

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, "OUR GIRLS" (WINTER 1880)¹

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Abstract: In her most popular lyceum lecture, "Our Girls," Elizabeth Cady Stanton adapted to the constraints of the lyceum by cultivating a motherly persona and offering educational advice on the upbringing of children. For her audience of plain folks, Stanton simplified abstract and complex ideas about patriarchy and women's oppression and offered an alternative view of femininity.

Key Words: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lyceum, Suffrage, Feminism, dress reform.

On November 12, 1869, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the suffrage movement's most prominent leader, joined James Redpath's Lyceum Bureau and began a twelve-year stint as a public lecturer. Since the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, Stanton had been the leading voice of the suffrage movement, speaking regularly at suffrage events and conventions throughout the country. In explaining her career change to her friend and partner in the movement, Susan B. Anthony, Stanton wrote that she had grown tired of suffrage conventions. "I do hate conventions," Stanton wrote, "for I dislike to be in a position where any set of people have the right to say, 'For the sake of the cause don't do this or that.'"² Similarly, in a letter to suffragist, Martha Coffin Wright, Stanton expressed her frustration with conventions, writing that she would "rather go to Heaven this spring than attend another."³

As a lyceum lecturer, Stanton typically spent eight months of the year on the road, delivering lectures to mostly rural communities in the West and Midwest. According to biographer Elisabeth Griffith, Stanton attracted large audiences on the circuit and earned between one and two hundred dollars for each lecture--enough to put two of her sons through Cornell University. Although Stanton addressed a wide array of topics from maternity to prison reform, "Our Girls"--a lecture on the upbringing and socialization of young girls--was by far her most popular lecture. Stanton's daughter estimated that Stanton earned some \$30,000 for "Our Girls" alone.⁴

The lyceum circuit allowed Stanton the opportunity to spread her message of women's rights to a very different audience than those who may have attended a suffrage convention or legislative hearing. As historian David Mead explained, the lyceum attracted only a "few intellectuals and a large body of plain citizens."⁵ In "Our Girls," Stanton adapted to this audience by cultivating a motherly persona and offering educational advice on the upbringing of children. For her audience of "plain citizens," Stanton's reflections on fashion and beauty simplified abstract and complex ideas about patriarchy and women's oppression. Cast as an educational lecture on child rearing,

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Stanton adapted to the constraints of the lyceum lecture. Yet, Stanton also critiqued prevailing notions of femininity and traditional gender roles, making "Our Girls" one of her most far-reaching and radical public speeches.

Stanton's Biography

Elizabeth Cady was born on November 12, 1815, as the seventh child of Daniel Cady and Margaret Livingston Cady in Johnstown, New York. Daniel Cady's income as a judge and later a member of the United States Congress provided Stanton a life of privilege. As Griffith explained, the Cadys were considered the "first family of Johnstown," living in a large mansion and employing up to twelve servants at a time. By the time Elizabeth was born, Daniel Cady was considered one of the wealthiest landowners in the state of New York.⁶

When recalling her childhood in her autobiography, *Eighty Years and More*, Stanton suggested that her father's political interests may have passed on to her while still in the womb. The "excitement" of her father's campaign for Congress, she wrote, was shared by her mother and "may have had an influence on my prenatal life and given me the strong desire I have always felt to participate in the rights and duties of government."⁷

When Stanton was eleven years old her older brother, Eleazar, died after a short illness. Eleazar had just graduated from Union College and Stanton remembered him as the "pride of my father's heart." After Eleazar's death, Stanton recalled her father exclaiming, "Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!"⁸ In an often repeated story, Stanton explained her efforts to be like a boy:

All that day and far into the night I pondered the problem of boyhood. I thought that the chief thing to be done in order to equal boys was to be learned and courageous. So I decided to study Greek and learn to manage a horse. . . . They were resolutions never to be forgotten--destined to mold my character anew.⁹

Stanton spent the next six years attending Johnstown Academy with the boys of her class. When she graduated, she hoped to attend Union College in Schenectady but was told that girls were not admitted. This was the first time that Stanton experienced gender discrimination and she became outraged, recalling that "my vexation and mortification knew no bounds."¹⁰ Since she was barred from attending college, Stanton begrudgingly attended Willard's Seminary for Girls in Troy, where she excelled in debate and oratory--skills she would put to use soon for the cause of women's rights.

In 1839 Elizabeth met Henry Brewster Stanton, a celebrated abolitionist, and the couple was engaged within a month. On May 1, 1840, they were married and eleven days later set sail for a six week journey to London for the World Antislavery Convention. As the wife of a delegate to the convention, Elizabeth fully expected to participate in the slavery debates and she even attempted to convert fellow passengers on the ship to the abolitionist cause. Unbeknownst to Stanton and the other American

delegates, the English delegates had already decided that the American women would not be allowed to participate in the convention debates.¹¹ The ensuing debate on the "woman question" and the ultimate defeat of the resolution to admit women convinced Stanton and fellow abolitionist, Lucretia Coffin Mott, of the need for a convention "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women."¹²

The first women's rights convention took place eight years later in Seneca Falls, New York. Organized by Stanton, Mott, Martha Wright (Mott's sister) and Mary Ann McClintock, some three hundred people attended the convention at the Wesleyan church, including forty men. At Seneca Falls, Stanton delivered the first public speech of her career and presented the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. Parodying the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Sentiments maintained that "all men and women are created equal."¹³ In her first public speech, Stanton confessed her fear of public speaking and emphasized the importance of the women's rights cause. "I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you at this time, having never before spoken in public," she admitted, "were I not nerved by a sense of right and duty, did I not feel the time had fully come for the question of woman's wrongs to be laid before the public, did I not believe that woman herself must do this work."¹⁴

Throughout the antebellum period from 1848 through 1860, Stanton delivered dozens of speeches in support of woman suffrage at legislative hearings, temperance meetings, and women's rights conventions. She also served as president of the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) from 1866-1869 and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) from 1869-1890.¹⁵ Stanton's suffrage advocacy throughout this period was always part of her larger, more ambitious attempt to challenge some of the most entrenched beliefs, values, and social customs of the nineteenth-century.

During the Reconstruction era, Stanton lectured on the lyceum circuit, traveling to small towns across the western frontier. These lectures lacked the legal and constitutional argumentation of her suffrage speeches. Indeed, they may seem, at first glance, essentially apolitical. Yet, discussing education and the socialization of young boys and girls, Stanton in fact continued to expand her feminist agenda. In Stanton's two most popular lyceum lectures, "Our Girls" and "Our Boys," she challenged some of the most basic assumptions about nineteenth-century gender roles. Essentially advocating the elimination of gender distinctions in the education and rearing of children--the teaching of supposedly masculine and feminine virtues--she sought to undermine what she viewed as the educational foundations of a sexist society.

The Nineteenth-Century Lyceum Movement

The history of the lyceum, Angela Ray has explained, "illustrates a process of expansion, diffusion, and eventual commercialization."¹⁶ Josiah Holbrook, a Yale educated farmer, founded the lyceum in Millbury, Massachusetts in 1826. Holbrook conceived the lyceum as an educational venture designed to provide intellectual stimulation, practical training and moral improvement to local artisans, farmers, and textile workers.¹⁷ In his "Plan for Mutual-Education Societies," published in the *American Journal of Education*, Holbrook envisioned a lyceum that would offer "mutual

instruction in the sciences, and in useful knowledge generally."¹⁸ Equally important, Holbrook hoped that the lyceum would provide young men a diversion from the saloons. As he explained, young men needed protection from that "monster, intemperance."¹⁹ His goal was to provide "some object of sufficient interest to divert the attention of the young from places and practices which lead to dissipation and to ruin."²⁰

Holbrook envisioned the lyceum as a forum for adult education and community improvement at the grass-roots level. "Adult education throughout the history of nineteenth-century America," John Tapia observed, "was generally accomplished through public discourse and discussion."²¹ Holbrook imagined a democratic forum open to everyone—rich or poor. Although he never fully realized his utopian vision, the lyceum did provide entertainment and intellectual stimulation at a reasonable price.²²

Local teachers, scientists and preachers volunteered their services as lecturers in the first few decades of the lyceum. Throughout the antebellum period, communities controlled the planning and booking of lectures and lyceum speakers reflected local issues and concerns. Although a few nationally known reformers lectured in the 1850s on controversial issues like abolition and woman suffrage, most lecturers avoided political advocacy. As historian Donald M. Scott explained, "the lecture was an oratorical form deliberately and carefully separated from all partisan and sectarian discourse."²³

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s, professional lecturers became more common, and centralized booking agencies were needed to coordinate travel schedules and negotiate fees. As Ray explained, by the "late 1860s, arranging lyceum lectures had become a lucrative commercial enterprise, and the most highly sought platform celebrities during the Reconstruction era earned large incomes from lecturing."²⁴ James Redpath's Boston Lyceum Bureau was founded in 1868 and soon became the most prominent and successful central booking agency. Establishing what he called "star lecture courses," Redpath promoted the most popular and profitable speakers, including such "stars" as Susan B. Anthony, William Jennings Bryan, and Wendell Phillips.²⁵ All of these speakers made names for themselves on the circuit and could earn as much as \$500 per lecture.²⁶ The career as a lecturer was especially attractive to women who were still barred from traditional professions and most institutions of higher learning.²⁷

The selling of Redpath's Boston Lyceum Bureau to James Burton Pond and George Hathway in 1875 (renamed simply the Redpath Lyceum Bureau) marked a significant transformation in the lyceum movement. Although moral and intellectual improvement still remained a priority of lyceum speaking, entertainment and profit took a more prominent role. "Lyceum activity," Ray explained, "thus began as a part of a movement for public education and self improvement and gradually metamorphosed into commercial entertainment."²⁸ The emphasis on commercial success affected both the choice of speakers and topics, as well as the content and style of the lectures themselves. "Lecturers presenting controversy," Ray maintained, "adapted to the situations they faced by muting their views in performance: muffling the controversial material by presenting it alongside other subjects, approaching the tabooed topic indirectly, or concentrating on generalities rather than specifics."²⁹

Many critics have denounced the commercialization of the lyceum as a betrayal of Josiah Holbrook's vision of grass-roots education. Mead, for example, lamented how the profit-making motive transformed the lyceum into mindless entertainment.³⁰ Similarly, Carl Bode suggested that the "lyceum as an American social institution. . . ended with the Civil War," as the educational mission gave way to commercial entertainment.³¹

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's lecture, "Our Girls," reflected her attempt to conform to the entertainment focus of the lyceum, yet her speech clearly advocated educational and social reform. Like other pioneers of the public platform, Stanton had to invent a role for herself on the lyceum, and she did so by both conforming and rebelling against the conventions of the postwar lyceum. Speaking as a mother, Stanton offered practical, common-sense advice about raising young girls and she appealed to every mother's desire that her child would grow up healthy and happy. At the same time, Stanton called attention to the social and political barriers that prevented all women from reaching their full potential. Subverting prevailing notions of femininity and masculinity, Stanton celebrated the androgynous girl of the future who would reject the submissive and subservient roles of the past.

"Our Girls:" Redefining Gender Roles in the Nineteenth Century

From 1869 through 1880 Stanton delivered various versions of "Our Girls" on the lyceum circuit. The title evolved from "The Coming Girl" (1869) to "The Girl of the Future" (1872) and finally to "Our Girls" in 1875. Stanton adapted her stories and the themes of the lecture to suit the immediate concerns of her audiences. Yet, she still maintained the central thesis: that young girls should reject artificial standards of beauty and manners and pursue the educational or vocational training they needed to reach their full potential.³²

At first glance, "Our Girls" appeared to be a typical lyceum lecture, addressing an educational theme through entertaining anecdotes. Adopting a motherly persona, Stanton told stories from her own experience as a mother of seven children and offered practical advice, as befit the lyceum. At a deeper level, however, Stanton challenged conventional wisdom by urging women to fight for their daughters' right to grow up free from artificial constraints that stifled their ambition and potential. Exploring the connections between femininity, standards of dress, and the socialization of young girls, Stanton suggested that young girls were stifled by patriarchal customs.

In critiquing fashion and beauty standards, for example, Stanton echoed earlier dress reform advocates like Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Grimké. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argued that prevailing fashions of the time were "artificial" and "unnatural" and she urged women to be "left in a state nearer to nature."³³ Some forty years later, Sarah Grimké developed a similar critique of fashion and beauty standards in her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*. Not only was women's fetish for fashion unnatural and harmful, Grimké maintained that it also corrupted women's character. Grimké lamented that too many women "dressed like dolls" to attract the lustful "eye of man."³⁴

In resurrecting this debate, Stanton argued that standards of beauty and fashion violated the "law of Nature" by molding woman into "man's ideal." Instead of following their natural instinct and pleasing themselves, young girls learned that woman was "made simply to please man" by an "endless variety in her costume" (7).³⁵ Like Wollstonecraft and Grimké before her, Stanton transcended the narrow concerns of comfort and convenience that had defined the debate on dress reform and instead resurrected the larger moral critique of fashion.

Stanton also pointed to the fashion double standard that required women to appear "half naked," while men were "modestly clothed to the very chin." In the end, women were nothing more than "French courtezans, whose life work it is to fascinate man and hold him for her selfish purposes" (9). Women were reduced to playthings for men's salacious desires and became "man's handy work" (8). This, Stanton suggested, stifled the ambition of young girls and perpetuated a patriarchal society.

An equally disturbing consequence of patriarchal fashion standards was women's ill health. Stanton observed that prevailing fashion norms did "violence" to "Nature" by artificially creating "small waists" and a "constrained gait" that harmed women's health. Stanton pointed to how fashion trends created unnatural constraints on the body and led to "moody, listless, weary" young girls. The "unnatural restraints," Stanton argued, prevented circulation "of the blood and action of the heart and lungs" and might even lead to nerve and muscle damage. Such common ailments as headaches, earaches, side aches and backaches, Stanton predicted, would be prevented if young girls were allowed to wear loose, comfortable clothing (13). Adding humor to lighten the atmosphere, Stanton joked that God himself had not thought it "necessary to lap the ribs of American women" (14).

The consequences of such fashion trends, however, were serious and Stanton pointed to the psychological, as well as the physiological effects:

With iron shoes, steel-ribbed corsets, hoops, trails, high heels, chignons, paniers, limping gait, feeble muscles, with her cultivated fears of everything seen and unseen, of snakes, spiders, mice and millers, cows and caterpillars, dogs and drunken men, firecrackers and cannon, thunder and lightning, ghosts and gentlemen, women dies ten thousand deaths, when if educated to be brave and self-dependent, they would die but one. (8)

Considered in its entirety, however, "Our Girls" was much more than a lecture railing against fashion trends. For Stanton, standards of dress and beauty symbolized larger societal norms that prevented women from achieving their goals. More specifically, Stanton argued that traditional ideas about femininity constrained women by limiting their sphere of action. Fearing being labeled unfeminine or masculine, women were prevented from reaching their true potential in life. Conforming to the lyceum's emphasis on entertainment and education, Stanton avoided polemical arguments and instead offered simple observations and motherly advice, all the while redefining norms of appropriate feminine behavior.

In the introduction of "Our Girls" Stanton challenged her audience to recognize their own oppression. Consistent with the upbeat tone of the lyceum, however, Stanton did so indirectly, subtly and with humor. Stanton began her discussion of women's position in society with a humorous story. She recalled a time when her young son read a sign in Madison Park that said "No dogs admitted here." Responding with childlike naiveté, Stanton's son observed: "It is a good thing, mother, that dogs cannot read, it would hurt their feelings to know that they were forbidden to walk in parks." Stanton used this humorous story to reflect upon women's oppression in nineteenth-century society. Many women, Stanton argued, passively and innocently accepted their lot in society. Comparing them to the family pet, Stanton argued that "Bruno sleeps on his master's rug in some dark street pining for the sunshine and the grass and a frolic through field and forest, without knowing his degradation" (2). So too, Stanton argued, were the young girls of the country "pining" for freedom. Obeying their "masters" passively, women accepted their lack of freedom. Stanton was not accusatory in her observations. Instead, she maintained that women, like the family pet, were simply blind to their subservient status.

Instead of directly denouncing custom and tradition or moralizing against social injustices, Stanton offered simple advice that stemmed from her own experiences as a mother. While adopting a motherly persona, Stanton affirmed traditional virtues associated with motherhood: empathy, caring, and selflessness.³⁶ In this motherly role, Stanton softened her critique of gender roles and instead emphasized what the girl of the future *could* achieve if unconstrained by societal expectations.

Young girls, Stanton recognized, possessed a certain natural beauty that inspired people. "They are the music, the flowers, the sunshine of our social life," she observed. Girls were *not* naturally weak, passive, or fragile. In fact, in their youth, Stanton argued, girls were equal to boys in both physical endurance and energy. "See how they romp and play with hoops and balls, with sleds and skates, wash their brothers' faces in the snow, and beat them to a race on yonder pond," she exclaimed. This period of natural strength and equality was short-lived for girls, however, as they soon awakened to their second-class status. Girls soon realized that they were a part of a "subject, degraded, ostracised class." Instead of fulfilling their own ambition, girls were taught that they existed "simply to revolve round some man, to live only for him, in him, with him, to be fed, clothed, housed, guided and controlled by him." In carefully crafted imagery contrasting the natural state of girls with the artificial constraints, Stanton lamented that "one sex was foreordained to clutch the stars, the other but to kiss the dust" (1).

Stanton suggested that socializing young girls to passive roles failed to prepare them for the inevitable challenges, misfortunes, and tragedies in life. Offering practical, motherly advice, she presented traditional gender roles as an obstacle to prudent planning. Sounding almost alarmist, Stanton reminded her audience that "Fathers, Brothers, Husbands die, banks fail, houses are consumed with fire, friends prove treacherous, creditors grasping, and debtors dishonest." In such circumstances, the only way a girl could survive was through the "skill and cunning" of her "own brains and hands" (5). Debunking the chivalrous attitude that men would take care of women, Stanton described the young woman "thrown alone in the world without money,

without friends, without skill or place in the world." Educated to aspire only to beauty and fashion, the woman faced with such circumstances was left in a "helpless condition" (21).

Beyond the personal tragedies that resulted from socializing young girls to subservient roles, Stanton also warned of the social consequences. Girls who might have served society through a profession were instead obsessed with trivial matters of beauty and fashion. Worse yet, young girls were destroyed psychologically by their lack of choices. "The pent up fires that might have glowed living words of eloquence in courts of justice, in the pulpit, or on stage," Stanton lamented, "are to-day consuming their victims in lunatic asylums, in domestic discontent and disgust, in peevish wailings about trifles, or in the vain pursuit of pleasure and fashion." Stanton concluded that "[m]ultitudes of our noblest girls are perishing for something to do" (5).

To end on such a pessimistic note would violate the expectations of the lyceum. Thus, like many lyceum speakers, Stanton concluded with an optimistic and inspirational vision of the future. Envisioning a world where young girls would grow up unencumbered by societal expectations, Stanton painted a portrait of the "coming girl"—the girl of the future who would reject unnatural, debilitating and harmful standards of feminine beauty. Advocating dramatic changes in custom, law, and tradition, Stanton argued that the coming girl was "to hold an equal place with her brother in the world of work, in the colleges, in the state, the church and the home" (6). Addressing all areas of discrimination, Stanton advocated sweeping changes, yet by couching her vision in the language of motherly advice and concern, Stanton softened her critique of gender roles. Addressing her audience as "dear girls" (16), Stanton reminded them that "beauty works from within, it cannot be put on and off like a garment" (18). Instead of focusing on beauty and manners, she urged young girls to cultivate their higher faculties, avoid "[i]dleness" and "frivolity" (20), and earn their own living. In summary, she urged girls to be "true to yourselves" (18).

"Our Girls" is unique among Stanton's speeches in its emphasis on the psychological and social barriers to women's equality. Unlike her suffrage speeches in the earlier years of her career, Stanton avoided discussing the legal and political obstacles to women's emancipation. Instead, Stanton's lyceum lectures struck at the deeper roots of gender discrimination in child rearing and education. Lacking the explicitly political arguments of those more famous speeches, Stanton used narratives as evidence and personal experience as proof. In the final analysis, however, "Our Girls" advocated sweeping social changes and was, in some ways, more radical than Stanton's suffrage speeches.

Stanton's Legacy

In 1880 Stanton retired from the lyceum circuit. The grueling travel schedule had been difficult for a woman in her 60s and she eagerly anticipated a more sedentary lifestyle. As she explained in her diary in November of 1880, "I have fully made up my mind not to budge this autumn one inch outside my premises."³⁷ Six weeks later she was convinced that she had made the right decision. Reflecting on her retirement from

the lyceum circuit in a diary entry, she wrote: "I am so glad that I am not wandering on those Western prairies. Heavens! It makes me shudder to think of my weary lecture tours from Maine to Texas during the last twelve years."³⁸

Despite the hardships of the lyceum tour, Stanton had fond memories of her experience and she felt that she had been part of an important social movement. "The Lyceum Bureau was, at one time," she recalled in her autobiography over a decade later, "a great feature in American life."³⁹ Addressing "all the vital questions of the hour," Stanton felt that she had done "great educational work."⁴⁰

Equally important, Stanton believed that "Our Girls" had an immediate impact on those who heard it. She even boasted that the lecture had stirred up "some lethargic *femmes coverts* to a state of rebellion against the order of things."⁴¹ Lyceum lectures, of course, rarely incited rebellion, nor were they intended to spark controversy. Generally designed to educate, entertain, and inspire, Stanton apparently accomplished those goals, as the popularity of "Our Girls" seemed to confirm. Yet, in some ways, "Our Girls" represented one of Stanton's most far-reaching critiques of traditional gender roles. Fundamentally redefining standards of beauty and femininity, Stanton not only attacked prevailing convention as unnatural and harmful, but also illuminated the psychological and social harm of such practices.

After retiring from the lyceum, Stanton continued to strike at the foundation of sexism and to anticipate the most pressing concerns of later generations of feminists. Dedicating most of the 1880s to writing *The History of Woman Suffrage*, Stanton began yet another ambitious project that, in a sense, continues to this day: the crafting of a useable, feminist history. The *History of Woman Suffrage* ultimately resulted in six volumes--each nearly a thousand pages--and took more than three decades to complete. Stanton joined with suffragist Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage to edit the first three volumes, while the final three volumes were completed by Anthony and Ida Husted Harper after Stanton's death. As divisions in the suffrage movement's ranks created competing factions, the *History* promoted Stanton's own agenda for moving the women's movement beyond the narrow confines of the vote. As the suffrage movement became dominated by a new generation of younger, more conservative activists in the 1880s, the *History* reminded them of the sacrifices of pioneers like Stanton herself.⁴²

By the 1890s Stanton had all but retired from the public platform and continued to dedicate most of her time to writing. As she wrote in her diary in November of 1892, "I can still do good work with my pen, and it shall be at the service of our reforms so long as its powers last." Convention speaking was no longer appealing to her in her golden years. "I cannot clamber up and down platforms, mount long staircases into halls and hotels, be squeezed in the crush of receptions, and do all the other things public life involves." She admitted that those days had "passed for me."⁴³

In the last decade of her life, Stanton became more convinced that the mainstream suffrage movement was moving in the wrong direction and her diary entries reflected her frustration and anger:

The longer I live, the more I am struck with the stupidity of people in not doing the right thing at the right time. Our younger coadjutors seem to be too satisfied with painting in the brightest colors the success of the women's movement, while leaving in the background the long line of wrongs which we still deplore. A rose-water campaign for discourtesy might do, but when the vast majority of us are deprived of all our civil and political rights, the struggle must be a fierce one.⁴⁴

Stanton would continue to fight the fierce struggle throughout the next decade, delivering her most famous speech, "The Solitude of Self," in 1892. In 1895 she published her most controversial work, the *Woman's Bible*.⁴⁵

The *Woman's Bible*, more than any of Stanton's works, reflected her concern with broadening the women's rights agenda to include all of the causes and consequences of woman's oppression.⁴⁶ The most polemical work of her career, Stanton's *Bible* constituted a wholesale attack on Christianity and the Bible. Since the Bible taught that "woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgement seat of Heaven, tried, condemned, and sentenced," Stanton inferred that it could not possibly be the work of God.⁴⁷ "I do not believe," she wrote, "that God inspired the Mosaic code, or told historians what they say he did about woman." And as long as women believed such "mournful" stories, their "emancipation" would be "impossible."⁴⁸

Reactions to the *Woman's Bible* from clergy and social conservatives was predictably hostile, but the response of Stanton's colleagues and friends in the suffrage movement was hardly more positive. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) condemned the book as an embarrassment and hindrance to the suffrage cause and passed an official censure, denying any association with "the so-called 'Woman's Bible' or any theological publication."⁴⁹ Susan B. Anthony was so distressed by the censure of her friend that she contemplated resigning as president of NAWSA, but--to Stanton's dismay--decided against it.

Undeterred by the criticism of her friends and associates, Stanton seemed to relish all the attention the controversy generated. She even printed the censure resolution in the second volume of the *Woman's Bible*, published in 1898. Precisely because it was so controversial, the *Woman's Bible* became a best-seller, went through seven printings, and was translated into six languages.⁵⁰

Still, Stanton seemed interested in more than just stirring things up. She seemed genuinely convinced that, like her earlier views, her controversial critique of religion would someday become a part of mainstream feminist thought. Her goal throughout her long career was to attack discrimination wherever she saw it--in the home, in the workplace, in law, and even in the pulpit. As she explained in 1899, "it requires no courage now to talk *suffrage*." Instead, she urged the younger generation of "coadjutors" to "demand equality everywhere."⁵¹

Stanton's corpus of rhetorical works illustrated her determination to look beyond the short-term goal of female enfranchisement in order to address more fundamental causes of woman's oppression. Stanton apparently foresaw that the

passage of a woman suffrage amendment would not be a panacea, as the vote alone would not eliminate the more fundamental causes of sexism, including sexual domination, traditional marriage, the exclusion of women from history, unequal opportunities in the workforce and in education, and even traditional Christianity.

Contemporary feminists have embraced Stanton's feminist agenda and many of her ideas have become a part of the mainstream movement. Modern feminists have maintained that aspiring to standards of ideal beauty and thinness can adversely affect the lives of women and limit their opportunities. Feminist activists like Andrea Dworkin have pointed to the psychological effects of marketing femininity to women. Aspiring to ideal "[s]tandards of beauty," Dworkin maintained, stifles the "intellectual possibility" and "creative potential" of women.⁵² Likewise, feminist writer Naomi Wolf has pointed to the health consequences of the "beauty myth," arguing that as many as eight in ten college-aged women have adopted "disordered eating" habits in an endless effort to achieve cultural standards of thinness.⁵³

In many ways "Our Girls" predicted the future of the Second and Third Waves of feminism. Striking discrimination at its root cause--the socialization of young girls--Stanton advocated revolutionary changes. Envisioning a day when all girls would have the same opportunities as boys, Stanton predicted sweeping changes in custom and tradition, many of which have since been achieved. In 1900--just two years before she would die--Stanton asked an important question: "What can be done to strike these dull minds and awaken them to the deep significance of our agitation?" Answering her own question she surmised, "Something sensational should be done."⁵⁴

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Notes

1 This essay is based on two previous studies: Lisa Shawn Strange, "Dress Reform and the Feminine Ideal: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the 'Coming Girl,'" *Southern Communication Journal* 68 (2002): 1-13; and Lisa Shawn Hogan and J. Michael Hogan, "Feminine Virtue and Practical Wisdom: Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 'Our Boys,'" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 415-436.

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5 David Mead, *Yankee Eloquence in the Middle West: The Ohio Lyceum, 1850-1870* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1951), 20.

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12 *Seneca County Courier* 14 July 1848 in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, ed., *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1 (New York: Fowler and Wells Publishers, 1991; reprint edition, New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969), 67.

13 Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, 70.

14 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Speech at the Seneca Falls Convention," in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, ed., *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists*, vol. 2 (New York: Praeger, 1989), 42.

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