

## Sarah Grimké

1792–1873

Sarah Grimké, not content to leave the work of abolition to the male leaders of her time, tirelessly wrote and spoke against slavery. In one of her letters, she admits, “I feel much as if I were speaking to those who would not hear tho’ one rose from the dead” (*Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld* 401). Sarah Grimké, along with her younger sister Angelina Grimké Weld, broke most of the contemporary conventions for white ladylike conduct by speaking in public. After leaving Charleston to join the Society of Friends, the two sisters traveled throughout New England fulfilling speaking engagements in both small parlors and large churches. Their speeches and publications about abolition and women’s rights reached thousands of people in New England and the Southern states.

After being harshly criticized for addressing women’s rights in her antislavery work, Sarah Grimké responded with *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838), which was the first major publication about women’s rights in the United States. In these letters, as in the letter anthologized below, Grimké uses scripture to support her claims. By quoting Bible verses and passages, she persuades her critics, particularly the clergy, to re-examine their belief that pursuing women’s rights was a distraction, a lesser cause in comparison to abolition. She writes, “I cannot see why minds may not be exercised on more than one point without injury to any.”

Theodore Weld, Angelina’s husband, was one of the original organizers of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a member of the Society of Friends. He held considerable influence on the movement and the Grimkés, and he repeatedly asked the sisters to stop speaking of women’s rights. In the letter to Weld included here, Sarah Grimké argues her right to address women’s issues in her writing and when she speaks in public on abolition. In her opening line, she describes Angelina as “wrathy” over Weld’s advice in previous letters that the sisters confine their speeches to the abolition issue alone. In fact, when adding her own section to the bottom of this letter, Angelina crossed out Sarah’s adjective “good” in the second line and substituted the word “bad” above it. Sarah Grimké’s response to Weld’s advice is perhaps more measured and reasoned, but she is nonetheless passionate in her insistence that women’s rights must be connected to human rights.

### “Letter to Theodore Weld”

1837

Fitchburg [Mass.] 9/20/37

My dear brother,

Angelina is so wrathy that I think it will be unsafe to trust the pen in her hands

to reply to thy two last <sup>bad</sup>~~good~~ long letters. As I feel nothing but gratitude for the kindness which I am sure dictated them, commingled with wonder at the “marvellables” which they contain, I shall endeavor to answer them and as far as possible allay the uneasiness which thou seems to feel at the course we are pursuing. My astonishment is as great at thy misconceptions as thine can be at ours. Truly if I did not know brother Theodore as well as I think I do, I should conclude his mind was beclouded by the fears which seem to have seized some of the brotherhood least we should usurp dominion over our lords and masters. But as I think we are fully agreed that dominion is vested in God only, I shall proceed. The 2d marvellable is “That we magnified the power of the N. E. Clergy.” The mtgs. we have had, generally full, if not crowded, have satisfied our sister that here she was mistaken. I never tho’t so. My convictions for several years past have been that the ministry as now organized is utterly at variance with the ministry Christ established, tends to perpetuate schism and disunion, and therefore must be destroyed; and I believe verily that the Ch. so called is standing right in the way of all reform. I must say a few words about brother Wright, towards whom I do not feel certain that the law of love predominated when thou wrote that part of thy letter relative to him. I do not think he designed to exhibit us as trophies of his conquests, but simply to throw his views (and ours incidentally) before the public. We feel prepared to avow the principles set forth in the “domestic scene.” To my own mind they have long been familiar, altho’ I acknowledge that coming in contact with another mind similarly exercised on these points has given additional strength and clearness to my views. I wonder that thou canst not perceive the simplicity and beauty and consistency of the doctrine that all government, whether civil or ecclesiastical, conflicts with the govt. of Jehovah and that by the Christian, no other govt. can be acknowledged without leaning more or less on an arm of flesh. Would God all abolitionists put their trust where I believe H. C. W[right] has placed his, in God alone. Brother Weld, my heart misgives me for the ab-

olition cause when I see that A. S. men when smitten on one cheek as R. G. Williams was, instead of turning the other cheek as Jesus commands, appeal to the arm of the law for retaliation. And E. P. Lovejoy keeping arms in his office! Truly I fear we have yet to learn the lesson "Trust in the Lord, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." Surely posterity will brand us as hypocrites. The slave must not raise his hand against his oppressor, but we are at liberty to revenge our wrongs. Oh consistency where art thou?

Thou sayest the point at issue between us is whether "you, S. M. and A. E. G., should engage in the public discussion of the rights of women as a distinct topic. Here you affirm and I deny." Now, dear brother, I do not think we ever affirmed that we ought to engage in a public discussion on this subject: all either of us had or now have in view was to throw our views before the public. I have not the least idea of spending any time in answering objections to my letters in the N. E. Spectator; I do not feel bound to take up any caviller. There are my opinions on what I regard as a very important branch of human rights, second to no other. Those who read may receive or reject, or find fault. I have nothing to do with all that. I shall let thee enjoy thy opinion about the opening in the N. E. Spectator; I must wait to see the issue before I conclude it was one of Satan's providences. Thy illustration about the building of the wall serves my purpose admirably. Nehemiah disregarded the scoffs of his enemies, and continued his work; but nevertheless he set half the people in the lower places behind the wall, with their swords, their spears and their bows to guard the workmen. This is all we have done. We have kept steadily on with our A. S. work; we have not held one mtg. less, because we gave a little attention to guard the workmen from the thrusts of the enemies. Thou takes it for granted that our heads are so full of *womans rights*, *womans rights* that our hearts have grown cold in the cause of the slave, that we have started aside like broken bows. Now we think thou hast verily misjudged us. My cough rendered me incapable of speaking in public. Of course I did not require time to prepare lectures and I really cannot see where is the harm of my writing on any other subject that presented to my mind. I am amazed at thy talking of us as Reformers in the A. S. cause; such a tho't never entered my head. We were the followers and aiders of the Reformers, but we bro't no new artillery into the field; we used the weapons others had used before us. Thou seems to overlook the fact that before a word was written on the subject of womans rights, the Pastoral letter had been issued and that in every place that we lectured the subject of our speaking in public was up for discussion. My reason for giving my views with my name was simply because I wished to be answerable for those views. The idea that my name gave any currency to the opinions I advanced never presented itself; so far from it that I regretted that M. W. Chapman had not undertaken it, because I believed her name would give weight to the sentiments. I thank thee for the suggestion of helping a third person to the argument; it really did not occur to me. Nor did I intend to involve myself in any controversy which would take all my time and

strength. Truly my brother thou hast called up a host of difficulties, which if they arise, I shall not encounter; and as to absorbing the public mind I do not see much like it. My letters are quietly received and if any of the subjects therein discussed attract attention I cannot see why minds may not be exercised on more than one point without injury to any. I was not aware that the ministers were playing the part of hypocrites when they said women had no right to speak in public. I believed they tho't what they said.

I do not think women being *permitted* to pray and tell their experience in revivals is any proof that Christians do not think it wrong for women to preach. This is the touchstone, to presume to teach the brethren. Let a woman who has prayed in a revival claim to be the appointed minister of Jesus and to exercise that office by teaching regularly on the sabbath, and she will at once be regarded as a fanatic, or a fool. I know the opposition "arises (in part) from habitually regarding women as inferior beings" but chiefly, I believe, from a desire to keep them in unholy subjection to man, and one way of doing this is to deprive us of the means of becoming their equals, by forbidding us the privileges of education to fit us for the performance of duty. I am greatly mistaken if most men have not a desire that women should be silly. Thou says I have summoned the ministers and churches to surrender. Not I truly. I do not believe, if I remember right, that I have said one word yet in my letters on the subject of womens preaching; we have done exactly what thou sayest we ought to have done, gone right among the ministers and lectured just when and where we could. I agree with thee that moral reform is successfully advanced "by uplifting a great self-evident central principle before all eyes". This has been done by proclaiming human rights and thus the way was prepared for the reception of the doctrine of womans rights. I have read the New Tes. my dear brother, I tho't to edification; but I cannot agree with thee in the application of that text, "I have many things to say," etc. I do not suppose Christ had allusion to the truth of the gospel, these he had declared again and again, but to the sufferings which awaited his disciples after his death; these sufferings he left time and circumstances to unfold as they were strengthened to bear them. If Jesus alluded to any great and important truth, why is none such revealed in the scripture after his ascension? I rejoice with thee that the cause of the slave cannot be destroyed by our misconception of duty, if indeed we have misconceived it, but we believe that if women exercised their rights of thinking and acting for themselves, they would labor ten times more efficiently than they now do for the A. S. cause and all other reformations. Do not wrong us by supposing that in our movements the slave is overlooked. The direction to J. E. Fuller may be continued. We received the Eman. and last Re[corder] and Q[uarter]ly. My cough is much better. I lectured last sabbath at Lunenburg and tuesday at Westminster with very little inconvenience. I see nothing about next winter but trust the Lord will direct our steps. At present we have engagements that will keep us till the middle of Nov. If I may choose, I hope my lot will not be cast in the city of N. Y. Could we travel

during the winter in N. Y. or Penn.? We did not know D. A. Payne. I have not said half I have to say but this must suffice for the present as Angelina wishes to try her hand at scolding again. Farewell dear brother, may the Lord reward thee ten fold for thy kindness and keep thee in the hollow of his holy hand—thy sister in Jesus

S. M. G.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Grimké, Sarah. *An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States*. New York: 1836.
- . *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman, Addressed to Mary Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society*. Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838.
- Weld, Angela Grimké. *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings, 1835-1839*. Edited by Larry Ceplair. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

## Angelina Grimké Weld

1805–1879

Angelina Grimké Weld was the first woman in the United States to address a legislative body—the Massachusetts State Legislature in 1838. She testified to support the right to petition the government about slavery. Born in Charleston to slave-owning parents, she observed the oppression of slavery firsthand and resolved to take action. She followed her older sister, Sarah Grimké, north to Philadelphia and joined the Society of Friends. By regularly referring to her upbringing in the South, Angelina Grimké Weld created a strong *ethos* in her rhetoric, demanding that Northerners take no less action than she, a Southerner.

Although Angelina delivered more speeches than her sister, they both wrote and spoke to mixed audiences of up to fifteen hundred people in churches and lecture halls all over New England, and they faced harsh criticism for doing so. Angelina was accustomed to such criticism, though. Her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States* (1836) was so radical that some Southern postmasters destroyed copies of the book. When she began to introduce women's rights into her public rhetoric about abolition, she faced severe criticism not only from the clergy but also from her early supporters, including John Greenleaf Whittier and Theodore Weld, her husband. In response to them, she writes, "If we surrender the right to speak to the public this year, we must surrender the right to petition next year and the right to write the year after and so on. What then can woman do for the slave when she is herself under the feet of man and shamed into silence?" (*Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld* 430)

The "Address at Pennsylvania Hall" was one of several speeches given that night to both the male and female antislavery societies as part of the dedication ceremonies of the hall. The comments in parentheses, written by the contemporary reporter, describe the scene inside and outside the hall. Delivered while a throng of anti-abolitionists gathered outside throwing rocks at the windows and shouting, the speech bravely censures all those complicit in the system of slavery, including the church, political leaders, and Northern and Southern men and women. Instead of being threatened by the mob, Angelina Grimké Weld incorporates the mob into her rhetoric and asks, "What is a mob? What would the breaking of every window be? What would the leveling of this Hall be? Any evidence that we are wrong or that slavery is a good and wholesome institution?" The following night, Pennsylvania Hall would be burned to the ground.