

Module 04: How Did Abolitionism Lead to the Struggle for Women 's Rights?

Evidence 11: Letter from Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, 1837

A

Introduction

In the final letter from Angelina Grimké to Jane Smith, Angelina highlights the antagonistic responses provoked by her speaking tour with her sister, especially before audiences of both women and men. While it was acceptable at the time for women to speak publicly to groups of women, most Americans considered it scandalous for women to lecture in public before men. Reflecting the correlation people drew between inappropriate female behavior and immorality, the Grimkés found themselves attacked for lecturing before what were popularly called "promiscuous" groups of women and men. Angelina wrote the following later that summer to her future husband, the abolitionist orator and organizer Theodore Weld:

"No doubt thou hast heard by this time of all the fuss that is now making in this region about our stepping so far out of the bounds of female propriety as to lecture to promiscuous assemblies. My auditors literally sit some times with 'mouths agape and eyes astare,' so that I cannot help smiling in the midst of 'rhetorical flourishes' to witness their perfect amazement at hearing a woman speak in the churches. . . . I am waiting in some anxiety to see what the Executive Committee mean to do in the troublous times, whether to renounce us or not." (1)

Nevertheless, crowds flocked to hear the eloquent sisters speak against slavery. During the summer and fall of 1837, Angelina and Sarah filled eighty speaking engagements, addressing over 40,000 people in five short months. As activists, the two women could not be ignored.

Questions to Consider

- Besides the attack on her morality for stepping out of bounds, what other obstacles does this letter suggest Angelina faced as a woman actively participating in the abolitionist movement?
- Based on the letter, what qualities did Angelina believe men and

women shared?

- What did Angelina consider to be the greatest "insult" to her "womanhood?"
- What do you think Angelina thought about the concept of separate spheres and the idea that women and men were essentially different and therefore played different roles in American society?

Document

Boston

May 29, 1837

My Dear Jane:

. . . It has really been delightful to mingle with our brethren & sisters in this city. On 5th day [Thursday] evening we had a pleasant meeting of Abolitionists at Francis Jackson's, in the rooms where the Female AntiSlavery Meeting was held. On 6th day [Friday] evening, we had just another such at Friend Chapman's, Ann's father. Here I had a long talk with the brethren on the rights of women & found a very general sentiment prevailing that it was time our fetters were broken. Goodell said he was well aware that women could not perform their duties as moral beings, under the existing state of public sentiment. M Child & M Chapman support the same views. Indeed very many seem to think that a new order of things is very desirable in this respect.

And now, my dear friend, in view of these things, I feel as if it is not the cause of the slave only which we plead, but the cause of woman as a responsible moral being, & I am ready to exclaim, "Who is sufficient for these things?" These holy causes must be injured if they are not helped by us. What an untrodden path we entered upon! Sometimes I feel almost bewildered, amazed, confounded & wonder by what strange concatenation of events I came to be where I am & what I am. And if I look forward, I am no less bewildered. I see not to what point, all these things are leading me.
. . .

Tomorrow, we begin our public labor at Dorchester. . . . Pray for us, dear Jane. We need it *more* than ever. We see only in a glass darkly what results are to grow out of this experiment. I tremble for fear. . . . Sister is to speak at the Moral Reform Society this afternoon. I will leave this open & say

something about it.

We have just returned from the meeting, & the Lord was there to help us, for I, too, opened my mouth, tho' I had refused to engage to do so. About 300, I guess, were present & appeared interested in the remarks made. We broached one part of the subject, which I doubt not was new to many, i.e., that this reform was to begin in *ourselves*. We were polluted by it, our moral being was seared & scathed by it. Look at our feelings in the society of *men*, why the restraint & embarrassment? If we regarded each other as *moral* & intellectual beings merely, how pure & elevated & dignified would be our feelings towards, & intercourse with them. How is the solemn & sacred subject of marriage regarded & talked about? My heart is pained, my womanhood is insulted, my moral being is outraged continually, & I told them so. After we had finished, many women came up & expressed their pleasure & satisfaction at this part particularly of our remarks. They were their own feelings, but had never heard them expressed before. . . .

Farewell my dear Jane. May we often meet where spirits blend in prayer is the desire of Thy Angelina.

(1) "Angelina Grimké to Theodore Weld, 12 August 1837," in Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1934; reprint Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1965), 414. ([back](#))

Source:

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