sup>25</sup> Bentham’s rational, empirical ideals helped lead Wright to become what Lori D. Ginzberg refers to as “essentially [the] last gasp of the American Enlightenment.”<sup>26</sup> And more influential still was a relationship she would have with the American revolutionary hero, and kindred spirit, Marie Joseph Marquis de Lafayette.

Her relationship with Lafayette has garnered much debate over the course of history and it elicited many rumors in her day. Current historical scholarship, such as Gail Bederman’s article for *American Literary History*, proposes that their relationship

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<sup>23</sup> A. J. G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1939; reprint, Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, Inc., 1972), 56 (page citations are to the reprint edition). Although this source is cited as a published study of Frances Wright, I found it to be more useful for the inclusion of primary sources such as newspaper articles, letters, and log entries.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 51.

<sup>26</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, “‘The Hearts of Your Readers will Shudder’: Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought,” *American Quarterly* 46.2 (June 1994): 207.

was based around the fact that Wright enjoyed acting as his assistant and grew used to the power his name invoked. Because of this direct connection to his affairs, she later tried to lobby powerful men for support with her Nashoba project without truly understanding “how differently men responded when she attempted to achieve her own political aims.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, most of her contemporaries assumed that because of the intimacy of their correspondence they must have been torrid lovers. Although her letters show a remarkably emotional side to her personality that her highly sculpted writings had not revealed, she insisted that her intimacy with Lafayette was based entirely on her desire for a father figure in her life and an intellectual, emotional companion.<sup>28</sup> Demonstrating this desire is a letter she wrote to him explaining that she felt her mental capabilities were just as strong as any man’s. In it she writes “my beloved friend, the mind has no sex but what habit and education give it, and I, who was thrown in infancy upon the world like a wreck upon the waters, have learned as well to struggle with the elements as any child of Adam’s.”<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the status of her relationship with him, it was decided against the better judgment of his jealous family that she and her sister Camille should follow in his wake to America in 1824.<sup>30</sup> It was during this second trip that her life changed drastically, new relationships formed, and her sensibilities as a reform-minded woman rose to the surface.

It soon became evident to her that America had changed in her absence in the past few years. First, she was horrified to see that women’s scope of possibilities had closed even further with the introduction of a “cult of true womanhood.” She fell victim to this

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<sup>27</sup> Gail Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia, and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826,” *American Literary History* 17.3 (2005): 446-449. Quotation from p. 449.

<sup>28</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 74-75.

<sup>29</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 74. Frances Wright to Lafayette, February 9, 1827.

<sup>30</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 76-78.

narrowed view and found herself breaking away from her place in Lafayette's shadow as a revolt against the increasingly subservient place women had come to occupy. She also found that the rumors that had encircled their relationship in France reached across the ocean and she grew tired of dispelling invectives against her character. Furthermore, watching the way Lafayette was treated in the manner of nobility sickened her in light of her ideas of simplicity in daily life and equality in actions.<sup>31</sup>

Her feelings on equality were even more prominent in her growing disgust for the treatment of slaves. In an act of great independence, she planned a tour of the south apart from Lafayette to observe the evils for what they were in the hopes of publishing an article about the conditions. Before she left Washington for her journey, however, she happened across Robert Owen, a man who had fascinated her earlier in her life, and now captured her attention by his purchase of Harmonie, a small town in Indiana. Begun as an experiment in reform by George Rapp – a man concerned with Christian labor and celibacy – Owen planned to use the site for his new “moral world.”<sup>32</sup> She was invited to visit the premises, and after a long journey she arrived at what she saw as a sheer “economic miracle.” Fully aware of the fact that Rapp's town had prospered due to the labors of poor, uneducated German peasants, she was astounded that it had flourished as it did.<sup>33</sup> She began to wonder if the same sort of experiment could be applied to slaves; she began to speculate that she could institute her own large-scale reform to further disseminate her beliefs.

The next stop in her tour was in Illinois at Albion, a compound begun by George Flower who became another extremely influential figure in her life. In him, she found a

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<sup>31</sup> Morris, Fanny, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 93.

truly sympathetic man committed to the same causes which excited her. He had settled in southern Illinois as a result of his battles to keep it a free state and he tirelessly defended the rights of freed slaves and the morals of white men and women who supported the anti-slavery cause. Keeping in mind Flowers' stories of violence against blacks, Owen's pursuit of a moral community, and her preexisting views on slavery, she entered the Deep South and discovered that she had not at all underestimated its injustice. Nonetheless maintaining her basic sympathy for the southern planters, she started to formulate a plan that could feasibly end slavery without destroying the economy of the South.<sup>34</sup>

Although it pained her to do so, she decided to stay in America while Lafayette returned to France. In George Flowers, she had found an intellectual replacement for the General. Soon, Flowers joined her in New York to start their plans for a community devoted to the education and freeing of slaves, aiding their matriculation into society.<sup>35</sup> Their plans grew from a number of influences and sources. They took some of their ideas from the industrious Harmonists and from the Enlightenment ideals they had encountered in their tireless pursuits of reason. They also borrowed Owens' creation of a school for children where they could meld instruction and beneficial manual labor. From the "adult Sunday schools" of the industrialized British, they derived an evening meeting schedule where the slaves of their community would be reminded daily of their pursuit of education and freedom. In an attempt to gain public support as well as public funding, they pointed out that one communitarian farm must lead to another; thus, profit stood to be made.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 106-107

After the plans had been laid, she and Flowers looked for a suitable spot for their colony and found one along a small river that fed into the Mississippi, about fifteen miles away from Memphis, Tennessee. Using her own private funds, she purchased 320 acres and set about procuring another 320 while she waited for yet another 600 to come onto the market. She renamed the area Nashoba, the Chickasaw word for Wolf. Flowers returned to Illinois to bring back his family as well as the initial provisions, farm tools, animals, and building supplies.<sup>37</sup> In short, they launched headlong into their utopian ideal, far beyond the point of turning back. This was possibly due to their belief in the right to create a society of their choosing within the liberties of America or perhaps resulted from their desire to improve upon the evils of society. In either case, it is evident that Nashoba was at once Wright's greatest experiment and unfortunately her greatest failure, leading to a piece of the notorious side to her reputation.

From the start, there were misgivings from outside observers, as well as many reasons for Wright herself to have her doubts as to the success of the established community. James Madison kindly pointed out that Wright's assumption that sufficient white labor was available to fill the gaps created by freeing slaves was not completely supported, but actually unrealistic. He also noted that since she was so abhorrent of religion and had chosen not to make it a part of Nashoba, she lacked any sort of substitute for the power of religious instruction. Her communitarian members were not educated enough to understand her approach to morality through reason.<sup>38</sup> He also suggested downsizing the amount of land she wanted to procure for farmland and houses. She took the suggestion seriously due to the poor quality of land, the difficulty of finding men who

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<sup>37</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 142. Frances Wright to Madame Charles de Lasteyrie, December 26, 1825.

<sup>38</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 111.

wished to build houses upon a swamp, and the illness which seemed to manifest itself routinely because of the climate.<sup>39</sup>

It was illness which led to George Flowers' slow approach to Nashoba and, once he arrived, he chose to settle a full fifteen miles outside of the actual community, most likely on the behalf of his wife and young children. Flowers eventually left the experiment permanently and returned to Illinois, a devastating blow to the management of Nashoba.<sup>40</sup> It was not long after his departure that the experiment floundered due to the lack of practical management, proper funding, and support of a "philanthropic emancipation" scheme.<sup>41</sup> Not ready to admit defeat, Wright placed the compound in the hands of trustees, but she had extreme difficulties in presenting the community in a way that would cement membership or encourage recruits. For example, Frances Trollope, one of Wright's last attempted recruits in early 1828, commented that "no schools had been established" within the community despite the presence of two professors and a small collection of books. The plantation was "without beverage of any kind except rain water" and most of the food was inedible. Most horrifying to her, Trollope was forced to share Wright's bedroom and found that it "had no ceiling, and the floor consisted of planks laid loosely upon piles."<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, outside opinions of the community were not flattering. Lafayette, in a letter to Camille Wright, wrote that he was "overcome by a weight of anguish and terror" at the thought of them "on a plantation freshly cleared, which everyone knows is unhealthy." Even more telling, he wrote that it was "an inexpressible torment to me not

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<sup>39</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 143. Wright to Madame Charles de Lasteyrie, December 26, 1825.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>41</sup> Bederman, "Revisiting," 450.

<sup>42</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 189. All quotations from the writings of Frances Trollope.

to see a conclusion to your philanthropic adventure.” He had ceased to see it as a legitimate experiment and more as a death trap that was deprived of clean living, fresh water, and medicine.<sup>43</sup> Robert Dale Owen would write in his memoirs that when he visited in Nashoba, he found the land “second-rate only” with “[three] or four squared log houses and a few small cabins for the slaves the only buildings.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1827, she was also disappointed by the floundering of New Harmony which had run itself close to ruin in the absence of Owen. It had begun with a larger resource base, as well as better returns from its agriculture and manufacturing, than Nashoba. Wright suddenly realized that it would probably take at least two years before her own agricultural pursuits would yield product and another three before she would profit from the yield.<sup>45</sup> Firmly discouraged, she fell victim to an intense fever and returned to France to recover in the company of Owen. Against the telling example of New Harmony, she left her meek sister and the volatile James Richardson in charge of Nashoba.<sup>46</sup> This would prove one of the worst mistakes she ever made.

In a series of devastating publications in *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Richardson outlined his libertine activities in Wright’s absence. His log stated that slaves were prone to laziness and as such he had begun to treat them according to the old slave system they had left. For instance, he tied and beat two women “in the presence of Camille and all the slaves.”<sup>47</sup> He cited a circumstance where a slave “expressed a complaint” that a man had “come to her bedroom uninvited, and endeavoring without her

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<sup>43</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 157-158. All quotations in a letter from Lafayette to Camille Wright, 1827.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. From Owen’s memoirs.

<sup>45</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 116-119.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 167. From James Richardsons’ account, May 24, 1827. This entry remained unpublished, see Morris, *Fanny*, 144.

consent, to take liberties to her person.” Although he listed Camille as disciplining the man, she also denied the woman a lock for her door since it was inconsistent with the communitarian belief that “the proper basis of the sexual intercourse to be the unconstrained and unrestrained choice of both parties.”<sup>48</sup> He also haphazardly endorsed miscegenation by broadcasting the fact that “Mam’selle Josephine and he began to live together” and reiterated the community stance on “color and on the sexual relation.”<sup>49</sup> Wright attempted to quell some of the rumors and outrage surrounding these publications, but not before they had left a lasting taint upon her community and upon her own reputation. In 1828 when Richardson removed himself from the commune, he left behind his tarnishing legacy. Fanny Wright was now notorious for running “one great brothel, disgraceful to its institutors, and not reprehensible, as a public example...”<sup>50</sup>

In addition to this obvious reason for the failure of her community, Wright’s colony collapsed because she was unaware of the practicalities necessary in creating a large-scale reform community. Her experiment was really born of a desire to pinpoint what she saw as the issues in society and project her improvements in a tangible way. It is much easier to write on numerous issues than it is to correct them all within one fenced community i.e. she spread herself too thin. She had to turn once again to her forte, writing, this time lecturing on, as well as publishing, her work. Bederman also suggests that perhaps her failure at Nashoba left her embittered with the American populace in its lack of support; consequently, she saw them as “ignorant and prejudiced, hypocritical and

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<sup>48</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 167-168. All quotations from James Richardsons’ account, June 1, 1827.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 169. From James Richardsons’ account, June 17, 1827.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 171. From an article in *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, published anonymously by “MENTOR.”



self interested, or irritating religious fanatics.”<sup>51</sup> Even if she was not quite that resentful, she was ready to truly assert her opinions as necessary corrections to American society for the realization of equality. She was ready to “prepare the way for the new vision that America had been promised and deserved” and she would do so at all costs to her reputation.<sup>52</sup>

Early in 1828, Camille Wright and her husband, originally a New Harmony recruit, returned to Indiana, leaving Nashoba mainly abandoned. Wright remained behind for another six months, but she ceased accepting recruits for the community, stating sadly in one letter to a prospective member that “co-operation has well nigh killed us all....”<sup>53</sup> She was also enticed by the prospect of New Harmony, particularly by Owen’s insistence that the Thespian Society “might be made a most powerful engine to form the opinions and the taste of all the surrounding country.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, in an earlier visit to the community, she realized her prowess as a public educator within the school systems that William Maclure had instated in Owen’s absence. She started to think of herself more in terms of being a published author, scientific thinker, and lecturer than a utopian reformer.<sup>55</sup> Finally, she left Nashoba and upon her arrival in New Harmony became the joint editor of Robert Dale Owen’s *New Harmony Gazette*, a paper that they would eventually rename the *Free Enquirer*. It was also at New Harmony that she undertook the life of a public lecturer, constructing a series of seven educational speeches that composed what are arguably her most important writings. She had become

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<sup>51</sup> Bederman, “Revisiting,” 452.

<sup>52</sup> Robert J. Connors, “Frances Wright: First Female Civic Rhetor in America,” *College English* 62.1 (September 1999): 38.

<sup>53</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances*, 201. Frances Wright to Robert Jennings, February 24, 1828.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 206. Robert Dale Owen to Frances Wright, 1828.

<sup>55</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 129.

convinced that “the country desperately needed to hear what she had to say – and needed to hear her say it.”<sup>56</sup>

The preface to her lecture series, published eventually in 1834 in *Life, Letters, and Lectures*, but generally referred to as her *Course of Popular Lectures*, was extremely telling of her own realization that some judiciousness in thought had been lacking in her first travels through America and the resulting manuscript. In an attempt to explain herself, she stated that it “required a second visit, and more minute inspection, to enable [her] to see things under the sober light of truth, and to estimate both the excellences that are, and those that are yet wanting.”<sup>57</sup> For example, her views on slavery and the necessity of emancipation remained similar, but she now saw slavery as a single piece of a more pervasive set of evils – namely the lack of knowledge and the limited dissemination of fact – permeating American society.<sup>58</sup> She also identified what she saw as the two main errors in American thought and progress. The first was “the neglected state of the female mind, and the consequent dependence of the female condition.” The second error called out the “inaptness and corruption of the public press,” run by people with hidden agendas or lacking in courage enough to display their own thoughts on paper.<sup>59</sup>

Before she launched into her full discussion of necessary reforms, she first outlined knowledge and inquiry, facts and opinions. Attempting to become “the spokesperson – to both enemies and friends – of the possibilities of applying rational

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<sup>56</sup> Connors, “Civic Rhetor,” 39.

<sup>57</sup> Wright, *Life*, vi.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, *Life*, vi - vii.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, vii. Both quotations are from the same page.

standards to the problems of the age,”<sup>60</sup> she began with an Enlightenment based outline of the pursuit of knowledge, which stemmed from the basic human principle of improvement. Since man possessed the abilities to adapt and change as well as to observe and question, she believed knowledge was an empirical gathering of facts, not a careless conglomeration of beliefs forced upon a person from birth. Investigation and inquiry in a scientific manner became the most important means of acquiring knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Finally, she pointed out that “we can only *know* a thing by its immediate contact with our senses, so is *all knowledge compounded of the accurately observed, accumulated, and agreeing sensations of mankind.*”<sup>62</sup> Reformers, then, were the people who were willing to accept knowledge on the basis of fact, courageously formed their own opinions, and began correcting the errors of society. Reformers were neither “dependant on popular patronage” or “ambitious of popular admiration.”<sup>63</sup> They were the just educators who helped provide an atmosphere in which people were free to ask questions and make their own judgments.

It was in her very first lecture of the series, “On the Nature of Knowledge,” that she addressed women’s rights and roles in America. A huge proponent for women’s extended roles outside of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” she noted that numbers of women at her lectures had increased steadily, but that she was still uneasy with the common conception that they should not attend public lectures in the presence of men.<sup>64</sup> The ignorance of women was due to the fact they were denied education, as was evidenced by her small female constituency. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett interprets Wright’s

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<sup>60</sup> Ginzberg, “Infidelity,” 202.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *Life*, 6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 13. Italics from the original lecture series publications.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>64</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 171.

lecture at this point as saying women who were “deprived of education, [were] thereby deprived of the resources on which to base rational decisions,” leaving them completely “dependent on those who dispensed formulas of belief and actions,” namely husbands or clergymen.<sup>65</sup> In other words, men who allowed their wives, daughters, or sisters to wallow in dependence, or trapped them at home, committed treason against the human mind. Wright also hailed women as “by far the most important and influential” members of the human race and asserted that “improvement must advance but feebly” until this is realized by all.<sup>66</sup> She blamed this particular inadequacy upon religion, which kept women trapped in ignorance and degradation in order to thrive.<sup>67</sup> It was this particular “slander” against women’s role in religion that caused many women to shy away from attending the lectures for fear of being labeled as sinful, or even “fallen.”<sup>68</sup>

The corrupting influence of religion was in fact a central theme to nearly every lecture of the series, mainly because she felt the inquiring spirit she claimed was severely stunted by religion. Ginzberg even goes so far as to say Wright “symbolized the rationalist critique of clerical dominance.”<sup>69</sup> As she expounded the necessity of fact, knowledge, and reason, she came to see religion as counteracting the morals of a benevolent society. “Religion,” she said, “appertains not to the table of human knowledge,” and secondly it “give[s] rise to interminable disputes and all varieties of bad feeling.”<sup>70</sup> Even more ferociously, she asserted that followers of religion could never “have wasted their lives and their treasure in squabbles about hairdrawn distinctions in

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<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority – The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, and Margaret Fuller*, Scholarship in Women’s History: Rediscovered and New, ed. Gerda Lerner, (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1994), 39.

<sup>66</sup> Wright, *Life*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>68</sup> Ginzberg, “Infidelity,” 210.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>70</sup> Wright, *Life*, 152.

fantastic ideas and unimportant possibilities, had not the custom been originated of employing *teachers of opinion*, instead of *teachers of facts*.”<sup>71</sup>

Rhetorical fireworks aside, she did go about setting up an argument against religion in a logical manner – not that logic kept her safe from verbal attacks. Her assault centered on the clergy, a group of people whom she felt existed for the sole purpose of tricking people into lives dominated by doctrine. From the start, she admitted that she was well aware of the anger she would induce in her inflammatory lectures, but that her speeches were, nonetheless, entirely necessary. The only reprieve she granted the clergy was her concession that they had less maneuvering space to teach empiricism and reason than did editors of papers or school teachers. If the press chose to represent badly formed opinion, the fault was entirely with the editors, but the clergy had a very marked path they had to follow. She had some sympathy for the more enlightened ministers who had lost close-minded congregations when a sermon strayed from doctrine and towards enlightenment. Still, for the good of America and mankind, she railed against the clerical teachings that kept the human mind focused on heaven, on demons, and on dreams rather than on solid, grounded fact.<sup>72</sup> Again she warned her audience of blindly believing opinions and bade them find the reason “*why* you believe, understand *what* you believe and possess a reason for the faith that is in you.”<sup>73</sup> Believing what a pastor preached was simply not enough. Furthermore, science in its straightforward manner was vastly more applicable and understandable than the riddles coming from the pulpit.<sup>74</sup> Religion could

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<sup>71</sup> Wright, *Life*, 90.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 42-45.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 45. Italics from the original lecture series publications.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 47.

not be justified as knowledge and teaching the unknown constituted all that was miserable.<sup>75</sup>

It stands to reason that with Wright's views on the pursuit of knowledge, education would be one of her most visible aspects of reform. Fittingly, in her last lecture of the series, called "On Existing Evils and Their Remedies," she brought it to the foreground. Upon further inspection of American society, she became impatient with the progress the people were making—quite different from the sympathetic stance she took in her initial book—and she pointed out that one of America's most antiquated systems was education. With universities drawing funds from religious parties and charters and parish schools under the thumb of priests, America still linked itself too closely to England. Worse still, the children going to these schools were limited to those with affluent parents.<sup>76</sup> She called for a complete overhaul of the existing system, basing a new version on "*national education*" as well as a "*rational education*."<sup>77</sup>

However, before she delved into a detailed plan for national education, she revealed what she saw as a few educational constructs by which to live. Parents should let their children discover facts and sensations on their own without any sort of interference. Children provided with a set code of morals were only stifled in their discovery of science and virtue. Handing them facts took away their questioning nature. She also pleaded with parents to allow this process of discovery to belong to daughters as well as sons.<sup>78</sup> Her plans for a large reform in school systems sprang both from the fact that she

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<sup>75</sup> Wright, *Life*, 63-66.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 105-106.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

wished education to be open to all classes—thus discouraging disparities in wealth and poverty—and her steadfast opinion that ignorance was the greatest of all evils.<sup>79</sup>

What she proposed, then, was that legislatures divide the country into districts—not parishes—and allow all children the same chance at instruction, regardless of class or sect. The schools would then be split into age appropriate classrooms based on the population and demographics. She saw each institution as having the same facilities open to them, so no certain district had a better educational system than the next and all children had an equal chance to work with tools and books. Those who did not respond to this chance or entered with a predisposition towards laziness would be separated out until their habits were corrected.<sup>80</sup>

The role of the parent in this system was interesting for a number of reasons. First, she wished for instruction to begin at the age of two, whisking children away from their parents except in designated visiting hours. This way they could not “interfere with or interrupt the rules of the institution.”<sup>81</sup> This might not have seemed strange to her, due to her own childhood without a true parental figure. On the other hand, parents were directly involved with the upkeep of the schools. A tax per child was instated upon them and those who didn’t have the monetary funds were allowed to contribute manufactured goods, agricultural products, or the services of manual labor until their child reached an age when he or she could contribute equally with their parents. At that point, the manufacture or labor became the child’s responsibility, preparing them for a life as an adult in the industrial classes as well as increasing their physical health and activeness.

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<sup>79</sup> Wright, *Life*, 103.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 113-114.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 114.

She also called for a graduated property tax to ask more of the rich in support of the poor. In this way, she established a fund for orphans.<sup>82</sup>

Her final stipulations upon the national educational system included that the children make no distinction among themselves that showed inequality. They all ate in a common room, wore sensible and plain clothing, shared daily exercises and duties according to strength and ability, not rank, and studied, played, and pursued each other's happiness above everything else.<sup>83</sup> This last goal was stuck to her belief that people acting on another person's comfort will inevitably act on their own—a concept she calls “*moral truths*.”<sup>84</sup>

Her discussions of religion and education led to a reform she addressed in her lectures, and actually instituted later on: a Hall of Science dedicated to reason, empiricism, and, above all, inquiry. Her hope was that the rich and poor would come together in a sort of industriousness to help unify education across classes. The unification of citizens regardless of class would then help to do away with the distinctions of sectarian religion. Enlightenment ideals could lead away from metaphorical sermons and toward halls where men and women met to discuss truth and debate without violence.<sup>85</sup> This reform really became just another way for her to publicize her inflammatory lectures and the building provided a basement press for the dissemination of her joint newspaper with Owen.

It was on Sunday, April 26, 1829 that Wright proclaimed her Hall of Science open in New York. She had paid \$7000 to acquire Ebenezer Baptist Church and convert it,

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<sup>82</sup> Wright, *Life*, 115.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 49. Italics from the original lecture series publications.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 51-52.



ironically, into a pinnacle of empiricism. It quickly became a convening place for liberals, and in keeping with this theme, Wright relocated the Free Enquirer to the basement of the building. For ten cents, New Yorkers could come and hear her Sunday lectures, and it was from this building she gave her Address to Young Mechanics on June 13, 1830.<sup>86</sup> She praised the working, industrious classes for their unity among a scattered society, as well as for investing their time in the “great natural interests of man” leading them to think prudently about “wholesome reforms and general union.”<sup>87</sup> She also asked that her audience consider the policies of government and the study thereof, as well as the art of public speaking, as benefits to the human mind.<sup>88</sup>

Her lecture series and the subsequent lectures given at the Hall of Science proved more than any previous work, or reform efforts, that her need to make her opinions known was her most important task. She continued to lecture in public, but rapidly declined in popularity due to her uncompromising nature on radical ideas. Connors states that Wright “never seemed to realize that people came to see her speak after 1836 because...she had become the most infamous woman in America.”<sup>89</sup> The following quote by Owen outlines his suspicions on why her lectures and reform attempts might have failed to reach her audience, as well as vividly shows the shortcomings which kept her from becoming a virtuoso:

[Wright had] a mind which had not been submitted to early discipline, courage untempered by prudence, philanthropy with had too little of commonsense in it to give it practical form and efficiency, an enthusiasm eager but fitful, lacking the guiding check of sound judgment. An inordinate estimate of her mental powers, an obstinate adherence to opinions once adopted, which

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<sup>86</sup> Morris, *Fanny*, 194.

<sup>87</sup> Wright, *Life*, 198.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-204.

<sup>89</sup> Connors, “Civic Rhetor,” 43.

detracted seriously from the influence which her talents and eloquence might have exerted.<sup>90</sup>

Frances Wright, then, denied herself the possibility of becoming a virtuoso with a wide basis of listeners by refusing to yield her opinions at all costs, including the support of a public she wanted to reach. Her opinions on equality and education for women and slaves, as well as on the necessity of dispensing with religion, had merit. Unfortunately, they fell just short of legitimacy within the era in which she spoke and landed, instead, in the territory of curious notoriety.

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<sup>90</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Francis*, 153. From Owen's memoirs.