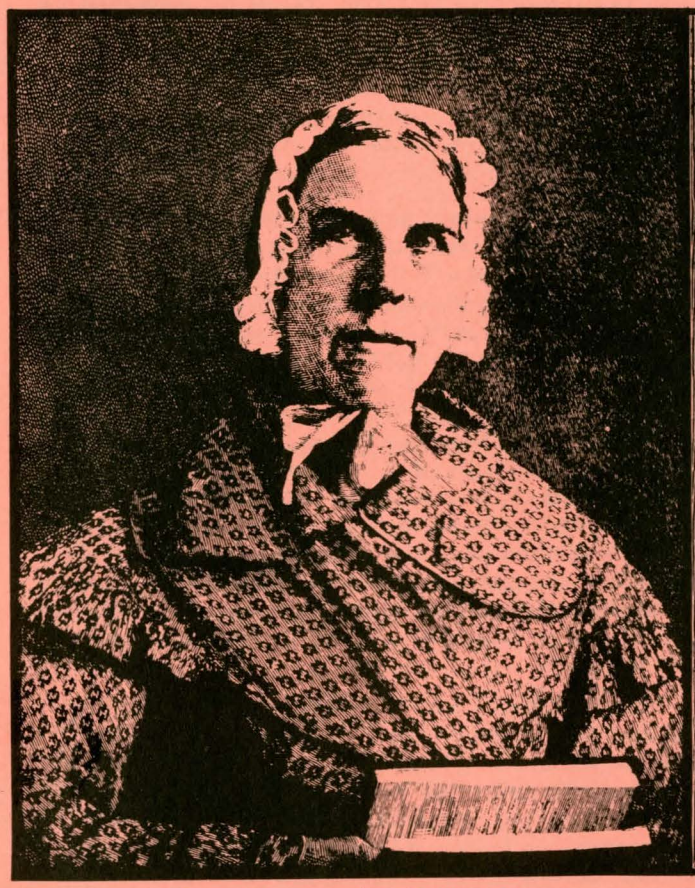
Struggling Into Existence

The Feminism of Sarah and Angelina Grimké

Ellen Dubois



Sarah M. Grimke (1792-1873)

Angelina E. Grimke (1805-1879)

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Sarah's writings are doing wonders. Some few females have Emancipated themselves and are beginning to stand erect, to the great astonishment of the aristocratic spectators. When our sisters were here you know how they were treated, even by abolitionists; they were only allowed to breathe once. This one breath was not lost entirely. Some felt the purifying influence. I have ever since been struggling into existence. There is a rattling among the dry bones . . . . if they should come and breathe again upon us, we should stand up a living /force/.

> Sarah C. Rugg to Anne Warren Weston
> August 21, 1837

The mid-1830's saw the birth of American feminism, and two ex-slaveholders from South Carolina, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, were its midwives. A decade before, Francis Wright was lecturing and writing on "the Woman Question," but her remarkable insights into the oppressive nature of the feminine experience went largely unheard. The Grimkes exposed and challenged male supremacy within the context of another great struggle for human liberation, and in the fertile soil of abolitionist humanitarianism, their labors in behalf of women took root. The abolitionist crusade provided the Woman Movement with a politics which drew its inspiration from ideals of universal social justice, and supplied a generation of committed women, from Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone to Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who powered feminism through its first crucial decades.

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As their most recent biographer has demonstrated, Sarah and Angelina Grimke were living the tenets of feminism long before they ever argued them publicly.[1] The sixth and ninth children of a leading Charlestown slaveholder, they were destined for the lives of well-defined luxury and gentility accorded to the daughters of the planter aristocracy. Their rejection, first of the moral complacency that made the slave-holding life bearable, and later of the slaveholding life itself, started them on a path of lonely independence that few nineteenth century women were courageous enough to take. They argued against slavery with their Charlestown friends and relatives, they converted to the socially-disreputable faith of Quakerism, and, finally, they left Charlestown to strike out on their own in Philadelphia. In these and other ways, the Grimkes ". . . /broke/ loose from the restraints of decorum, which draw a circle around the life of women, and with a contemptuous disregard for the rules of society, . . . leaped over the boundary of feminine modesty."[2]

Sarah had been in Philadelphia for twelve years and Angelina had been there for six when, in March, 1835, George Thompson, the articulate British advocate of immediate emancipation, came to that city to deliver one of his stirring lectures. Both women had developed a concern for the black man from their intimate association with the culture and institutions that enslaved him, and Angelina had begun attending meetings of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. When Angelina heard Thompson's lecture, she was moved by his outrage, his sincerity, and his able defense of immediate emancipation. A few months later, in anticipation of Thompson's appearance in Boston, William Lloyd Garrison issued a call to all Bostonians to eschew the violence that often attended Thompson's lectures and to receive the British abolitionist in peace. Angelina was impressed with Garrison's defense and wrote him a letter telling him so. The literateness of the letter, in addition to the fact that Angelina was an ex-shaveholder and the sister of one of the leaders of the American Colonization Society, prompted Garrison to reprint the letter in the Liberator. Garrison's appeal was to no avail and Thompson was met by an angry mob of Boston citizens who, if not for the intervention of the Mayor, might have killed America's most controversial abolitionist and the British firebrand he sponsored.

The entire incident was publicized in an anti-slavery pamphlet consisting of Garrison's original appeal to the citizens of Boston and Angelina's letter. Her connection, albeit unintended, with the now-famous Boston riot, plus the undeniable power of her letter and the personal conversion it attested to, brought her sudden public recognition. In the fall of 1836, after the publication of her Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States, she was asked to address small groups of women in the New York City area in behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Her lectures to women were an acknowledged success, and a few months later the Executive Committee of the Society suggested that she and her sister make an extended speaking tour of New England. The Grimkes agreed, and in June 1837 arrived in Boston to begin their work.

The Grimkes' commission to speak in New England was on the same terms as it had been in New York, to lecture to groups of women on the abolitionist cause. Within a few weeks after the beginning of the tour, however, Angelina and Sarah found themselves speaking before mixed audiences of men and women. Such a course was a serious deviation from accepted standards of feminine propriety and invited sharp criticism. No woman since Fanny Wright had ventured to speak in public before "promiscuous assemblies." But the Grimkes, strengthened by the Quaker tolerance of woman preachers and by their own incipient feminism, stood their ground. Late in June, Sarah wrote to Gerrit Smith:

> What will Brother and sister Smith say to our holding meetings irrespective of sex? One brother wanted to come and another thought he had a right and now the door is wide open. Whoever will come and hear our testimony may come.[3]

The door indeed was wide open and through it feminism entered.

Women lecturing publicly was affront enough, but their speaking before mixed assemblies was more than public decorum could bear. As the Grimkes proceeded on their tour they encountered more and more hostility until, in late July, they confronted the combined wrath of the Congregational clergy of Massachusetts. In a Pastoral Letter which was read from the pulpit and widely distributed in pamphlet form, the members of the General Association of the Congregational clergy inveighed against abolitionists, called upon the churches to retain their neutrality on such "perplex and agitating subjects" as immediate emancipation, and spent not a little time on the indecorous antics of the Misses Grimke:

> . . . We invite your attention to the dangers which at present seem to threaten the female character with widespread and permanent injury.
>
> The appropriate duties and influence of women are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties and that influence are unobtrusive and private, but the sources of mighty power. . . . The power of woman is in her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection, and which keeps her in those departments of life that form the character of individuals and of the nation. There are social influences which females use in promoting piety and the objects of Christian benevolence which we cannot too highly commend. . . .
>
> But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defense against her; she yields the power which God has given her for protection, and her character becomes unnatural. . . . We cannot, therefore, but regret the mistaken conduct of those who encourage females to bear an obtrusive and ostentatious part in measures of reform, and countenance any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers. . . . the true influence of woman in society, is /thus/ consumed, and the way opened, as we apprehend, for degeneracy and ruin.[4]

Though they had previously taken stands in favor of women's rights, the Grimkes had not intended to make a public crusade of feminism. With this Pastoral Letter, however, the Congregational clergy had struck the first blow, and Sarah and Angelina became convinced of the necessity of defending that which had been so seriously challenged. "It was the Pastoral Letter which did the mischief . . .," they wrote Theodore Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier, "/but/ the time to assert a right is when that right is denied."[5] Earlier that month, Sarah had begun in The Spectator a series of essays of "The Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman," addressed to Mary Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society. In the third letter of the series, she took the opportunity to respond publicly to the Congregational Association's charges. In strong and uncompromising language, she not only defended the rights of women, but attacked those who would challenge those rights:

> . . . 'Her influence is the source of mighty power.' This has ever been the flattering language of man since he laid aside the whip as a means to keep woman in subjection. He spares her body; but the war he has waged against her mind, her heart, and her soul, has been no less destructive to her as a moral being. How monstrous, how anti-Christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on man![6]

In the furor raised by the Pastoral Letter, and in the Grimkes' decision to respond to it publicly, Sarah and Angelina were supported by the more radical of their fellow abolitionists. In a letter to Henry C. Wright, one of those who stood by them throughout the controversy, the Grimkes' wrote of William Lloyd Garrison:

> Dear Brother Garrison has been passing the day with us; as iron sharpeneth iron so doth a man the counten/ance/ of his friend and it has cheered . . . /our/ spirit to find that he does unite fully with us on the subject of the rights of woman. I did not see how his enlightened mind could do otherwise but it has been pleasant to hear the confirmation from his own lips . . .[7]

Anne Warren Weston made her support of the Grimkes known in an open letter to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society:

> The path that Sarah and Angelina Grimke have marked for themselves is one in which they will probably encounter much of suffering and persecution. As a Society we are determined as far as lies in our power to meet whatever awaits them.[8]

Other female abolitionists also expressed their support. "Mary Parker sent us word," Angelina wrote to Weld, "that the Boston women would stand by us if every body else forsook us."[9]

In her letter to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, Anne Weston had suggested that those men who assailed the Grimkes and challenged the rights of women to lecture publicly were the same men who defended slavery and condemned the abolitionists. Angelina and Sarah, she implied, could expect support in their championing of women from men engaged in anti-slavery work. Mrs. Weston's prediction was both hasty and incorrect. Some of the sharpest opposition the Grimkes were to experience would be from their abolitionist colleagues.

The first voice raised from within the ranks seems to have come from Amos A. Phelps, later to become a strong opponent both of women's rights and Garrisonian "ultraism." "Brother Amos A. Phelps wrote us a long, kind, admonitory letter recommending our desisting from our present course and confining our labors to our own sex," Sarah informed Wright on July 12. "But we wrote him word that we could not consent to adopt any other course than that

which seemed clearly to be our duty. . . . We have not heard from him since . . ."[10] Few other abolitionists, however, took so strong a position against those activities of the Grimkes which involved "the woman issue"; most endorsed their continued lecturing to mixed audiences, in defiance of the Association's edict.

The Grimkes, however, were not content merely to continue the activities which had initiated such controversy; they had resolved to respond to the Pastoral Letter and to defend publicly the rights of women. It was at this point that they met their strongest opposition from other abolitionists, and they met it in the person of their political mentor and Angelina's future husband, Theodore Weld.

Even before the appearance of the Pastoral Letter, Weld had written Sarah and Angelina that he supported their right to lecture before mixed audiences:

> If the men wish to come, it is downright slave holding to shut them out. Slaveholders undertake to say that one class of human beings shall not be profitted by public ministry.[11]

Weld differed with the Grimkes, however, on the grounds that justified their actions. "If any gainsay your speaking in public and to men," he wrote, "they gainsay the Quakers and not the abolitionists."[12] The Grimkes were not to be disposed of so easily. "We do not stand on Quaker ground, but on Bible ground and moral right," Angelina corrected Weld. "What we claim for ourselves we claim for every woman whom God has called and qualified with gifts and graces. Can't thou stand just here side by side with us?"[13]

He could not. With the appearance of Sarah's response to the Pastoral Letter, he told them so:

> I advocate . . . that woman in EVERY particular shares equally with man rights and responsibilities . . . now, notwithstanding this, I do most deeply regret that you have begun a series of articles in the papers on the rights of woman.[14]

Such a course, which identified them publicly as champions of woman's rights, was in his opinion ill-advised. They were particularly fitted, he wrote Sarah and Angelina, to argue the cause of the slave, and others could defend women just as well. Besides, he argued, "such a practical refutation of the dogma /of female inferiority/ as your speaking furnishes" was worth far more than any public statement of principles.[15] The abolition issue was central to all other moral enterprises; secure public conversion on that issue, and all other reforms would follow easily.[16] John Greenleaf Whittier concurred with Weld. He accused the Grimkes of "abandoning in some degree the cause of the poor and miserable slave, sighing from the cotton plantation of Mississippi, and whose cries and groans are forever sounding in our ears, for the purpose of arguing and disputing over some trifling oppression . . ., forgetting the great and dreadful wrongs of the slave in a selfish crusade against some paltry grievance of our own. . ."[17]

The Grimkes, however, had given no indication that they planned to abandon abolition. "Do not wrong us," they wrote, "by supposing that in our movements the cause of the slave is overlooked."[18] It was not the concern that the Grimkes would be lost as laborers to the anti-slavery cause that lay at the center of Weld's opposition to the course they had chosen to pursue; rather, it was his fear that abolition would be harmed by association with any other controversial issue, and especially an issue as "trifling" and "paltry" (to use Whittier's words) as the rights of women. He wrote to the Grimkes, advising them to "leave the lesser work to others . . . and devote, consecrate your whole bodies, souls and spirits to the greater work," begging them to adhere to his sense of priority.[19]

If this meant (as it did) allowing a serious attack on the equality of the sexes to go unchallenged, Weld was ready to sacrifice the cause of women's rights. Weld's advice to the Grimkes prefigured the admonition given to Elizabeth Stanton and Susan B. Anthony when the Fourteenth Amendment was pending. "This is the Negro's hour"; Radical Republicans pleaded in 1865, "do not clog his way; . . . be generous and magnanimous; the Negro once safe, the woman comes next."[20] Sarah and Angelina did not agree with Weld; they were convinced of the necessity of a public statement of their position. "I believe we ought not now to retreat from the ground we have taken," Sarah wrote, "and if we do this it will only make harder work at some future day . . ."[21] The next 130 years were to prove her prediction accurate. Because they had sustained, and acted on, their conviction that women's rights were "a very important branch of human rights, second to no other,"[22] the Grimkes had forced "the woman issue" into the front line of American reform, and had willed feminism an impressive body of writings substantiating that conviction. Had Stanton and Anthony, thirty years later, been able to convince other reformers that women's rights were indeed a cause "second to no other," the political enfranchisement of women might not have waited until 1920, and women's full citizenship might not still be waiting.

* * * * * * *

To understand the opinions and ideology surrounding the relations between the sexes which the Grimkes, as pioneer advocates of the equality of men and women, had to confront, it is necessary only to turn to the writings of their contemporary, Catherine Beecher. If Theodore Weld was the Grimkes primary strategic opponent, Beecher was their foremost ideological adversary. Her Essay on Slavery and Abolition included a great deal of comment on the activities and interests appropriate to women. The core of her argument was that "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 beneficient and immutable law."[23] Applying this to women, she concluded that "heaven had appointed to one sex the superior, and to the other the subordinate station . . ."[24] Thus, woman's influence must only be exerted in "unassuming and unambitious . . . dependent and defenceless" ways, and the whole area of political activity fell "without her sphere."[25] This rank anti-feminism represented the ideological setting into which the Grimkes stepped.

Angelina's reply to Catherine Beecher's Essay and Sarah's Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women represented the core of the Grimkes' contributions to feminist thought. In the pages of these two works, the Grimkes presented strong and well-reasoned arguments for the equality of the sexes, and trace the development and scope of women's subjugation. The depth of their analysis and the quality of their thought is impressive. Not only did they "anticipate by a dozen years the main arguments of the feminist movement ,"[26] but in many areas their analysis went far beyond those arguments.

The Grimkes recognized that to some degree commentators like Beecher were correct--women were mentally, morally, and physically inferior to men. However, rather than attribute this to some "grand feature of the Divine economy," they were firm in seeing this as a cultivated inferiority, rooted in specific historical and cultural experiences. Furthermore, they identified men as the particular agents of women's historical subjugation:

> All history attests that man has subjected women to his will . . . never has he elevated her to the rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind; and how he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought and says, the being he has thus deeply injured is inferior.[27]

Having realized the causal connection between women's oppression and male chauvinism, the Grimkes proceeded to the concept of male supremacy; that is, they identified women's subordinate position with the usurpation of power and privilege by men. They perceived that men, by restricting women to an inferior position , had assured themselves an inordinate share of the material and experiential wealth that the sexes were meant to share. Since theirs was a religious vocation, they were particularly concerned with the restriction of the ministry to men.

The Grimkes also realized that the doctrine of separate spheres led to excesses in the behavior of both sexes:

> This regulation of duty by the mere circumstances of sex, rather than by the fundamental principle of moral being, has led to all the multifarious train of evils flowing out of the anti-Christian doctrine of masculine and feminine virtues. By this doctrine, man has been converted into the warrior, and clothed with sternness and those other kindred qualities... whilst woman has been taught to lean upon an arm of flesh, to sit as a doll arrayed in "gold and pearls and costly array," to be admired for her personal charms, and caressed and humored like a spoiled child ...[28]

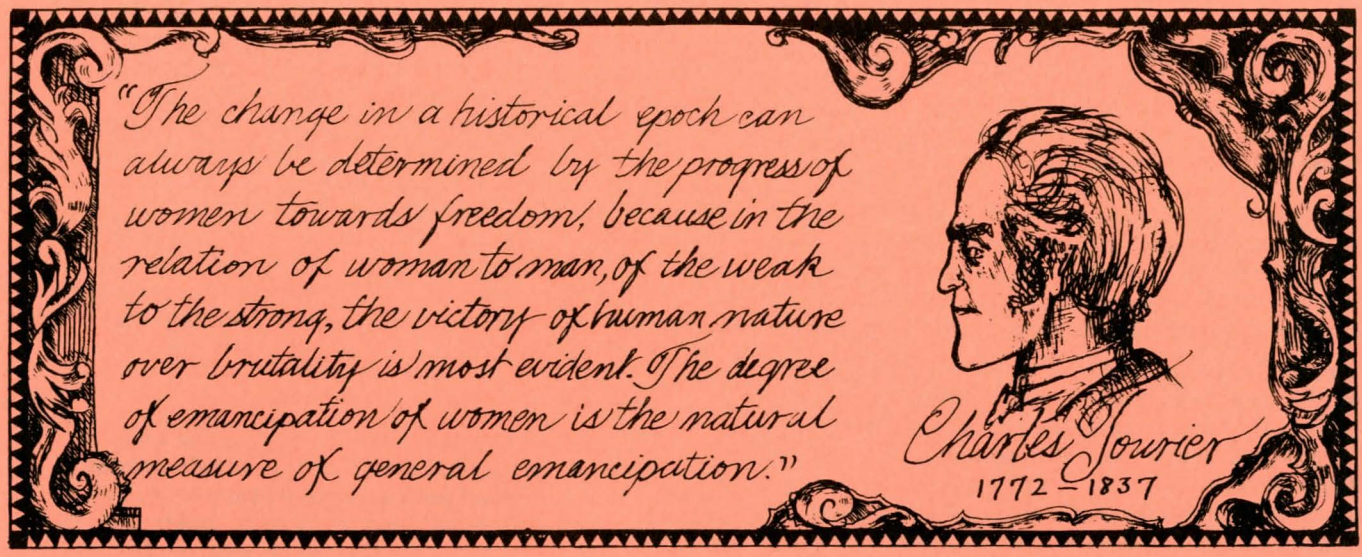
Thus, like the current women's liberation movement, the crux of the Grimkes' argument was not that women be allowed to behave like men. Their feminism was more complex than that. Inherent in it, was a critique of the 'masculine virtues,' and since they operated in the context of a male-controlled social order, a critique of the dominant values of society. Their demand that women be accorded full human rights did not imply that they were endorsing her "holding the reins of government over man," Sarah wrote in her letters to Mary Parker. "I maintain that they /men and women/ are equal, and that God never invested fallen man with unlimited power over his fellow man; and I rejoice that circumstances have prevented woman from being more deeply involved in the guilt which appears to be inseparable from political affairs."[29] That they were thinking like this a full decade before the Seneca Falls Convention makes the sophistication of their thought all the more striking and gives us some indication of their considerable abilities.

They applied this belief in the God-given equality of the sexes to nearly all areas of life and demanded that women be allowed access to the same education, vocations and avocations, and protection under the law that were accorded to men; they even went so far as asserting that the physical capacities of men and women were the same.[30] They do not seem to fall prey to that version of feminism which, accepting the doctrine of the moral superiority of women, uses it to justify the demand for women's rights. Quite the contrary, it is the consistent and uncompromising way in which the Grimkes asserted their belief in the equality of the sexes that, in the light of the time in which they wrote, is most striking. On only one issue -- that of domestic obligations -- did the Grimkes feel it necessary to qualify their assertion that the rights and duties of the sexes were not identical.

In her letter to the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society supporting and endorsing the Grimkes feminist activities, Anne Warren Weston had praised women who "while they cheerfully acknowledge and fulfill all the duties of their various domestic relations, are not at all prepared merely in virtue of their being women to declare themselves either subordinate or dependent."[31] Such women, who participated equally with men in the world at large and yet continued to perform all the duties of wife, mother, and homemaker, represented Mrs. Weston's ideal of feminine emancipation; and the Grimkes agreed. Sarah expressed their position on the role of women in the home and family in the seventh of her letters to Mary Parker:

> Now that her /woman's/ attention is solicited to the subject of her rights, her privileges, and her duties, I would entreat her to double her diligence in the performance of all her obligations as a wife , a mother, a sister and a daughter . Let us remember that our claim to stand on perfect equality with our brethren can only be substantiated by a scrupulous attention to our domestic duties ...[32]

The Grimkes saw no conflict between woman's full and equal participation in the world-at-large and her traditional obligations as wife and mother; they argued that public activity would not unfit woman for her domestic duties, and implied that her domestic duties would not imperil her public activity. The validity of such a position could not be ascertained through theoretical debates; it had to be tested in the crucible of women's lives.



Less than a year after the controversy over women's rights had begun, the Grimkes themselves were provided with just such an opportunity to put their beliefs into practice. In May of 1838, Angelina married Theodore Weld, and the Welds, together with Sarah, moved into a small cottage in Fort Lee, New Jersey. All three of them were intensely aware that the marriage, far from being a simple personal act, was a public experiment in living those feminist ideals that Sarah and Angeline had so articulately and courageously espoused. After two months of married life, Angelina wrote to Anne Weston:

> We keep no help and therefore are filling up "the appropriate sphere of woman" to admiration, in the kitchen with baking pans and pots and steamers etc, and in the parlor and chambers with the broom and the duster. Indeed I think our enemies would rejoice, could they only look upon us from day to day and see us toiling in domestic life, instead of lecturing to promiscuous audiences. Now I do verily believe that we are doing as much for the cause of woman as we did by public speaking; for it is absolutely necessary that we show that we are not ruined as domestic characters, but so far from it, as soon as duty calls us home, we ... are as anxious to make good bread as we ever were to deliver a good lecture.[33]

Weld saw their task in the same terms and he told Angelina so a month before their wedding:

> ... let me add that there is an additional responsibility resting upon you, Dearest, and a mighty one. It is this. Your being so generally known as a public lecturer to promiscuous assemblies, and especially as having addressed the legislature, all eyes are upon you and almost all mouths are filled with cavil. Nine tenths of the community verily believe that you are utterly spoiled for domestic life.[34]

To the degree that the Grimkes wished to prove their assertion that lives of full and involved public commitment did not destroy women "as domestic characters," the marriage succeeded admirably. But if they wished to prove that woman could participate equally with men in the world-at-large while, at the same time, fulfilling her traditional duties with the home and family, the marriage was a tragic failure.

Their personal attempt at reconciling feminism and the family began auspiciously enough. In their impassioned pre-wedding correspondence, both Theodore and Angelina revealed a deep concern for making their marriage absolutely egalitarian. Observing that "among the dislocations of the age marriage and the relations of husband and wife are perhaps ... the most horrible perversions of all," Theodore suggested to Angelina that their union might be destined to rehabilitate that institution.[35] He described the ideal relations between husband and wife as the sharing of responsibility and decision-making:

> They should most prayerfully and with the utmost confiding freedom converse together on all the responsibilities involved in the marriage relation, on the mutual relation of husband and wife.[36]

and Angelina agreed.[37] They both vowed that, after their marriage, they would continue to dedicate themselves to God and the slave.

As the wedding drew near, a few voiced their pessimism. Garrison reported to his wife that he was not enthusiastic about the impending marriage:

> I frankly told Angelina my feelings, and expressed my fear that Bro. Weld's sectarianism would bring her into bondage unless she could succeed in emancipating him. She heard my remarks very pleasantly, and trusted "the experiment," as she termed it, would prove mutually serviceable.[38]

Angelina responded with similar optimism to the misgivings of other abolitionists. "/They/ say that I will now be good for nothing henceforth and forever to the cause," she informed Weld, "for I find it generally

understood that thou art opposed to my speaking in public, etc. Now if they think so, they are very excusable for grumbling about it."[39] A long, kindly letter arrived from Angelina's mother in Charlestown, full of advice for how her daughter should conduct her married life, and sounding an ominous note:

> After you become a Matron, I hope you will feel that retirement is best suited to your station; and you will desire to retire from the busy scenes of publicity, and to enjoy that happiness which I hope your home will yield you.[40]

Angelina, it can be assumed, disregarded her mother's suggestions. On the afternoon of May 14, the wedding guests, who included most of the leading abolitionists of the day, gathered at Anna Grimke Frost's home in Philadelphia to witness the reading of the marriage vows. "Theodore addressed Angelina in a solemn and tender manner," Sarah reported. "He alluded to the unrighteous power vested in a husband by the laws of the United States over the person and property of his wife, and he abjured all authority, all government, save the influence which love would give to them over each other as moral and immortal beings."[41] The couple was blessed by two ministers, one black and one white, and thus began "the experiment, as she termed it."

As if to make a declaration that they were not going to "retire from the busy scenes of publicity," Angelina and Sarah plunged immediately into political activity. The wedding had been timed to coincide with the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, and two days after taking her vows, Angelina, and Sarah with her, proceeded to join their abolitionist sisters.[42] Angelina delivered a stirring speech and both women were elected vice-presidents of the Convention. They labored hard and courageously, watched a Philadelphia mob burn down the newly-dedicated Pennsylvania Hall, and when it was all over immediately withdrew to their new home in Fort Lee.

All three of the new inhabitants of Fort Lee were badly in need of rest. The sisters especially had just finished an exhausting year-long speaking tour of New England, and Angelina had not completely recovered from the typhoid fever she had contracted the winter before. The pace they had been keeping was a killing one and so it is not surprising that the first few months after the marriage, they all took the opportunity to relax, and to withdraw from public activity. Sarah and Angelina threw themselves into learning 'the domestic arts,' and Theodore spent a few days a week at the office of the Anti-Slavery Society in New York. In the winter of 1838, they began to collect material for a massive survey of slave conditions; all winter they combed through newspapers and periodicals and when they were finished, the results were compiled into Slavery As It Is, the most widely sold of all abolitionist tracts.

As the months wore on, however, the sisters began to receive inquiries about their future participation in anti-slavery work. Sarah's services were solicited for New England, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.[43] A Charles Hadwin wrote Angelina in January from Worcester. "When shall we hear thee and Sarah again orally pleading the cause of the oppressed," he asked. "Ought such talents be rapped (sic) in a napkin or such lights hid under a bushel?"[44] Privately, Henry Wright expressed his concern. "I have no expectations that Sarah or Angelina will ever go forth again," he wrote Abby Kelly. "They have retired and are, I fear, under an influence that has bound and fettered their souls."[45]

At first, Sarah's and Angelina's responses to charges that they had abandoned their reform commitments were confident. Their 'retirement', they asserted, was a principled action, consciously taken to prove the tenets of their feminism. "I do not agree with thee that I can now be doing anything of more importance than superintending my household affairs," Angelina wrote to Anne Weston in October, 1838, "because in doing so I am proving that public lecturing does not unfit woman for private duties. No one then but Sister and myself can do our work and demonstrate this for the benefit of our sex at large."[46] The implication was that their domesticity was voluntary, and that when once again they heard the call to public service in behalf of woman or the slave, they could and would go.

The conditions of their private lives were changing, however, and gradually their domesticity was becoming less voluntary, their familial duties more demanding. In December, 1839, Angelina gave birth to Charles Stuart Weld, the first of her three children, and a few months later the Weld household moved to a larger home, a farmhouse in Belleville, New Jersey. Co-incident with this was a cut in salary that Theodore had taken, and Angelina and Sarah found themselves forced to manage a larger household on a greatly reduced, and constricting, budget. In the first few months of marriage, Angelina had been optimistic that experience would bring a lessening of domestic burdens. "We are looking forward to a much easier time than we have yet had," she had cheerfully written then.[47] But this hope had been shattered, due in large part to the new responsibilities that motherhood imposed upon her and Sarah; their familial obligations were now very nearly overwhelming.

In the winter of 1841, Theodore emerged from his semi-retirement to assist the petition campaign which anti-slavery Whigs were now waging in Congress. He spent the winter of 1841-42 in Washington, returned to Belleville in April, and then went back to Washington for the winter session of Congress; during his absence from the farm, he left "the domestic burdens entirely in the hands of the two women."[48] He had not found that the role of husband and father prohibited his return to active politics; for him domestic obligations had continued to be voluntary activities. Not so for Sarah and Angelina. Unlike Theodore, they were never able to reemerge from the isolation of their private lives. After the publication of Slavery As It Is, they made no more major contributions to either abolitionism or feminism. Their domestic obligations even prevented them from attending the World Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in 1840, to which they had been asked to go as delegates.[49] By that time, just five years after their spectacular entry into abolitionist and feminist activity, their public careers were largely at an end.

The step into domesticity had proven an irreversible one for the Grimkes. They had embarked on their 'experiment' to prove that women were capable of leading full and active public lives while continuing to adhere to the traditional familial forms that society demanded of their sex. To the degree that their lives were a test for their beliefs, they proved just the opposite, that it was precisely her 'domestic relations' that relegated woman to her inferior status, and that kept her from full involvement in the world beyond the hearth.

The Grimkes premature withdrawal from the public sphere and their subsequent retreat into domesticity and motherhood represent the squandering of the immense talents of two remarkable women. Had Angelina and Sarah been men, greater note might have been taken of the foreshortening of their political lives, but since they were women, the sacrifice of their unique talents to the routine, yet exhausting demands of domestic duties continues to go unnoticed and unlamented by historians. Their contemporaries, however, were not unaware of the dimensions of their tragedy. After visiting Angelina at Fort Lee, Abby Kelly reported to Anne Weston, "How many changes have come over 'the spirit of her dream.'"[50]

It was a tragedy, both for the Grimkes themselves and for the crusade they had initiated, which, in its early years, needed all the brilliance and bravery it could muster. In his new and radical history of the Woman Movement, William O'Neill argues that feminism in America failed to alter substantially the feminine condition, and he attributes this to the ultimate refusal of the Movement to deal critically with the fact that "it was the obligation imposed upon women by their marital and familial roles that prevented them from achieving full equality."[51] It was the Grimkes failure also.

Like the great majority of their sisters, in their century and ours, the Grimkes sacrificed the unique promise inherent in their humanity to the routine demands made upon their femininity. The same social forces and conventions which overwhelmed the Woman Movement overwhelmed them, and in the tragedy of their lives the tragedy of American feminism and of American womanhood is writ small. ▪

1. Gerday Lerner, The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967). Much of the biographical material in the article is taken from this excellent and exhaustingly documented study.
2. A description of Fanny Wright, from an editorial in the Louisville, Kentucky Focus, 1828, quoted in Robert Dale Owen, "Rights of Women," The Free Enquirer, December 10, 1828, p. 54.
3. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (eds.), Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844 (2 Vols; New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), I. p. 410 (June 28, 1837). Hereafter referred to as Weld-Grimke Letters.
4. "Pastoral Letter of the Massachusetts Congregationalist Clergy," Up From the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of Feminism, ed. Aileen S. Kraditor (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968), pp. 50-2.
5. Weld-Grimke Letters, I, p. 428 (August 20, 1837).
6. Sarah M. Grimke, Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman: Addressed to Mary S. Parker (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1837), pp. 16-7. Hereafter referred to as Parker Letters.
7. Weld-Grimke Letters, I, p. 438 (August 27, 1837).
8. Anne Weston to Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, August 21, 1837, Weston Papers, Boston Public Library.
9. Weld-Grimke Letters, I, p. 419 (August 12, 1837).
10. Ibid., I, p. 420 (August 12, 1837).
11. Ibid., I, pp. 411-412 (July 22, 1837).
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., I, p. 418 (August 12, 1837).
14. Ibid., I, p. 425 (August 15, 1837).
15. Ibid., I, p. 426 (August 15, 1837).
16. Ibid., I, p. 435 (August 26, 1837).
17. Ibid., I, p. 424 (August 14, 1837).
18. Ibid., I, p. 450 (September 20, 1837).
19. Ibid., I, p. 426 (August 15, 1837).
20. Quoted in History of Woman Suffrage, II, eds. Elizabeth C. Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Gage (Rochester, New York: Charles Mann, 1887), pp. 93-5.
21. Weld-Grimke Letters, I, p. 419 (August 12, 1937).
22. Ibid., I, p. 448 (September, 20, 1837).
23. Catherine E. Beecher, An Essay on Slavery and Abolition with Reference to the Duty of American Females (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), p. 98.
24. Ibid., p. 99.
25. Ibid., pp. 100-102.
26. Lerner, p. 193.
27. Parker Letters, p. 11.
28. Ibid., p. 115-116.
29. Ibid., p. 33.
30. Ibid., p. 30.
31. Anne Weston to Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, August 21, 1837, Weston Papers, BPL.
32. Parker Letters, p. 39.
33. Angelina Grimke Weld to Anne Warren Weston, July 15, 1837, Weston Papers, BPL.
34. Weld-Grimke Letters, II, p. 637 (April 15, 1838).
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., II, p. 635 (April 15, 1838).
37. Ibid., II, p. 648 (April 28, 1838).
38. William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Garrison, May 12, 1838, Garrison Papers, BPL.
39. Weld-Grimke Letters, II, p. 653 (May 2, 1838).
40. Ibid., II, pp. 617-618 (April 4, 1838).
41. Ibid., II, p. 678 (May 20, 1838).
42. Gerda Lerner's The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina is the general source of biographic material.
43. Weld-Grimke Letters, II, p. 708 (November 19, 1838).
44. Ibid., II, p. 737 (January 1, 1839).
45. Henry C. Wright to Abby Kelly, February 25, 1839, Stephen S. Foster and Abby Kelly Foster Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.
46. Angelina Weld to Anne Weston, October 14, 1838, Weston Papers, BPL.
47. Ibid., July 15, 1838.
48. Lerner, p. 292.
49. Ibid., p. 296.
50. Abby Kelly to Anne Warren Weston, May 29, 1839, Weston Papers, BPL.
51. William O'Neill, Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969) p. 353.