COMBATANTS OR COMPATRIOTS?

CATHARINE BEECHER, FRANCES WRIGHT, AND ANTEBELLUM REFORM

by

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INTRODUCTION

In 1836, coinciding with Frances Wright's return to America, Catharine Beecher published her first piece directly addressing religious topics. Written ostensibly as a series of letters between friends of varying religious beliefs in an attempt to explain in layman terms the controversies within the Presbyterian church, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* also contained one of Beecher's most vitriolic attacks on another woman.

"Who can look without disgust and abhorrence upon such an one as Fanny Wright," raged Beecher, "with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected, and feeling no need of protection, mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with barefaced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly. And what are the topics of her discourse, that in some cases may be a palliation for such indecorum? Nothing better than broad attacks on all those principles that protect the purity, the dignity, and the safety of her sex....I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of a woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting."[1]

Catharine Beecher's enraged cry against this "unwomanly" woman typified the virulent emotions Wright aroused among the religiously orthodox and politically conservative in the late 1820s and 1830s. To Beecher and, apparently, to the majority of "respectable" middle class Americans, Wright posed a particularly vicious threat to morality and social stability: a threat that combined religious infidelity, sexual transformation, and a working-class consciousness.

The personal animosity between Catharine Beecher and Frances Wright had

[1] Catharine Beecher, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (Hartford: Belknap and Hamersley, 1836), 23.

many readily apparent sources. First, Wright and Beecher profoundly disagreed on religion. In both her writing and in her public lectures, Wright stridently proclaimed her anti-religious views, declaring religion antithetical to American republicanism. Beecher, however, saw religion as the vital organizing principle in American life that not only complemented but was the source of republicanism. Second, Wright and Beecher sharply diverged on issues of social class. For Wright, working-class Americans embodied the nation's values and she sought to mobilize the working class into action. Beecher, in contrast, positioned herself in allegiance with the upper classes and expressed extreme caution over social mingling with the working class. Third, Wright and Beecher differed on the means and outcomes of antislavery efforts. Wright strongly advocated antislavery measures by any means, while Beecher worried about the extremism of abolitionist efforts. Last, Wright and Beecher disagreed on women's appropriate public and political role. Wright not only advocated but herself modeled an actively public and politically partisan woman through her published political commentaries and numerous lecture tours. Beecher, on the other hand, drew a sharp distinction between women and the public world of political partisanship, counseling women toward a more demur neutrality contained within a home-centered context.

These seeming contrasts would appear to position Frances Wright and Catharine Beecher as emblems of the antagonisms that tore through the rest of the antebellum United States. The rising tide of immigration coupled with early industrialization and urbanization produced both widespread exaltation in human progress and possibility, but also fear and anxiety about a world transformed by forces seemingly outside individual human control. While some saw America as a nation bound together by the democratic principles of its founding documents, others saw only social chaos, religious infidelity, immorality, rank materialism, and

reckless individualism. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Americans were all "a little wild... with the numberless projects of social reform" and "all were prepared with a draft for a new community in their pockets."[2] Secular and religious reformers of every stripe lodged critiques of American society (as well as each other) and proffered their plans for social renewal and restoration.

In this thesis I argue that despite an openly antagonistic relationship and public positions that would seem to locate them on opposite ends of the political spectrum, Frances Wright and Catharine Beecher had far more in common than their images, personal aversion, and legacy suggest. Both engaged many of the same topics and analyzed them in similar ways. Most significantly, both saw women as central to the process of reform and the nation's future stability. They also employed comparable rhetorical strategies to urge their audiences toward reform. Through an examination of their specific arguments and suggested programs of reforms, as well as the way in which they spoke of and to their audience, I will explore the similarities and the larger national project that personal animosity has obscured. Most significantly, these similarities between Wright and Beecher suggest that both women's adherence to morally expressed gender difference undercut their challenges to social inequalities as well as their own attempts to constuct a new model of female authority within a unified nation.

Indeed, Wright and Beecher lived ostensibly very different lives. At the height of her career in the late 1820s and 1830s, Frances Wright was one of the most famous (and to some, such as Beecher, the most notorious) women in America. Wright first gained prominence as a lecturer and staunch advocate of a nonsectarian educational system.[3] She also wrote books and articles, co-edited a newspaper,

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[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson in Marty Martin, *The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1961), 74.

[3] The following biographical information is drawn from Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

established her own utopian community, and worked tirelessly to promote her secular vision of equality and liberty.

Born in Scotland in 1795 to privileged and liberal parents who died two years later, Frances Wright rebelled against the Tory relatives who raised her and a society she thought repressed her intellectual pursuits. Drawn to the United States in hope that it would provide the freedom and scope of action she craved, Wright first visited America in 1818. The great success of her trip led to the the publication, in 1821, of Wright's *Views of Society and Manners in America*, the first serious book published about the U.S. in England, attributed not to Wright though, but, ambiguously, to "an Englishwoman." Befriended by the Marquis de Lafayette, a man who became a father-figure and subject of her intense devotion, Wright returned to the United States in 1824, gaining access to American politicians and intellectual leaders through her association with Lafayette. A visit to Robert Owen's utopian community, New Harmony, persuaded her of the effectiveness of his socialist system and augmented her utilitarian sense of the malleability of cultural institutions. Witnessing slavery on a tour of the South, Wright began to develop her own experimental community, Nashoba, to demonstrate the capabilities of former slaves to become useful members of society through manual labor and education.

Frustrated by the limitations and financial failures of Nashoba, yet still convinced of her own ability to determine the best course for America, Wright devoted herself to the transformation of the intellectual and political climate through educational reform. From 1828 through 1830, Wright lectured widely and published her speeches as well as additional articles and correspondence in the pages of the *Free Enquirer* with her co-editor, Robert Dale Owen. Reaching a height of celebrity during these, her most prolific and public years as an advocate of knowledge and a national education system, Wright's image and name assumed a

notoriety that existed long after her withdrawal from the lecture circuit and return to Europe in 1830. Married in 1831, Wright's relationship quickly soured and she returned to the United States in 1836. Though she lectured and published articles sporadically until 1839, publishing an anonymous history of England in 1848, Wright's public role faded into virtual obscurity. In 1852, she died in Cincinnati.

Like Wright, Catharine Beecher was a vocal proponent of educational reform in the antebellum years. Writing on topics as diverse as religion, women's rights, family, home design, health, and abolitionism, Beecher played an instrumental and influential part in shaping and reflecting middle-class identity and values.[4] First gaining notice as a teacher and a champion of educational opportunities for women, Beecher, over the course of her life, established three schools for young women, authored a variety of textbooks and manuals, and founded a national education association.

Born in East Hampton, Long Island in 1800, Beecher was the eldest daughter of Calvinist minister, Lyman Beecher, and sister to Harriet Beecher Stowe and half-sister to Isabella Beecher Hooker. While she would later credit her mother with imparting a "*high ideal* of excellence," it was really her father who captured her heart and attention.[5] After completing her education at Sarah Pierce's Female Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, Beecher was urged by her father to submit more fully to God, an act of self-abnegation especially difficult for an educated woman who idolized her fiercely ambitious father.

After the death of her religious but unconverted fiancé, Alexander Metcalf, Beecher rebelled against her father's religion, and moved to Hartford in 1823. There, she established the Hartford Female Seminary, offering an intellectually

[4] The following biographical information is drawn from Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale, 1973) and Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[5] Beecher quoted in Boydston, et al., *The Limits of Sisterhood* , 15.

rigorous alternative to dame and finishing schools for middle class girls. After six years in Hartford, Beecher published *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education,* an educational treatise that identified her chosen path, teaching, with women's traditional domestic work--a philosophy to which Beecher remained committed for the rest of her life.

Frustrated by her inability to secure an endowment for her school, Beecher followed her father to Cincinnati in 1832, founding the Western Female Institute the following year. The West was, for Beecher, of especial concern because of its centrality to the nation's destiny, and she devoted her school to saving and civilizing Cincinnati's young women. In 1837, the school failed, but Beecher's belief in her ability to enact her social philosophy never faltered.

Beecher spent the next twenty years developing her plan to prepare New England women to teach in the West, constantly pleading for financial support. Traveling back and forth from East to West, Beecher established the Milwaukee Female Seminary in 1850. While raising money for the school and designing its programs, Beecher continued to publish prolifically. By the end of the 1850s, though, Beecher's most active writing years were coming to a close. Accompanying her family back east, Beecher lived with her sister, Harriet, in Hartford in the 1860s. Beecher moved in with her brother, Thomas, in Elmira, New York, where she died in 1878.

By and large, the scholarship on Wright and Beecher accepts a positioning of these two lives as polar opposites and as embodiments of the conflicting views that characterized the era. The outrage and indignation contained in contemporary accounts of Wright, in addition to Beecher's own opinions, have contributed to both women's subsequent portrayal as diametrically opposed-- as "radical" and "conservative"-- by historians of the nineteenth century. These "radical" and

"conservative" identities have largely led scholars to focus on Wright's adamant denunciations of religion and condemnations of marriage as a form of female slavery. These issues then became the evidence of Wright's "radical" departure from the perceived cultural dominance of the evangelical rhetoric espoused by Beecher, who equated religious morality with the domestic home. Viewing Wright and Beecher oppositionally--Wright's secularism as the supposed opposite of Beecher's religiousity--focuses attention on superficialities that occlude both women's greater reform goal.

Early works on both women tended toward celebratory accounts, seeking to rescue them from the past and reveal their contributions to the present age. In 1881, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Mathilda Joslyn Gage chose a portrait of Wright as the frontspiece of the first volume of their *History of Woman Suffrage*. Reviled in her own time as an "infidel" and "high priestess of Beelzebub," Wright's inclusion in this seminal suffragist work of the 1880s marked her entry into the pantheon of feminist heroines. Twentieth-century scholarship has maintained this view. In *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer: The Study of a Temperament*, A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson contribute to Wright's "radical" characterization, entitling their first chapter "The Making of a Rebel," and asserting that Wright sought, "to stir up and quicken the somewhat stagnant currents of the popular mind in the early nineteenth century."[6] Likewise, Margaret Lane, in *Frances Wright and the "Great Experiment,"* argues that "history has treated her [Wright] unfairly" and that Wright contributed many admirable things to that "sorely vexed country" that were dismissed, often

[6] A.J.G. Perkins and Theresa Wolfson, *Frances Wright, Free Enquirer: The Study of Temperament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), 384. Two books on Wright were published in the 19th century, one negative and one positive. Reverend William L. McCalla's *An Examination of Miss Wright's System of Knowledge* (1829) attempted to show Wright's resemblance to witches and harlots, while Gilbert Amos, a fellow secularist freethinker, published *Memoirs of Frances Wright, the Pioneer Woman in the Cause of Human Rights* (Cincinnati, 1855). W.R. Waterman published a short work in 1924 entitled *Frances Wright.*

violently, because she was ahead of her time.[7]

Early work on Catharine Beecher followed a similarly glorifying vein as that on Wright. In *Catharine Esther Beecher (Pioneer Educator),* Mae Elizabeth Harveson hails Beecher as a "pioneer in the movement for educational equality."[8] Interestingly, Harveson argues that Beecher was both "conservative" and "radical" for her time. She labels Beecher "conservative" for holding a safe and steady course in her advocacy of religion and the domestic home, but "in pressing the right of her sex to education...she forsook the beaten path of ages and became the radical."[9] For Harveson, Beecher's struggle to expand women's educational opportunities and to make teaching a respectable female profession was the "radical" gesture in the antebellum era that deserved recognition and remembrance. Harveson's conception of "radicalism" seems, by no means, to resemble the characterizations of Wright's radicalism made by other scholars, though, because Beecher remained firmly within a religiously moral frame.

In 1984, Celia Morris Eckhardt published what continues to be the most current full-length biography of Frances Wright, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America.* As the title suggests, Eckhardt furthers Wright's radical image as she seeks to explicate Wright's importance in defying conventions in the face of disheartening opposition. According to Eckhardt, Wright's "radicalism made her a problem to most of her contemporaries because the feminism that began to develop in her lifetime did so largely in the benevolent organizations....Most of these women were reformers rather than radicals [and] never endorsed anything like the thoroughgoing transformations Fanny insisted were essential to social decency, if not survival."[10]

[7] Margaret Lane, *Frances Wright and the "Great Experiment"* (Totowa, NJ: Roman and Littlefield, 1972), 45, 46.
[8] Mae Elizabeth Harveson, *Catharine Beecher (Pioneer Educator)* (New York: Arno, 1969 reprint), ix. Originally published 1931.
[9] Harveson, *Catharine Beecher,* 254.
[10] Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 282.

Here again, benevolence organizations, construed as both religious and comprised of the majority of mainstream women, are depicted as the antithesis of Wright's brand of reform. The opposition Eckhardt establishes between Wright and other female reformers finds its fullest illustration in her description of Wright's primary adversary, Catharine Beecher, the "exemplar of respectable women." To Eckhardt, Beecher's "attack on Frances Wright became the prototype of the attacks that conservative American women launch on women who differ."[11] In this way, Eckhardt reinforces the dichotomy of Beecher as the archetypical conservative woman, and Wright, the radical.

Wright's radicalism assumes a slightly different form in the hands of Sean Wilentz. In *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850,* Wilentz argues less for the radicalism and uniqueness of Wright's ideas but for her ability to reformulate and distill ideas drawn from utilitarianism, deism, and Jacobin feminism into a defiant rhetoric that fostered a radical culture among working class men.[12] Wilentz rightly points to the way in which Wright's rhetoric on educational uplift seemed to insinuate her own unique qualifications to dictate proper republican ethics that often sounded as authoritarian and moralistic as those promoted by the evangelicals she attacked. In the end though, Wilentz seems to dismiss Wright as more of a public spectacle, attracting crowds fascinated by a female speaker and her dramatic style, than as a notable and influential thinker with radical ideas for social transformation.

In marked contrast to Wilentz, Susan S. Kissel argues that Wright's ideas affected every level of society despite her rejection by the majority of Americans. In her *In Common Cause: The "Conservative" Frances Trollope and the "Radical" Frances Wright,* Kissel, seeking to recognize the achievements of Wright and Trollope,

[11] Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright,* 249.
[12] Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 181.

argues that both women have been misunderstood and stereotyped as oppositional voices when, in reality, their differences were more a matter of personality. Kissel claims that the "conservative" and "radical" label attached to each woman's name obscures their shared call for social reform, rightly calling these labels into question. Both women sought to produce a more humane civilization and believed that female leadership would be "necessary for the advancement of culture."[13] While Kissel's work attempts to expand and complicate the conservative-radical dichotomy, Kissel largely discusses Trollope and Wright independently of one another. This results in a narrative that appears to challenge the conservative image of Trollope, revealing the "deep-seated" desire for social reform that possibly underlay and helped explain her friendship with Wright,[14] without challenging Wright's radicalism beyond associating her concern for social cohesion and her objection to capitalist exploitation as a more typical conservative concern. Since Kissel argues that the primary similarity between Trollope and Wright was their desire for social reform, her conclusion that "in this goal of affecting social change, Frances Trollope and Frances Wright were 'radical'"[15] seems only to perpetuate the radical-conservative dichotomy without revealing the ways in which these labels overlap.

Echoing Kissel's positive assessment of Wright's originality and influence on later generations, Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, in *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, and Margaret Fuller,* focuses on what she terms the three "major theorists" of feminism. Calling Wright the "first radical leader in the women's movement" and arguing that "her thoughts on women were so original," Bartlett, too, affirms Wright's radical image,

[13] Susan S. Kissel, *In Common Cause: The "Conservative" Frances Trollope and the "Radical" Frances Wright* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 61.
[14] Ibid., 89.
[15] Ibid., 147.

further asserting that "she showed what women could be and encouraged others to fulfill their potential."[16] While Bartlett begins to explore the complexity of Wright's character, correctly noting that Wright often referred to women as the "weaker sex" and that her vision of social change was largely male-defined, Bartlett does not fully develop this point. She dismisses this aspect of Wright's rhetoric and concludes that this resulted from Wright's concern for humankind rather than a concern for developing a separate notion of womanhood.[17] Thus Bartlett proclaims Wright "a minimalist who saw no significant differences between men and women with regard to their physical, mental, moral, and sexual capacities,"[18] an expansive vision of humankind that made Wright far ahead, and therefore a marginalized radical, of her time.

More recently, and in contrast to most depictions of Wright, Alison M. Parker in her piece, "'What We Do Expect the People Legislatively to Effect': Frances Wright, Moral Reform, and State Legislation," has explored how politically Wright was far less an aberration of antebellum Jacksonianism than has been previously thought.[19] Parker uses Wright to reveal the social and political volatility of the early nineteenth century as well as its openness to new ideas, while placing Wright's rhetoric firmly within the Revolutionary tradition and its founding documents. Parker persuasively demonstrates that widespread skepticism of centralized authority made Wright's advocacy of moral suasion and legislative change at the state level comparable and attractive to other moral reformers. Parker does not refrain from labeling Wright a radical nor does she offer a comparative analysis of

[16] Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, and Margaret Fuller* (New York: Carlson, 1994), 5, 29.
[17] Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority*, 44-46.
[18] Ibid., 38.
[19] Alison M. Parker, " "What We Do Expect the People Legislatively to Effect": Frances Wright, Moral Reform, and State Legislation," in *Women and the Unstable State in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Alison M. Parker and Stephanie Cole (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 62.

Wright and other, more mainstream, reformers, but she does differ from earlier scholars in positioning Wright within mainstream American politics due to Wright's focus on state rather than national legislation.

While the scholarship on Frances Wright has generally invoked themes of secular radicalism, work on Beecher has flowed in the opposite direction, constructing an image of a socially conservative, religious woman despite her educational ambitions and accomplishments. Kathryn Kish Sklar's 1973 biography of Beecher, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity*, argues that Beecher provided women with a "strong female-role identity" within a domestic context that reconciled women's inequality with egalitarian democracy.[20] For Beecher, the fundamental division in society was between men and women. She sought to restore hierarchical authority and give women a place within it, joining the "growing American tendency to glorify domesticity."[21] Sklar rightly identifies some of the contradictions in Beecher's own life, especially the way that Beecher's constructed female identity "constantly intruded into her consciousness and her career."[22] In resisting society's ridicule of unmarried women, Beecher spent much of her life reconciling social opinion with her self. Sklar also accurately points to tensions derived from Beecher's religious loyalties and the internal and familial conflicts that influenced her mix of "innovation with conservatism, honesty with dissemblance" to shape a coherent ideology of domesticity.[23] Yet, in many ways, despite pointing to some of the inconsistencies between Beecher's life and thought, Sklar seems to express an overall admiration for Beecher and her accomplishments, consistently emphasizing the ways that Beecher persevered in the face of difficulty. While Sklar discusses Beecher's disagreements with the abolitionist sisters the

[20] Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale, 1973), 270.
[21] Ibid., 136.
[22] Ibid., xiii.
[23] Ibid., xiii.

Grimkes over appropriate behavior for women, she does not mention Wright or the scathing indictment of her contained in many of Beecher's early writings.

Though Sklar's book remains the most recent work focused solely on Catharine Beecher, other scholars have examined Beecher in tandem with other women, most notably her famous sisters. In *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Women's Sphere*, Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis provide a documentary framework to compare and analyze three of the Beecher sisters, Catharine, Harriet, and Isabella, to suggest how each woman's life experiences influenced her perspective on what it meant to be a woman in the nineteenth century. The authors assert that the Beecher sisters illustrate, in differing ways, the blending of the seemingly contradictory premises of natural rights and domesticity.[24] For Catharine Beecher, this blending resulted in an early advocacy of domesticity and the shared experience of womanhood, a view that helped conceal the class and race divisions that plagued antebellum society. Of the sisters, Catharine emerges as the most conservative, though the authors stop short of labeling her as such. They rightly affirm her strong religious affiliation and its effect on her vision of womanhood, remarking that "the central theme of her life's work [was] that women, in their roles as mothers and teachers, were the world's true ministers."[25] While the authors also correctly argue that Catharine attacked as "unwomanly" women whose values departed from her vision of female domesticity, they seem to assume that Beecher's wrath indicated a truly oppositional set of beliefs, calling Wright an "anathema to Beecher's emerging ideas of womanhood."[26]

As with Sklar's work, Boydston, Kelley, and Margolis point to the

[24] Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 6.
[25] Ibid., 42.
[26] Ibid., 228, 236.

contradictions within Beecher's life, work, and vision of domesticity, a theme that continues in Nicole Tonkovich's *Domesticity with a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller.* Seeking to explore how writing women exceeded textually their constructed domestic spheres while maintaining the illusion of their containment, Tonkovich argues that the binary of separate spheres obscures the details and complexity of these four women, relegating them to an apolitical, conservative position.[27] While Tonkovich remarks that Beecher appears as the most conservative of the four women profiled, her life demonstrated "the trajectory of initial acquiescence to normative domesticity and its interruption by crisis."[28] Though this seems to suggest that Beecher was perhaps not conservative, Tonkovich then calls Beecher's vision of social reform a "conservative political agenda."[29] While Tonkovich reveals some of the contradictions between Beecher's personal life and her writings, demonstrating the fiction of separate spheres, for Tonkovich, Beecher remains a conservative, religious figure without a substantive textual or biographical comparison to women considered less conservative.

More recently, Barbara A. White's family biography, *The Beecher Sisters*, seeks to use the sisters to illustrate the social, economic, and religious changes and issues of the nineteenth century. Though Isabella figures most prominently in the narrative, the lives of all four sisters play important roles. White notes that Catharine is primarily remembered as a "conservative social thinker-- an 'anti' in the terms of the suffragists because she was against woman suffrage," and for her work in establishing teaching as a female profession.[30] She partially disputes this characterization, calling Beecher "radical" in her refusal of the Calvinist faith of her

[27] Nicole Tonkovich, *Domesticity with a Difference: The Nonfiction of Catharine Beecher, Sarah J. Hale, Fanny Fern, and Margaret Fuller* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 201-202.
[28] Tonkovitch, *Domesticity with a Difference,* 183-184.
[29] Ibid., 200.
[30] Barbara A. White, *The Beecher Sisters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 260.

father and of the surrounding culture that excluded women, especially unmarried women, from productive work and positions of influence. White even argues that some of Beecher's beliefs are "held by women who call themselves feminists today," calling attention to Beecher's concern for the hardships of women's economic dependency and the undervaluation of the work of housewives and mothers,[31] suggesting the complexity obscured by dichotomous labels. Yet White is quick to counter her comparison of Beecher to modern feminists by recognizing the restrictive scope of respectable action for women contained within Beecher's domestic ideology, and correctly shows that the "willingness to fight" some more personal social strictures, such as her father's Calvinist faith, did not subsequently result in a challenge to the basic nineteenth-century gender system, not to mention those of class or race.

While more recent works on Wright and Beecher have presented more complicated analyses of their lives and works than a simple "radical" or "conservative" identification ever could, revealing the complexity obscured by dichotomies, none has comparatively evaluated these two women, who in life and in subsequent portrayal, appear irreconcilably opposed. What could a woman who loudly and publicly declared her aversion to religion have to say to or even have in common with the daughter of a minister who proclaimed her "the destroyer of all that is moral and virtuous in the world?"

While Wright and Beecher appear to have lived rather different lives, their biographies actually provide some first glimpses of their intriguing commonalities. Both women had strong attachments to prominent male intellectuals. They also traveled widely throughout the United States, lecturing and writing, and did not have permanent homes--a rather significant detail for two nineteenth-century women. Moreover, Wright and Beecher were institution-builders: Wright of a

[31] White, *The Beecher Sisters*, 74.

utopian community, Nashoba, and Beecher of three schools for young women. Each woman also expressed profound frustration at her inability to secure financial support for her institutions. Most significantly, as this thesis argues, Wright and Beecher used similar arguments and a rhetorical style as they sought to change American society to fit a particular idealized image and national destiny, never losing faith in their own abilities to determine the best course of action to achieve social change.

CHAPTER ONE

THE "DISORDERED MIND OF MAN:" NATIONAL DECLINE AND THE SAVING GRACE OF WOMAN

Although they seemed to position themselves on the opposite side of every issue, Frances Wright and Catharine Beecher engaged much the same set of basic subjects and analyzed them in suprisingly similar ways. Both worried that the republican principles of the nation were already in decline--that daily practice no longer matched the nation's high ideal, threatening the future of the nation. Both women attributed this to the rise of petty self-interest and conflict. Both also believed that the institutional framework for social transformation already existed and needed only to be properly mobilized. Although with seemingly different ends in mind, both Wright and Beecher identified similar problems plaguing American society, and both depicted a surprisingly similar idealized woman as central to the health of the nation.

For Wright and Beecher, the turmoil and distractions of daily life in antebellum society posed a threat to the health and future of the nation that required immediate attention. First, both Wright and Beecher believed that the republican ideals of liberty and equality were in peril as the chasm between these ideal principles and daily life seemed to grow wider, seriously endangering an already fragile national unity and stability. For Wright, this took the form of repeated calls for Americans to open their eyes to the injustices all around them and to realize the great need for reform. "Time is it in this land to commence reform," declared Wright to an audience in Philadelphia in 1829, "Time is it to search out the misery in the land, and to heal it at the source. Time is it to remember the poor and the afflicted, ay! and the vicious and depraved...and to address our inquiries to the

improvement of our human condition, and our efforts to the practical illustration of those beautiful principles of liberty and equality enshrined in political institutions, and, first, and chief, in the national declaration of independence."[1] To Wright, America was a society in crisis because daily life in America had produced an intolerable gap between the ideals of economic and social equality and opportunity she had first read about as a young adult, and the reality of poverty, slavery, and ignorance that confronted her at every turn--a situation that had compelled Wright to step forth into a "world distracted with dissension and profaned with vice...in the cause of human reason, happiness, and tranquility."[2]

Like Wright, Beecher believed that the nation was in danger, which similarly led her to detail the disparity between principle and practice that existed throughout the nation. In her 1831 work, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* Beecher wrote, "If we look to our own boasted land of liberty and religion, what toiling of selfish and discordant interests, what mean and low lived arts to gain honour and power, what shameful attacks on fair reputation and unblemished honour, what collisions of party strifes and local interests....[T]he history of the world, unites with the testimony of individual experience, to prove the same mournful truth, of the disordered mind of man."[3] Something had clearly gone wrong, a situation that prompted both women to call the attention of the nation to republicanism's imperiled state.

Slavery represented a second area of concern for Wright and Beecher. Interestingly, both Wright and Beecher referred to the institution of slavery as not only reprehensible in and of itself, but as one example of the larger system of exploitation, selfishness, and inequality that plagued modern society. "My attention

[1] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Lecture VII. Of Existing Evils, and their Remedy. [As delivered in Philadelphia, June 2, 1829]," *Life, Letters, and Lectures 1834/1844* (New York: Arno, 1972), 103.
[2] Wright, "Religion," in D'Arusmont, *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 68.
[3] Catharine Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy, Founded upon Reason, and the Bible* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1969 imprint), 261.

has been attracted towards the political anomaly and moral injustice presented by the condition of the coloured population in the slave-holding states," declared Wright, "[which] have convinced me that American negro slavery is but one form of the same evils which pervade the whole frame of human society."[4] Similarly, Beecher wrote,

> Here also the curse of slavery brings the blush of shame to every honest man, that from year to year on the anniversary of the national liberty, hears the declarations of rights this very nation is trampling under foot. Two millions of slaves, deprived of the best blessing and the dearest rights of humanity, are held in the most degrading bondage, by a nation who yearly and publicly acknowledges their perfect and unalienable rights.[5]

Slavery stood as the central symbol of the selfishness that had corrupted the nation's morality, leading not only to the perversion of liberty and equality, but concomitantly to the exploitation of all of its inhabitants, of whom slaves were the most visible example.

In the same way, Wright and Beecher believed that religious dissension constituted yet another corruption of republicanism and the national project. Though Wright and Beecher differed on the role of religion, both shared a primary critique of contemporary religion because it was presented as absolute truth rather than subjected to processes of sensory evidence and reason by each individual. While Wright and Beecher usually spoke generically of religion, both had a specific type of religion in mind; they were both largely reacting to evangelical revivalism. The competing claims to doctrinal authenticity by various established and upstart Protestant sects was an especially dismaying and divisive force in the antebellum years that attracted the attention and indignation of Wright who sought national unity based on universally accepted principles. The contending Protestant doctrines

[4] Wright, "Preface," *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* vi.
[5] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 261-262.

clearly violated her sense of harmony. Beecher, too, wanted national unity, but a unity founded on the doctrines of Calvinism that she herself believed. To Beecher, Calvinism was religion--all other doctrines were merely misunderstandings of scripture.

To Wright, religion seemed antithetical to knowledge because knowledge comprised facts that could be substantiated through visible and tangible evidence or observation that animated the senses: "nothing can be known where there is nothing to operate on our senses; or, to place more accurately the position, *where we have no primary sensations to constitute elementary facts.*"[6] Religion was speculation because it was based on assumed rather than substantiated data that seemed to be available to only a select few rather than the masses. This religious plurality, with each person believing that God had revealed the truth to him or her and not to others, contradicted the immutability and universality of facts that made something a science, and therefore, knowledge. Wright urged Americans to turn away from that "which from the earliest date of human tradition, has filled the earth with crime, and deluged its bosom with blood, and this hours, fills your country with discord, and impedes its progress in virtue."[7] The divisiveness of religion only perpetuated other divisions and evils that imperiled republicanism and the nation's future. "Are we not creatures occupying the same earth, and sharing the same nature?,"[8] asked Wright, positing national unity as the future for a people who embraced liberty, equality, and harmony gained through reason.

Curiously, the religiously devout Beecher shared Wright's criticism of contemporary religion, though her solution was not to abandon religion but to embrace the Bible more fully on an individual level. Beecher declared that the eternal claims of the Bible were certain when little else in life was, despite the variety

[6] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Religion," *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 56.
[7] Wright, "Religion," *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 65-66.
[8] Ibid., 68.

of religious sects and divisions: "when we look abroad into the world, and observe the experience of mankind, it would seem very reasonable to draw exactly the opposite conclusions [from Beecher's claim of Biblical certainty]. For there is probably no one thing, about which there are a greater variety of opinions than the Bible."[9] Beecher argued that the Bible could be believed because it was based on human testimony, just like other sources of knowledge, such as science, business, and art. She argued that religious differences resulted not from Biblical inconsistencies, but from a lack of individual contemplation of the texts. "Mankind seem to believe the Bible true as a matter of mere report, because their fathers did before them, and all their neighbours do," Beecher complained. She went on, "Men seem to suppose that it is the exclusive business of religious men, to learn to interpret the Bible, and every man is willing thus to trust his faith, to the diligence and faithfulness of another."[10] Beecher even disputed the lessons taught by ministers, commenting that, "Religious teachers fall in with the common notions of society, and leave either people uninstructed in the foundation of their confidence in the Bible, [or] to believe in it because it is the fashion, and thus to give up belief when the fashion changes."[11]

Like Wright, Beecher urged people to apply reason based on their own observation and experience to determine truth in all aspects of their life, even religion: "the diligent and faithful seeker of truth...after having obtained and arranged the rules which he employs in understanding other books and the common language of life, and secured the knowledge necessary to apply them to the word of God...can make up his mind with a degree of certainty known on no other subject of importance."[12] While Wright argued that empirical study of

[9] Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 211.
[10] Ibid., 215, 216.
[11] Ibid., 215.
[12] Ibid., 219.

scripture would reveal no tangible evidence, Beecher believed that it would provide "complete satisfaction," and the resulting certainty would unite people. Despite their disagreements about religion, Wright
and Beecher agreed on how knowledge is acquired. Wright asserted, "That as 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."*[13] Similarly, Beecher wrote, "All the knowledge gained by mankind may be resolved into that of *experience.* All of the knowledge acquired by the senses and consciousness, is strictly *our own* experience. The knowledge communicated to us by other beings, is founded on the belief that 'things will be in agreement with past experience,' and therefore that *human testimony* can be trusted."[14] Though they may have disagreed on the outcome of rational empiricism as applied to scripture, both women asserted the importance of knowledge acquired through individual consideration over an unquestioning acceptance of the ideas of others.

Yet neither Wright and Beecher had lost hope that the situation could be remedied and each sought to reform the nation before it was too late. On the one hand, Wright despaired: "That evils exist, none that have eyes, ears, and hearts can dispute. That these evils are on the increase, none who have watched the fluctuations of trade, the sinking price of labour, the growth of pauperism, and the increase of crime, will dispute."[15] At the same time, though, Wright also recognized that, "The simple machinery of representation carried through all its parts, gives facility for its being moulded at will to fit with the knowledge of the age. If imperfect in any or all of its parts, it [America] bears within it a perfect principle--the principle

[13] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Lecture I. On the Nature of Knowledge" *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 13.
[14] Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 156.
[15] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Lecture VII. Of Existing Evils, and their Remedy. [As delivered in Philadelphia, June 2, 1829]", *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 107.

of improvement."[16] Beecher sounded a similar call, remarking that, although "the long reign of selfishness, has seemed to pervert and poison even the taste and moral sentiments of men," "the virtue of the people" remained as a source of possible regeneration. She continued, "all will agree that virtue consists in acting for the general good of society, though there may be much difference of opinion, as to the best mode to be pursued." [17] Both argued that the necessary structure for change already existed and both believed that individuals were essential to the process, although Wright and Beecher defined this structure differently. To Wright, the government and the proclamations of the Declaration of Independence provided the framework for change. All that remained was the conversion of the individual minds that comprised the heart of the nation. Beecher also felt that the tools for change already existed. Beecher referred to change beginning with a community of individuals, writing, "Experience has shown, that when certain moral evils exist in a community, efforts to awaken public sentiment against such practices, and combinations for the exercise of personal influence and example have in various cases tended to rectify these evils."[18] While Beecher did not directly affirm the frame of government in the same way as Wright, Beecher did express faith in the principles of liberty and equality, and the ability of individuals to be "saved by *knowledge.*"[19]

To Wright and Beecher, social reform and regeneration depended on women. Both believed that women played a particularly critical role in the process of reform, serving as agents of morality to future generations-- an importance that seemed forgotten by men in this selfish age. Grounding her understanding of female

[16] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Address I. [Delivered in the New Harmony Hall, on the Fourth of July, 1828]," *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 119.
[17] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 262, 237, 395.
[18] Catharine Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), 9.
[19] Beecher, *The Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 367.

patriotism in the household, Wright repeatedly alluded to the importance of women's position as mothers to the next generation of American citizens, affirming an ideology of gender that associated morality with a white middle-class women and womanhood with the home. "I have been led, also, incidentally," wrote Wright, "to advert to the influence exerted over the fortunes of our race by those who are too often overlooked in our social arrangements and in our civil rights--I allude to WOMEN." She admonished men to "think it no longer indifferent whether the mothers of the rising generation are wise or foolish. Think not indifferent whether your own companions are ignorant or enlightened. Think it not indifferent...those who are to form the opinions, sway the habits, [and] decide the destinies of the species."[20] Likewise Beecher, in her *Treatise on the Domestic Economy,* wrote, "It is equally conceded, that the formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother writes the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibres that hereafter are the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation."[21] Women as wives and mothers held the position to raise children who would carry forth the banner of republicanism and thus, ensure its future. As Beecher wrote, "the success of democratic institutions...depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people,"[22] a situation that allowed women a considerable role in exacting the changes necessary to secure true republicanism.

More intriguing is the importance of the idea of a specific female "influence" in the thought of Wright. "When women shall employ their *influence,*" wrote Wright, "in the domestic circle and in society generally...we shall see a change in the

[20] Frances Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II," *Free Enquirer,* 28 January 1828.
[21] Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on the Domestic, for the use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1848), 37.
[22] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 36.

habits and all the fashions of the day" [emphasis added].[23] For Wright, women's abilities were best used within the domestic realm and especially through men--a rather unexpected view from a woman who publicly pressed her program of reform on audiences of men. In urging men toward legislative reform, Wright emphasized that women's influence was, "not through their children only, but through their lovers and husbands," who alone held the power to determine whether women were "enlightened friends or capricious mistresses, efficient coadjutors or careless servants; reasoning beings or blind followers of superstition."[24] Wright often referred to men as women's protectors, writing, in one instance, of "the protecting tenderness of man" over the "timidity of women."[25] In defining women almost wholly in terms of their familial responsibilities and urging men toward exacting change, Wright consigned women to a passive domestic role, far apart from the arena of direct action, and within an ideology of gender that characterized the passivity of "influence" with respectable femininity.

Wright and Beecher's use of the language of female influence allowed them to give women an important social role without ever separating women from a culturally acceptable domestic role--a rhetorical strategy that further suggested their sanction of passive femininity. "Influence" implied an inward, quiet, and less visible manner that was more passive than politicized. Appropriate female behavior, according to Beecher, involved not only attention to appearance, morality, and manners but also "a shrinking from notoriety and public gaze."[26] The more invisible, the more effective was women's influence, and thus the more feminine. A woman's authority was to be so gentle, persuasive, and unseen that society would

[23] Frances Wright, "An Amateur of Tight Lacing," *Free Enquirer,* 5 August 1829.
[24] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II" *Free Enquirer,* 28 January 1829.
[25] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge" *Free Enquirer,* 4 March 1829.
[26] Catharine Beecher, *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (Hartford: Belknap and Hamersley, 1836), 22.

hardly know that a subversion had taken place.[27] By justifying women's influence as an extension of their maternal duties, Wright and Beecher could mobilize the discourses of influence on behalf of multiple causes. With the growth of economic hardships, women's domestic duty to alleviate harsh conditions through caregiving extended, so that in rhetoric and reality, "influence" leapt across various barriers and allowed women entry into many areas once considered primarily male strongholds.[28] Women, by persuasive, quiet action, could affect change on a scale far beyond their homes through "influence" on their male relations--eventually, according to Wright and Beecher, affecting the fate of republicanism itself.

Wright and Beecher also shared a conviction that education was key to reform and that the education of women--heretofore largely neglected--was crucial to the preservation of true republicanism. Wright and Beecher felt that women's education had been especially neglected. Both expressly linked women's education to the successful realization of the nation's highest ideals. Wright declared, "Until some measures shall be adopted for the judicious and equal instruction and protection of every daughter born to the Republic, ye cannot be (as I conceive) Republicans."[29] Similarly Beecher wrote, "The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual, but educate a woman and the interests of a whole family are secured."[30] Because women imparted values to the next generation of citizens through their influence, women's education was especially important for Wright and Beecher. The knowledge of a few men had produced republican principles, but these could never be sustained or fully realized without the diffusion of knowledge to all. "Without knowledge, could your fathers have conquered liberty?" asked Wright, "and without knowledge, can you retain it? Equality!

[27] Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 15.
[28] Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 17.
[29] Wright, "Morals" in *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 83
[30] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 37.

where is it, if not in education? Equal rights! they cannot exist without equality of instruction. 'All men are born free and equal!' they are *born*, but do they so *live*? Are they educated as equals? and, if not, can they *be* equal? and, if not equal, can they be free?"[31] For both women, educational reform would allow women and men to gain the knowledge necessary to alleviate exploitation and oppression.

Both Wright and Beecher advocated knowledge acquired through the establishment of educational institutions. For Wright, the only way to correct the existing social ills was to implement a truly equal, national, and republican educational system. This system, administered by the state and completely separate from religious institutions, would provide complete schooling for all American children, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. While Beecher's schools retained some religious ties, she, too, sought to provide educational institutions for all children fully funded by wealthy benefactors. For Wright, private schools had too long been a privilege of the rich and only by replacing these schools with free, nonsectarian schools would Americans establish the mental preconditions of social equality and "moral government."[32] Wright criticized what she saw as the idleness of the upper classes, especially women, who denigrated the very labor that sustained their social status, and sought to elevate the social value of work through the education of the working classes in public schools. Wright urged men to pass legislation to establish these schools because it was the "one measure by which alone childhood may find sure protection; by which alone youth may be wise, industrious, moral and happy."[33]

Wright and Beecher believed that the most important aspect of their systems

[31] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, "Lecture II. Of Free Inquiry, considered as a means for obtaining just Knowledge," *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 25.
[32] Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 178.
[33] Frances Wright, "Editorial: To the Intelligent among the working classes; and generally, all honest reformers" *Free Enquirer* , 5 December 1829.

was the education provided to young girls. Wright admonished fathers for differentiating between their sons and daughters, thus encouraging the inadequate education of their girls: a father "in his exercise of authority, as by right divine, over the judgment, actions, and person of the child; in his forgetfulness of the character of the child as a human being, born 'free and equal,' that is having equal claims to the exercise and development of all his senses, faculties and powers with those who brought him into existence, and with all sentient beings who tread the earth."[34] Wright argued that the effect of women's limited education was widespread; it held every one, male and female, and therefore, the nation as a whole, back from achieving their true potential. She asked, "Fathers and husbands! do ye not also understand this fact? Do ye not see how, in the mental bondage of your wives and fair companions, ye yourselves are bound? Will ye fondly sport yourselves in your imagined liberty and say, 'it matters not if our women be mental slaves.'"[35] For Wright then, equality and liberty began in childhood through the equal education of young men and women.

Beecher, too, took a special interest in the education of women and shared Wright's concern for the complete education of young women. Beecher believed that women had an equal interest in all social and civil concerns, that "no domestic, civil, or political, institution, is right, that sacrifices her interest to promote that of the other sex...[since] the success of democratic institutions...depends upon the intellectual and moral character of the mass of the people."[36] While female education was pivotal to both women's programs for true democratic republicanism, Beecher, unlike Wright, thought this was best achieved through schools designed specifically for and taught by women.

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[34] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II" *Free Enquirer,* 28 January 1829.
[35] Frances Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge. By Frances Wright. As Delivered in the Park Theatre, City of New York" *Free Enquirer,* 18 March 1829.
[36] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 26, 36.

For Beecher, women's importance to the nation's future was defined by their role not only as mothers and teachers within their own homes, but also as teachers within classrooms of young women, an extension of their domestic role. "It is to *mothers* and to *teachers*, that the world is to look for the character which is to be enstamped on each succeeding generation."[37] Beecher advocated the creation of endowed institutions for young women whose trustees could secure a course of education for attendees. She premised her idea for her schools on institutions that already existed to prepare young men for careers in medicine, religion, and the law which were financed by wealthy individuals and state legislatures. "Our County, then, is most abundantly supplied with endowed institutions," Beecher declared, "which secure a liberal education, on such low terms as make them accessible to all classes, and in which the interests of education are watched over, sustained, and made permanent, by an appropriate board of trustees."[38] While Beecher's schools were not the public, state-funded institutions proposed by Wright, Beecher argued that her largely privately funded schools would still provide education to "young women destitute of means."[39] Like Wright, Beecher opposed the degradation of labor by the upper classes, but since

her primary concern was with women's domestic work, she explicitly sought only to elevate the value of women's work within the home by equating it with respectability: "In past ages, and in aristocratic countries, leisure and indolence and frivolous pursuits have been deemed lady-like and refined, because those classes, which were most refined, countenanced such an opinion. But whenever ladies of refinement, as a general custom, patronise domestic pursuits, then these

[37] Catharine Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education, Presented to the Trustees of the Harford Female Seminary, and Published at Their Requests* (Hartford: Packard and Butler, 1829), 7.
[38] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 52.
[39] Ibid., 61.

employments will be deemed lady-like."[40] Because women, in Beecher's view, had the most important responsibilities to society--primarily the care of children and the home--they should be just as properly educated and qualified to carry them out as ministers, lawyers, and doctors already were. Once women were better educated, they could then better fulfill their own familial responsibilities and become the perfect teachers of domestic duties to young women.

For Frances Wright and Catharine Beecher, early nineteenth century America seemed a nation imperiled by ignorance, selfishness, and antirepublican forces that required attention and reform. Both placed women at the center of their programs of social reform and argued that education was the only way to secure true republicanism. Yet Wright and Beecher consistently depicted women in relation to the domestic home and allowed women only an indirect conduit to power through their influence over men, which seemed to suggest that women did not possess the qualities of independent thought and reason necessary in a republic. As they struggled to reconcile republican principles with economic and social realities, Wright and Beecher developed ways of understanding the world around them that centered on their individual and opposing

views of religion, yet still resulted, in the end, in a shared call to expand women's educational opportunities. Yet as intriguing as the similarities of Wright and Beecher's programs of social reform and their depiction of ideal women were, their comparable

discussion of actual women reveal an even more complex relationship between these historically "radical" and "conservative" voices than the content of their reform programs suggest.

[40] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 62.

CHAPTER TWO
IDEALIZING REPUBLICAN WOMANHOOD

Although Wright and Beecher seemed to praise women's role in the national destiny, underneath this robust idealism, both women possessed a much darker view of actual American women. While both claimed to speak on behalf of and for the betterment of women, they simultaneously criticized particular groups of women, implicitly associating these groups of women with the social evils degrading national progress. Wright and Beecher developed their educational institutions to address the problems they identified with these women. Because Wright and Beecher had a negative perception of actual women, both appealed to men to support and enact their reforms, despite their insistance on women's importance to the process of reform. By viewing actual women as especially problematic to the nation's future, both Wright and Beecher began to differentiate themselves and to differentiate real women from the republican ideal.

Despite their continual emphasis on the importance of women to the national project, neither Wright nor Beecher expressed much praise for other individual women, though each targeted different groups of women as objects of their particular contempt. The stridently secular Wright excoriated anyone tied to religious institutions, while Beecher, religiously devout, assailed the irreligious as well as lower class and immigrant women. They directed their antagonism toward different groups of women that each believed posed a specific threat to the realization of true republicanism. I will argue this first for Wright and then for Beecher

First, Wright directed much of her animosity toward religious women, because for Wright, organized religion stifled independent thought and posed the greatest threat to equality and liberty. Wright argued that priests held undue power over society, encouraging a mental conformity that upheld aristocratic hierarchies and selfishly took money that could be used to help the poor and expand educational opportunities--traits that Wright saw as clearly antirepublican. Though Wright condemned men for contributing to the problems plaguing society, she seemed to see their part as more a matter of personal choice rather than a character flaw. Women degraded the nation out of irrational ignorance born of educational deficiency and mental weakness: men out of calculated selfishness. Since women comprised the majority of church members,[1] Wright continually associated women--all women-- with the qualities of religion that she thought most threatened the republic-- primarily superstition, irrationality, and emotionalism.

Wright's belief in women's propensity to religiosity invoked notions of inherent female qualities that equated women with clerical antirepublicanism. Though she condemned the inadequate education received by most women, Wright expressed ambivalence about women's ability to escape their mental enslavement without the aid of men. Wright believed that male priests were well aware of and deliberately played on women's inherent weakness: "far from obeying to the letter of their spiritual leader, 'Be ye fishers of men,' we find them every where *fishers of women*. Their own sex, old and young, they see with indifference swim by their nets; but closely and warily are their meshes laid, to entangle the female of every age."[2] While Wright's references to priests would appear to indicate that she, like Beecher, directed her animosity toward the Catholic religion, Wright made no distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism because she believed that

[1] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 8.
[2] Frances Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge. By Frances Wright. As Delivered in the Park Theatre, city of New York," *Free Enquirer* , 18 March 1829.

Protestants were really Catholics under a different name. Though Protestants actively proclaimed their differences, Wright argued that both Catholics and Protestants operated under the same set of misguided assumptions that perpetuated ignorance and inequality. Women, manipulated by priests, then fulfilled their maternal duty in error, unknowingly assisting a clever priestcraft in the perpetuation of clerical dominance, and thus social evil, through the transmission of religious teachings to children, who,"knowing the least of things, believe the most in doctrines: who rocked perhaps in the cradle by fond but mistaken mothers, closed nightly your infant eyes to troubled sleep upon tales of wicked angels, and tempting devils; and opened them, to shrink under the blessed light of morning, from the imaginary frown of a revengeful God." The emotional vulnerability of women that allowed them to become easy victims of the clergy's rational ingenuity, reinforced a notion of female passivity and irrationality: two qualities that excluded women from participation in the republic.

Though Wright insisted on the importance of women's maternal influence, in her discussion of education she called on men to educate their children as an apparent stopgap for the erroneous and frivolous teachings their wives imparted. Her depiction of the pious mother in an irrational thrall to a priest functioned to equate masculinity with secularism and reason, the prerequisites of independent thought and action in the republic. She criticized men who left their daughters in the hands of their mothers, "who may take them to Sunday's preaching; and, with the aid of a little music, a little dancing and a few fine gowns, fit them out for the market of marriage."[3] According to Wright, mothers could not provide the same educational opportunities that fathers could: left only to their mothers, daughters could never become rational beings. Thus, the fate of a woman depended on the individual will, reason, and action of a man.

[3] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II" *Free Enquirer*, 28 January 1829.

Thus, Wright's insistence on the importance of women to the health and future of the race referred to their capacity to act as a retarding force. Wright commented:

> It has already been observed that women, wherever placed--however high or low in the scale of cultivation,--hold the destinies of human-kind. Men will ever rise or fall to the level of the other sex and from some causes in their conformation we find them, however armed with power or enlightened with knowledge, held in leading strings by the least cultivated female....[I]f they [men] knew their interests, they would desire the improvement of those who, if they do not advantage, will injure them.[4]

No matter how much education men received, their lives remained forever touched by the first teachings of their mothers. Only men had the power to change their fate by mandating the education of women. "Pledge yourselves, then, men of industry!" Wright commanded, "pledge yourselves, minds, hearts and votes, to the one measure--that saving, that regenerating, that omnipotent measure...win to it [education] the attention of your wives and your children themselves. Interest all you love, and all you know, and, if possible, all whom you come in contact, weighing its advantages, and advancing its execution."[5]

Wright's distrust of mothers to educate and provide for their children became more overt in the details of her proposal for educational reform. As Beecher would later do, Wright proposed a system of boarding schools. She suggested the removal of children from their homes at the age of two and their placement in state-supported residence schools. These children, "so variously raised in error or neglect," would be separated in each establishment, "by means which those entering with bad habits would be kept apart from the others until corrected."[6]

While these institutions

[4] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II" *Free Enquirer*, 28 January 1829.
[5] Wright, "Editorial: To the Intelligent among the working classes" *Free Enquirer*, 5 December 1829.
[6] Wright, "Lecture on Existing Evils and their Remedy" *Free Enquirer*, 12 December 1829.

would be located near neighborhoods, parents could only visit during certain hours and could, "in no case, interfere with or interrupt the rules of the institution."[7] A mother's influence, therefore, was so central to childhood development that children needed to be separated at an early age to learn the proper mental habits that their mother's had never learned. Wright believed that best and most efficient way to achieve educational reform was through children because their minds had not yet become set into a particular mental configuration. Wright beseeched fathers to use their, "exercise of authority, as by right divine, over the judgment, actions and person of the child...[to] place them, safe and superior to the storms of life, in the security of well-regulated, self-possessed minds."[8] Since men were necessarily absent in order to provide financially for their families, Wright's advocacy of residence schools seemed to portray women as the antithesis of the "well-regulated, self-possessed minds" vital to the rational education of children. In her education program, removing children from their homes allowed Wright to eliminate the threat to the nation posed by women.

While Wright directed her antagonism primarily at religious women, who she generally did not distinguish from any other women, Beecher's antagonism focused principally on working-class women, though all women were implicated. Beecher's criticisms closely entwined issues of class, immigration, and religion. Beecher insisted that all American women were equally important to the task of "extending over the world those blessed influences, which are to renovate degraded man" and that "[n]o American woman, then, has any occasion for feeling that hers is a humble or insignificant lot. The value of what an individual accomplishes, is to be estimated by the importance of the enterprise achieved, and not by the particular position of the laborer." Women should feel themselves "invigorated and cheered"

[7] Wright, "Lecture on Existing Evils" 12 December 1829.
[8] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge: Lecture II" *Free Enquirer*, 28 January 1829.

as "indispensible portions of a grand result," Beecher insisted.[9] Since Beecher implied a unity based on women's special duty to the nation as mothers and teachers within the domestic home, she tended to advocate a culture of womanhood defined on the values and behavior of her own white middle-class status that obscured the realities of race and class.

For Beecher, the rising generation of uneducated, working-class people posed a particular threat to the nation and the future of democracy: a threat only heightened by their irreligion or Catholicism. "The great crisis is hastening on, when it shall be decided whether disenthralled intellect and liberty shall voluntarily submit to the laws of virtue and to Heaven, or run wild to insubordination, anarchy and crime," Beecher warned: "The education of the lower classes is deteriorating, as it respects moral and religious restraints....[A]t the same time thousands and thousands of degraded foreigners, and their ignorant families, are pouring into this nation at every avenue."[10] Beecher believed that the principles of liberty inherent in American republicanism had removed the moral influences on the lower classes, and that something that to be done to avoid the complete dissolution of morality and civil society. Because she believed that the principles of democracy were aligned with those of Christianity, Beecher condemned secular movements, such as Wright's, not only because they opposed religion but also because they often appealed to the lower classes, upsetting Beecher's sense of a religious morality rooted in class hierarchies. The Catholicism of many of the new immigrants posed a threat altogether different to the nation. Unlike Protestantism, in which "every person is to be an independent interpreter of the Bible,"[11] Catholicism, argued Beecher, depended on the interpretation of one person, the pope, whose wishes and

[9] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 37.
[10] Catharine Beecher, *An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers* (New York: Van Nostrand and Dwight, 1835), 14-18.
[11] Catharine Beecher, *An Appeal to the People in Behalf of Their Rights as Authorized Interpreters of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1860), 334.

demands superseded all else, including the republican principles of the United States, which threatened the stability of the nation. The only way to resolve these problems, in Beecher's view, was to establish a national system of moral education that would train upper class women, "who have the highest estimate of the value of moral and religious influence,"[12] to educate the nation's children and save them from the ill-breeding endemic in children's own families, especially among the irreligious or Catholic lower classes.

While Beecher consistently emphasized the importance of women, their ability to exert moral influence, and the need to address the ill-breeding of the lower classes, Beecher saw women of all classes as deficient in some measure. Though upper- class women were more likely to be morally superior, Beecher believed the upper classes complicit in the worsening of social evils by perpetuating aristocratic pretensions that deemed labor degrading and unbecoming. Because of this view, upper-class women often left the care of their children to their ill-bred domestics--a practice which Beecher in some ways likened to child abuse on the part of their mothers. She criticized mothers for neglecting the intellectual and physical development of their daughters while encouraging the frivolity that perpetuated national degradation: "As soon as their school days are over, dressing, visiting, evening parties, and stimulating amusements, take the place of study, while the most unhealthful modes of dress add to the physical exposures."[13] When "ladies" began systematically to manage and care for their homes and children, fulfilling their natural duty to the nation, then the association of labor with degradation would disappear: but these "ladies" would first have to be trained themselves.

Similar to Wright, Beecher believed that most women were either unaware of or simply ill-prepared to perform their duties to society. A woman, according to

[12] Beecher, *An Appeal to the People*,18.
[13] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 45.

Beecher, "feels her obligations, in reference to her influence, over her husband, and a still greater responsibility in rearing and educating her children,"[14] but she was completely unprepared to fulfill these obligations and consequently unable to raise daughters aware of their particular responsibilities to society. Like Wright, Beecher expressed little faith in the ability of mothers to train their daughters properly and sought to establish institutions that could: "But whose business is it to see that these young females are not huddled into crowded rooms?... or that they pursue an appropriate and systematic course of study? or that their manners, principles, and morals, are properly regulated? Parents either have not the means, or else are not qualified to judge."[15] Therefore, while Beecher distinguished a theoretical benevolent and moral superiority in women that especially qualified them to instruct children and affect the future of the nation through their influence, she simultaneously criticized virtually all women for failing in their responsibilities. Their failures left all women, even the morally superior upper class, diminished in the eyes of Beecher.

Despite their criticisms, Wright and Beecher did not believe that women were inherently incapable of reform: it was all a matter of right training. Beecher indeed believed that women could do many things themselves necessary to achieve her vision of social transformation: "It is my full conviction that there is no *real* social evil to which woman is now subjected which is not fully in her power to remedy."[16] More importantly though, Beecher especially stressed that these remedies came through the *development* of habits and practices. They were not something women already possessed. This applied particularly to upper-class women who, according to Beecher, modeled moral behavior to their social inferiors:

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[14] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 44.
[15] Ibid., 53.
[16] Catharine Beecher, *The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Woman* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Co., 1851), 225.

"It is, therefore, the peculiar duty of ladies, who have wealth, to set a proper example."[17] Conceiving and defining of moral virtues as learned social behavior allowed Beecher to identify a special mission for women as teachers, a conflation of "mothers" and "teachers" that accounted for her interest in viewing motherhood as a profession. Schools were necessary to provide the proper training to women, Beecher argued, "But it is to the mothers of our Country, that the community must look for this change. It cannot be expected, that teachers [men], who have their attention chiefly absorbed by the intellectual and moral interests of their pupils, should properly realize the importance of this department of education[.] But if mothers generally become convinced of this, their judgment and wishes will meet the respectful consideration they deserve, and the object will be accomplished."[18] Though she sought to persuade men to support her school reforms, Beecher envisioned women, particularly herself, actually carrying out the reforms she advocated.

Though Wright largely refrained from directly addressing women as agents of reform, she did not believe that women were inherently unable to attain knowledge: it was all a matter of proper schooling, and in this way, she sounded much like Beecher. Wright argued that part of the problem was that women had not received the proper educational upbringing to save themselves from the ignorance that made them susceptible to the meddling of priests: "Nor is the ignorance of our sex a matter of surprise, when efforts, as violent as unrelaxed, are every where made for its continuance. It is not as of yore. Eve puts not forth her hand to gather the fair fruit of knowledge. The wily serpent now hath better learned his lesson; and, to secure his reign in the garden, beguileth her *not* to eat."[19] Wright proclaimed that truth and knowledge were not the exclusive privilege of

[17] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 50.
[18] Ibid., 51.
[19] Ibid.

men. "I should be tempted to ask," remarked Wright to an audience of primarily men, "whether truth had any sex: and I should venture farther to ask, whether they count for nothing, for something, or for every thing, the influence of women over the destinies of the human race."[20] Though Wright did not proceed to lay out a course of precise instruction for women as Beecher did, Wright did seek to establish that the right habits were easily developed and attained. She assured her audiences "that all the facts to which I refer, and all the learning to which I find myself constrained to allude, are of most easy attainment: far, far easier than are the errors over which they are now perhaps weekly stumbling in the churches of this city."[21]

This negative assessment of most women posed for both Wright and Beecher the problem of establishing their own individual credentials--as women--to speak. Both women tried to accomplish this by arguing that they--perhaps uniquely among women-- possessed the right training. By arguing that true knowledge came through experience and observation, Wright and Beecher sought to overturn the notion that women were *inherently* irrational beings. Rather, they argued that women had experiences and observations just like men. The only problem was that most, if not all, women were interpreting them incorrectly and irrationality, and thereby endangering themselves, their children, and the nation. Through references to their own lives, Wright and Beecher affirmed their rationality by premising their reform efforts on the knowledge gained by what they had seen and encountered in their own lives. This knowledge had allowed them to recognize the distance between the nation's ideal and the unfortunate reality. Both believed that experience, observation, and reason were the only way to attain knowledge, and knowledge, the way to human happiness and true republicanism, "All that I then observed," declared Wright,

[20] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge," *Free Enquirer* (18 March 1829).
[21] Wright, "Religion," in *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 58.

> conspired to fix me in the determination of devoting my time and labour to the investigation and exposure of existing evils and abuses, and to the gradual development of the first principles of all moral and physical truth, every where so perplexed and confounded by the sophistry of false learning, the craft of designing knavery, and the blunders of conceited ignorance.[22]

Similarly, Beecher referenced her own travels and careful study as the basis for her reform:

> During my extensive tours in all portions of the Free States, I was brought into most intimate communion, not only with my widely-diffused circle of relatives, but with very many of my former pupils who had become wives and mothers...And oh! what aches were the result of these years of quiet observation...During my travels the last year I have sought all practicable methods of obtaining information, and finally adopted this course.[23]

Wright and Beecher believed that individuals possessed of unencumbered knowledge (the result of personal experience) would naturally act for the benefit of all: "Every mind in every choice of its own mode of happiness, always to select that which in regard to itself, should be the greatest good *on the whole*, instead of greatest *present* enjoyment."[24] To this end, Wright and Beecher sought to demonstrate that the motivation for their reforms was the realization of human happiness and the nation's destiny. In the Enlightenment conception of natural rights, all who acknowledged and submitted to their authority held a particular duty to preserve them--a point Wright and Beecher sought to demonstrate in themselves and to instill in others as a republican characteristic through their reforms.[25] Because they themselves had acquired unencumbered knowledge, both asserted that they were fulfilling their republican duties by acting for the benefit of all, helping to offset their

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[22] Wright, "Preface," in *Life, Letters and Lectures,* x.
[23] Beecher, *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness,* 121-122.
[24] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 237.
[25] Darsey, *Prophetic Tradition,* 29.

vulnerability to attacks.

Although both Wright and Beecher saw women as central to their reform efforts, their criticisms of women often led them to target their message toward men. Wright and Beecher recognized the power that men held to bring about their reforms, especially since their educational reforms required monetary support in order to build schools. Expressly identifying men with their role as providers in their families, Wright urged men toward her reforms as a protective measure for their wives and children should something happen to them: "I speak...to husbands who, while shortening their existence by excess of labor, forsee, at their death, not sorrow alone, but unrequited industry and hopeless penury, involving shame, and perhaps infamy, for their oppressed widows and unprotected children."[26] Unlike Beecher, who primarily wanted privately funded institutions, Wright sought to establish schools fully funded by the government and she encouraged men to advance her reforms through their legislatures to acquire the necessary funding. She believed that a man's ability to provide for his family was his primary obligation, and, therefore, his sole motivation for supporting particular legislative measures. Because she premised education as one of the necessary family provisions, Wright saw her vision of reform as the realization of men's action and directed her appeals to men rather than women. "Pledge yourselves, then, men of industry!" declared Wright, "pledge yourselves, minds, hearts and votes, to the one measure....[W]in to it [education] the attention of your wives and of your children themselves; interest all you love, and all you know, and, if possible, all with whom you come in contact, in weighing its advantages, and advancing its execution...[to] govern as fathers as well as citizens, as citizens as well as fathers."[27] Because men

[26] Wright, "Lecture on existing evils and their remedy, as delivered in the Arch Street theatre, to the citizens of Philadelphia, on the second of June 1819, by Frances Wright," *Free Enquirer* (12 December 1829).

[27] Wright, "Editorial: To the Intelligent among the working classes; and generally, all honest reformers" *Free Enquirer* (5 December 1829).

had access to political power and directed the fortunes of their families, Wright attempted first, and perhaps solely, to achieve the support of men.

Like Wright, Beecher sought the support and cooperation of men to fund her schools and to sustain her vision of reform. Although the Hartford Female Seminary had proved an enormous success, Beecher had larger goals for the school. She wanted to secure an endowment that would allow her to convert the seminary into a boarding school and engage a full-time moral instructor. To demonstrate the serious nature of her intended academic program for women, Beecher provided her philosophy and vision of educationl to gain the attention, and hopefully the financial backing, of Hartford's leading citizens. In the concluding notes to her *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* Beecher wrote that her work was intended for and had been sent to "various gentlemen of candor and intelligence for their inspection and advice, with the belief that its connection with the interests of education is a sufficient claim to their attention."[28] This work and her earlier piece, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education,* were intended not for her students or even for other women. Both were clearly written for a male audience. Yet, Beecher remained unsuccessful in attaining either one of her goals. Hartford's men refused to supply a permanent endowment to the school, which further frustrated Beecher, who later bitterly noted that even as the men denied her school's endowment, they had found the money to endow a local men's college.[29]

Beecher was not alone in her inability to secure men's financial backing for her institutional goals. Wright, too, received neither the approval of fellow reformers and usual admirers nor the monetary support she sought. Publishing her plans for the Nashoba in the local newspapers and in Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation* in 1825, Wright announced that she was eager to have free

[28] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* concluding "note."
[29] Catharine Beecher, *Educational Reminiscences and Suggestions* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1874), 79-81.

people, white or black, settle as soon as houses were ready for them, expecting that she would have the various businesses established by midsummer of 1826.[30] Despite the publication of Wright's proposal in various papers and distribution in pamphlet form, no one sent money. Other anti-slavery advocates declined to support Wright's community even as they praised her efforts on behalf of education. Though the colony at New Harmony established by Robert Owen, her intellectual inspiration and friend, would eventually fail, Wright must have noted that New Harmony had, for at least a time, secured the financial and material resources as well as voluntary settlers that she herself desired for Nashoba. Even Wright's sister, Camilla, had implicitly assumed Owen had a greater chance of success, writing that should Nashoba fail, New Harmony would be their "*resource and resting place* and one that I cd [sic] look to with infinite satisfaction."[31]

These failures did not diminish Wright and Beecher's resolve and continued appeals to men to support their reforms because both fervently believed that the future of the nation was truly at stake. Though women played a central part in both Wright and Beecher's vision of the values and character of the nation, they also saw American women as incapable of the reforms they intended without some kind of assistance. Wright and Beecher similarly presented an idealized image of women that bore little relation to the actual women they saw around them. While women, properly trained, would play a crucial part in the reform process, it was men who held the power to enact and provide the necessary legislative measures and financial support that would make that educational training possible. By associating actual women with antirepublican qualities, Wright and Beecher began to craft their image of an ideal republican woman in an attempt to distance themselves from actual women and to legitimate their reform efforts.

[30] Frances Wright to Benjamin Lundy, 7 November 1825, published in *Genius of Universal Emancipation* (17 December 1825).
[31] Camilla Wright, quoted in Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 115-116.

CHAPTER THREE
"THE REVOLUTION WE HAVE TO EFFECT IS MENTAL AND MORAL:" REDEFINING FEMALE AUTHORITY

Wright and Beecher not only engaged the same set of basic subjects and lines of analysis, but also employed comparable rhetorical strategies to persuade their audiences toward reform as well as their own authenticity as reformers. Wright and Beecher established their cultural legitimacy as reformers by drawing on two distinct and primarily masculine discourses--rational empiricism and propheticism. The sense of national peril and faith in the nation's redemption that informed the reforming impulses of Wright and Beecher invoked perhaps one of the most powerful and common recurring themes of American society: perfectionism. Perfectionist ideology depicted the United States as a nation of the future: despite the disillusionment, injustices, and failings of the present age, the United States, as decreed by God and nature, would become the model and standard by which other nations would be measured. Both were raised in intellectual environments steeped in rational empiricism and had strong relationships with powerful male figures who provided models of authority, reason, and leadership. These relationships strongly influenced both women's understanding of rationality and knowledge as they constructed their sense of themselves and ideal womanhood within the national destiny. Propheticism, on the other hand, allowed Wright and Beecher to claim authority even though they were part of the undereducated and problematic group "women." By invoking rationalist discourses and assuming a position of reform prophet, Wright and Beecher sought to craft a new image of woman based in masculine discourses of rationality and authority while remaining distinctly "woman."

In arguing for and on behalf of the national destiny, both Wright and Beecher drew on a long tradition of perfectionist rhetoric in the United States. The roots of religious perfectionism trace back to the European exploration and conquest of North America. Seventeenth-century colonists to New England envisioned communities founded as models of religious perfection, moving ever closer to the kingdom of God. Puritans had premised their Protestantism as crucial to the rise of freedom because it challenged the superstition and privilege associated with the Middle Ages and Catholicism. In the eighteenth-century, New Light revivalists had preached of the millennial age when the Holy Spirit would reign on Earth. The defeat of the Catholic French in the Seven Years' War reinforced the sense of Protestant purpose and progression toward an exalted state. Moreover, religious revivals in the early nineteenth century assisted in infusing the idea of perfection into daily life. Through the act of conversion, an individual became part of a community that had affirmed its shared commitment to a perfectible society by way of a ritualistic experience.

The revolutionary era produced a more secular and political perfectionism that paralleled, and in many ways, entwined the religious vision, infusing the way that both Wright and Beecher understood themselves, the nation, and reform. Drawing on the ideas of human progress inherited from the Enlightenment, American political rhetoric portrayed the nation's independence as a singular model of freedom in a tyrannical world that helped politicians embed the sense of national destiny into politics. The rationalism of Enlightenment thought complimented Protestantism's emphasis on the use of reason and common sense to discover religious truths. Thus Beecher could later argue that the principles of democratic liberty were, in fact, the very same as those of Christianity: "The great maxim which is the basis of all our civil and political institutions, is, that 'all men are created equal,'

and that they are equally entitled to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' But it can be readily seen, that this is only another mode of expressing the fundamental principle which the Great Rules of the Universe has established, as the law of His eternal government....The principles of democracy, then, are identical with the principles of Christianity."[1] Protestantism, republicanism, reason, and freedom were seen as locked in a struggle against repressive Catholicism, monarchy, and aristocratic pretension.[2] The experiences of war made the revolutionary generation especially value the vision of America's destiny.

The rhetoric of perfectionism articulated not only the rationale but the means by which Wright and Beecher argued and acted on behalf of their social reform. Perfectionism's emphasis on the transformation of individuals informed the way that Wright and Beecher urged the efficacy of moral suasion to present arguments and to affect change. While they expressed great faith in the democratic process, both believed that reform legislated from above would not bring true change because laws did not transform individual habits and opinions. "Though all reform be possible in a country blessed with a government purely representative in principle," stated Wright,

> the progress of reform must always keep pace with the public mind....Revolutions that are effected in a day are ever deceptive. They involve a change of men rather than of measures; of names and forms rather than of principles. The revolution we have to effect is mental and moral, and must be reached through the means of instructional improvement.[3]

This change, on the level of each individual, could only be induced through influence and reasoned arguments based on experience and observation: a recognition that

[1] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 25.
[2] George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 40.
[3] Wright, "Address, On the state of the Public Mind, and the measures which it calls for. As delivered in New York and Philadelphia, in the autumn of 1829, by Frances Wright," *Free Enquirer* (31 July 1830).

social transformation was only possible by altering the daily practices and spatial relationships that supported an unjust system.[4] Individuals would then come together to implement real change through the existing electoral system, and hopefully, in the view of Wright and Beecher, to mandate the funding of educational institutions to ensure the proper formation of the habits of children. "It is true," wrote Beecher, "that every habit can be corrected and changed, but nothing requires greater firmness of purpose and energy of will. For it is not *one* resolution of mind that can conquer habit, it must be a constant series of long continued efforts." She went on to comment that, "Mankind know that they can exert great influence over each other, through the medium of language, so that often one man by communicating his thoughts and feelings, can change the purpose, and govern the will of thousands of his fellow beings, and bring them to yield the control of their interest, plans, and actions to him."[5] Through intellectual arguments and reason, an individual persuaded others of the advantages of his or her ideas, which would naturally work to benefit and promote the happiness of every one else.

Moral suasion appealed especially to Wright and Beecher's conception of knowledge. Because they sought the realization of the highest ideals presumably shared by all Americans and defined knowledge as the outcome of personal observation and experience, moral suasion seemed to provide an effective rhetorical strategy to convey their sense of perfectionism and the personal intimacy of republican principles. Morality and knowledge, for both Wright and Beecher, were essentially the same: each was universally available because each concerned principles located in nature and, once attained, compelled individuals to act for the benefit of all. "In casting our eye over the table of just knowledge," declared Wright, "we shall find the rule we seek, under the head of "MORALS"....The word

[4] David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 229-230.

[5] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 87, 371-372.

MORALS, then, is employed to designate a course of actions, whose effects are beneficial to ourselves and others."[6] Beecher similarly associated morality with knowledge, dividing reason, the basis of her understanding of knowledge, into demonstrative knowledge, or things we perceive directly, and moral knowledge, or things we personally experience.[7] Since Wright and Beecher roughly equated morality and knowledge, moral suasion, or the appeal to the feelings and reason of individuals, offered the most effective means as well as the strategy most compatible with their beliefs, for both to present their arguments for social reform.

For both Wright and Beecher, social reform and future progress began with and strongly emphasized the striving individual, a central component of perfectionist discourse. As a symbol of progress and what remained to be achieved, the individual became a recurrent figure that found resonance throughout American culture and ideologies. The individual was more an abstraction than an actual person, though, becoming a cultural aspiration of self-reliance and self-improvement for white Americans within perfectionist ideologies. Wright and Beecher both, like other perfectionist reformers, referred to these traits of the striving individual as largely amorphous qualities that Americans should remember, glorify, and emulate. In surveying the course of events in America, Wright wrote,

> Yea! this distinctive characteristic of a free people shines forth in every epoch of American history. We see it in 1607, prevailing in the swampy wilds of Virginia; again, on the rocky shores of New England. We find it ever awake and struggling through all the colonial history, until it rose to its height in 1776. We find it alive in 1789; we behold it burning with new vigour in 1801, and see it crowned with victory in 1815. Here we see the energy inherent in the national character, inspiring noblest resolves, preferring and defending true principles

[6] Wright, "Lecture V. Morals" in *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 71-72.
[7] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy*, 101-156.

and wise institutions.[8]

For Wright, the individual resolve and character of Americans allowed them to meet and overcome the challenges they faced, moving ever forward toward their national destiny despite the ills that presently plagued society. Wright believed that something inside the beings of all Americans had the potential to drive them harder and further than any other previously existing society: they needed only to be taught to recognize their role and particular duty.

Self-improvement also held particular interest to Beecher, who based her school curriculum on the careful development of systems and "habits of industry" in the domestic home. Beecher eagerly endorsed an ethic of hard work, believing that those women who were skilled and frugal would not only succeed, but could also rise in social stature through their labor: "It may be urged...that it is impossible for a woman who cooks, washes, and sweeps, to appear in the dress, or acquire the habits and manners, of a lady...[but] if a woman will make some sacrifices of costly ornaments in her parlor, in order to make her kitchen neat and tasteful...if she will rise early and systematize and oversee the work of her family, so as to have it done thoroughly, neatly, and in the early part of the day; she will find no necessity for any such apprehensions."[9] Through skillfully executed hard work and self-sacrifice to her family, traits commonly considered feminine, a woman of meager means could become a "lady."

The cultural ethic of self-reliance and hard work especially complimented Beecher's ambivalence toward lower-class women, who she believed could rise in stature by emulating the habits of their social betters. This emphasis on self-improvement and self-creation helped to resolve the tensions between middle-class affection for the industrial economy that supported their social class and their

[8] Frances Wright, "Address, Containing a Review of the Times, [As delivered in the Hall of Science, New-York, on Sunday, May 9, 1830]" in *Life, Letters and Lectures,* 186.
[9] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 62.

aversion toward its effects on society and the family. In this way, the failure of working-class Americans became less a matter of injustice and inequality than one of insufficient individual enterprise and striving, a point emphasized by Beecher: "It is the power of choice, which raises man to the dignity of an intellectual and moral being."[10] Therefore, Beecher could refer to upper-class families as moral models for society because she believed that they had attained their position not through any particular advantages, but because they had worked harder, practiced thrift, and overcome their greater exposure to the moral temptations of materialism that came with wealth.

Although Beecher's perfectionist vision for the nation never led her to establish a utopian community like Wright did, both women's institutional aspirations reflected the optimism that America could be the site of social and moral perfection, a feeling that pervaded much of antebellum society. The sense of destiny that had spurred the establishment of primarily religious utopian New World communities by early European settlers reemerged in the early nineteenth century along with the creation and growth of more secular utopian communities. While some religious groups such as the Shakers had been involved in these separatist efforts for decades, many experienced a resurgence that reflected the perception of the United States as an appropriate site for perfecting human society. Wright, like many Europeans, believed that the United States was uniquely positioned to create morally just societies, supporting the belief that it stood somehow apart from the rest of the world and human history: "True, the 4th of July, '76, commenced a new era for our race. True, the sun of promise then rose upon the world."[11] Wright's conviction led her to establish Nashoba in 1826, a community of former slaves that she hoped would prove that slaves could become useful members of society.

[10] Beecher, *Elements of Mental and Moral Philosophy,* 79.
[11] Wright, "Lecture VII. Of Existing Evils, and their Remedy," in *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 107.

Although Nashoba failed, Wright never lost faith that the United States offered the ideal environment in which to develop new principles of politics, morality, and community. Though not a utopian community on the order of Nashoba, Beecher's female seminaries were founded on much the same premise: that humans could be reformed and perfected within a specially conditioned environment. It was through educational institutions that Beecher envisioned America becoming an exemplar to the world: "And this is the Country, which the Disposer of events designs shall go forth as the cynosure of nations, to guide them to the light and blessedness of that day. To us is committed the grand, the responsible privilege, of exhibiting to the world, the beneficent influences of Christianity, when carried into every social, civil, and political institution."[12]

While these broad cultural assumptions about the nation's destiny and the power of individual striving provided a framework within which Wright and Beecher similarly understood and communicated their conceptions of social reform, they also generated a constant stream of criticisms about the nation in which they lived. Viewing change as both advancement and degradation helped create an opposition of the materiality of the industrial economy and the humanity of liberty and equality that was central to the perfectionist appeal to principles.[13] Both depicted the nation as moving ever-forward toward increased opportunity and freedom. Yet both women also sensed a loss of control and expressed considerable anxiety over the increasing social inequality and economic insecurity in a nation that proclaimed itself dedicated to the republican principle of individual liberty. "Fathers of this nation!,"cried Wright. "Well are ye asleep in your graves! By the sword of Washington, by the wisdom of Franklin, by the honest democracy of Jefferson, it is time for Americans to arouse, and to vindicate the words of this charter!"[14] While

[12] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 36.
[13] Williams, *The Country and the City,* 294.
[14] Frances Wright, "Parting Address," in *Life, Letters, and Lectures,* 209.

Wright and Beecher continually affirmed the nation's privileged position in the world and future human trajectory, they also cautioned against the forces that threatened to split the nation apart.

By similarly drawing on two separate discourses of authority--propheticism and rational empiricism-- Wright and Beecher sought to establish their authority and position as moral arbiters and instructors to a wayward society. Whereas propheticism had derived from Biblical sources and was long a feature of religious rhetoric, rational empiricism had evolved out of the Enlightenment and involved primarily secular rhetorics. While it is not surprising to find the secular Wright endorsing a rationalist tradition, or the religious Beecher employing prophetic rhetoric, what is striking is that both women not only used both traditions, but that they used them in much the same way. Propheticism allowed Wright and Beecher to claim authority even though they were part of the problematic group "women." Rational empiricism provided a means for Wright and Beecher to distance themselves rhetorically from these women by affirming that they had attained the knowledge and possessed the traits they deemed essential to republicanism. Together, Wright and Beecher used both discourses to construct their space as reformers and to redefine republican womanhood.

By relentlessly applying their moral yardsticks and finding those they measured almost always deficient, Wright and Beecher became reform prophets. Wright and Beecher made symbolic use of the material conditions of antebellum society--economic exploitation, slavery, religious dissension, and deficient educational institutions--as a condemnation of the current order and a violation of the nation's principles to construct their space of reform. By directly addressing the disparities between the ideal and reality, and associating the gap with an inability to realize the national destiny, Wright and Beecher came rhetorically to personify the

perfectionist assumptions of national morality and republicanism that lie beyond the daily discernible reality of inequality and confusion. In this way, Wright and Beecher constructed their role as prophets of reform.

Propheticism suited Wright and Beecher's perfectionist reform rhetoric particularly well because it drew on the legacy of the Puritan jeremiad, creating, and even assuming, unity in the midst of social crisis. The jeremiad had originated in the example of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah who had understood that the strongest argument for his authenticity and authority was not an argument at all, but a simple affirmation that God had sent him to reveal self-evident truths to a community of sinners.[15] As a primary strategy of religious exhortation, Puritan ministers used the jeremiad to encourage religious submission and to mobilize action in the face of communal decline and God's angry retribution. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, Puritan ministers, assuming the role of Jeremiah, "had drawn their inspiration from insecurity....They fastened on it, gloried in it, even invented it if necessary. They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress. Crisis became both form and substance of their appeals."[16] Religious perfectionists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries predicated religious adherence on this sense of crisis. During the Revolution, the religious jeremiad joined with its secular, political counterpart, and carried on through the nineteenth century. Wright and Beecher constantly invoked the theme of national decline to marshal action and to urge people toward their reforms. That the nation's highest ideals were clearly at stake constituted a social crisis for Wright and Beecher that demanded immediate attention. Invoking this sense of crisis and peril allowed Wright and Beecher to construct the fiction of national wholeness and community by reminding Americans of the perfectionist

[15] Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 19, 20.
[16] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 62.

assumptions and republican principles that they supposedly shared as a nation.

By constructing the nation in relation to its foundational principles--liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness--Wright and Beecher could become prophets of reform, donning this mantle through their ability to see what others could not or would not see. They shared a sense of mission: a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with republican principles. Both also took an uncompromising and often excoriating stance toward their reluctant audience. This sense of mission and inflexibility were all traits associated with propheticism, and, in particular, the jeremiad.[17] Accordingly, Wright and Beecher, like the Puritan ministers before them, did not seek to persuade their audiences by seeking common ground on which to arrive at mutually affirmable goals. Instead, both women sought to undermine and dismantle the belief structures that impeded the acquisition of true knowledge by systematically revealing the inadequacy of existing education, particularly for women. In propheticism, Wright and Beecher found a powerful and persuasive masculine rhetorical strategy that distanced them from other women.

Because their programs of reform focused on improving the condition of women, as women themselves, both Wright and Beecher also needed to establish their personal distance from women in order to claim a space of cultural legitimacy and authority--especially in seeking the support of men. It was imperative for Wright and Beecher to demonstrate their personal differences to further legitimate their use of the masculine rhetoric of propheticism. For both women, rational empiricism provided the means to demonstrate this difference because of its emphasis on experience, observation, and evaluation. Wright and Beecher presented and justified their views on women as correctives based, presumably, on skills that they themselves already possessed, having spent their lives carefully examining the situation of American women. Their careful study and reasoned

[17] Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 16.

evaluation provided the rationale for both women to differentiate themselves personally from other women.

Beecher's criticisms and didactic writings seem to reveal an underlying sense of her difference from other women. Beecher felt that she had engaged on a "calculated [path] to inspire American women with a sense of their high responsibilities to their Country."[18] She believed that women's particular duties to the nation could not "be realized by those, who have not turned their attention to the subject" as she herself had.[19] Beecher sought to explain her background and competency in prescribing domestic skills to women--a point of especial importance since Beecher was not married and did not have a home of her own. Aware of her vulnerability to criticism on this point, Beecher wrote in the preface to her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* that she had been trained from youth "to the care of children, and to the performance of most domestic duties," having lived "most of her life, in the families of exemplary and accomplished housekeepers."[20]

Wright, too, understood her difference from women as the product of her attention and study of the subject. She offered herself as an example of what a woman could become through education. She had, from youth, received and engaged in the correct practices of observation and experience to arrive at the reasoned knowledge she presented to her audiences. "Shall I be forgiven for adverting, most unwillingly, to myself?" asked Wright. She continued,

> Having assumed an unusual place, I feel, that to my audience some explanation is due. Stimulated in my early youth, by I know not what of pitying sympathy with human suffering, and by I know not what persuasion, that our race was not of necessity born to ignorance...I have as little the inclination to obtrude on you the process of investigation and course of observation I followed through the

[18] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 38.
[19] Ibid., 51.
[20] Ibid., viii.

> period of an eventful youth...Suffice it, that I have been led to to consider the growth of knowledge, and the equal distribution of knowledge, as the best--may I say, the only means for reforming the condition of mankind.[21]

In this way, Wright and Beecher sought to demonstrate and justify their difference from other women by virtue of their upbringing and study, viewing these differences as a particular asset to their reform efforts.

Though Wright and Beecher differentiated themselves rhetorically from other women in arguing for social reform, women played a central part in both women's vision of the values and character of the national destiny. Their shared sense of the nation's future directly corresponded to how Wright and Beecher related to and positioned themselves in relation to other women. Criticizing particular groups of women allowed Wright and Beecher to distance themselves not only from certain women but also from the traits and behaviors that they believed harmed the nation. This positioning revealed the individual qualities Wright and Beecher saw in themselves and deemed essential to republicanism, which influenced how they defined ideal womanhood within the nation's project perfection. As each envisioned the role of women in the national destiny, both Wright and Beecher sought to expand the rhetoric surrounding women to fit their own particular circumstances.

Both Wright and Beecher attempted to redefine the image and republican qualities of ideal womanhood to resemble their own lives. In affirming her own rationality to her audience, Wright aligned herself and her vision of the nation's destiny with the reason that she gendered masculine. Writing of her youth in her published autobiography, Wright wrote (in the third person), "Surrounded at all times by rare and extensive libraries, and commanding whatever masters she desired, she applied herself by turns to various branches of science, and to the study

[21] Wright, "Lectures on Knowledge" (18 March 1829).

of ancient and modern letters and the arts."[22] As she stated in many of her speeches, Wright sought to establish her commonality with the rational course of education pursued by Enlightenment thinkers and the founders of the republic--all men. Thus, when she asked an audience of men whether truth had any sex, she was asserting her own ability, and presumably that of other women, to acquire the reasoned knowledge associated with and held primarily by men. This allowed Wright to present a new and singular image of herself as woman: a woman modeled on man.

Beecher, too, sought to craft the image and character of ideal womanhood. Both Wright and Beecher differentiated between male and female attributes. Unlike Wright, Beecher saw these differences as positive and complementary. For Beecher, women and men possessed very definite and different attributes that determined their place in society. While these differences were, like Wright's, oppositional in some ways, Beecher conceived of the differences working together to create a harmonious society rather than working against each other. Beecher argued that every individual, male or female, was entitled to equality and liberty but that in order to secure these principles, a system of social relations must be in place. "What these relations and their attending obligations shall be," wrote Beecher,

> are to be determined, not with reference to the wishes and interests of a few, but solely with reference to the general good of all...For this purpose, it is needful that certain relations be sustained, which involve the duties of subordination...Society could never go forward, harmoniously ...unless these superior and subordinate relations be instituted and sustained.[23]

Having established the need for relations of subordination to ensure republicanism, Beecher went on to delineate the specific areas in which women or men took the

[22] Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Biography, Notes, and Political Letters of Frances Wright D'Arusmont. From the First British Edition* (New York: John Windt, 1844), 9.
[23] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy,* 25-26.

superior position: "In civil and political affairs, American women take no interest or concern, except so far as they sympathize with their family and personal friends....In matters pertaining to the education of their children, in the selection and support of a clergyman, in all benevolent enterprises, and in all questions relating to morals and manners, they [women] have a superior influence."[24] In this way, Beecher sought to delineate specific gendered powers and to elevate the importance of women's work as commensurate, even superior to, if different from, the qualities and work of men. Because Beecher viewed the preservation and transmission of morality as the pinnacle of human achievement and the linchpin of republicanism, she hinged the nation's advancement toward its destiny on women's domestic duties.

Wright and Beecher both modeled ideal womanhood on their intellectual surroundings and figures of authority from their own lives. Both Wright and Beecher had strong relationships with powerful and influential men that, in turn, seemed to affect their construction of woman and gendering of the national destiny. For Wright, her time in the United States was marked by a close friendship and identification with the Marquis de Lafayette that gave her access to important public figures such as Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and James Madison. Beecher, on the other hand, was the first-born child of the ambitious and fiery Calvinist minister, Lyman Beecher, with whom she closely identified and who she remembered as having called her, many years later, "the *best boy* he had."[25] Lyman's prominence as a Calvinist minister also allowed Beecher access to influential public figures in New England as well as Ohio. While these experiences and relationships would produce differing conceptions of religion and ideal womanhood, Wright and Beecher each constructed a sense of themselves and their personal authenticity through these

[24] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 33.
[25] Beecher quoted in Boydston, et al. *The Limits of Sisterhood*, 17.

models of male authority and legitimacy.

The individuals and intellectual environment in which Wright found herself throughout her life greatly affected her understanding of the world and her vision of reform. Surrounded by powerful men in an environment that, in the Enlightenment tradition, valued knowledge, intellect, and reason, Wright established herself and dealt with this deeply gendered world by stressing only those traits assigned to men. Like Lafayette and the men around her, Wright de-emphasized the physical and spiritual and argued on behalf of the intellect, erasing the characteristics that society insisted differentiated women from men and making women, such as herself, like the men who had developed and now governed the United States.[26] "I dare say you marvel sometimes at my independent way of walking through the world," wrote Wright to Lafayette, "just as if nature had made me of your sex instead of poor Eve's. Trust me, 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 male child of Adam."[27] Wright stressed intellect and knowledge as the preeminent components of personal identity, dismissing all matters spiritual and viewing passion and sentiment as a hindrance to reason--issues that were, by the early nineteenth century, particularly identified with women. Anticlericalism was also a notably popular feature of democratic movements, providing a common language to strike at aristocratic pretension and authoritarian privilege.[28]

Even as Wright recognized the forces oppressive to women's equality and opportunity, she remained so rooted to and aligned with a secular political model

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[26] Lori Ginzberg, "'The Hearts of Your Readers Will Shudder': Fanny Wright, Infidelity, and American Freethought," *American Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (June 1994):195-226: 217-218.
[27] Frances Wright quoted in Lloyd Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 158.
[28] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 103.

that the only way to state her position was through masculine political language. The Enlightenment tradition of political dissent had created a masculine political language that entrenched a notion of the republic based on male citizenship, and a notion of individualism premised on universal rights intended to give men a common claim to the political rights of the citizen.[29] In affirming the theoretically natural and universal rights established in the nation's founding documents, Wright defined herself as reformer and rationalist through her similarity with a republican conception of cultural legitimacy and individualism figured masculine. To Wright, when women assimilated, as she had, to the dominant masculine culture of empirical rationalism through education, true republicanism would be attained. Furthermore, Wright's allusions to events in American history consistently emphasized masculine political acts or wartime triumphs as indications of national progress and evidence of the nation's particular destiny--events that also often featured personal friends, such as Jefferson and Madison. "For myself, I feel proud to declare, that no less perfect and entire is the democracy of my views and principles," asserted Wright, continuing: "I would see the righteous declaration here penned by Jefferson, signed by sages, sealed with the blood of the fathers of this nation, and solemnly sworn to by their sons on each anniversary of its birth."[30] For Wright then, cultural legitimacy and authority came from her identification with the traits of rationalism gendered masculine and personal association with influential male friends and leaders: men she recognized as the embodiment of her ideals. Because she addressed and actively sought a primarily male audience to advance her reforms, Wright came to understand herself and justify her legitimacy as a reformer through her similarities with men. Wright's upbringing and close relationships with men steeped in Enlightenment thought

[29] Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France, and the United States 1780-1860* (New York: Macmillian, 1985), 3; Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 5.
[30] Wright, "Parting Address," in *Life, Letters and Lectures*, 217.

contributed to her understanding of a masculine national destiny and a notion of womanhood modeled on traits associated with men. Thus, it was through her dissociation from the antirepublican qualities associated with femininity that Wright found the power she admired in political leaders like Lafayette and sought for herself as a reformer.

Like Wright, Beecher's relationships with men, intellectual development, and personal experiences deeply affected her understanding of herself, authority, and reform. Beecher's father Lyman was a dominant source of learning, power, and love. As she later recalled of her childhood, "It has been said the children love best those that govern them best....Mother was gentle, tender, and sympathizing, but all the discipline of government was with father. This strong and decided government was always attended with overflowing sympathy and love. His chief daily recreations were frolics with his children."[31] Beecher's father proved a far more compelling figure to her than her mother, and he remained a dynamic model as well as a powerful influence throughout her life. After the death of her mother, Lyman began to encourage Beecher to think more seriously about religion, urging her toward the self-sacrifice and religious submission expected of Calvinist women. This social and religious abnegation did not come easily for a woman who relished her autonomy and took pride in her accomplishments. The eternal damnation of her deeply religious fiancé, unconverted at his death, further challenged and strained Beecher's relationship with her father. The confrontation between Beecher and the religious heritage her father represented was one of the most formative experiences of her life, as she herself, like her fiance, remained unconverted. Beecher never fully escaped the dominating force of her father's personality and struggled to come to terms with the intellectual, social, and religious world out of which she was raised.

[31] Catharine Beecher in Lyman Beecher, *The Autobiography of Lyman Beecher,* ed. Barbara Cross (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 104.

Despite her personal challenges, Beecher remained so engrossed in Lyman's religious world that rather than imagining a completely different intellectual and emotional framework for her reforms, she reshaped the old ones to suit her needs, recasting both the teacher and the mother as female counterparts of the minister. Convinced as she was of her own abilities and brought up by her father to relish influence and acclaim, Beecher sought a profession that was as nearly like the ministry as possible for a respectable woman. In conflating the mother and the teacher, Beecher paralleled the role of the minister by charging women with not only the education of minds, but with the formation of souls. "But are not the most responsible of all duties committed to the charge of woman?" asked Beecher. "Is it not her profession to take care of mind, body, and soul? and that, too, at the most critical of all periods of existence? And is it not as much a matter of public concern, that she should be properly qualified for her duties, as that ministers, lawyers, and physicians, should be prepared for theirs?"[32] To Beecher, teachers held an importance to society equal to, if not greater, than that of other professions, because of women's influence over the perfection of the soul.

The ministry provided a compelling model for Beecher to construct her image of teaching as a respectable profession for women. Like Lyman, Beecher charged women with some responsibility for matters of the soul. Beecher's conception of the soul differed from her father's, though, because she had not converted to his faith. Unlike Lyman, Beecher looked for salvation in social conduct rather than spiritual redemption, developing and defining the required moral habits into a coherent system of education for women. Beecher wrote,

> The Author of our being has so regulated the dispensations of his Providence, and the constitution of our moral, intellectual, and physical natures, that *doing right*, on the whole, does tend to promote the

[32] Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 52.

> happiness of every individual in all cases, even in this world, and doing wrong, does eventually lead to a diminution of enjoyment. Whenever, then, the human mind can, by reason or persuasion, be brought to feel that the path of rectitude is the path of happiness.[33]

Conceiving of moral virtue as of learned behaviors rather than spiritual rebirth allowed Beecher to understand herself as a moral, religious person. Like the minister, charged with guiding individuals toward salvation, Beecher envisioned herself leading women toward salvation by educating them in the proper habits of industry. For Beecher, teachers complemented and assisted the minister in their shared goals: "Though she may not teach from the portico, not thunder from the forum, in her secret retirements she may form and send forth the sages that shall govern and renovate the world....Though she may not be cloathed as the ambassador of Heaven, nor minister at the altar of God; as a secret angel of mercy, she may teach its will, and cause to ascend the humble, but most accepted sacrifice."[34] The complementarity of teaching and the ministry underscored Beecher's belief that women and men possessed different attributes that, together, created a harmonious society. It was, thus, through the casting of the teacher as female minister that Beecher found the power she admired in her father and desired for herself, while maintaining the guise of female propriety through its containment within the walls of the domestic home.

For Wright and Beecher, the sense of national destiny invoked in perfectionist discourses provided a powerful language and set of ideological assumptions for both to similarly imagine the reformation of antebellum society, and, more importantly, to imagine themselves as "woman." By aligning themselves and the expected outcome of their reforms with the achievement of the nation's destiny, Wright and Beecher found justification and legitimacy for their efforts by employing

[33] Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education,* quoted in Boydston, et al, *The Limits of Sisterhood,* 44.
[34] Beecher, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education,* 53.

the masculine rhetorical strategy of propheticism. Aligning themselves with the prophetic tradition permitted Wright and Beecher to claim cultural authority even though they were part of the problematic category "woman." Rational empiricism allowed Wright and Beecher to distance themselves personally from women and to demonstrate their acquisition of the knowledge and characteristics they saw as essential to the realization of true republicanism. Men also provided powerful and influential models for both women to construct their sense of self and of ideal republican womanhood. By personally and rhetorically differentiating themselves from other women, Wright and Beecher patterned their male relations and borrowed from masculine discourses of authority to craft a new image of the republican woman within a unified and destined American nation.

CONCLUSION

In 1836, Catharine Beecher described Frances Wright as the antithesis of everything Beecher professed to believe about the nation and appropriate female behavior. Beecher's personal invective illustrated the tensions of an antebellum society that in so many ways seemed strikingly disparate and at odds with itself that it required a tremendous leap of faith to imagine a coherent national culture. These sharp social tensions and contrasts have bolstered Wright and Beecher's subsequent portrayal as "radical" and "conservative" by historians of the nineteenth century. Besides the personal animosity expressed by Beecher toward Wright, historians have indeed had many readily apparent sources for this characterization. Wright and Beecher differed on not only religion, but also issues of social class, the means and outcomes of abolitionism, and on women's appropriate public and political role. These seeming contrasts would appear to position Wright and Beecher as irreconcilably opposed.

And yet, as I demonstrate, a close look at both Wright and Beecher reveals a number of similarities--similarities that suggest that Wright and Beecher had far more in common than their images, personal aversion, and legacy have suggested. Both women identified the same social and economic problems and similarly concluded that these problems impeded the realization of true republicanism. Wright and Beecher remained committed to a comparable set of assumptions about what made American distinct and what it meant to be an American as they urged individuals toward a path that would lead all, as a nation, to the harmonious future predicted in perfectionist discourses. Both also proclaimed the transcendent authority of women's moral influence in the face of social turmoil. The surprising

similarities between Wright and Beecher and their analysis of the nation's future reveal that both women were engaged in efforts to contribute to ongoing contestations over national representation and women's place within that nation.

Wright and Beecher were certainly not alone in their attempts to understand and conceive of the nation and nationhood nor the role of women. The antebellum years were characterized by the rise of both religious and secular groups, organizations, and movements, such as the Mormons, as well as alternative communities, like Brook Farm, that each developed different and competing notions of community, order, and unity. Images of the nation remained as various as the people who, ostensibly, constituted a unified political entity called the United States. Across and between movements and classes, people also sought to set the boundaries of appropriate female behavior and activity. Many individuals attempted to claim and conflate ideas of morality and femininity as their own, mobilizing morally expressed gender difference for various ends. Even those who sought to transform the conditions that made men and women unequal believed enough in an ideology of female difference to serve the interests of the more conservative among them.[1] Living in a world being transformed rapidly by forces seemingly outside individual human control, Americans struggled to construct cultural fictions of nationhood and womanhood that would not only justify and explain their actions but also help them to make sense of the world around them. As Stephen John Hartnett has persuasively argued, these antebellum fictions' most important function was to "fulfill collective needs for edification and legitimation."[2]

By invoking republican principles and deploying perfectionist rhetoric to achieve social reform and regeneration, Wright and Beecher sought to create, legitimate, and project a singular and harmonious notion of "Americans" and the

[1] Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 34

[2] Stephen John Hartnett, *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.

"United States." This broadly conceived process involved many conflicted and localized notions of nationalist representations, rhetorics, and discourses and permeated the work of many antebellum writers and thinkers. Declaring independence from British rule in the eighteenth century had entailed far more than a political or economic revolution--it also necessitated a revolution in both internal and external representation. During the Revolution, American political leaders had dispensed with older conceptions of the North American colonies as European possessions, and developed new representations and descriptions that attempted to prove the legitimacy of colonial rebellion and American nationhood to a world audience.[3] Part of this process of nationalist discourse involved depicting the American republic as the culmination of a rationally discernible system of causation--a national history of a people moving ever closer to their projected potential through a series of portending events.[4] To Wright and Beecher, the widening and intolerable gap between what they saw as the high ideals of liberty and equality proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, and the reality of poverty, slavery, and ignorance seriously endangered the realization of true republicanism. This disparity between principle and practice became the foundation and provided the rationale for their reform efforts. Each woman used this gap to craft programs of reform that would contain and, potentially, transform the internal schisms that impeded the path to true republicanism and national unity.

Both Wright and Beecher saw women as critical to the realization of the nation's projected destiny. Despite their appeals to men to enact their reforms, Wright and Beecher believed that women--not men--would ensure the future of republicanism by virtue of women's inherent morality. Both Wright and Beecher

[3] Jennifer Rae Greeson, "Colonial Planter to American Farmer: South, Nation, and Decolonization in Crevecoeur," in *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*, ed. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 103-120: 103.
[4] Michelle Burnham, "The Periphery Within: Internal Colonialism and the Rhetoric of U.S. Nation Building" in *Messy Beginnings*: 139-154: 146.

depicted female morality and influence as the saving grace of a republican nation, standing not only apart, but above the social, political, and economic dislocations that threatened to tear Americans and the nation apart. Because Wright and Beecher conceived of the principles of equality and liberty as issues of national morality rather than matters of legislation, these republican ideals became the special preserve of women. For Wright and Beecher, then, women's moral influence was an essential part of republicanism.

Wright and Beecher's belief in gender difference and the transformative power of female moral influence became central to their efforts to construct the fiction of an existing national and republican community. Both urged Americans toward a unity based on republican principles that they assumed everyone believed and shared. They argued that an inherent love of liberty and equality eclipsed local dissensions and divisions, uniting individuals behind the republicanism that they understood as the defining mark of Americans. Though Wright and Beecher maintained a constant stream of criticisms of the society in which they lived, neither woman ever questioned the existence of a unified nation and people, nor the idea that republicanism was the only way to achieve national perfection. For both, the problems they identified in antebellum society endangered the future of a unified nation and people that already existed, rather than threatening or complicating the *creation* of a sense of shared nationhood. The ideals of American republicanism, conceived in the revolutionary era, had aimed to secure and present a independent nation based on social, political, and cultural organization both to itself and the world--a constructed national image placed upon diverse regional institutions, peoples, and forms.[5] To do so required the foregrounding of a singular image of nationhood--what has been called the "monovocalism" of republicanism--that

[5] Edward Watts, *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 16.

aimed to prove the legitimacy of America as a nation of the world while occluding complex internal identity struggles.[6] By constantly invoking the theme of national decline--the degradation of the nation created during the Revolution-- Wright and Beecher sought to urge immediate action and to construct the fiction of national community and unity. Both Wright and Beecher charged women with the moral preservation of the republican principles that defined this national community.

In ascribing particular gender roles and characteristics to individuals living in a republican nation, Wright and Beecher participated in this monovocalism by creating two different yet indispensable categories of Americans: men and women. Idealizing women and celebrating female morality allowed Wright and Beecher to create a sense of American womanhood based on women's supposed shared social experience. This unified womanhood served to obscure the race and class differences that created social divisions and potentially threatened national harmony. For Wright and Beecher, female morality and influence were essential to womanhood, overcoming local particularities and conflicts. The closely joined terms of morality and femininity in the antebellum years supplied the language of national conformity with respect to gender roles and behavior for American women.

By stressing the importance of individual striving, hard work, and self-improvement, Wright and Beecher sought to give every American, but especially every American woman, a stake in the nation's projected future. For both, true social reform and regeneration depended on the transformation and cultivation of individual sentiments and opinions, not the arbitrary action of a leader or legislative body on an unwilling populace. Wright and Beecher, like other antebellum reformers, insisted that public opinion, over which women supposedly had great power through their familial influence, effected social transformation and legislative

[6] Watts, *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic* , 139, 75.

change.[7] This belief granted women a sense of personal authority and was the primary way that women exerted their influence in society. Wright and Beecher remained convinced that individuals possessed of "right knowledge" gained through personal observation and experience would not only naturally act for the benefit of all but would arrive at the same conclusions as they had. In this way, they contributed further to the monovocalism of republicanism by simultaneously acknowledging and then ignoring different or oppositional subjects.[8] Though Wright and Beecher encouraged individuals to reason based on their own experiences, recognizing, on the one hand, the multiplicity of opinions possible through rational empiricism, they also, on the other, concluded and based much of their legitimacy as reformers on the assumption that individuals would naturally realize the truths that Wright and Beecher had already attained. Both understood "American" not as something that might exist in different versions but as something that existed in a particular republican model. This was especially true for women, and Wright and Beecher criticized those women who believed or acted in ways contrary to their vision of the characteristics and behaviors of ideal republican women. The republican principles that Wright and Beecher saw as essential to the future of the nation would be secured through the system of education they had devised.

The educational institutions that Wright and Beecher envisioned sought, in many ways, to create and replicate students who aligned with their understanding of what constituted republican individuals. Because Wright and Beecher saw women as critical to this process of educational reform and to the stability of republicanism, women became the foundation of their program to realize their image of the nation's destiny--without republican women, a republican nation could

[7] Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 76.
[8] Burnham, "The Periphery Within," in *Messy Beginnings*, 143.

neither exist nor endure. Both developed educational systems intended to achieve and secure true equality and liberty by cultivating specific habits and traits, particularly in women. These schools became physical manifestations of republicanism for Wright and Beecher because they provided the intellectual preconditions of knowledge, personal observation and experience, and designated particular duties to individuals that would make equality and liberty tangibly felt and universally accessible. Both sought to align actual women with the particular principles with which all Americans theoretically agreed and that would provide a singular image of the national characteristics of womanhood. In this way, Wright and Beecher sought to transform actual women into the ideal women they envisioned as central to national coherence and the nation's projected destiny. Yet, despite women's importance, Wright and Beecher did not envision women or femininity as the public face of the nation. A woman's role was to be the quiet, unseen support for the public actions and rational deliberations of her male relations. Although both Wright and Beecher saw women as critical to the realization of the harmony they saw in republicanism, they also identified women as especially problematic. Venerated as paragons of morality and virtue on the one hand, and denounced as critically flawed on the other, women faced a profoundly contradictory environment in the early republic. For Wright and Beecher, the process of national representation involved reconstructing womanhood and female authority to fit within the fictive national identity they sought to create. This process of creation and representation involved designating specific roles and duties for men and women--duties that primarily affirmed female passivity by urging women toward indirect conduits of power and by associating women with the domestic home. While moral suasion and female influence gave women some sense of power, both rhetorical methods implied a more inward and less visible manner that

conformed to contemporary assumptions of femininity. These assumptions about femininity largely aimed to contain women. Despite Wright and Beecher's emphasis on the importance of women to the nation, neither saw women or femininity as the public face of the republican nation they imagined. In this way, the historically "radical" Wright contributed to an ideology of female domesticity largely associated with the "conservative" Beecher.

Even as Wright and Beecher worked to redefine ideal womanhood and to establish institutions that would train women to become rational individuals, they did not see this training resulting in an expansion of women's position in the nation beyond the home. While Beecher did indeed work to make teaching a respectable occupation for women, she justified this expansion as an extension of a domestic femininity and gender difference. Wright's primary motivation for advocating women's education was to curb the transmission of what she saw as erroneous teachings on the part of mothers. To Wright, educational reform would allow mothers to raise their children properly on the principles of rational empiricism, only reinforcing women's maternal domestic role. Certainly an idea of female moral influence and virtue within the domestic home granted *some* women *some* personal authority. But women like Wright and Beecher pursued life courses that diverged from their discussion of domestic women and sought to establish their cultural legitimacy as reformers through masculine discourses of authority.

Wright and Beecher's emphasis on gender difference and appropriate female behavior contained strongly conservative implications, both for their notion of ideal womanhood and for themselves as reformers. Even as they modeled many aspects of ideal womanhood on masculine forms of cultural authority and legitimacy, both women remained at pains to maintain a distinctly female identity premised on gender difference. They shared the rhetoric of female virtue and propriety to

justify, in part, the morality of their own activism as well as the morality of the women they sought to reform. In the antebellum years, the ideology of female moral influence provided an accessible language for charges of "immorality" and "unfemininity" against reformers seen as attacking deeply embedded institutions, even if the reformers too adhered to notions of gender difference. In this way, Beecher's angry tirade against Wright can be seen as an effort first, to control what were to her more "radical" (read: dangerous) secular influences, and, second, to signal the respectability and morality of her own cause.

More importantly though, Wright and Beecher's adherence to an ideology of gender difference undercut their own attempts to claim authority. Wright and Beecher's construction of womanhood was dependent on women's shared social experience, yet this common experience was created by the very belief in gender difference that perpetuated the sexual inequality that both women sought to reform. While they envisioned distinct roles for women as agents of morality to future generations in an ideal republican nation, these roles would continually accord women a subordinate and constrained position. Both Wright and Beecher remained trapped in a paradox that undercut their challenges to antebellum society--constructing ideal republican womanhood on masculine traits negated the uniquely feminine qualities of morality, while morally expressed gender difference bolstered the sexual inequalities that created a shared womanhood.

Wright and Beecher's fear of the destabilizing forces at work in the antebellum years led both to recreate the only standard of national legitimacy and coherence they had known: that of a particular kind of republicanism. Relying on oppositions for the sake of stability and unity while glossing over local complexities, secular and religious reformers like Wright and Beecher were similarly engaged in a process of nationalist representation and self-creation rooted in comparable

understandings of republican principles, authority, and rhetoric. Though publicly, Beecher and Wright seemed to be working toward quite different ends, both women actively sought the reform and regeneration of American society and a similarly idealized image of women within the national destiny. In short, both Wright and Beecher seemed to believe that the United States could achieve its projected perfection through the coordinated action of women, as they similarly attempted to construct a harmonious and singular nation and people that could overcome and transcend the forces that threatened to tear the nation apart.

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