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The Grimké Sisters: Radical Defenders of Women's Rights and Abolition

MEGAN BAILEY

HST 4650: Civil War, Spring 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Drew Swanson

Megan graduated summa cum laude from WSU in December 2015 with a degree in History. While at WSU, she was a member of the History Club, Phi Theta Alpha, and Phi Kappa Phi. Megan plans to attend graduate school.

Megan notes:

My primary reason for completing this particular project was to highlight Sarah and Angelina Grimké's extraordinary accomplishments as 19th century abolitionists and women's rights advocates. By doing so, I hope to draw attention to the sacrificial endeavors and various contributions of lesser known females throughout history.

Dr. Swanson notes:

Ms. Bailey's paper is an excellent piece of undergraduate scholarship. She examines the lives and work of two southern abolitionists, South Carolina's Grimké sisters, in an analysis that limns the importance of gender and religion in opposition to American slavery. She also convincingly argues that the sisters' radicalism ultimately undermined the long term success of their crusade. The essay draws on a solid secondary source base as well as selected writings of the sisters themselves.

When examining the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement from a gender perspective, historians and scholars have primarily focused on the lives and influences of a few, celebrated female characters. For example, abolitionist heroines such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who authored *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Sojourner Truth have received significant attention and achieved revered status among scholars and non-academics alike. However, few individuals beyond the world of academia have heard of America's first southern, female abolitionists, Sarah and Angelina Grimké. The Grimké sisters, who belonged to the powerful planter aristocracy in South Carolina, were arguably two of the leading female abolitionists of the pre-Civil War era. They authored numerous pamphlets, letters, resolutions, and speeches condemning the evils of slavery and racial prejudice, participated in several anti-slavery conventions during the 1830s, and advocated complete social, civil, and religious equality for African Americans and women. However, despite their early successes as southern abolitionists and pioneers of social reform, the Grimké sisters have remained enigmas in the modern, non-academic world.¹

Historian Gerda Lerner surmises that the reasons for their relative obscurity are undoubtedly related to the nineteenth century bias against unconventional women. Consequently, neither Angelina nor Sarah “was mentioned in the history of antislavery until 1961.”² Nevertheless, the Grimké sisters' contributions to the abolitionist movement were strikingly compelling given their background and personal experience with slavery in the South. However, their impassioned views concerning the evils of slavery and racial discrimination were considered excessively radical by both religious sects and conservative abolitionists throughout the North. Additionally, Sarah and Angelina Grimké's abolitionist efforts in the public arena extended far beyond the rigid domestic sphere that nineteenth-century women were expected to inhabit. As a result, they faced incessant criticism and harassment for daring to speak publicly before “promiscuous” mixed audiences. Despite employing numerous biblically-based arguments to justify their defiance of racial and gender conventions, the Grimké sisters were denounced by various anti-slavery societies and religious

¹ Ellen H. Todras, “The Grimké Sisters,” in *The History of Southern Women's Literature*, eds. Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weeks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 72-76.

² Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Woman's Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 263.

organizations for bringing “shame and dishonor” to nineteenth-century womanhood.³ Therefore, the Grimké sisters’ radical philosophies concerning racial and gender equality ultimately impeded their long-term participation and effectiveness as abolitionists in the public sphere.⁴

Sarah and Angelina Grimké’s radical disillusionment concerning racial inequality originated during the earliest years of their childhood. The Grimké sisters were born into a prominent slaveholding family in Charleston, South Carolina, and were raised on a wealthy plantation during the antebellum period. Their father, Judge John Faucheraud Grimké, was a respected lawyer, politician, and member of South Carolina’s exclusive plantation society. As an esteemed and affluent representative of this firmly established social system, John Grimké characteristically owned hundreds of slaves. Thus, the Grimké sisters personally witnessed the evils of slavery as an institution on a regular basis during their formative years. Although most children of slaveholding families eventually learned to accept “the underlying logic of the system,” Sarah and Angelina seemingly refused to conform to that disturbing mentality.⁵ Sarah, for instance, recalled that she often wept and prayed as a child whenever slaves were chastised or mistreated on her father’s plantation. She deplored that slavery was a continual “millstone about my neck, and marred my comfort from the time I can remember myself.”⁶

It is important to understand that Sarah and Angelina Grimké were concurrently aware of the numerous limitations placed on nineteenth-century women. Sarah, in particular, struggled to resign herself to these gender based restrictions, particularly in the realm of education. During the earliest years of her education, Sarah had shown an active interest in learning such masculine subjects as geography, advanced mathematics, and natural science. However, young women were highly discouraged from engaging in such strenuous studies due to the imagined delicacy of their feminine minds and natures. Consequently, when Sarah attempted to convince her father to allow her to participate in her older brother Thomas’s Latin

³ Carol Lasser and Stacey Robertson, *Antebellum Women: Private, Public, Partisan* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 146.

⁴ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 15, 110, 120, 128.

⁵ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 15.

⁶ Sarah Grimké, in Catherine Birney, *The Grimké Sisters: Sarah and Angelina Grimké, The First Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman’s Rights* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1885), 11, quotation on 11; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 11-13, 15-16.

lessons, John Grimké vehemently denied her request. Sarah later voiced her frustrations regarding her inadequate education in a moving essay titled “The Education of Women”:

With me, learning was a passion, and under more propitious circumstances, the cultivation of my mind would have superseded every other desire. In vain I entreated permission to go hand in hand with my brothers through their studies. The only answer to my earnest pleadings was ‘You are a girl—what do you want with Latin and Greek... You can never use them.’⁷

Thus, although Sarah and Angelina were educated at one of Charleston’s premier institutions for young women, their studies were specifically designed to prohibit the excessive taxation of their gentle female minds. As a result, both sisters were painfully aware that, due to their gender, their intellectual aspirations had been continuously stifled throughout their youth.⁸

During their childhood and well into their adulthood, Sarah and Angelina Grimké grew increasingly disturbed and saddened by the depraved “system of American slavery” in the South. Their anti-slavery convictions were so deeply embedded that they eventually left South Carolina permanently, “to escape the sound of the lash and the shrieks of tortured victims.”⁹ The Grimké sisters’ intimate knowledge of and personal experience with slavery had profoundly impacted the depth of their radicalism. They had witnessed first-hand slavery’s “demoralizing influences, and its destructiveness to human happiness.”¹⁰ Consequently, Sarah and Angelina departed from their native state in 1821 and 1829, respectively, with the fervent conviction that all African American slaves should receive complete and immediate emancipation. They further adhered to the belief that all individuals, regardless of race, should be granted basic human rights, and enjoy complete social, civil, political, and religious equality. Angelina later defended their radical stance by simply stating that she “had seen too much of slavery to be a gradualist.”¹¹

Although the Grimké sisters were passionately opposed to slavery, their immediate involvement in the northern anti-slavery movement was tempered for several years by a plethora of issues. To begin with, both sisters were ardent members of the Society of Friends in Philadelphia, a religious sect that opposed

⁷ Sarah Grimké, “The Education of Women,” in *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

⁸ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 13-14, 16-17.

⁹ Sarah Grimké, “Narrative and Testimony of Sarah M. Grimké,” *Christian Reflector* (1838-1848), May 22, 1839, accessed March 11, 2015,

<http://ezproxy.libraries.wright.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/135927509?accountid=15141>.

¹⁰ Angelina Grimké, in Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 271.

¹¹ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 41, 60, 130, quotation on 130.

social activism and public commitment to the abolitionist cause. Additionally, during the nineteenth-century, women were vehemently discouraged from publicly speaking or writing about political matters. Consequently, females who attempted to assert themselves by engaging in the language of abolitionist discourse in the public sphere risked the utter diminution of their distinctive feminine traits, such as modesty, delicacy, and restraint. Thus, Sarah and Angelina's immediate and open participation in the anti-slavery movement was undoubtedly constrained by these social conventions. However, in the spring of 1835, a dissatisfied Angelina unabashedly defied the Society of Friends and became an active participant in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Although Sarah originally refused to follow in her younger sister's defiant footsteps, she too began to grow increasingly frustrated with the Philadelphia Quaker Society's lack of social activism and frequent acts of racial discrimination.¹²

Sarah and Angelina Grimké's unintentional and dramatic foray into the public arena of abolition was spearheaded by the controversial activist William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was a radical abolitionist who had organized the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and founded *The Liberator*, a northern anti-slavery newspaper. Both Garrison and the Grimké sisters supported the immediate emancipation and integration of African Americans, and strongly rejected the beliefs of conservative northern abolitionists who favored colonization and gradualism. In September of 1835, Angelina composed a letter to Garrison "declaring her support of his radical stance against slavery."¹³ In the letter, Angelina revealed her private concerns regarding the pro-slavery and anti-abolitionists riots that were taking place throughout the country. She mused that "[a]lthough I expected opposition, I was not prepared for it so soon—and I greatly feared [the] abolitionists would be driven back...and thrown into confusion." Angelina concluded her letter with an ardent plea to Garrison to stand firm in his convictions. She entreated, "[t]he ground upon which you stand is holy ground: never...surrender it. If you surrender it, the hope of the slave is extinguished."¹⁴ Garrison was deeply moved by the contents of Angelina's letter; additionally, he recognized the value and honesty of Angelina's words and shrewdly discerned that they should be read and admired by a national audience. Consequently, Garrison

¹² Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 78, 80, 82, 91-92.

¹³ Katherine Henry, "Angelina Grimké's Rhetoric of Exposure," *American Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (June 1997): 342.

¹⁴ Angelina Grimké to William Lloyd Garrison, September 1835, in Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 85.

published Angelina's letter in its entirety in his newspaper *The Liberator*, without her permission. Within weeks Angelina's impassioned response propelled her to the forefront of the abolitionist movement and deepened her personal commitment "to the cause of radical abolitionism."¹⁵

During the next three years, Sarah and Angelina Grimké dedicated their lives to the American Anti-Slavery Society and the abolitionist cause. They became intense activists in the public arena, founded the Female Anti-Slavery Society, and produced numerous anti-slavery pamphlets, letters, essays, and resolutions. As a result, they sacrificed familial relationships, friendships, personal safety, and their reputations as genteel women. The religious leaders of the Society of Friends, for example, disapproved of Angelina's published letter and insisted that she recant some of the opinions and sentiments expressed within the letter. When Angelina refused to comply with their demands, the Society condemned her brazen actions and shunned her association. In her diary, Angelina recalled the anguish she experienced at the Society's condemnation. She lamented, "I was indeed brought to the brink of despair," but "tho' I sufferd so deeply I could not blame the publication of my letter, nor would I have recalld it if I could...I felt willing to bear all, if it was only made an instrument of good."¹⁶ Additionally, Sarah and Angelina's shockingly public display of their radical beliefs and abolitionist activities appalled their slaveholding relatives in South Carolina, and eventually resulted in a lifelong estrangement between the two women and their family.¹⁷

Angelina Grimké drew further criticism from various sources due to the composition of her infamous "Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States." In her 1836 appeal, Angelina ardently refuted the South's biblical argument for slavery by examining numerous biblical laws relating to slavery and servitude. Additionally, Angelina daringly entreated her female peers to educate themselves on the subject of slavery and its monstrous evils. By urging them to examine the politics and ideologies behind the institution of slavery, Angelina Grimké fundamentally encouraged southern women to venture beyond the educational boundaries that Western society had predetermined for them. Thus, Angelina brilliantly utilized her public

¹⁵ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 78-79, 85-87, quotation on 87.

¹⁶ Angelina Grimké, *Walking by Faith: The Diary of Angelina Grimké, 1828-1835*, ed. Charles Wilbanks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 212-213.

¹⁷ Henry, "Angelina Grimké's Rhetoric of Exposure," 343; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 87-89, 92, 101; Todras, "The Grimké Sisters," 72-76.

voice to subtly address and criticize deeply embedded beliefs relating to women's proper roles within American society. Historian Gerda Lerner deduces that although Angelina's appeal was not necessarily revolutionary in its argument and language, her appeal was distinctly "unique in abolitionist literature because it [was] the only appeal by a Southern abolitionist woman to Southern women."¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, Angelina Grimké's "Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States" was passionately censored in the South, and hundreds of copies were publicly burned. Angelina was also permanently barred from Charleston and threatened with mob violence, arrest, and imprisonment if she dared to venture into the city; subsequently, neither Angelina nor Sarah ever visited Charleston again. Additionally, the Philadelphia Society of Friends responded to the appeal by permanently disowning the Grimké sisters for publicly propagating their radical and dangerous anti-slavery philosophies.¹⁹

Angelina and Sarah Grimké began their abolitionist crusade in the public sphere by speaking to female-only audiences on the subjects of slavery and racial discrimination. During the first few months of their public speaking campaign in early 1837, the Grimké sisters primarily spoke in domestic settings, which included "sewing circles and private parlors."²⁰ However, as their reputations as southern abolitionists began to grow, the Grimké sisters were invited to speak before increasingly larger female audiences, including the distinguished American Anti-Slavery Society. According to professors Carol Lasser and Stacey Robertson, the Grimké sisters' mesmerizing appeal and notoriety were directly correlated to their "intimate knowledge of southern slavery and their skilled oratorical style."²¹ Angelina's emotional rhetorical expression, in particular, was remarkably effective among northern audiences and succeeded in rousing considerable public support for the abolitionist cause. Throughout her speeches, Angelina masterfully weaved an unfiltered exposé of slavery in the South while concurrently attacking racial prejudice and inequality in the North.²²

Due to the overwhelming popularity of their lectures, the Grimké sisters transitioned from speaking in private homes to lecturing in church sanctuaries and public lecture halls. However, the Grimké sisters'

¹⁸ Henry, "Angelina Grimké's Rhetoric of Exposure," 348; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 95-96, quotation on 96.

¹⁹ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 98, 100-101.

²⁰ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 94.

²¹ Lasser and Robertson, *Antebellum Women*, 44.

²² Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 92, 94, 107, 109-111.

advancements in the realm of public speaking were met with disapproval and protestations by northern citizens and several leading northern abolitionists, including Gerritt Smith. Smith was of the opinion that Sarah's and Angelina's highly publicized demonstrations would negatively impact the overall effectiveness of the abolitionist campaign. Additionally, there were countless northerners who believed that "the idea of a woman lecturing in a church was utterly shocking."²³ Nonetheless, despite the mounting criticism against their obtrusive violation of women's proper roles, Sarah and Angelina "remained undaunted in their struggle" against slavery and racial and gender discrimination.²⁴

An onslaught of additional problems plagued the Grimké sisters during their 1837 New England tour. To begin with, men began attending Sarah and Angelina's abolitionist lectures with alarming frequency in several towns throughout the North, which included Boston, Roxbury, Salem, and Lynn. Furthermore, Angelina had successfully participated in a series of debates against two Massachusetts men who had challenged her statements regarding the mistreatment of slaves in the South. Thus, Sarah's and Angelina's decisions to speak and debate publicly before mixed audiences elicited a firestorm of controversy throughout the North, and produced a plethora of seething reactions from the general public, conservative abolitionist groups, and various religious organizations. The New England churches, in particular, reacted with open hostility and disapprobation. Their opposition was predominantly attributed to their fervent support of the old Colonization Society. Additionally, they believed that women should remain silent on political matters and refrain from speaking in public. Subsequently, on June 28, 1837, the Massachusetts Congregational Clergy issued a pastoral letter in which they publicly criticized the Grimké sisters for "encourage[ing] females to bear an obtrusive and ostentatious part in measures of reform."²⁵

Angelina and Sarah Grimké experienced further opposition for speaking publicly from members of their own sex. Catherine Beecher, for example, was a northern abolitionist and reformer who advocated the subordination of women to men, and supported segregation and colonization. In her book titled *An Essay on*

²³ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 107.

²⁴ Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimke, and Margaret Fuller* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 59-60, quotation on 59; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 106-108.

²⁵ Lasser and Robertson, *Antebellum Women*, 145-146, quotation on 146; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 114-115, 118-119, 124-126; Todras, "The Grimké Sisters," 73-75.

Slavery and Abolitionism with reference to the Duty of American Females, Beecher severely admonished the Grimké sisters for violating their proper female roles in American society. Beecher fundamentally believed that women “had no business in any public sphere of the antislavery movement,” and should remain within their preassigned domestic and social spheres.²⁶ Angelina responded to her former mentor’s remonstrations by declaring that the denial of a woman’s political rights as an American citizen was a “violation of human rights, a rank usurpation of power, a violent...confiscation of what is sacredly and inalienably hers.”²⁷

The Grimké sisters fervently believed that the subjugation of women was intricately connected to the subordination of African Americans; thus, they adamantly declared that the “denial of our duty to act” in support of the abolitionist cause, “is a denial of our right to act...and if we have no right to act then may *we* well be termed ‘the white slaves of the North.’”²⁸ Thus, in February of 1838, Angelina Grimké transcended the proper boundaries of nineteenth-century womanhood by addressing the Massachusetts State Legislature’s legislative committee on “behalf of the anti-slavery petitions presented by women.” Angelina’s decision to speak before the legislative committee further infuriated the general public; subsequently, the Grimké sisters were skewered by the press and referred to as notorious troublemakers by disgruntled northerners. Soon thereafter, the Grimké sisters abruptly retired from the abolitionist spotlight and retreated into a life of domesticity. Although historians and scholars have furiously debated the cause of their abrupt departure, many agree that the Grimké sisters were exhausted by the challenges they experienced throughout their abolitionist careers in the public arena.²⁹

Sarah and Angelina Grimké utilized their private frustrations and individual experiences as southern women to publicly promote social, political, and civil equality for African Americans and women. However, their roles as female leaders within the abolitionist movement were considered highly controversial and ultimately “obscured the remarkable accomplishments of their mission.”³⁰ Additionally, the Grimké sisters’ outspoken critiques of racial and gender inequality alienated them from various religious organizations and

²⁶ Todras, “The Grimké Sisters,” 74.

²⁷ Angelina Grimké, in Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 130; *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 128-130; Todras, “The Grimké Sisters,” 74-75.

²⁸ Angelina Grimké, in Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 114.

²⁹ Henry, “Angelina Grimké’s Rhetoric of Exposure,” 348; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 114, 155, 161.

³⁰ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 115.

conservative abolitionist groups which deprived them of crucial support in the North. Furthermore, there were numerous abolitionists who blamed Sarah and Angelina Grimké for the eventual split in the abolitionist movement because “their actions heightened conflict over leadership” within the movement, and “brought ideological disagreements into open controversy.” Consequently, the Grimké sisters’ revolutionary beliefs regarding racial and gender equality directly challenged America’s prevailing social system and elicited a negative emotional response that undermined the effectiveness and longevity of their abolitionist careers in the public sphere.³¹

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³¹ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina*, 114-115, quotation on 115.