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## Catharine Beecher on Abolitionism and the Duties of American Females 1837

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*Catherine Beecher (1800–1878), education advocate and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe, believed that women held a quiet, but powerful, influence within the family and home. Consequently, Beecher stressed that for a woman to take a public stance on a political issue was “out of her appropriate sphere.” Beecher wrote the following essay in response to female abolitionist Angelina Grimke’s public plea for women to aid in abolitionist efforts. At the time that this essay was published, Beecher had already founded two important schools for women, and she went on to help found The Ladies Society for Promoting Education in the West, which played a key role in creating several women’s colleges in the Midwest. —Renata Fengler*

Bibliography: Kathryn K. Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), xii–xiv, 19, 132.

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[1] My Dear Friend, Your public address to Christian females at the South has reached me, and I have been urged to aid in circulating it at the North. . . . Our acquaintance and friendship give me a claim to your private ear; but there are reasons why it seems more desirable to address you, who now stand before the public as an advocate of Abolition measures, in a more public manner.

[2] The object I have in view, is to present some reasons why it seems unwise and inexpedient for ladies of the non-slave-holding States to unite themselves in Abolition Societies; and thus, at the same time, to exhibit the inexpediency of the course you propose to adopt.

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[3] To appreciate more fully these objections, it will be necessary to recur to some general views in relation to the place woman is appointed to fill by the dispensations of heaven. It has of late become quite fashionable in all benevolent efforts, to shower upon our sex an abundance of compliments, not only for what they have done, but also for what they can do; and so injudicious and so frequent, are these oblations, that while I feel an increasing respect for my countrywomen, that their good sense has not been decoyed by these appeals to their vanity and ambition, I cannot but apprehend that there is some need of inquiry as to the just bounds of female influence, and the times, places, and manner in which it can be appropriately exerted.

[4] It is the grand feature of the Divine economy, that there should be different stations of superiority and subordination, and it is impossible to annihilate this beneficent and immutable law. On its first entrance into life, the child is a dependent on parental love, and of necessity takes a place of subordination and obedience. As he advances in life these new relations of superiority and subordination multiply. The teacher must be the superior in station, the pupil a subordinate. The master of a family the superior, the domestic [servant] a subordinate – the ruler a superior, the subject a subordinate. Nor do these relations at all depend upon superiority either in intellectual or moral worth. . . . However unworthy the master or worthy the servant, while their mutual relations continue, no change in station as to subordination can be allowed.

In fulfilling the duties of these relations, true dignity consists in conforming to all those relations that demand subordination, with propriety and cheerfulness.

[5] In this arrangement of the duties of life, Heaven has appointed to one sex the superior, and to the other the subordinate station, and this without any reference to the character or conduct of either. It is therefore as much for the dignity as it is for the interest of females, in all respects to conform to the duties of this relation. . . . But while woman holds a subordinate relation in society to the other sex, it is not because it was designed that her duties or her influence should be any the less important, or all-pervading.

[6] It is Christianity that has given to woman her true place in society. . . . “Peace on earth and good will to men” is the character of all the rights and privileges, the influence, and the power of woman. A man may act on society by the collision of intellect, in public debate; he may urge his measures by a sense of shame, by fear and by personal interest; he may coerce by the combination of public sentiment; he may drive by physical force, and he does not outstep the boundaries of his sphere. But all the power, and all the conquests that are lawful to woman, are those only which appeal to the kindly, generous, peaceful and benevolent principles.

[7] Woman is to win every thing by peace and love; by making herself so much respected, esteemed and loved, that to yield to her opinions and to gratify her wishes, will be the free-will offering of the heart. But this is to be all accomplished in the domestic and social circle. There let every women become so cultivated and refined in intellect, that her taste and judgment will be respected; so benevolent in feeling and action; that her motives will be revered;—so unassuming and unambitious, that collision and competition will be banished;—so “gentle and easy to be entreated,” as that every heart will repose in her presence; then, the fathers, the husbands, and the sons, will find an influence thrown around them, to which they will yield not only willingly but proudly. . . . But the moment woman begins to feel the promptings of ambition, or the thirst for power, her aegis of defence is gone.

[8] A woman may seek the aid of co-operation and combination among her own sex, to assist her in her appropriate offices of piety, charity, maternal and domestic duty; but whatever, in any measure, throws a woman into the attitude of a combatant, either for herself or others—whatever obliges her in any way to exert coercive influences, throws her out of her appropriate sphere. If these general principles are correct, they are entirely opposed to the plan of arraying females in any Abolition movement; . . . it draws them forth from their appropriate retirement, to expose themselves to the ungoverned violence of mobs, and to sneers and ridicule in public places; because it leads them into the arena of political collision, not as peaceful mediators to hush the opposing elements, but as combatants to cheer up and carry forward the measures of strife.

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[9] In this country, petitions to congress, in reference to the official duties of legislators, seem, in all cases, to fall entirely without the sphere of female duty. Men are the proper persons to make appeals to the rulers whom they appoint, and if their female friends, by arguments and persuasions, can induce them to petition, all the good that can be done by such measures will be secured. But if females cannot influence their nearest friends, to urge forward a public measure in this way, they surely are out of their place, in attempting to do it themselves.

[10] There are some other considerations, which should make the American females peculiarly sensitive in reference to any measure, which should even *seem* to draw them from their appropriate relations in society. . . . There are now nearly two millions of children and adults in this country who cannot read, and who have no schools of any kind. To give only a small supply of teachers to these destitute children, who are generally where the population is sparse, will demand *thirty thousand teachers*. . . .

[11] Where is this army of teachers to be found? Is it at all probable that the other sex will afford even a moderate portion of this supply? The field for enterprise and excitement in the political arena, in the arts, the sciences, the liberal professions, in agriculture, manufactures, and commerce, is opening with such temptations, as never yet bore upon the mind of any nation. Will men turn aside from these high and exciting objects to become the patient labourers in the school-room, and for only the small pittance that rewards such toil? No, they will not do it. Men will be educators in the college, in the high school, in some of the most honourable and lucrative common schools, but the *children*, the *little children* of this nation must, to a wide extent, be taught by females, or remain untaught. The drudgery of education, as it is now too generally regarded, in this country, will be given to the female hand. . . .

[12] [I]f females, as they approach the other sex, in intellectual elevation, begin to claim, or to exercise in any manner, the peculiar prerogatives of that sex, education will prove a doubtful and dangerous blessing. But this will never be the result. For the more intelligent a woman becomes, the more she can appreciate the wisdom of that ordinance that appointed her subordinate station, and the more her taste will conform to the graceful and dignified retirement and submission it involves.

[13] An ignorant, a narrow-minded, or a stupid woman, cannot feel nor understand the rationality, the propriety, or the beauty of this relation; and she it is, that will be most likely to carry her measures by tormenting, when she cannot please, or by petulant complaints or obtrusive interference, in matters which are out of her sphere, and which she cannot comprehend.

[14] But it may be asked, is there nothing to be done to bring this national sin of slavery to an end? . . . . To this it may be replied, that Christian females may, and can say and do much to bring these evils to an end; and the present is a time and an occasion when it seems most desirable that they should know, and appreciate, and exercise the power which they do possess for so desirable an end. And in pointing out the methods of exerting female influence for this object, I am inspired with great confidence, from the conviction that what will be suggested, is that which none will oppose, but all will allow to be not only practicable, but safe, suitable, and Christian.

[15] In the present aspect of affairs among us, when everything seems to be tending to disunion and distraction, it surely has become the duty of every female instantly to relinquish the attitude of a partisan, in every matter of clashing interests, and to assume the office of a mediator, and an advocate of peace. And to do this, it is not necessary that a woman should in any matter relinquish her opinion as to the evils or the benefits, the right or the wrong, of any principle or practice. But, while quietly holding her own opinions, and calmly avowing them, when conscience and integrity make the duty imperative, every female can employ her influence, not

for the purpose of exciting or regulating public sentiment, but rather for the purpose of promoting a spirit of candour, forbearance, charity, and peace.

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### Discussion Questions:

1. According to Beecher, how was it appropriate for women to exert their influence within society?
2. What arguments did Beecher make in an attempt to discourage women from participating in the Abolitionist movement?
3. According to Beecher, what was the appropriate course of action women could take to end slavery?

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SOURCE: Catherine E. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1837), 2–9, 97–110, & 128–29. Some paragraphing has been altered, and paragraph numbers have been added.

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