

The Debate over Woman's Suffrage in *Brother Jonathan*, 1843

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes an analysis of a neglected 1843 debate published in the weekly newspaper *Brother Jonathan*. This debate, which was about women's rights, opposed a pro-feminist man (John Neal) to an anti-feminist woman (Eliza Farnham). The study of their respective arguments and tones illuminates the mechanism of power and performance at play in women's resistance to feminism, at a time when women were denied many rights, particularly through the doctrine of coverture. The historical alliance between abolitionism and feminism finds an echo in Neal's rhetoric which takes up the metaphor of slavery to compare women with slaves. Conversely, Farnham applies the metaphor to men. While neither author actually evokes the presence of real slave men and women, both perform gendered roles that are meant to defend their own visions of manhood and womanhood. Published 5 years before the Seneca Falls convention, this often-overlooked exchange further proves that women's rights were being discussed in the early 19th century in a variety of spaces, a fact which the recent historiography of suffrage has put forth in an effort to decenter and reshape the traditional narrative of the 19th amendment.

KEYWORDS: Women, suffrage, 19th century, gender norms, power, performance, public sphere, domesticity

Introduction

On June 17, 1843, the New York based weekly newspaper *Brother Jonathan* published a lecture entitled "Rights of Women" that the author and editor John Neal had given a few months earlier (January 25, 1843) at the Broadway Tabernacle.

The article, which radically denounced women's subjection and firmly stood in favor of sex equality, ended with the promise of an ongoing debate as it announced that "a lady distinguished in the literary world" would develop "the other side of the question". Eliza Farnham was this lady. She and Neal engaged in a debate that lasted through the summer and contributed to highlighting the issue of women's rights five years before the advent of the famous women's rights convention at Seneca Falls.

The debate, which reached a large public, opposed a truly feminist man to an anti-feminist “true” woman.¹ I will here use the anachronistic term “feminist” to refer to the views expounded by John Neal himself. These views were basically shaped by:

-A consciousness that women live in a man-controlled world and that, as a consequence, they occupy a subordinate position in society.

-A belief in the equality of the sexes and in the power of the law to bring about social, economic and political equality.

This debate confirms the complex and mixed dynamics of the woman's rights movement² which did not simply oppose oppressed women to misogynist men. As is now well-documented, some men supported feminism while many women silently or outspokenly resisted it.³

In her memoir *Eighty Years and More* that she published in 1898, one of the founding mothers of the movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, gives a vivid account of how notions of “true womanhood” informed women's hostility and resistance to feminism:

I was often told by fashionable women that they objected to the woman's rights movement because of the publicity of a convention, the immodesty of speaking from a platform, and the trial of seeing one's name in the papers. Several ladies made such remarks to me one day; “Really”, said I, “ladies, you surprise me; our conventions are not as public as the ball room where I saw you all dancing last night. As to modesty, it may be a question, in many minds, whether it is less modest to speak words of soberness and truth, plainly dressed on a platform, than gorgeously arrayed, with

¹ I am referring here to the notion of “true womanhood” initially explored by Barbara Welter's seminal article (“The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860”, 1966) which defined the ideal 19th-century woman as pious, pure, domestic and submissive. While Welter's work has been reassessed and criticized since, the recurrent use of the adjective “true” in the debate under study justifies my adoption of the phrase.

² The use of the singular “woman” was widespread in the 19th century. I will occasionally opt for this spelling when the context is explicitly historical or when I report words from 19th century reformers .

³ For a recent study focusing on men in the suffrage movement, see Quanquin, 2020. For anti-suffrage female activists, see Marshall and Thurner.

bare arms and shoulders, to waltz in the arms of strange gentlemen. And as to the press, I noticed you all reading in this morning's papers, with evident satisfaction, the personal compliments and full descriptions of your dresses at the last ball. I presume that any one of you would have felt slighted if your name had not been mentioned in the general description." [...] the ladies around me were so completely cornered that no one attempted an answer (196).

While Eliza Farnham did not belong to the circle of fashionable ladies engaged in entertaining activities, she was part of the group of white middle-class women conventionally shunning public visibility. Stanton's exposure of the ball room and the newspapers as public spaces where fashionable ladies wish to be seen not only undermines the dominant gender ideology anchored in the dichotomy public/private; it also underlines that femininity is a show performed by actresses in costume craving for sexual attention and public recognition.

In her memoir, Stanton also mentions the hostility of the press that targeted the female and male advocates of woman's rights by quoting from an article from the *Albany Register* dated March 7 1854:

While the feminine propagandists of women's rights confined themselves to the exhibition of short petticoats and long-legged boots [...]the people were disposed to be amused by them, as they are by the clown in the circus, or the performances of the minstrelsy of gentlemen with blackened faces, on banjos, tamborines and bones. But the joke is becoming stale [...] people are beginning to inquire how far public sentiment should tolerate these unsexed women who would step out from the true sphere of the mother, the wife or the daughter [...]

It is a melancholy reflection that among our American women, who have been educated to better things, there should be found any who are willing to follow the lead of such foreign propagandists as the ringleted, gloved exotic Ernestine Rose. We can understand how such a man as [...] the sleek headed Dr. Channing may be deluded by her into becoming one of her disciples. They are not the first instance of

infatuation that may overtake weak-minded men [...] such men there are always and their true position is that of being tied to the apron strings of some strong minded woman, but that one educated American should become her disciple [...] is a marvel. (190-191)

This extract reveals that both strong-minded women and weak-minded men are accused of unsexing⁴ themselves. The feminist women are compared to comic clowns who no longer arouse male desire or amusement while the feminist men are accused of some form of deficient masculinity: they can't resist their sexual drives, become infatuated and their mind is too weak, lacking masculine qualities such as ambition and authority. Stanton concluded: "when we see the abuse and ridicule to which the best of men were subjected for standing on our platform in the early days, we need not wonder that so few have been brave enough to advocate our cause in later years" (191). Certainly, in Stanton's mind, John Neal belonged to these few brave men as he later actively contributed to her newspaper *The Revolution and History of Woman Suffrage* pays him homage (vol.1 24-28).

Stanton's recollections shed light on two important issues regarding feminism, femininity, and the question of women's resistance to feminism. First, they point to the unsexing *power* of feminism, as the woman's rights cause was said to transform its supporters into deviant specimens of masculinity and femininity. Secondly, they also suggest that both feminism and femininity are a *show* involving actors and actresses who blur traditional gender boundaries. The woman's rights convention platform is likened by the critics to a "circus" or a stage and feminism—like femininity— involves a kind of public performance.

This paper will examine the notion of resistance to feminism through the combined lenses of power and performance: to what extent are women resisting feminism motivated by the urge to display and perform their femininity? How does the implicit or explicit adhesion to gender and racial norms shield or empower them? What kind of spaces (public/private /hybrid) and audiences are involved in the performance?

⁴ I use the term in its 19th-century meaning of depriving of the qualities typical of one's sex.

I suggest here that the debate published in *Brother Jonathan* can be seen as one such space (open by print culture) staging a kind of duel, between an actor and an actress interrogating or reasserting the assigned places of the sexes. In the process they not only interrogate or reassert the boundaries between a set of binaries (feminine and masculine/public and private/civilization and barbarity/rights and privileges/slavery and freedom); they also stage their own adhesion (or lack of) to certain types of masculinity and femininity.

The defense of, and resistance to women's rights in the early 1840s

By the early 1840s, women's rights were discussed in the double context of the growing enfranchisement of white men characterizing the Jacksonian era and the increasing involvement of women in a number of reform movements that put forth their gender specificity and enlarged their domestic boundaries (Clinton, Baker).

The involvement of women in the abolitionist movement also led a minority of vocal advocates to compare (white) women's status with that of the slaves in the South. In 1837, the Quaker abolitionist Sarah Grimké, accused by the Massachusetts clergy of speaking in public, asked men to "take their feet from our necks" (Letter II, 10) and claimed she was "persuaded that the rights of woman, like the rights of slaves need only be examined to be understood and asserted..." (Letter III, 15). As black and white women abolitionists worked together in this early phase, in particular through the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society or Anti-Slavery Conventions of American Women, they constructed a "new female political culture" (Yellin 1989, Yellin and Van Horn, Quanquin 2022) which, coupled with the controversy over the place of women within the abolitionist movement, eventually favored the rise of a feminist consciousness. Yet, the women's rights conventions of the 1850s globally focused on white middle-class women's claims, leaving out the predicament of actual women slaves. This evacuation of black women, as we shall see, was also noticeable in the debate under study.

The increasing presence of women in the public sphere caused quiet resistance or outspoken criticism among the defenders of traditional sex roles who, through a proliferation of

discourses and sermons, had been spreading the idea since the early 19th century that woman's place was in the home and that the male and female sexes naturally occupied their own different and complementary spheres. Among these defenders, the voice and writings of Catharine E. Beecher reached a wide public. In 1837, she published *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females*, which criticized Angelina Grimké's efforts to organize abolition societies among the women of the non-slave holding states and urged American women not to step out of their domestic sphere. Claiming that "woman is to win everything by peace and love" (100) and that "the moment a woman begins to feel the promptings of ambition, or the thirst for power, her aegis of defence is gone" (101), Beecher strongly defended the divinely ordained subordination of women. She reasserted this position in her widely-read *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* which was first published in 1841 and went through 15 editions⁵. In a chapter entitled "The Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women", Beecher equated the "principles of democracy" with the "principles of Christianity" (2), highlighting the superiority of the United States nation over non-Christian and non-republican countries, a recurrent theme by the late 1830s. Arguing that the privileges of American women depended on their accepting a subordinate position in the "domestic relation" and "in civil and political concerns" (9) Beecher dismissed the question of women's rights as a potential threat to the status quo and their advocates as blind:

If those who are bewailing themselves over the fancied wrongs and injuries of women in this Nation, could only see things as they are, they would know, that whatever remnants of a barbarous or aristocratic age may remain in our civil institutions, in reference to the interest of women, it is only because they are ignorant of them, or do not use their influence to have them rectified; for it is very certain that there is nothing reasonable, which American women would unite in asking, that would not readily be bestowed. (9-10)

⁵ For more details on the impact of this book, see Sklar pp 151-167.

At the same time, the question of women's subordination was strongly challenged by the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, first in the "Conversations", a series of classes she gave to a group of women in Boston between 1839 and 1844; and then in her essay "The Great Lawsuit: Man v Men. Woman v Women". This was published in *The Dial*, the magazine she edited, in July 1843; the essay coincided with the publication of the debate on woman's suffrage in *Brother Jonathan*. While Fuller did not directly address the radical and marginal question of women's suffrage, neither in the "Conversations" nor even in the "Great Lawsuit", her classes and her essay, which she subsequently developed into the influential *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), and which later became an inspiration and a model for the first generation of feminists. Indeed, as a "powerful advocate of an activism of the mind, and to some extent, of the social mind" (Capper 523), and then as a more outspoken critic of the constraints of the domestic sphere and lack of rights and opportunities oppressing women, Fuller pleaded for women's intellectual, social and political emancipation: "we would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down", we would have every path laid open to woman as freely as to man" ("The Great Lawsuit").

It is worth noting that Margaret Fuller was no stranger to Neal and Farnham. By the late 1830s, Fuller already knew and admired John Neal whom she invited in 1838 to address her students in one of her classes in Providence on a topic entitled "On the destiny and vocation of woman". She said of him, "I knew none who was so truly a man" and later sent him a copy of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (qtd in Fleischmann 147). Neal wrote Fuller to urge her to "take a right view of the subject of women" (qtd in Fleischmann 144).

As for Farnham, Fuller met her a year after the debate, when the former was matron of Sing Sing prison. As she was revising her article on women, Fuller visited the prostitutes at Sing Sing and talked with Farnham. Although Fuller and Farnham did not agree on women's sphere of action, ultimately, as will be developed below, they partially shared a vision of women's higher spiritual nature or special role.

Neal's plea to Fuller regarding a "right" (i.e. "radical") view of the subject inscribed itself in his lifelong fight for sex equality.⁶ John Neal was born in 1793 in Maine; he had a Quaker background and was raised by his widowed mother who struggled to raise him and his twin sister Rachel. In 1820, he was excluded from the community because of the sexual overtones of his early novels (Watts & Carlson XV). After an experience in business that left him bankrupt, Neal travelled to England where he befriended the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and returned to the United States in 1827. He then became known as a prolific magazine writer, editor, novelist, historian, literary and art critic. Neal was an early defender and representative of American literature who fell into oblivion and whose place in American cultural memory has only recently been restored.⁷ A passionate Republican with a taste for reforms and fiery debate, Neal opposed the death penalty, the lotteries, dueling, fought for the development of physical education and the causes of temperance and abolition. By the 1820s, he was also a keen proponent of women's rights, a cause he steadily defended until his death in 1876, in a much fiercer and more radical way than temperance and abolition. Indeed, liquor-wise, Neal advocated moderation but not prohibition; as regards slavery, he adopted a moderate approach, supporting colonization rather than full abolition (Sears 109).⁸ Neal's relatively tepid critique of slavery is surprising since, as a Republican, he was deeply attached to human inalienable rights. In 1823, he was invited to join a debating society in Baltimore gathering slaveholders wishing to speak on the subject of slavery. Disgusted with their "weak and frivolous" critiques of slavery, Neal gave a radical and improvised speech against human bondage and linked it with women's wrongs, an episode he relates in his autobiography:

Who shall be the judge, when it is asked how long an apprentice, a child, or a *wife*—and here the great question of woman's rights and woman's wrongs, with all its

⁶ An early account of Neal's feminism can be found in a 1945 article by Boyd Guest.

⁷ The book edited by Edward Watts and David J. Carlson (2012) represents the latest attempt at restoring John Neal's place in the American literary and cultural landscape of the 19th century. Prior to this book, Neal was the object of two brief biographies published in the 1970s (Lease and Sears) and his work was analyzed by some critics in the 1980s who mainly studied him as a transitional figure between Cooper and Brown, and Poe and Hawthorne (Watts & Carlson XIV).

⁸ Neal aided the formation of a colonization society in Portland in 1833 and broke with William Lloyd Garrison whose views he found too extreme.

tremendous bearings, in all their magnitude, opened upon me, as by a flash of lightning—when it is asked, how long they shall be rendered by law incapable of acquiring, holding or transmitting property, except under special condition, like the slave? (*Wandering Recollections* 50).

Thus, Neal's defense of women primarily consisted in denouncing their slave status, but it seems that he was more concerned about women's plight than about the slaves' actual predicament. Although some critics note he was devoid of racist prejudices (Sears, Weyler) he somehow prioritized the oppression of (white) women, as this quotation reflects: "talk about the slaves of the south, it is our women of the north who require to be set free."⁹

Neal also articulated his defense of women's rights on the issue of suffrage, and he was an exceptional spokesman in this respect. As Weyler notes, by the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the discourse of women's rights, much hampered by the transatlantic scandal attached to Mary Wollstonecraft, had contracted to discussions revolving around women's education and deserted the public stage, retreating into private letters (235). Neal was about the only man to voice a frontal attack on the doctrine of coverture which he denounced as a form of slavery. In the 1830s, Neal's discourses on women's rights grew more radical, shedding a gallant defense of education to endorse a radical claim to full sexual equality.

In the 1830s and onwards, Neal gave a series of lectures and engaged a number of debates over women's rights, steadfastly defending universal suffrage as the only solution to women's emancipation. The roots of his feminism were shaped by late eighteenth century thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Catharine Macaulay and Judith Sargent Murray, and he is described as "an exceptional voice" filling "an intellectual gap between Judith Sargent Murray and Sarah Grimké, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Fuller" (Weyler 227). Neal's exceptional feminist voice made itself heard through the newspaper and magazine networks in which he participated. As editor of *The Yankee* and *Brother Jonathan*, he reached a wider

⁹ This quotation is an extract from an essay entitled "Rights of Women" that Neal published in *The Yankee* in 1828 in response to the closing of a Boston school for girls, which infuriated him (Weyler 239).

public, so far unexposed to his radical ideas about women's rights. *Brother Jonathan*— the title refers to the ancestor of Uncle Sam¹⁰ —was a popular, inexpensive illustrated weekly newspaper founded (or rather taken up) by Benjamin Day and James G. Wilson in 1842. In 1843, the paper was purchased by the American novelist Ann S. Stephens who asked Neal to become chief editor. That year, Neal used *Brother Jonathan* to spread his views on women's rights.

John Neal's lecture, "Rights of Women"

Neal's lecture recycled many of the well-oiled arguments he had honed over the years. He begins with questions shaped by the language of republicanism and Manifest Destiny : "What is freedom or liberty ? that freedom or Liberty which "we the people" claim to be the only true interpreters, the only faithful expounders on earth ? [...] is it of two sexes ?" (183). Examining this question in the light of Christian and Republican principles, Neal concludes that neither Christianity nor the rhetoric of natural rights have prevented American women from being treated as *slaves*. The author cleverly downplays the contrast between so-called "barbarian" countries and a "closer" country, i.e. the USA. He evokes the treatment of women in remote and pagan countries, depicting the body torture inflicted on the feet of Chinese women, the Hindu widows being thrown into the fire, the condition of women in un-Christian lands treated like beasts of burden. But while American men and women pity these poor women, says Neal, they do not realize that they actually live in a similar country. In a context permeated with discourses extolling the admirable combination of Christian virtues and US democratic values, this kind of comparison was frequent (Horsman, Stephanson).

However, it seems Neal never fully adhered to the belief in white supremacy and he was, for example, hostile to Jacksonian expansion and Indian removal policy (Watts 209). Thus, it is

¹⁰ Between the Revolution and the Civil War, *Brother Jonathan* was a popular personification of New England and more broadly embodied the ordinary American (Morgan 21); Neal published an eponymous novel in 1825 which was meant for a British audience and promoted this figure as a symbol of the United States which he used to validate his literary declaration of Independence (Liagre 111). For a deeper analysis of Neal's vision of the Yankee, see Liagre 69-118. Literature on the newspaper *Brother Jonathan* is scarce.

possible that he mainly hinged on this rhetorical trope to bring the point home among a public well-attuned to the discourses extolling national superiority.

Neal's arguments also hinge on the difference between right and privilege, and he gives an ironical twist to the rhetoric of privilege such as Catharine Beecher developed it:

There, it is the privilege of woman to be spoken to in a subdued voice, never to be contradicted never to be reasoned with, and *to grow up in the belief that men are their slaves* (italics mine), and that women always have their own way at last [...] There too it is the privilege of woman to be excluded from all participation in business, in the professions, in government, in power. (183)

Echoing the above-mentioned notion of performance, it is worth noting that at one point, Neal adopts the role of a knight ready to stand up to the defense of women and fight a duel:

It is in vain that she proposes to argue the question, she is only laughed at for her pains. If she quotes his own language against him [...] his answer is a rude laugh, a sneer, a sarcasm, or an appeal to the newspapers. But we are not so easily silenced. And if argument is wanted, argument they shall have these mighty logicians and mightier statesmen... (183)

With his masculine power, political knowledge and rhetorical skills, Neal comes to the rescue of women. His lecture turns to explaining the ideological roots of the American nation, the different sorts of political regimes and the Founding Fathers' intentions and definition of freedom: "to be free, men must be allowed to govern themselves" (184).

Why should women be denied the freedom of self-government? Neal rhetorically asks before concluding that if the Founding Fathers did not include women in the phrase "all men are created equal", "they would not be better than the Turks".¹¹ (184)

¹¹ By the early 19th century, the negative vision of Turks was well established in the US through the legacy of European literature which described the Muslim world in general as synonymous with despotism. The Greek war of independence further fostered anti-Turkish sentiments as a Philhellene public grew (Ehran 76-77, 82).

His lecture provocatively describes man in general and the American man in particular as a tyrant, denying women the very rights he fought to acquire, taxing her without representing her, submitting her to laws and marriage laws in particular which oppress her and in which she has no voice. He dramatically concludes that “if women are neither inhabitants nor people, they are not persons [...] they are not moral agents, they are not treated better than the ‘beasts that perish’” (185).

For Neal, only suffrage can give access to the fundamental right of liberty: “to be free, people must be allowed to vote as they like— to choose— they must not only be electors but eligible to office” (184). While his arguments were not wholly original (others before him had defended suffrage as a natural right¹²), his exalted tone and rhetorical power gave them more resonance.

Eliza Farnham's answer

Eliza Farnham's twofold answer was published on June 24 and July 1st 1843. Her name appeared as Mrs T. J. Farnham as she had been married since 1836 to Thomas Jefferson Farnham who, by the early 1840s, was becoming a well-known writer of the American West.¹³ Born Eliza Burhans in New York state in 1815, her childhood matched the profile of a domestic novel's heroine ; Eliza lost her mother at age 6, was separated from her siblings and was sent to live on an uncle's farm in the western part of the state. She stayed there until age 14 and she describes this period of her life as “years of bondage.”¹⁴ Her aunt, pictured as a brutal, nasty, atheist woman, made Eliza work hard, humiliated her on account of her lack of beauty and dark skin and routinely beat her in front of her weak, powerless husband. Eventually, thanks to her brother, she left the farm that had never been a home, went to school and taught for a few years (she actually developed into a bright self-taught thinker) and in the mid 1830s left for Illinois to join her sister. There she met Thomas Jefferson

¹² See for instance Keyssar, 10 and Zagarri, 28-29.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson Farnham (1804–1848) published several accounts of his travels across the West in the 1840s. As a fervent supporter of Manifest Destiny, he led a missionary expedition to Oregon and lived for a while in California where he bought land in Santa Cruz. He and Eliza had three sons but only one reached adulthood. Eliza's hectic voyage to California is related in Levy 35-39.

¹⁴ Eliza. W Farnham, *My Early Days*, 1859, p. 42

Farnham, who was a lawyer, 11 years older, and married him in 1836. Her first son died at 11 months. During her stay in Illinois, she gathered material that she later published into a book, *Life in Prairie land* (1846). (Levy 13, 117)

Largely self-educated, she studied phrenology and became interested in prison reform. She had Quaker friends around her but spent long periods of time alone while her husband was exploring the west. Eliza shared her husband's ardent support of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. In 1840, the Farnhams came back to New York state, had a second son, and there Eliza was immersed in the feverish atmosphere of reform. Perhaps Inspired by the Grimké sisters' lecturing activities, or Margaret Fuller's conversations, or again women giving public readings at the New York society library, such as Anna Cora Mowatt, Eliza decided to give a series of lectures. This decision did not please her husband, but she did lecture, arguing that the financial difficulties of her family made it necessary. She lectured for women only, in philosophy, science, phrenology, and eventually became an important humanitarian reformer on behalf of women, particularly the criminal and the insane. In 1842, she visited many prisons and asylums, and in 1844 she became the matron of the women's department at Sing Sing prison. In 1842, her name was becoming familiar in the intellectual circles of the Northeast, she was often introduced as a western lady and her lectures were well received although occasionally criticized (Levy 7-19, 158-164).

This brief biographical sketch reveals that Eliza Farnham did not speak from the sheltered space of a stable home protected by a sedentary and financially supporting husband. The very fact that she published this article evinced that she did not live a purely domestic life. Yet, or because of that, her reply is strongly anchored in the rhetoric of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood. As literary critic Sidonie Smith notes in *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, "the outspoken woman mutes the autonomy and agency inherent in her decision to engage in public work by sustaining the subject position of the true woman, sensitive to suffering, eager to sacrifice herself to others, willing to serve as the vessel for another's will" (28).

In a typical conflation of religious and physiological arguments, Eliza Farnham develops an essentialist discourse that conventionally adheres to the cult of domesticity and the ideology of republican motherhood. But while expounding and extolling woman's nature, her arguments also bring up different categories of women whom she holds guilty. This is perhaps the most original aspect of her essay: indeed, she does not simply refute Neal's major argument that women in Christian America are slaves, she also reverses the image and means to prove that *men* are the slaves of women, thus giving substance to Neal's ironic remark that "it is the privilege of woman to grow up in the belief that men are their slaves." I will first briefly show that Farnham's answer reflects an adherence to the Republican motherhood and true womanhood tenets and then I will focus on how the essay constructs a defense of man that also reads as an indictment of a form of womanhood denying American values, a form of un-American womanhood.

Like in Neal's essay, the question of slavery and liberty is central but it is worth highlighting that, like Neal, she never addresses the presence of *real* slaves, which might seem strange and yet was typical amongst white reformers favoring abolition. The actual fate of women of color is completely evacuated from the stage, confirming a white middle-class centered approach of the debate.

Taking up Neal's question "What is liberty? is it of two sexes?", Farnham answers that: "liberty is of as many kinds as there are differently constituted species in the world to enjoy.. [...] what is liberty to one would be slavery to another. To be equally free is not to be free to do and enjoy the same things but to be equally free in what the author of our being has appointed us to enjoy or accomplish" (236).

To bring the point home, as in a sermon, she opposes the orchard-loving robin to the mountain-loving eagle and exclaims: "Leave her alone (her being the robin) to follow on her natural instinct and this is her freedom, slavery comes upon her when these privileges are denied" (236). About women she writes: "Like the female of other species, her freedom is of the lesser kind, it is a small ring within a larger. She is perfectly free when she can feel this

lesser sphere but is enslaved to the same extent that she is forced or enticed beyond it” (236).

These arguments read as a perfect illustration of the doctrine of separate spheres and her text echoes the sentimental discourses that tended to praise the moral superiority of true womanhood: “in her true sphere, she is the star that is to light the feet of man to a better path [...] she is the brightest link in the long chain between earth and heaven. Her declaration of right is ‘I am a wife and mother’. To be these is my freedom, to be other would be slavery” (236). Farnham admits that the law (especially regarding women’s property) can occasionally be wrong but, like Catharine E. Beecher, she has faith in the power of female moral persuasion and male understanding. She summarizes the problem like this: “a few social grievances which we alone, or we best can abolish, a few civil wrongs, which some persuasion on our part would induce our legislators to amend, and the question is left to stand upon the exercise of equal political rights” (266).

The question of political rights fills her with a conventional feeling of disgust: true women are neither physically nor mentally constituted for such rights and true women have no such desires. For Farnham, the absence of political rights means absence of political duties which she calls unnatural duties; in other words, this absence of duties means freedom. In keeping with dominant discourses, political women are described as monstrous: “monstrous anomaly of a woman’s name appearing on the official records of this republic”, and she radically rejects public offices: “mothers and wives of freemen but office holders and politicians, never” (266) The monstrosity of political office is, of course, linked to the belief that a woman cannot perform her sacred office (motherhood) and be a “president, sheriff or senator” (266).

God, as the creator of nature, is often invoked: “why should nature impose a double task upon the weaker agent? [...] God never intended that she should, when she becomes the governor, the legislator or the politician she is no longer a woman.” (266) Exercising political power thus constitutes a violation of natural and biblical laws and Farnham’s faith in the superiority of the Christian religion, combined with her enthusiasm for rational, scientific

discourses, lead her to merge physiology and theology. Thus, much of Farnham's response aims at refuting Neal's claim that Christianity treats women like slaves and "beasts that perish" a phrase that Neal borrowed from the bible and that she finds extremely shocking. Like in many contemporary sermons addressed to women, Christian America is depicted by Farnham as a land of freedom and privilege for women, with the practice of monogamy, the absence of cruel treatment, and the freedom of women regarding the choice of a spouse, and the protection afforded by coverture.¹⁵

But the most original dimension of her reply lies in its construction of an American manhood which blends past revolutionary heroism with present "physical bondage". Just as Neal adopted the posture of a manly knight standing up to defend female victims, Farnham adopts the voice of a poetess, retracing the brave fight for liberty; her essay breaks into flights of lyrical prose inspired by Manifest Destiny that depict men as gallant soldiers and selfless pioneers:

The air is now filled with groans and shrieks [...] Now comes the clash of arms, the flood of gore-the thunder-groans and shouts of man's stern determination. This is a fearful scene but woman's eye looks not upon it. She sees the little star (of liberty) and hushes the beatings of her heart. And when the clouds have rolled away and the sunlight breaks over the earth...and flowers breathe their fragrance around him, man finds himself free...thus was it when our forefathers drew the sword in defence of our liberties. Where was woman then ? [...] with his sword in one hand, he shielded her with the other from the blood and horror through which he pressed [...] with every step that he advances toward the sacred temple of Liberty, he leads woman at his side. Nor does he ask her to put forth her arm to clear away the obstacles. He fares onward with what advance he may, levelling forests, bridging oceans, spanning continents (267).

¹⁵ For examples of contemporary discourses contrasting women's treatment between Christian and pagan countries, see Daniel Smith, *Lectures on Domestic Duties* (92) and Mrs Rebecca Lee, *An Address, Delivered in Marlborough, Connecticut*, September 7, 1831.

Farnham notes that the “republican Experiment” is young and that progress must still be achieved, not through female rights but rather through further male enlightenment. Here the poetess becomes a prophet: “doubt it not, the time is approaching when woman will enjoy the fullest share of liberty” (267). Somewhat paradoxically, Farnham does not so much reject the notion of women’s rights as postpone them: “We are yet but experimenters in the doctrine of human rights (...) why then should we demand the theory of female rights should be at once perfected? it can only grow with the growth of man’s” (267). Thus, Farnham implies that any wrong that man may commit against woman is not due to his tyrannical nature but to ignorance. Man is like a child in the temple of liberty but is bound to improve. But the motherly forgiving tone Farnham uses to exonerate man becomes accusatory when she depicts the slavery in which women hold men. Her arguments then operate a striking reversal in terms of sexual spheres as she describes fashionable ladies in Broadway and the streets of any American city; she urges her reader to look at these ladies parading in public, “garbed in sumptuous dresses and wearing costly jewels” (237). The spectacle of this luxury, in its echo of European aristocracy, is a display of un-American womanhood. Then, from the wealthy streets, she leads her reader into the smoky warehouses, the dark offices and noisy banks where men “toil like galley slaves” for their indolent and demanding wives. Farnham targets the middling classes who make men slaves to their caprice and their love of ease. She draws a line between the “good woman” who legitimately enjoys the fruits of her husband’s work by virtue of the respect she commands and the “bad woman” (238) who exploits her husband through the domestic power she abuses, and acts like a capricious tyrannical housewife seeking constant domestic warfare. Farnham also denounces the high born and prejudiced women who look down on their poorer sisters and economically exploit them (238). Thus, in her eyes, economic exploitation is not due to patriarchal hierarchy but to some form of female tyranny and deficient sisterhood.

The ensuing exchange between Neal and Farnham displays more personal remarks and attacks. Neal addresses Farnham as “Madam” or “my dear madam” in a tone blending

gentlemanly respect and gentle sarcasm. He means to “prevail” and convince her that he is right, cleverly outlining her fine rhetorical skills as proof that women ought to govern themselves (304). In his reply dated July 15, Neal describes her answer as a plea for the rights of Man, accuses her of assailing her sex, of reducing all women to wives and mothers, which they are not, and of overestimating the importance of physical strength—he wittingly recalls that some men are physically weak and some women are stronger (304). The passage from the generic woman/man to the plural women/men noticeably enlarges the gender norms, broadening the categories of the masculine and the feminine to include small, narrow-shouldered male bodies and sturdy, single and childless females.

Farnham’s final reply is shorter and more aggressive in its reassertion of gender boundaries and “true” femininity and it reads like a call for resistance:

When I look about for the female proselytes and advocates of these doctrines that have from time to time stood with brazen front, unsexing themselves in the face of public opinion [...] (I find) there is little danger that beings so unsexed can retain the power to do much harm. But when a leading mind among men steps forth to encourage this unnatural treason to our womanhood, there would be cause for alarm, but for that faith which may be placed in the good sense of that portion of the sex worthy the name of women, which will enable them to resist fallacies, even when woven ingeniously with a tissue of poetry, and disguised in eloquence such as you have flung around a doctrine hideous and repulsive as the skeleton, which is but a skeleton though shrouded by a pall of crimson and gold (367).

This passage mingles notions of power and performance; it hints at feminism as performance and female feminists as shameless and powerless actresses on a public stage while the feminist man is rather in the role of the deluding stage director, constructing a deadly show the central character of which, the doctrine of woman’s rights, is a sumptuously disguised skeleton. Farnham ends her article by reasserting her rejection of the doctrine of woman’s rights: she quietly resents Neal’s “direct” manners, and haughty rhetoric and opposes a strong, god-inspired resistance:

That you may have the advantage of me in brilliance of language and lawyer-like sophistry I am ready to admit but that you have in truth I respectfully deny since the Creator himself has supplied me with all the argument that I have been capable of using. Believe me sir, it has been from no love of display or thirst for disreputation that I have ventured to reply to your papers—I have written from a sole sense of duty to the sex—from the desire to refute a dangerous doctrine which might mislead the ignorant and ambitious of that sex to become discontented with their natural condition (367).

We see here that Farnham stages herself as a slightly offended, modest woman shunning the public gaze but ready to expose herself for the sake of women. Her rhetoric, tone, and posture construct a domestic, pious femininity that is meant to “sex” her in the eyes of the public as powerfully as feminism unsexes its proponents.

Conclusion

John Neal's feminism went far beyond the issue of suffrage as he fought for a “broadly based equality, social, education, legal and political” (Sears 100). However, suffrage represented one of the cornerstones of sex equality and Neal embodies one of the few male voices who openly and consistently fought for it in the first half of the nineteenth century and beyond. As noted previously, he contributed to Stanton's and Anthony's newspaper *The Revolution* and he also published a novel entitled *True Womanhood* (1859), the pious heroine of which proudly rejects marriage and claims she can find happiness outside the marital relationship.

Focusing on this 1843 debate reinforces the recent historiographical perspectives on women's suffrage which have rejected 1848 as the unique beginning of feminism and questioned the classic narrative that invisibilizes non-white actors and actresses (Tetrault, Jones). This printed debate reminds us that women's suffrage was actually discussed before 1848 and the press was only one of the many spaces where it was discussed, along with churches, anti-slavery conventions, and domestic spheres. The exchange also confirms that most discussions about women's rights actually targeted white (middle-class) women.

Indeed, in the debate, black enslaved persons are both present and absent, conjured up and erased, emptied of their actual experience of bondage as they are reduced to a metaphor, a mere symbol of oppression. Thus, the debate primarily involves white actors who take for granted that whiteness is the norm and Christian civilization the highest.

This debate also unveils the process at work in Farnham's resistance to feminism: her answers reveal that she *increasingly* asserts her resistance, not so much, ultimately, through rational arguments but through religious and domestic ones, a shift which probably serves a purpose. Alison Piepmeier, the author of *Out in Public*, wrote about Sarah Hale, the famous writer and editress of the *Lady's Book* and promoter of domesticity:

Hale did more than simplistically align herself with one sphere or the other ; she strategically negotiated the discourses available to her to allow her a fuller range of choices than this model provided. Indeed, Hale's adamancy and refusal to waver which may initially seem to be signs of her commitment to the private sphere can, instead be read as tools in her complex negotiations (7).

I think this could apply to Farnham who never ceased to express her devotion to the home sphere *even as* she increased her visibility in the public sphere, as matron, reformer, writer, and traveler. In this perspective, it becomes possible to envision the idea of resistance as a tool enabling women to negotiate their interactions with the public sphere and properly shape their incursions into the political realm. Farnham's resistance to feminism became less adamant in the 1850s as her view of women grew more radical and verged on spiritual gynocracy. In her last book *Woman and her Era*, (1864) she sought to bring the scientific proof of woman's angelic nature and absolute superiority. Predicting a future dominated by the feminine, a world redeemed by woman, this book expressed a form of "apocalyptic feminism",¹⁶ i.e. the belief in a female savior bringing in a new era of peace, harmony and

¹⁶ This phrase was proposed by Elizabeth K. Helsinger in *The Woman Question*, (1983), vol.2, p. XV. Helsinger defines apocalyptic feminism as the belief in a "female saviour leading the way to a fuller humanity" and notes that for Farnham it amounted to "an absolute claim to female superiority" while for Margaret Fuller, it meant a "temporary claim for woman's special role within an overall vision of human equality."

democracy. But although Farnham now recognized the work of the women's rights advocates, in this utopian era, suffrage remained secondary: angels don't vote.

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