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### **Me, You, the Wide World:**

#### **Letters & Women's Activism in Nineteenth Century America**

by Sarah Klein

Feminist scholars have spent the past two decades paying closer attention to the connection between gender and genre—as parallel spaces where identity and ideology are produced. We increasingly understand both gender and genre as socially constructed entities, performances if you will, that provoke particular expectations from audiences. A number of scholars doing feminist work have convincingly argued that a text's conventions, form, and style are associated with the power relationships explored in its content. This line of inquiry has been alive and well in rhetoric/composition circles, as well as in literary, film, and cultural studies. Feminist re-examinations of women in the rhetorical tradition have, for example, prompted an ongoing discussion about gender and genre. One of the most intriguing outgrowths of this critical recovery has been the conversation about the epistolary and women's histories.

Despite the fact that their fields of inquiry and critical approaches are diverse, what each of these feminist scholars has come up against (in one way or another) is the *mythology*

of the letter. The epistolary form has long been pigeonholed as “feminine” and “private,” and rhetorical scholars have, in the past ten years, started to unpack this mythology in earnest. Building upon the work of Jean Elshtain and others, they have begun to recognize how constructed and problematic the dichotomy of political (public) vs. social (private) really is – particularly for those working on women’s rhetoric. We now recognize that the feminization of letter writing took hold in France in the second half of the seventeenth century and that the epistolary became widely regarded as a genre well-suited to women’s “untutored and spontaneous expressiveness,” perhaps through the letter’s historical association with conversation (Earle 6). By the eighteenth century, this feminization of the letter was a powerful stereotype (Earle 6). It then too, by association, became an “emblem of the private” even while it “retained its actual historical function as a form of public communication and exchange” (Steedman 116-17). As Carolyn Steedman notes, literary history seems to assume that the epistolary is “natural to women,” but “these assertions are grounded in a social history of female subjection that has been revised in recent years” (121). The contemporary, revisionary scholarship in this field begins with feminist examinations of Cicero’s epistolae form and classical models whereby written correspondence (or “sermo”) became classified as everyday speech rather than as formal oratory (Carrington 215, Henderson). It revisits Ovid’s “amorous” letters attributed to women (Cape) and examines medieval women’s letters of commerce (Richardson). It recontextualizes letter writing under humanism from the fourteenth century forward (Carrington and others), and increasingly raises questions about American women’s traditions.

Lisa Gring-Pemble is one of the few scholars working on nineteenth century women’s rhetoric to look closely at the letter as a primary rather than a peripheral text. Examining the

early Oberlin College personal correspondence of Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Gring-Pemble suggests that for these women the “private” epistolary functioned as a pre-genesis space for consciousness-raising and the exploratory development of woman’s rights arguments in a safe textual space. “Personal” letter exchanges, she notes, were used by Stone and Brown Blackwell to share, contest, and work through preliminary political arguments on woman’s rights, as well as to reflect upon the daily realities of their lives as women – within a relatively protected, non-threatening medium of communication. She notes that many of the “personal” thoughts and arguments expressed by the two women in their youthful correspondence tum up again in more thorough, forceful, and mature forms in their public, activist rhetoric of later years.

My study uses Gring-Pemble’s work as a critical jumping-off point. I want to further investigate, using additional case studies, how letters have functioned in relation to nineteenth century American women’s roles as activists. To what extent can we argue that the epistolary allows these women to manipulate or collapse the private/public dichotomy to strategic, political ends? Beyond the “pre-genesis” stage of consciousness-raising, does the epistle serve as a rhetorical space for activism? To what extent can we argue that these rhetors use the letter to do political work? Using the published letters of Sarah Grimke, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frances Harper as my case studies, I argue that the epistolary is in fact a rhetorical outlet *crucial* to the activist work of these women. The letter allows them to negotiate the period’s gendered “separation of spheres” and facilitates their political/rhetorical careers.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Women, Rhetoric, and the Epistolary Form**

Investigations into epistolary and the rhetoric of seventeenth century women such as Margaret Cavendish and Madeleine de Scudery are among the crucial preludes to studying American women, because scholars like Sutherland and Donawerth have exploded the gendered dichotomy of public/private in texts that predate the nineteenth century. By their historicizing they have “set the stage” for studies of American women and the epistolary act. For example, Sutherland interprets and contextualizes Cavendish’s letters, sometimes written to fictitious persons, by concluding that “she was using the genre of letter-writing to express her [political] opinions” (261). Donawerth has noted that in the seventeenth century, bounds of public and private are blurred in both the writing and reading of letters, where the epistolary is often a communal, family affair. In fact, “private letters were even likely to turn up in print, to be consumed by a wider public audience” (314). Donawerth reveals that seventeenth century De Scudery “adapts rhetoric to [her] political circumstances,” making use of epistolary types and working within a culture built around the “private” salons which “offered much more opportunity to influence . . . than did the ‘public’ court of an absolute monarch” (310). In autocratic seventeenth century France, where rhetorical activities other than public speech (including “personal” conversation and “private” writing that spread news) wielded great political influence, De Scudery understands the far-reaching power of a “private” form. Indeed, as Rebecca Earle has documented, eighteenth and nineteenth century correspondence too “confounds an easy classification into public and private,” mixing family gossip and less personal news (3). As she notes, the letter operated as news-vehicles preceding formal American newspapers, “offering its literate reader both information and commentary” (4).

When nineteenth century rhetorical scholar Mary Augusta Jordan theorized the epistolary, she too alluded to the boundary-defying flexibility of the genre, whereby a model letter might include “something about me, something about you, something about the wide world” (239). In the American context, we would be remiss to enter any investigation of women’s rhetoric and the epistle without acknowledging its subtext: the republic of letters that marked eighteenth century culture. As Frank Shuffleton has argued, “the republic of letters was both a revolutionary and a unifying phenomenon, and it was, furthermore, a peculiarly epistolary event, a republic made out of letters . . . It most clearly reveals itself in its favorite genre, the epistle, both public and private” (289). As he suggests,

Epistolarity in the years of the early republic could encourage a sense of an open, more egalitarian society . . . The epistolary network knit together women and men with widely differing social, economic, and religious positions. The American republic had to find some way to embrace all of the contending voices that spoke from different sections, classes, and ideological positions. This need was addressed . . . culturally by the figure of the republic of letters with its readiness to accommodate the whole span of rational discourse. (290)

As Shuffleton goes on to document, despite Constitutional, theoretical democracy, “women were shut out of meaningful engagement in political life,” except perhaps through their participation through the epistolary genre late in the eighteenth century: “a relatively open space in which women could exercise their . . . moral intelligence . . . even if those inflections were misheard by their brothers” (291). At the same time, Shuffleton distinguishes between the epistolary spaces of men and women, through which men perpetuated “an ethic of justice”

and women a more personal/social “ethic of care” and “bond of affection” (301). Presumably these discursive epistolary roles completed each other and together achieved “universality.” Shuffleton observes that “ideally [there would exist] the expression in one person of that postconventional morality able to shift with ease from the viewpoint of one [realm] to the other” (301). What needs to be clarified is that his contemporary “ideal” was more fully realized by the women of the period than has been recognized. Perhaps it is our current “reading” of the republic of letters that needs deconstructing and revising. There is evidence to suggest that at least by the early nineteenth century, American women *did* in fact “shift with ease from the viewpoint of one to the other” through their own republic of letters, defying the separation of spheres to do political work.

Letters have largely been used as historical artifacts and as clues for literary biography, but they are not merely peripheral texts that may support our readings of the “real works.” As the most recent feminist rhetorical studies are proving, they are texts with inherent value in and of themselves – they are their own field of inquiry. Contemporary feminist work on the letter form has focused on several key qualities that make it an interesting site for investigation: its nature as an “imprecise frontier,” its sense of immediacy, the equal potential for secrecy or publicity, acute audience-awareness, its self-revealing undertones, its ability to map daily realities and detailed experience, its interactive and a dialogic nature, its role as a “cementer of social bonds” and as an antidote for the illusion of “mundane personal information” versus “real purpose” in text, its negotiation of absence and presence, its forever-incomplete ownership of discourse, its “writing of the self,” its potential to measure power dynamics among writers and readers, and its historical use as a tool for the moral instruction of women (Earle, Cooper, Gilroy and Verhoeven, Bower).

### **Case Studies: Setting the Stage**

Curiously enough, a letter penned by two French women confined in Paris's St. Lazarre Prison suggests a great deal about the significance of the letter in nineteenth century American women's political rhetoric. On June 15, 1851, Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland wrote a letter to the Second National Convention at Worcester, Massachusetts offering support to American women and backing the Seneca Falls Declaration of woman's rights. Roland had attempted to vote in 1848 in France and Deroin ran as a candidate for the Legislative Assembly in 1849. Both women served six-month prison terms for these illegal activities and for their association with a blacklisted socialist group (the Central Committee of Associative Unions). The letter was read aloud to the American audience by Ernestine Rose, who expressed a sense of solidarity with the French authors, and the address was warmly received. So warmly, in fact, that at the behest of the convention a few women, including Lucretia Mott, undertook an ongoing correspondence with these and other French activists. Too, its text was circulated in pamphlet form after the convention, as an excerpt from the event's proceedings, and thus as a key figure on the rhetorical record. The St. Lazarre letter is constructed by rhetors who are identifiably "socially concerned," to use Roderick Hart's terminology. If, as Hart theorizes, the persuader is an individual "seeking to change not just one life but many lives . . . who wants to make a particular kind of change, a public change," then this text artifact is unabashedly doing rhetorical, political work even as it forges "personal" bonds and is deployed in a stereotypically "private" genre (11). Deroin and Roland write:

Dear Sisters: . . . Your socialist sisters of France are united with you in the vindication of the rights of woman to civil and political equality. We have,

moreover, the profound conviction that only by the power of association based on solidarity . . . can be acquired . . . the civil and political equality of woman, and the social right for all. . . From the depths of the jail which still imprisons our bodies without reaching our hearts, we cry to you, Faith, Love, Hope, and send to you our sisterly salutations. (pars. 1, 6-7)

Hart sees rhetoric's functions in these terms: it unburdens, distracts, enlarges, names, elongates, and empowers (13-18). If we find Hart's schema useful, the letter sent to American women from St. Lazarre Prison is a rhetorically-rich text begging to be explored. This letter does the rhetorical tasks that so many other "personal" epistolaries by "private" women accomplish. It represents merely one case study among scores that may complicate our understandings of both letter-writing and nineteenth century activist rhetoric.

For activists like Frances Harper, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sarah Grimke, the letter proves more rhetorically significant than we have previously recognized. Although their arguments, contexts, and concerns were distinctly unique, each of these women devoted herself to related causes that sought to address power and powerlessness in American society: woman's rights, abolition, race relations, suffrage, and temperance. Working in the mid- through late-nineteenth century, these women fought diligently for social and political justice, adopting the often thankless, difficult mantle of the nineteenth century female rhetor. Despite interests and strategies that sometimes overlapped, sometimes diverged, the letters of these women provide a window into their rhetorical lives and testify to the importance of letter-writing in what we today understand as early "feminist" and "anti-racist" movements.

## **Sarah Grimke**

Sarah Grimke (1792-1873), sister to the more widely recognized Angelina, was born to a South Carolina slave-holding family. In their adult lives the sisters migrated to Pennsylvania and plunged themselves into activism. Both became Quakers and abolitionist speakers whose rhetoric capitalized on their authority as “eyewitnesses” to the terrors of southern slavery. Together they toured Massachusetts for the first time in 1837, speaking on abolition before conspicuous audiences.

Although their rhetoric may not have been the most radical or inflammatory of the period, historian Miriam Schneir notes that “they found that the rigid limitations imposed by society on the behavior of women could not be disregarded without consequences” (35). A pastoral letter was written by the Congregationalist Clergy of Massachusetts, widely distributed and read in Congregationalist churches throughout the state in reaction to this first Grimke speaking tour. As Schneir records it, “without mentioning the Grimkes by name, the letter severely condemned their actions in speaking publicly and abandoning their rightful sphere . . . [and] warned womankind that there was danger of ‘permanent injury’ to the female character if such unwomanly activities should be pursued” (35-6). Sarah Grimke responded with her “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman,” written in the second half of 1837 as she kept up a lecture itinerary.

Grimke variously addresses the letters to Mary Parker (president of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society at the time) and to her sister Angelina, fashioning them as personal correspondences. But there is much more going on here than casual banter – Sarah Grimke uses these letters to not only articulate her vision of woman’s rights, but also to refute the charges made by the Massachusetts clergy. The “Letters” were eventually published in serial

in the *New England Spectator*, and then in pamphlet form in 1838. The reach thus became considerable for these complex arguments addressing religious, economic, social, and legal realities of mid-nineteenth century American life by bridging the concerns that subjugated women.

Grimke crafts a careful, effective ethos for herself in these epistles, framing herself as a fearless, godly activist, “engaged in the great work of public reformation . . . fulfilling one of the important duties . . . as an accountable being . . . in exact accordance with the will of Him to whom, and no other, she is responsible for the talents and the gifts confided to her” (letter III). Through this series of epistles, she argues a Biblical revisionism to counter the religious interpretations made by the Massachusetts clergy, clarifying her understanding of the scriptures in relation to the “duties” and “privileges” of women (letters I, II). She redeems Eve with a revisionary argument, but adds, “I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy” (letter II). She recontextualizes the rhetoric of her own accusers, deftly suggesting that history will look upon the claims of the Massachusetts clergy with as much “astonishment” as “the opinions of Cotton Mather and other distinguished men of his day . . . [who] solemnly condemned nineteen persons and one dog to death for witchcraft” (Letter III). Grimke denounces the “servitude of women,” pointing to the abuses of the marriage institution, the condition of black women in slavery, and the lack of education and opportunity for American girls. She calls for “mental and spiritual freedom” for women and declares “how monstrous, how anti-Christian, is the doctrine that woman is to be dependent on man!” (letter III).

With this pointed language, Grimke addresses her purported, primary audience of “sisters,” those women to whom she understands herself to be joined “in the bonds of womanhood,” in a manner that shows a savvy awareness of her overhearing audiences. Without speculating unduly about intention, when the letters did land themselves in publication and pamphlet circulation, the Massachusetts clergy were subject to a more “public” refutation and public audiences were privy to the voyeuristic pleasure of overhearing a rather tantalizing “private,” “womanly” discourse. How did the various audiences “read” the rhetoric of these letters? We cannot be sure about reception and ultimate effect, but the fact that the genre had been used strategically and provocatively is clear. The epistle, as a sanctioned “female” form, had been used rhetorically for most subversive means. Sarah Grimke had taken the damning letter from the Massachusetts clergy, which had been read aloud publicly in scores of pulpits, and turned it on its head for her own political platform. By mirroring the form and genre through which she had been castigated by the clergy, Grimke forcefully reclaimed a space which was perhaps helpfully ambiguous – both ostensibly private and yet potentially public, allowing her to confound gender expectations under the protection of a sanctioned female space. By crafting skillful and defiant argument within the conventions of a “feminine” genre, Grimke negotiated and manipulated this rhetorical space to do political work. She used this written form in order to disseminate a highly charged, combustible political message to a hostile overhearing audience – an effective medium for disseminating this sort of message while she continued her speaking tour under the less threatening mantle of a guarded and “ladylike” public oratory. Grimke’s message was the same in both settings, in both mediums, but one of her gifts was her audience-awareness, making the letter a most suitable form for her rhetoric. The epistolary allowed Grimke to

hone a more direct, angry rebuttal to criticism and to circulate it publicly, without exposing her to the kind of ostracism Fanny Kemble had suffered for raw abrasiveness.

For Sarah Grimke, then, the epistolary genre functions at least in part as a rhetorical vehicle for the dissemination of public, political argument, as a tool for carving out her own rhetorical ethos as an activist, and as an invention space for crafting the logos of her public oratories.

### **Frances Ellen Watkins Harper**

Frances Harper (1825-1911) had a distinguished career as a public speaker, writer, and activist. As Frances Foster notes,

Having been born into an articulate and well-respected free black family, Harper could have chosen to avoid many of the distressing realities that controlled the lives of the less fortunate members of her race. She chose not to do so. Harper decided that her personal survival and well-being were inextricably linked with the survival and well-being of the larger society and that confrontation, not silence was the way. (3)

Harper, trained in the classics and the Bible, a talented rhetor, was associated with the A.M.E. church and by 1854 traveled widely as a speaker denouncing slavery. She gained standing as a widely-known and popular speaker in the abolitionist circles of New England. She also worked for suffrage, women's education, and temperance, in addition to her fight for racial justice.

Scholars, including Foster, have made the argument that Harper's development as a poet paralleled her development as an activist – that the subtexts of her work in both realms correspond. Yet, scholarship has to date paid little direct attention to “personal” writings and their relation to her activist rhetoric, beyond conventional biographical readings. This may be because Harper left scant traces of personal papers, no diaries or journals, and wrote no autobiography – particularly unusual for social reformers of the period (Foster 22). Yet, as Foster too notes, “From her earliest writings, Harper advocated a life in which the personal and the public were merged in an effort to realize the moral, social, and economic development of society” (23). To avoid further integration of her “personal” and “public” rhetorics in our scholarship is thus probably a mistake.

Foster's *A Brighter Coming Day* has now published 27 of her personal letters, making them available for any number of new scholarly inquiries. Foster claims, “The letters in this collection were selected to indicate the biographical context within which the other works were written as well as to illustrate Harper's own development of this genre. Most . . . were published in her own lifetime . . . *The letters are particularly important because they reveal the intimate connection between Harper's life and her literature*” (37, emphasis mine). In response to Foster, and to specify the importance of texts other than the poetry and fiction, I suggest that the letters are also crucial texts in their own right because of what that they reveal about her rhetorical development as an activist. Their significance, in other words, is not just biographical.

Harper's letters from 1853 to 1864 are the focus of my inquiry here, because they mark the early development of her rhetorical career and represent a crucial stage in her political life. Harper's career took off during this decade, and her anti-slavery work in the

years before the Civil War marked one of her most politically potent periods. It was during these years that Harper gained notoriety as a social reformer and political speaker. Harper's letters were sometimes submitted as "letters to the editor" of newspapers, and thus published. In addition, personal contacts put several of her letters into print – for example, William Still, who printed them in his *Underground Railroad*.

The letters of this early period, which are my focus here, give witness not only to Harper's tenacity and devotion to her cause, documenting racial divides and personal challenges on the lecture circuit, but they also serve as an important invention and rehearsal space for Harper's activist rhetoric. Many of the arguments presented in her public speeches are shaped and crafted, in terms of logos and style, in her private letters addressed to individual friends. Through narrative and description of her experiences on the road, Harper develops the pathos and ethos of her lifelong platforms. It is in these personal correspondences that Harper's political vision shines through in her prose just as beautifully and persuasively as in her more well-known public oratory and prose. She writes to friends on September 28, 1854, testifying to the efficacy of her cause, reassuring them that she is making connections with women in New England who are

for putting men of Anti-Slavery principles in office . . . to cleanse the corrupt fountains of our government by sending men to Congress who will plead for our down-trodden and oppressed brethren, our crushed and helpless sisters, whose tears and blood bedew our soil, whose chains are clanking 'neath our proudest banners, whose cries and groans amid our loudest paens rise. (44)

In addition, here and in other letters like it, Harper invents and rehearses the message and style so familiar to audiences of her speeches and published essays. In addition, she uses the epistle to powerfully keep friends and connections informed of her political progress, news-sharing continually through this activist lifeline.

As an invention space for working through her own platform, Harper's personal letters are equally important texts. Harper documents the evolution of her politics and her rhetoric in her letters. She writes, on October 20, 1854:

I spoke on free Produce, and now by the way I believe in that kind of Abolition. Oh, it does seem to strike at one of the principal roots of the matter . . . Oh, how can we pamper our appetites upon luxuries drawn from reluctant fingers? Oh, could slavery exist long if it did not sit on a commercial throne . . . Oh friend, beneath the most delicate preparations of the cane can you not see the stinging lash and clotted whip? (44-5)

One of the most interesting examples of Harper's use of the epistle as an invention space is addressed to "My Dear Friend" on September 12, 1856 from Niagara Falls. Here she sketches out the narrative, imagery, pathos, and logos of the powerful speech she would deliver to the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1858:

I have just returned from Canada to-day . . . Well, I have gazed for the first time upon Free Land! And would you believe it, tears sprang to my eyes, and I wept. Oh! It was a glorious sight to gaze for the first time on a land where a poor slave, flying from our glorious land of liberty (!), would in a moment find his fetters broken, his shackles loosed . . . I have since then seen the rainbow-

crowned Niagara, girdled with grandeur, and robed with glory, chanting the choral hymn of Omnipotence, but none of the sights have melted me as the first sight of Free Land. (45-6)

With these lines, and throughout the rest of this letter, Harper begins to craft the text of the speech she would deliver two years later in a public forum. The 1858 speech's achievement is its effective use of imagery and storytelling, tapping into the master narrative of American liberty and exposing its hypocritical mythology under a slave-state. The speech develops a powerful counter-narrative with geographic spaces of natural beauty, including Canada, as its emblems. Using the rhetorical foundations which she establishes in this early letter, Harper later crafts a powerful oratory which incites, and subtly *indicts*, her Northern, mixed-race audience by collapsing geographical boundaries that act as metaphors for the nation's political and moral divides. Her contrast of evocative scenes of natural beauty in these northern settings with the pathos elicited by "no free soil" – implicating the north's complicity in southern slavery. Her methods appear originally in the imagery of the epistle, turning American geographies and their implied meanings on their heads – framing nineteenth century America as an unjust "landscape." The metaphors of place, of journey, are first expressed in these personal letters and fine-tuned for her public speeches.

Letters from 1858 and 1859 demonstrate Harper's use of correspondence to document examples of racism and abuse that she witnesses in her travels – a sort of epistolary record-keeping of narratives of the sort that she would frequently use in her persuasive addresses. Such documentation works in a circular way, creating not only a dialogic with the letters' recipients but *within herself* as she sorts through her arguments by incorporating and considering new events. Sprinkled in among the letters documenting abuses come letters such

as the one penned in April of 1859, where Harper takes the accumulations of her personal experience and witness to fashion with more clarity and precision her political stance:

I never saw so clearly the nature and intent of the Constitution before. Oh, was it not strangely inconsistent that men fresh, so fresh, from the baptism of the Revolution should make such concessions to the foul spirit of Despotism! . . . could let their national flag hang a sign of death on Guinea's coast and Congo's shore! . . . Wait, my brother, awhile; the end is not yet . . . Rest assured that, as nations and individuals, God will do right by us, and we should not ask of either God or man to do less than that. (47-8)

Too, she uses this space to encourage and remain in contact with her political allies while on the lecture circuit.

The use of the personal letter to encourage, comfort, and inspire her allies is also evident in her letters to John Brown and his wife Mary Brown in November of 1859. Here she offers a political vision of the "meaning" of Brown's suffering as a martyr to a racist system:

God writes national judgments upon national sins; and what may be slumbering in the storehouse of divine justice we do not know. We may earnestly hope that your fate will not be a vain lesson, that it will intensify our hatred of Slavery and love of freedom . . . (49)

Her "letters to the editor," written in a personal form but intended for newspaper publication, further demonstrate the epistle form as Harper's political call to action. Harper's June 1860 letter to the *Weekly Anglo-African*, referring to the capture of fugitive slave Moses Horner (for whom a cross-racial rescue attempt had dismally failed), provides a space in which Harper makes individual arguments to intervene in specific, urgent situations. She seizes the

moment for social justice rhetoric, addressing a geographically-distant audience in expedient form:

I saw in a late number of your paper an appeal from one of the Philadelphia rescuers, and I would ask through the columns of your paper if this appeal does not find a ready and hearty response in the bosom of every hater of American despotism? Shall these men throw themselves across the track of the general government and be crushed by that monstrous Juggernaut of organized villainy, the Fugitive Slave Law, and we sit silent, with our hands folded, in selfish inactivity? (52)

Harper's establishment of exigence here, and her use of the letter as an urgent call to action, shows her savvy understanding of the power of this textual medium. Several other examples of Harper's use of the epistle to bolster her public audiences and disseminate them to distant audiences are evidenced in other letters, such as the one written on December 9, 1859 to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, where she shares anecdotal news from the front and connects it to her global arguments on slavery legislation: "I am in Ohio now, and speaking on the Fugitive bill. Is it not shocking, the boldness of the slave-hunters since the triumph of the Slave Power in Northern Ohio . . .? Did you see the account of a late arrest of a man to whom 15 minutes' trial was given? Fifteen minutes to bid adieu to freedom . . ." (50). In letters such as this one, Harper mentions her ill health and asks for correspondence from her readers, further using this medium to maintain her role as a rhetor even when physical or geographical circumstances pose obstacles. The epistolary in all of these cases is a tool for consciousness-raising and solidarity-building, clearly a political act of advocacy.

Harper's later, post- Civil War correspondence, also deserves more scholarly attention. Those who take up this task in future explorations will discover that she uses the personal letter to chronicle the events of Reconstruction in the south and to circulate news of the same among northern audiences, as calls to action, as lobbying, and as a personal record of a political life. Too, these later letters are important because they demonstrate Harper's keen understanding of personal correspondence as a way to build bridges with other activists (sometimes from disparate sectors), to identify and reach diverse audiences, and to carry out successful, long-distance collaboration on political issues.

### **Anthony, Stanton, & the Letters of Everyday Women**

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton left behind an extensive and sometimes intimate epistolary record that traces a close friendship, a political bond, and a lifetime of lively debate and collaboration. Letters exchanged between two of the most well-known nineteenth century women rhetors are extant from 1852 until their deaths in the first decade of the twentieth century. This correspondence, which spans more than half a century, reveals much about the rhetorical role of personal letters in the activism of Anthony and Stanton. As Ellen Dubois has argued, from the earliest dated letters the correspondence “tells us a good deal about the characters of both women . . . [and] gives the impression that, from the very beginning of their collaboration, both women took a long-range perspective on the tasks of challenging traditional ways of seeing women’s position and of building a women’s rights movement” (53). A look through the now published personal letters exchanged between Anthony and Stanton over the years reveals that the epistle served as not only a personal, but a *political* dialogic. Letters were clearly an invention space for developing and debating the arguments these women made in more “public” settings and as a collaborative space for sketching out rhetorical tactics and debating positions. Epistolary allowed for the development of their rhetorical criticism, served a consciousness-raising role for both women by leading to political reflections about “personal” experience, and united two very different individuals in an effective, efficient political team.

The “late” letters from 1895 to Stanton’s death in 1902, which were finally published in part in the 1992 revised edition of the Dubois *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony Reader*, reveal the functions of the personal epistolary late in their careers. While they used their correspondence to collaborate, invent, and reflect, just as in their earlier activism, the

epistolary took on new political importance for both women after 1895. Stanton, increasingly isolated by personal circumstances and poor health, sent letters to Anthony to be given as public addresses at political events she could not, or would not, physically attend. It served as a space for the two to hash out, if not ever to fully reconcile, their divergent political priorities, and to come to appreciate what we might now call *diversity* among women's concerns and experiences. They used their letters to pass along relevant political news from the field, with Stanton relying more heavily than ever upon Anthony's reports to keep abreast of public discourse. They both conducted political business, made pleas on behalf of women, and took stock of their partnership in the final epistles of their lives. Even in the weeks just before Stanton's death, the two used the occasions and circumstances of their lived realities to engage in activist argument. Anthony closes her final letter to Stanton in 1902: "We, dear old friend, shall move on the next sphere of existence – higher and larger, we cannot fail to believe, and one where women will not be placed in an inferior position but will be welcomed on a plane of perfect intellectual and spiritual equality" (299).

In addition to their lifelong dialogue in letters, one of the most significant epistolary events of the woman's rights movement is also associated with Anthony and Stanton. With Stanton's support from behind the scenes, Anthony, the increasingly more visible member of the pair in later years, organized a large woman's suffrage convention in 1880. The event, hosted in Chicago, was an attempt to bring Anthony's overriding political concern of suffrage to the attention of the major parties in a presidential election year. She and Stanton hoped to build exigence for the political parties to address the issue in their campaign platforms. Anthony wrote letters to newspapers to publicize the event, slated to take place just before the Republican convention. In these published epistles, Anthony called for attendees and asked

that “everyone who cannot go . . . send a postal card to the mass convention saying she wants the Republicans to put a Sixteenth Amendment pledge in their platform” (Dubois 201).

Unexpectedly, Anthony received thousands of letters from American women, although he had merely asked for the equivalent of a petition. Dubois has published nine of these letters from “everyday” American women, which are rarely seen and have been paid little critical attention. They have been examined as background research for biographies such as Ida Harper’s *Life of Anthony*, but have not been critically discussed in their own right. Aside from Dubois’ publication of a handful of the letters, they languish largely ignored in the Chicago Historical Society’s holdings of the National Woman Suffrage Association collection. As Dubois notes in introducing the published nine,

The fact that so many women responded to Anthony’s call makes it clear that the political feminism she championed was by no means limited to upper-class, educated white women, and that the poor, the old, the illiterate, and the black also felt their grievances as women and associated them with disenfranchisement. (201)

Although the letters were addressed directly to Anthony and told of personal experiences and beliefs of “private” women across America, collectively they formed a fascinating political rhetoric. Together they stand as testimonies to the connection between “private” realities of lived lives and “public” discourse of political argument. They make explicit, and sometimes eloquent, arguments aimed at not only Anthony as a reader, but at the larger overhearing audiences of the attending suffragettes and of the Republican party on the eve of its largest

pep rally. Through a purportedly “private” medium, these women make themselves, and their political stances, visible in the political arena.

The letters give a voice to and develop the ethos of individual women rhetors, transforming personal experience into political testament. For example, Live Pryor, president of the Ladies Enterprise Club of Richmond, Virginia, skillfully uses narratives of the abuses she has witnessed against black women in the south, writing to Anthony, “i must i feel let my feeling go out, so . . . i address you on Behalf of your Down Trodden Colored Sisters of Virginia” (206). Pryor also uses the epistolary occasion to network with Anthony and her fellow activists, requesting, “If you have any papers or book that is of no use to you our society would feel grateful to receive them as we wish to form a library” (206). This sense of unity with other women, and the affirmation of longing for a political voice, is often expressed in moving figures. A Mrs. Mary Travis of Fore’s Bend, Minnesota writes to Anthony:

Dear Sister who can slave this terrible . . . state of affairs. I would not tie any woman down to this life of unpaid toil, but justice means justice to all . . . I do want to vote; yes, I do, and I would like to be Robertspere – or the heads-man just one year or till the head of every murderer, and every sin-licensing statesman had rolled down from the guillotine. This slow murder and usurpation calls for just such a bloody, unmitigated remedy. (205)

Other women too use the narratives of their lived experience to disrupt America’s master narrative and to argue political platforms in their letters. “I am over 76 years old; have lived in different places; have seen man’s cruelty to women many times . . . It must be

stopped. I should be glad to say something on that great occasion and hear others; but I am a poor woman and a widow; and could not get money to come to save my life so sent my name and childrens," writes a Mrs. A. Beaumont from Illinois City (Dubois 202). Jane E. Sobers of Philadelphia testifies:

i have a desire to vote . . . free holder and tax payer when will we have our Rights and Justice in this world. I do not know some times what to think of some of the woman of our city they are a sleep they want to be roused up in Some way i for one have Bin Struggling hard with this world Since 1874 all Lone By my Self. I have to be man and woman boath . . . you have my hand and my hart. I only wish i have the power to help you though But I hope the day will come soon. (202-03)

Likewise, an Alzina Rathbun of Shellsburg, Iowa, writes:

I cannot be at the meeting although it is my greatest desire to be there . . . And what a sadness it brings over me when I look back when I was young and had to stay at home and work while my Brothers was away at school . . . What a sham is freedom . . . Smart men well they are what the world call smart judges and statesmen while I old lady not capable to do anything for my poor down troden sisters. I am so thankful there is so many capable to do something strike your best blows go to all their great conventions let them know you mean freedom if we never get it keep them stirred up that is some satisfaction . . . all this scribbling does not amount to much of course but I have give you my mind on the subject. (203-4)

After an elegant argument, in which she writes to Anthony, “I thank God for giving you the *moral courage* to insist, and persist, under such difficulties and discouragements . . . that woman should have some of the rights she for so many centuries has unjustly been deprived of,” an anonymous woman from Cleveland adds, “I saw the notice of this call several days ago and intended to have answered immediately, but many things prevented, for I am a married woman and not free, by any means, from the cares that relationship brings: and, 56 years old” (207).

These women’s letters to Anthony testify to the epistle’s potential to disseminate political rhetoric using women’s familiar experiences, co-opting correspondence as a vehicle for getting around material constraints and into political discourse. Although many American women, due to poverty, geography, the constraints of the domestic sphere, lack of support from their husbands, or other obstacles, could not participate physically in events such as the 1880 Chicago meeting, letters allowed them a medium through which they could not only make personal connections and advocate for themselves and other women, but through which they could participate rhetorically in activism. The fact that such letters were often read aloud or circulated at woman’s rights gatherings additionally provided the individual rhetors with a form of “publication” – yet another inroad to political lobbying.

### **Making Connections, Anticipating Future Projects**

These brief epistolary case studies reveal the multiple ways in which nineteenth century American women activists used the letter as an adaptable, effective rhetorical space. Grimke, Harper, Anthony, and Stanton use the historically feminized, privatized epistle to do political work. Personal correspondence functions, for these women, in a number of ways: as a pre-genesis invention space for working through arguments, and as a testing ground an initial template for public speeches and public, more formal, texts; as a medium allowing them to get around constraints of the domestic sphere and its material limitations to participate rhetorically in political activism; as a vehicle to advocate for themselves and for other women; as a savvy avenue for direct publication under the protection of a sanctioned, “lady-like” form; as a way to build networks and alliances with other politically-minded women and men; and as a way to disseminate relevant news, persuasive testimonies, and provocative arguments to both allies and to potentially hostile audiences.

These epistolary case studies highlight the personal letter’s ability to function as a vital rhetorical space. For Grimke, Harper, Anthony, and Stanton, the personal letter certainly performs rhetorical functions – it unburdens, distracts, enlarges, names, elongates and empowers. As Hart puts it, “rhetorical people do not hang back . . . the rhetor is an infiltrator” (14). Each of these nineteenth century rhetors uses the epistolary space to infiltrate new audiences and new situations, to move arguments forward in a relatively “safe” exploratory textual zone, and to negotiate their way around the constraints of the separation of spheres.

When Hart declares that rhetoric “distracts,” he means that “rhetoric acts like a good map” with a “distinctive point of view,” “narrowing our latitudes of choice without giving us the feeling that we are being thereby hemmed in” (15). For the women whose epistolary

rhetorics I've explored here, the letter serves as a template in which to narrow their political focus and move closer to bringing publics to new definitions, new criteria, and new categories of understanding the problems of American social and political life. Too, the epistolary allows Grimke, Harper, Stanton, and Anthony to "enlarge" discourse, "moving us along . . . asking us to consider a new solution to an old problem (or an old solution to a problem of which we are unaware)" (Hart 15). Their approach to social and political dilemmas and to injustice names and redefines, "providing listeners with a vocabulary" for talking about and working through urgent troubles in the public sphere. Their writing in letters allows them to elongate by "moving listeners to a better place, a happier circumstance," and to "appropriate the past" in politically decisive ways. Women actively participated in the nineteenth century American republic of letters, without a doubt. And their participation was not limited to a sequestered exercise of the "ethic of care," but crossed social and cultural boundaries to join, and shape, political and public debate.

Most importantly perhaps, these letters operate as *empowering* texts for both their writers and their audiences. The importance of these epistolary endeavors for the political activism of their writers is magnified by Hart, when he observes: "Social power often derives from rhetorical strength. Grand ideas, deeply felt ideas, and unsullied ideologies are sources of power too, but as the philosopher Plato told us, none of these factors can be influential without a delivery system, without rhetoric" (17). The letter as a delivery system afforded social power to writers and readers alike.

The case studies discussed here merely scratch the surface -- Much more work needs to be done on the role of epistolary in American women's activism and rhetoric. Many women rhetors who have been historically left in the shadows have been uncovered, and this

is an ongoing task for feminist scholars. Too, a number of letters in print are deserving of critical attention by rhetorical scholars, and countless correspondences of lesser-known women sit in collections gathering dust. Many of these, if studied and published, would add a good deal to the conversation about the letter and women's rhetorical histories. While literary scholars focus primarily on epistolary fiction and rhetorical scholars have primarily used letters as research documents to map out "context" and biography, there is more to be done. The American letter is a field of inquiry that promises new discoveries and new ways of looking at text, gender, and rhetoric.

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