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## A Woman's Voice: Female Autobiography in the Nineteenth Century

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Bard

A Woman's Voice:  
Female Autobiography in the Nineteenth Century

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2014



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*Introduction*

This project began with a mission statement, written almost exactly a year ago: “I plan to piece together a picture of the American family that is both emotionally and historically real, and convey that family to the reader through the twin lenses of fiction and historical analysis.” In the course of my research, however, two things became clear: first, that while there were indeed plenty of correspondences between family members, the task of sifting through them in order to organize them in any cohesive and enlightening way would be enormously time-consuming. Instead, there were longer-form primary sources—diaries, journals, and autobiographies—that allowed me to consider the stretch of peoples lives in their entirety. Second, it didn’t seem necessary to inject fiction into these personal stories and struggles. Rather, there were dozens of women who had written, with full color and detail, about their real lives. Fiction would merely be an imitation of the real stories they told. Just as fascinating as the stories themselves were the ways in which they told them, and to fictionalize their narratives would lose that valuable historical evidence. The task then became examining the contexts in which these women wrote, the larger movements in history that shaped them, either through their conforming to their standards or through their resistance to their changes.

The project centers around three main categories: the sciences, more specifically medical and anatomical science; religion, more specifically the waves of revivals called the Great Awakenings; and the political, exemplified in Abolitionist movement and the advent of women’s rights. The autobiographical writings of women who were entangled with these movements in order to examine how they experienced these shifts over the course of their lives and how they characterized their own place in history.



The reason the project focuses on women at all is not because there were no men in similar relationships to these movements, but in fact the opposite: because the writings of men have survived in so much greater number than those of women<sup>1</sup>, the default perspective of history is through the eyes of men. We understand the 19<sup>th</sup> century the way we do through the evidence provided by their testimonies. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich famously wrote that “well-behaved women seldom make history”<sup>2</sup>. The quote is often interpreted as a kind of call to action: don’t behave. Rebel, shake up the status quo, do not feel bound by externally-mandated rules of “good behavior”. It is a useful misinterpretation, but a misinterpretation nonetheless. Ulrich was speaking instead of the incredibly important work done by well-behaved women, who are typically not mentioned in the history books. Instead, they are an muted backdrop to world events; the actual fabric of history is mainly composed of men by men. This is the basis of much of Ulrich’s work; she focuses on the common woman, the silent women who “never asked to be remembered, and [...] weren’t.”<sup>3</sup>

Ulrich centers an entire book around the diary of the woman addressed in the first chapter of the project, and I used her *A Midwife’s Tale* as a starting point, although my work eventually took me other directions. Martha Ballard is the first woman chronologically and my window into the world of nineteenth-century medicine. As a midwife, she held a professional position in the medical world, and was perfectly poised to experience the shifts

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the reasons for why this is are addressed later on in the project, but one rather obvious one should be mentioned here: many women did not write about themselves because they either could not write or did not think their lives and thoughts worthy of being remembered.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich LT. “Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735.” *American Quarterly* [Internet]. 1976;28:20-40. This quote has also been attributed erroneously to many other women, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Marilyn Monroe, and, bizarrely, Anne Boleyn.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

in that world as scientific advances brought men into the birthing room and forced women out. Her diary reveals the life of a woman whose profession and way of life both are soon to be subsumed into the realm of male control. “Midwife” was a title steeped in feminine tradition, feminine mysticism, and female knowledge, but by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the duties of midwives had passed to male midwives and finally to male doctors in general. Martha Ballard represents a breed of woman who would not appear again until a century later, a woman who was the center of her domestic life but also in control of her economic, social, and financial being. Her profession was her means of control, and taking it away meant taking away an alternative to the domestic role of women.

In terms of the religious sphere, I contemplated writing about Ann Lee, the Mother of the Shakers movement. However, as fascinating as her life was, she left no personal record behind, and the focus on primary sources was too important to the project to abandon. Though the fictional aspect of the project was left behind, I did not want to lose the first-person experience of history altogether. Instead, I focused on the writings of two black itinerant preachers. Martha Ballard was disappearing into the male-dominated medical field as it emerged, whereas Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw were informed by the new religious America, attempting to establish a foothold in the church hierarchy of the time. They emerged from the male-dominated world of traveling ministry in order to share their exultations in God. Their struggles with the black church and their own internalized ideas of proper womanhood show the ways that women raised in a society that teaches them to be domestic could still break out of those roles and make their own way in the world. Their travelling means that they were literally stepping outside of their boundaries. They inhabit a space halfway between “behaving” and “not behaving”, to use Ulrich’s language, and they

are very aware of it, commenting on a world that does not allow them to live their lives in their full truth even as they work to fit properly within it.

The last figure is the one who least embodies Ulrich's "common woman", and certainly the most famous. Sojourner Truth, a New York native, religious leader, and political icon, has been written about extensively, both by her contemporaries and modern historians. But what makes Sojourner Truth so fascinating is not only her incredible life—her escape from slavery, her involvement with religious cults, her renaming of herself, etc.—but the way in which she has been written about. Her voice has been muddled by those of her biographers, detractors, and friends. It was through my examination of Truth and her life that the real theme of the project became clear: the effects of both history and historicity upon women.

What does it do to our understanding of history that Ulrich chooses Martha Ballard, a distinctly remarkable woman in that she delivered upwards of 300 children in her lifetime and put herself in danger in the daily execution of her duties, and labels her as a "common woman"? What does it do that church histories generally ignored the existence of female preachers like Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, but others did not? What does it do that Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I A Woman" speech was reported in different dialects depending on the one recording it, and what does it mean that various parts of her life were excised from her official narrative? This project is an attempt to return to the words in which these women chose to present themselves. Through them, we are able to get a clearer, more nuanced picture of these women as women, acting within and reacting to the world in which they lived.

*Chapter One: Martha Ballard*

Until the 18th century, the birthing-room of an expectant English or American mother was often a place crowded with female faces. The woman “laying in”, as it was called, would be attended by any and all female family members as well as the midwives of the area, whose main function was that of reassurance and emotional support. They would coach the mother through the birthing process, cut the umbilical cord, and pass the child into the waiting arms of its mother. By 1820, however, the delivery of children was considered entirely the province of men, with only lower-class and extremely rural mothers relying on midwives. Writing at the turning point of this shift—from 1785 to 1812—Martha Ballard’s extremely comprehensive daily diary illustrates not only the otherwise-undocumented details of her profession, but the feminine economic and professional control that was lost as power over obstetrics shifted to men.

Colonial American midwives were mostly a self-taught group. Without a centralized government, most laws and regulations were inconsistent from state to state, resulting in rather loose, half-formed institutions. This meant that as of the 1700s male doctors and female midwives were on a very similar level of knowledge, gained in a very similar fashion—through the apprenticeship system. The only exceptions were those male doctors with enough money to travel to Europe and educate themselves there—which they did, some of them training with William Smellie,<sup>4</sup> the leading English instructor of midwives as of 1740.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Smellie himself had never attended a live birth; all of his knowledge of the birthing process came from his dissection of pregnant corpses.

<sup>5</sup> Donegan, Jane B.. *Women & men midwives: medicine, morality, and misogyny in early America*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), 45.

Male midwives were a relatively new phenomenon. The English world of obstetrics was traditionally the province of women. The laws of propriety kept men from the birthing room, and the qualifications for a woman to practice as a midwife were few and far between. In *The Female Physician* (1724)<sup>6</sup>, John Maubray listed them extensively. Far from being expectations for a medical professional, however, they read more like something out of the later *Ladies' Book of Etiquette*:

SHE ought not to be *Fat* or *Gross*...SHE ought to be *Grave* and *Considerate*, enuded with *Resolution* and *Presence of Mind*...SHE ought to be *Patient* and *Pleasant*; *Soft*, *Meek*, and *Mild* in her *Temper*...She should pass by and forgive small *Failings*, and peevish *Faults*, instructing her gently when she does or says amiss: But if she will not follow *Advice*, and *Necessity* require, the MIDWIFE ought to reprimand and put her smartly in mind of her *Duty*.

Apart from the specification about the size of her arms—Maubray stipulates these are necessary so as not to “occasion racking *Pains* to the tender *labouring woman*”<sup>7</sup>—the descriptors he uses have very little to do with the actual delivering of children, and much more to do with her emotional state as the delivery happens, independent of her. These requirements, such as they were, contained absolutely no stipulations on medical knowledge. What this meant was that any woman with decent control of her emotions and the ability to handle the sight of blood could serve at the mother’s side. Accidents due to the incompetence of midwives were extremely common; in any case where the fetus was not turned “correctly” (i.e. head downward), parturition could easily result in

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<sup>6</sup> As will become clear in the rest of this chapter, the title of this work is extremely misleading. Women were not only not permitted to be licensed physicians, they were not considered capable of administering any kind of “physic”—the treatment of disease.

<sup>7</sup> Donegan, 10.

the death of both mother and child as the midwife attempted to remove the fetus by force. With no training in anatomy and no tools to speak of, the results were often grisly.<sup>8</sup>

There were several attempts to license English midwives, most notably by the Church of England, but they had little success. Partially motivated by the rise of deaths in childbirth, the church also had several other motives for involving itself in the practice of midwifery. The first was to allow midwives to perform baptisms in times of emergency. The second, and perhaps more compelling for the Church of the time, was to investigate midwives on suspicion of witchcraft. The link between magic and midwifery was merely the natural extension of the link between magic and femininity in general—especially any and all femininity related to sexuality.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, women were characterized as vastly more sexual than men. The female orgasm was thought to be necessary for conception<sup>9</sup>, and women were cast as seductresses: passionate, wild, and insatiable in the face of male restraint and reason. *Malleus Maleficarum*, the famous fifteenth-century treatise on witchcraft, claimed that witches were women taken by overwhelming lusts that only consorting with the devil could appease; the womb itself was an insatiable organ and anyone associated with it could be afflicted with said lust. Similarly, because midwives understood birth control—to an extent, at least, that most of the sixteenth-century public could not claim—they were deemed much more likely to assist with infanticide and abortion.<sup>10</sup> However, the links between witchcraft and midwifery may be exaggerated—

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>9</sup> This relates to the idea that the female reproductive system was just the male reproductive system, internalized—see the “one-sex” vs. “two-sex” model discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22.

most of the historical evidence linking the two actually involved midwives laying out the dead accused and checking them for witch's marks.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, the Church instituted a kind of midwife license, in order to obtain which a midwife had to demonstrate her prior experience, pay eighteen shillings, and swear an oath to her piety.<sup>12</sup> The regulations, while well-meaning, were not particularly effective. The circularity of the process—requiring a demonstration of experience practicing midwifery in order to be allowed to practice midwifery—was overlooked, and the issues of infant mortality and child death remained.

The solutions available, however, involved either allowing men into the birthing-rooms, which propriety would not allow, or instructing women in anatomy, which, in addition to being just as improper, was considered impossible. According to the assumptions of the time, women, with their fickle emotionality and inferior intelligence, were not suitable for long, complex study.<sup>13</sup> Even if they had, there was little for them to be told. With men unable to attend births, male knowledge of female anatomy and the birthing process had to be learned almost entirely through the dissection of pregnant corpses rather than observation of living women. Those rare midwives who might be both literate and “arrogant” enough to deem their knowledge worth sharing were limited by prohibitions against the publication of “lewd” drawings or descriptions.

In 1671, however, Jane Sharp published *The Midwives Book: Or the Whole Art of Midwifery*. The first text of its kind to be written by an actual midwife, it combined humeric theory with her own experience. This stressed the importance of balancing the

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<sup>11</sup> David Harley, “Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch”, *Social History of Medicine* 3, no. 1 (1990): 1 – 26.

<sup>12</sup> Donegan, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

four humors (phlegm, black bile, yellow bile, and blood, corresponding to phlegmatic, melancholy, choleric and sanguine, respectively). Men and women were thought to have different balances of humors, which explained their differing anatomy—men were warmer and drier, being more choleric than women, which meant they could afford to have external genitals and release heat through them; women, being naturally more phlegmatic, were cold and moist and had internal genitals. This was not considered theory, but scientific fact. Menstruation was an expulsion of “corrupt” humors.<sup>14</sup>

Anatomy was the main focus of the text; it centered mostly around descriptions of both male and female genitalia, as well as advice for how a child “lies” in its mother, which was the principal complication plaguing any birth. In a normal birth, a child would breach headfirst, allowing its body to follow smoothly. If, however, it was lying another way, it would have to be turned while still within the womb, so that there was no danger of distention of limbs or other damage to the child’s delicate bones.<sup>15</sup> The necessity of this “turning” process meant that the advent of new obstetrical tools was more than just a convenience, it was a turning point in the history of the profession.

The Chamberlen family, inventors of the obstetrical forceps, had made several attempts to incorporate midwifery; not, it appears, from any intention to elevate the science or teach the female practitioners the anatomy and scientific knowledge they were lacking, but to further pull the field of obstetrics into their power. Peter Chamberlen the Elder is thought to have invented the forceps as early as the 1630s, but kept it a family secret, only allowing his son and grandson to use them and keeping the details of their

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<sup>14</sup> Hobby, Elaine. Introduction to *The Midwife’s Book*, by Jane Sharp (Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xxxiv.

<sup>15</sup> Donegan, 25.



use closely guarded for almost a hundred years. In 1735, the first illustration of the forceps was published, and thereafter became an integral tool in the practice of obstetrics.

A world wherein a woman was not trusted to be strong enough to undergo years of study, however, was certainly not a world where she would be trusted with scientific instruments. A separation developed: in the case of a normal birth, midwives would supervise as usual, preserving the private femininity of her patient and the birthing process itself. However, as soon as any complication arose she was to call upon a male colleague, or “man-midwife”, rather than attempt to perform the delivery herself.<sup>16</sup>

\* \* \*

It was against this backdrop that Martha Ballard worked. She was born in either 1734 or 1735. Though originally from Oxford, Massachusetts, she settled in Hallowell, Maine, where she started keeping a diary. She wrote every day for the next twenty-seven years.<sup>17</sup> Unlike accounts we will examine in later chapters, whose rich style and advanced vocabulary give us insights into the psychology and beliefs of the nineteenth-century women who authored them, Ballard’s diary is extraordinarily simple and efficient, a working woman’s account of her business. It gives us a steady day-by-day picture of the work that rural American midwives were actually faced with, and of the ways in which rural, lower-class women were not only aware of the economic world around them but could and did exert control over it.

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<sup>16</sup> Donegan, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A midwife's tale: the life of Martha Ballard, based on her diary, 1785-1812*. (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition) Kindle Location 289.

The sheer span of time the diary covers means that it is an incredibly rich, dense source. It introduces a thousand threads without explaining any to a reader's satisfaction; to sew them together into something cohesive and meaningful for a modern reader is a matter of doing exhaustive outside research. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich takes on sections of the diary in her spectacular, comprehensive book *A Midwife's Tale*. She works with birth records, statistics, medical texts, and other diaries contemporary to Ballard's in order to understand the world Ballard lived in and the characters that populated it. Our intention in this chapter is simpler: to put it in complement and opposition to male writings about a midwife's duties; to place it within the framework of the history of obstetrics and the colonial domestic economy; and to explore the connections between "women's work" as it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the profession of the midwife.

Colonial and Revolutionary America were characterized by the self-sufficient domestic economy. As a land replete with resources and "no one"<sup>18</sup> using them, it was established as a production society from the first moments of settlement. When the Revolutionary War cut off both export and import of goods to and from England, the

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<sup>18</sup> The production and export of goods was seen as particularly civilizing and a way to "tame" the wild terrors of the American landscape as well as align the colonists with their mother country of Britain and against the "savagery" of the Native Americans. Weaving especially was seen by some as the basis for the civilized, gender-divided system. There is even evidence that white Americans introduced the weaving of cloth to various indigenous tribes in an attempt to reorder their society into something more "suitable": Benjamin Hawkins created schools for Creek women to learn to weave homespun, taking them away from their traditional duties in the fields. He hoped that Creek men would then be forced to tend to their crops as well as hunt, thus creating a social order he considered more natural. [1]

[1] Ethridge, Robbie. *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Kindle Edition) Kindle Location 3820.

colonies were ready for it, their home manufacture of textiles, soaps, and other household essentials allowing them to withstand the complete lack of imported British goods.<sup>19</sup>

A distinction between domestic manufacture and manufacture for domestic markets must be drawn: the former includes the fashioning of clothing, soap, furniture, and other objects meant for use in the home of the manufacturer; the latter refers to the manufacture of items to be sold on the small market economy within America. The former is often the province of women and the latter the occupation of men. However, the sexual division of labor in colonial and early republican America is highly confusing and contested; historians variously claim both that there was a strict divide between “inside” women’s labor and “outside” men’s labor and that these lines were so blurred as to be indistinguishable.

Much of it depended on region. In the south, slave plantations set sexual divisions of labor on their heads and shook them, with Black women working the fields and Black men serving as household servants as often as the reverse. In New England, however, the duties of the housewife, which would come to define womanhood over the course of the nineteenth century, were beginning to solidify. The American woman’s greatest source of pride became the order and upkeep of her household, the raising of her children, and the support of her husband was becoming. As Mary Beth Norton writes in her book on women of the Revolutionary period, *Liberty’s Daughters*:

Such a model of female perfection did not allow a woman an independent existence: ideally, she would maintain no identity separate from that of her male-defined family and her household responsibilities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McKeon, Michael. *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 170.

Those “household responsibilities” included the production of domestic goods, the most prominent and essentially feminine of which was the weaving of cloth. The act of weaving was a staple of Ballard’s life, and hence of her diary; it was the activity she referenced most outside of medical work and social calls. Many entries read like a lists composed of the three important spheres in her life: the domestic, the medical, and the economic.

A particularly useful example was the entry for July 26 1786:

Clear. Revd Mr Foster Dind<sup>21</sup> here. we Spun Cottne. I went to mr Williams<sup>s</sup>. Polly Fletcher wint from Nursing her. I receivd a pair of Shoes & 2/ from mr Beeman for attending his wife & for Medisen, of Savage Bolton 1-1/2 lb Cottne for Servis Done there.<sup>22</sup>

After a quick acknowledgment of the weather, she moved onto the business of the day. Reverend Mr. Foster dined with them, “we” spun cotton, she went to Mr. Williams, which is the phrasing she uses when attending pregnant women, and relieved Polly Fletcher, a neighbor’s daughter who had been helping with the pregnancy; and finally she was paid a pair of shoes and two shillings<sup>23</sup> from Mr. Beeman and a pound

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<sup>20</sup> Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Martha was the first woman in her family to be able to write anything more than her name, but her spelling, like that of many writers of the period, was phonetic rather than standardized, and she had her own kind of shorthand, especially concerning deliveries—”Dag<sup>b</sup>” or “Dafter” for daughter, etc. I’ve left the entries quoted in her style to preserve the quick, matter-of-fact style in which they were jotted down.

<sup>22</sup> Ballard, Martha, Robert R McCausland, and Cynthia MacAlman McCausland. "Martha Ballard's Diary Online." Martha Ballard's Diary Online. (Augusta: Maine State Archive, <http://dohistory.org/diary> (accessed February 10th, 2014)), entry for July 26, 1786.

<sup>23</sup> Although after the Revolutionary War dollars became the official currency of America, many Americans who loved through the Revolutionary period still reckoned money in pence and shillings rather than cents. Ballard marks shillings before the slash mark and pence after.

and a half of cotton from Mr. Savage. She spent the next morning carding said cotton and constructing a fence around her mill pond, before setting out to the Shaws, whose children were “Sick with ye Canker rash.” In the evening she received five visitors, all female, two of whom brought her a quarter of lamb weighing seven and a half pounds.

The visit by the Reverend was one of many; Ballard had a good relationship with her local church, with no suspicions of witchcraft evident at all. She attended funerals, helping to lay out the bodies of the deceased, and it is likely that she performed baptisms as well, as Hallowell was a small town and she made no note of priests attending the births of any of the children she delivered. The organizing and cooking of dinners and entertaining of guests such as the Reverend is one aspect of the typical domestic duties of a New England woman; the next line refers to the first step of the manufacture of clothing for Ballard and her family. But although Norton asserts that the ideal of domestic responsibility should leave no room for individuality, and that the direction of domestic activity should follow entirely from the husband’s line of work, it was clear that this ideal was not always achieved, and that there were other, more complicated relationships informing the home activities of wives and mothers than that with their husband.

Ballard described her domestic sphere not just in terms of her family and her own personal work maintaining her house and property, but as a business: she employed the daughters of her neighbors in exchange for her medical services to their families. Returning to the entry above, we can examine “we spun cotton” in that light—she was noting the work done in her side business as a weaver, the “we” referring to herself and whatever neighborhood daughters were currently under her employ.

As well as being patriotic acts, weaving and spinning were symbols of both humility and sisterhood, both creating a community of women and then limiting them only to that community. Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, a well-known female poet living in Philadelphia in the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, wrote several poems centered on her spinning wheel, some more politicized than others. In *The American Spinning Wheel* (1782), she reminded her rural sisters of their status as inferior:

Since Fate has assigned us these rural abodes,  
Remote both from fortune and honor's high roads;  
Let us cheerfully pass through life's innocent dale,  
Nor look up to the mountain since fix'd in the vale.  
When storms rage the fiercest, and mighty trees fall;  
The low shrub is sheltered which clings to the wall.

Their country living deprived them of “fortune” and “honor” in favor of “cheerful innocence”. Rural housewives were the low shrubs against the walls, sheltered from the storms that their urban sisters risked by rising above their station. However, in *The Contemplative Spinner* she also says that her wheel connected her to other women in a “Chearful uniting in Industrious Bands”<sup>24</sup>, highlighting the dual purpose of the art.

Spinning was contemplative, passive, creative, and endless. Unmarried women were called “spinsters” because that was where they spent their time: sitting at the spinning wheel, creating skein after skein of thread that will later go towards clothing themselves or their family members. It was productive without being active or in any way masculine. By making a business out of the weaving and spinning done in their households, Ballard and her contemporaries were pulling the feminine into the economic sphere and blurring the lines between domestic goods and goods for domestic markets; much of the economy of Hallowell, as described through Ballard’s diary, was based on a

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<sup>24</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 20.

system of barter as well as exchange of currency. The lamb, shoes, and shillings paid to her in the entries above were typical of the way her neighbors would compensate her for her medical services.

At the end of the eighteenth century Hallowell was a bustling town, situated on the Kennebec River. It served as a seaport for the warmer months of the year, until the Kennebec froze over in mid-November. When she was not at home overseeing her neighbors and their daughters at the looms, Ballard's midwife duties called her to both sides of the wide river. In the summer months, she would take the family canoe and in the winter often walk across the ice, usually alone, often crossing multiple times a day to return home or visit other neighbors that sent for her once she was already making calls.

Though Hallowell was far from being on the frontier, there was an element of danger and the savagery of nature underpinning Ballard's description of her work. It was physically strenuous and filled with pitfalls; in one memorable April she mentioned that she was travelling to a patient's house to deliver her child and "stept out of the Canue & sunk in the mire. Came back & Changed my Cloaths. Maid another attempt & got safe there."<sup>25</sup> She stayed out all night with various neighbors and patients. The very next day, after a severe storm, she set out again:

I Crost a Stream on the way on fleeting Loggs & got Safe over. wonderful is the Goodness of providence. I then proseeded on my journey. went beyond mr Hainses & a Larg tree blew up by the roots before me which Caused my hors to Spring back, & my life was Spared. great & marvilous are thy spareing mercies O God. I was assisted over the fallen tree by mr Hains. went on, Soon Came to a Stream, the Bridg was gone. mr Hewin took the rains, waided thro & led the hors asisted by the Same allmighty

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<sup>25</sup> Ballard, entry for April 23 1789.

power. I got Safe thro & arivd unhurt. mrs Hewin Safe  
Delivd at 10h Evng of a Daughter.<sup>26</sup>

There was never a possibility of turning back or allowing Mrs Hewin to fend for herself. These dangers were terrifying, and Ballard was clearly shaken, but it was all part of her work, and to be passed through with thanks to the Lord in the daily course of her activities. The mental and physical fortitude and perseverance shown here stand in stark contrast to the traits and abilities which midwives required as laid out by Maubray in 1724.

In June of 1787, she treated an epidemic of what she referred to as the “Canker Rash”—Scarlet Fever. The first affected was a child, the son of Ballard’s neighbor Captain Sewall, which may have been why the family called on Ballard as opposed to Hallowell’s doctor.

She charted the course of the Sewall child’s treatment, from the moment he takes ill (June 11<sup>th</sup>: “I went to Capt Sewalls to See his Child Sick with the rash, find it very ill”) through a harrowing false report (June 14<sup>th</sup>: “I heard Cap<sup>t</sup> Sewalls Son was Dead, hear it Contradicted. went there, find it very Low”), and finally to his burial (June 19<sup>th</sup>: “mr Ballard & the Girls went to the funeral of Capt Sewals Child.”)<sup>27</sup> She herself did not attend, instead attending to other patients who had since taken ill with the same rash. In this and most cases she was the primary physician and caregiver for the diseases, aches, pains, or ailments that her friends and neighbors might suffer. Doctors were expensive, and the kinds of folk remedies they prescribed were relatively easy to learn and to adapt to the supplies and capabilities of the midwife trade. She prescribed castor oil and various

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., entry for April 24 1789.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., entries for June 11 – 19.



herbs and plants (onions seemed to cure every ill), brewed burn salve, and set bones. These activities were as dangerous as her travels, if not more—she was constantly at risk of infection herself.

There are very few references to any doctors at all over the course of the years spanned by the text. In fact, although according to all the male-authored midwife literature—that is, all literature prior to Sharp’s *Midwives Book* and the overwhelming majority after—women were unsuitable for the treatment of anything other than the simplest of childhood diseases, Ballard’s diary is full of accounts of her addressing everything from viruses to broken arms. She did so with the same perfunctory professionalism as she showed in the delivering of children; sometimes, as in the case of August 13 1794, she went directly from serving as physician to serving as midwife:

Clear & very warm. I have been with mrs Pitts till Sun Sitt. was then Calld to the wife of Rich<sup>d</sup> Foster who is in Labour. I had no Sleep this night. I Did not Expect to find mrs Pitts alive when I returnd.<sup>28</sup>

Mrs. Pitts, thankfully, did live long enough for “Doct Williams” to see her on August 21st, one of the few appearances Williams made. He prescribed her “Bark” (although of what kind Ballard did not make any note, implying that this was not entirely a new idea), and Ballard helped him prepare it to give to her. The implication is that Ballard was serving as nurse; however, it seems clear also that there was not much difference between levels of knowledge between the doctor and the midwife—rather than some modern or complex medicine, he advises bark in the same way that Ballard

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., entry for August 13 1794.

might—and that she didn't necessarily trust his knowledge (she noted that she “Saw no ill Effect from [the bark]<sup>29</sup>” in a vaguely suspicious interjection).

Folk remedies were not Ballard's only medical knowledge, however. Her diary illuminates the ways in which rural midwives still gained scientific knowledge despite being unable to travel to Europe and gain the kind of education that Smellie and his contemporaries offered or make use of scientific tools. The anatomy that Jane Sharp described in 1671 was incredibly detailed, page upon page describing the consistency of the different kinds of flesh, working from knowledge that could only have come from her own experience: midwives, although they were not allowed to perform them themselves, were often invited to observe dissections.

Ballard observed four autopsies in the time that the diary covers. The first, in September of 1800, was of Nabby Andruss (likely “Andrews”), and of it Ballard said:

Doct Cony Dissected her, found her Comptaint was in the Uterus, it Contained 1 gal<sup>n</sup> water together with other Substance. the w<sup>t</sup> of it after the water was taken out was 7 lb. the Liver w<sup>d</sup> 3\_ lb. the trunk of her Boddy Contained a larg quantity of water.<sup>30</sup>

Although it was unclear what killed Nabby Andrews, Ballard's careful notes of the weight of uterus and the liver spoke of her diligence and attention to the autopsy; it's clear she took her job seriously and treated the diary as her medical journal as well as daily notes. In 1801 she gave a similarly dispassionate and scientific description of the dissected body of a boy she'd been treating for several months before his death:

The left lobe of the lights were found to be much inflamed, the intestines allso in which were 4 intersections, an inflammation of the kidneys and Blather. There were not a single worm Contained in the boddy but a small quantity of what the operators supposed to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., entry for August 21 1794.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., entry for September 16 1800.

be the bed in which they had resided. The gaull blather was larg and very full.<sup>31</sup>

Though affected by the child's death, Ballard at his autopsy remained professional, marking down the things interesting to her as a medical practitioner, rather than dwelling on the fact of the body of the child before her. These entries are entirely at odds with the prevailing image of women at the time: emotional, flighty, and unable to handle the sight of blood or other vulgarities. Ballard went directly from the autopsy to the house of another neighbor and delivered them a son.

In 1791 Ballard noted that a doctor “took account of Births & Deaths the year past from my minnits,”<sup>32</sup> which implied that Ballard, with her steady daily account, had been more fastidious in keeping track of the health Hallowell's populace than the doctor himself, or perhaps that he had not done so at all. The “minnits” she was referring to were noted down one column to the side of Ballard's diary entries. Each time she successfully performed a birth she noted it in this column (the above April birth was marked in her shorthand *Birth of Eben<sup>z</sup> Hewins Dag<sup>f</sup>*) and she did the same whenever she lost a patient or knew of a death in someone's family—and in the margins where we see the evidence of the economic autonomy that being a midwife brought her.

On May 24 1787, she wrote in the margins: *Birth. Mr. Blake's Son at about 5*, and then added – *fee Recievd.*<sup>33</sup> She didn't note down what the fee consisted of, nor who exactly paid it, whether it was cash or goods or services. All of that would come later, until the margins contained exact weights of the goods involved and record of those who still owed her money for services rendered. It was not the first entry in which she

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<sup>31</sup> Ulrich, *Midwife's Tale*, Kindle Locations 3923-3926.

<sup>32</sup> Ballard, entry for January 4 1791

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for May 24 1787

mentions being paid (remember the 1786 entry detailing payment, including the lamb), but it's the first time she separates it out, and the beginning of her keeping an organized account of her personal finances.

If Ballard's weaving business was an expansion and evolution of acceptable feminine roles, her economic accounts and the control they show over her economic state are the next step, far enough away from the original to be unrecognizable. Norton describes a feminine world opposite to the Ballard is living in: she cites a letter that was attributed (erroneously, as she points out) to Benjamin Franklin in which the writer advises men to keep their wives informed about their financial accounts, but claims that said advice was rarely followed. "Rural wives," she says, "often were unable to place a precise value on tools, lands, or harvested grain, even if they knew a farm's precise acreage or the size of the harvest."<sup>34</sup> If the woman was aware of her financial status at all, it was only in the vaguest terms. Ballard, on the other hand, despite never laying out a rubric detailing the prices of her services, clearly knew her worth, and whether or not her neighbors repaid her. In several places, even before she starts making her formal accounts, she tracked not only her own financial dealings but the debts and deals of her family:

March 5 1785: mr Ballard brought home a yoak of oxen which he Brought of Moses White

April 20 1786: Daniel went to the hook, Brought home 6 gallons of Rhum, 2 lb coffee, 5 lb Sugar & Some Tobacco & 1-1/4 Bushel of Salt from Jos Williams for me, for assisting his wife in travil with her Last Child.

May 8th 1786: mr Ballard went to Mr. Wm Gardners for money Due but got none.

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<sup>34</sup> Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, 6.

The middle entry is of particular interest. Her son brought home goods for her, given to him in exchange for her services, not his or his father's. This went beyond the advice of that anonymous letter; this was not just the men of her family consulting her on important financial matters. The financial matters were hers, and they were helping her settle them. As the diary continued, Ballard's increasingly noted Ephraim Ballard's expenses;<sup>35</sup> she became, if not entirely in control of the financials of the family in general, at the very least entirely informed of them and, like the minnits she gave to the doctor, the one keeping track of them in an organized and daily fashion.

Ballard turned 55 in 1790, five years after she began this diary.<sup>36</sup> During the twenty-seven years it records, ending only with her death in 1812, she delivered 814 babies. As she aged, she became more sedentary. She relaxed her bare-bones style, more likely to mention how she felt about the things that were happening around her than she ever was at first. The right-hand column of her diary became a place to mark where she was and who came to visit her, a switch from businesslike economics to a more social picture. The vast majority of entries from her last year of life were marked "at home", and many of them simply "unwel." Her last entry reads:

Clear the most of ye day & very Cold & windy. Daughter Ballard and a Number of her Children here, mrs Partridg & Smith allso. Revd mr Tappin Came and Converst Swetly and made A Prayer adapted to my Case.<sup>37</sup>

Two days later she died, leaving her life behind in a collection of homemade booklets. They are a testament to a hardworking woman in a profession being changed

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<sup>35</sup> The financial notes are actually where Ephraim Ballard appeared most often in the diary; otherwise, he was only worthy of mention when he was ill or he was helping Martha set up her looms.

<sup>36</sup> Ballard, entry for February 20 1790.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., entry for May 7 1812.

and infringed upon, a profession that allowed a degree of economic control and financial independence that was vanishing into the cult of domesticity and the societally enforced female dependency on men. Ballard may have been remarkable in terms of her tenacity and the breadth of her work, but she was characteristic of a kind of woman allowed to exist at the time of her writing. As Ulrich puts it, “outside her own diary, Martha has no history.” Ephraim Ballard is the one listed in the census and tax records of Hallowell. Reverend Mr. Tappin, who “Converst Swetly” with her on her deathbed, noted her death not as Martha but as Dorothy Ballard, apparently so little acquainted with her that he didn’t know her real name.<sup>38</sup> This nonexistence can be attributed both to the habit of historians of leaving notable women out of their histories and to the fact that she was, in fact, not notable.

Martha Ballard exerted a measure of control over her life, specifically in the financial sphere, that showed how women of the period were able to shape out a space for themselves in the American economic sphere. But to ascribe autonomy or even the desire for autonomy onto women of this period would be to force them into modern values and modes that they have not yet found themselves. Ballard may have been financially independent from her husband and sons, but she was still a woman at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: still caught in the double identity of the spinning wheel; and not even a decade after her death, her profession was discredited and her duties and status as a midwife taken over by men in the name of scientific progress and technical efficiency.

Young doctors were returning from Europe having learned the English sensibilities about midwifery. The delivery customs in urban America changed

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<sup>38</sup> Ulrich, Kindle Location 5765.

dramatically in the last half of the eighteenth century, especially in the north. Although Americans were separating themselves ideologically from England, they still preserved many of the same social values. In 1760 most births, even those requiring turning, would be attended by female midwives; by 1800 male midwives were attending even normal births.<sup>39</sup> That same year the first American midwife manual was published. Called *The Midwives Monitor and the Mother's Mirror*, it made it very clear that the only time midwives were to be consulted was in cases of perfectly normal births, and focused all of its instruction for the midwives themselves on how to detect abnormalities and when to contact male midwives for help.<sup>40</sup> It focused on the precious nature of the woman's life and the need for her to be in capable hands backed up by the latest science.

The growing need to coddle and keep women safe began to outweigh the mystical privacy of the birthing chamber, and the acceptance of male midwives in the birthing room led to the acceptance of midwifery, or obstetrics, as one branch of medical science that naturally lay under the purview of the modern, well-trained 19th century physician. As well as illuminating the life of Ballard herself, the story of midwives from the 1700s to the 1800s demonstrates the power that a single invention can hold over the course of society.

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<sup>39</sup> Donegan, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 125.

*Chapter Two: Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw*

The invention of the forceps heralded other shifts in medical technologies. With better tools, anatomists and physicians could better understand the human body, and many of the medical “truths” established by the classical world began to be dismantled in the light of empirical evidence. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the accepted model of sexual difference was what is referred to as the “one-sex” model. With the Biblical origin of life as yet uncontested by Darwin, men were considered the only true sex—the human created by God in his image, with woman being only a lesser companion fashioned from his rib. Anatomically, female genitals were seen as inverted male genitals, with ovaries as internal testicles, and this definition was not limited to the body but to the mind. Feminine qualities and behaviors, not to mention personalities and ways of thinking, were just distortions of and failures to live up to good, healthy masculine qualities and behaviors. With improvements in medical science, however, it became clear that female physiology was significantly different and distinct from male physiology, and the “two-sex” model of sexual definition developed. This model relied on the idea that men and women were in fact distinct and opposite to one another; that there were inherently masculine behaviors and inherently feminine behaviors.<sup>41</sup> Gender began to be abstracted from the body. The capacity for men to act in feminine ways, and for women to act in masculine ones, was greatly increased, and as such it became even more important to adhere to accepted standards of behavior in order to be seen as properly performing the duties of your sex.

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<sup>41</sup> Laqueur, Thomas. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 149.



This, in conjunction with the increasing prevalence of professions that took men outside of the home at a young age—whether they were heading west to seek gold or to the city to work or seek their fortunes—gave rise to the impeccably American ideal of the “self-made man”, whose worth lay not in his family name but in what he could achieve for himself. Manhood could, and in fact had to be, earned, and in the nineteenth century this was much simpler for white men than for black men. There were a hundred paths open to respectability and masculinity for the white man, but almost all of them were closed to the black population both before and after the Civil War. The pulpit was a bastion of respect, a place where black men could earn a place and a name.

There were a number of women, both black and white, who also attempted to ascend the steps of the pulpit and let their voices be heard. This chapter will focus mainly on two black women of similar origins, both of whom wrote autobiographies justifying their search for a platform for their beliefs. The struggle between these women, who felt themselves called by God to preach, and the men who so closely guarded the pulpit, informs their lives and their writings, as well as beginning to explain their absence from traditional historical discourse.

In 1817, at a camp meeting<sup>42</sup> near her home outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mrs. Zilpha Elaw had a vision. She felt herself lifted, surrounded by the sun above her. She looked down on the trees and saw her own body lying beneath them. A voice came to her and spoke: “Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou

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<sup>42</sup> Camp meetings were large religious meetings, usually held outside in camp grounds. Participants would stay in tents, pray together, discuss scripture, and hear clergymen preach. They were one of the primary ways women found religious community with one another.

must do.”<sup>43</sup> Upon returning to her senses, she offered up prayer for fellow worshippers at the meeting. She attended others like it and began travelling to pray at the bedsides of the sick or dying. Years later, she began to preach in earnest, visiting slave plantations throughout the southern United States; finally her mission brought her overseas to England, where she continued her work. She indicated at the opening of her autobiography that she was planning on returning to the states, but what became of her after that is unknown.

The autobiography, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour*, is one of the most complete and detailed sources of information on American female preachers of color. It describes her religious philosophies, her marital life, and the myriad struggles she had to overcome in order to do what she perceived as her duty to God. In doing so she was, unknowingly, joining a historical trend of female American preachers whose stories remained untold by anyone save the women themselves. Church histories, especially those written at the time but continuing even to modern times, have been written primarily by men either uninterested in or unwilling to record the work of their female contemporaries. Regardless, the trend existed—and from examining Elaw’s autobiography we can see the shifting interplay of societal forces that both helped and hindered women like her on their chosen path.

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<sup>43</sup> Elaw, Zilpha. “Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labors of Mrs Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour.” 1846. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. William L. Andrews. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 66.

The religious life of eighteenth-century northeastern Americans was characterized by waves of revivals collectively known as the First Great Awakening. Spreading from England beginning in the 1730s, many disparate sects of Christianity found footholds in Massachusetts, Maine, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and especially New York. Western New York state was so filled with preachers spreading their versions of hellfire and brimstone that it earned the moniker “the Burned-Over District.”<sup>44</sup> Notable among these were the Shakers, who believed in a dual-natured God with both male and female aspects, with Jesus as the human embodiment of His male aspect and their leader, Ann Lee, as the embodiment of the female.<sup>45</sup> Ann Lee came to America in 1774, settling in New York, and continued to lead the community she founded there until her death in 1784.

Although Elaw was born only six years later and a few states away, it is unlikely she would have been aware of Ann Lee or any of the other female preachers and ministers who took part in the First Great Awakening. Because church histories were almost entirely written by men generally did not include their female contemporaries, female preaching was a phenomenon that was forced to constantly reinvent itself. The woman preachers of the first decades of the 1800s were not joining a long tradition in which they could look to their predecessors for guidance, strength, and solidarity. In addition, the religious world they were joining was a different one from the era of the First Great Awakening.

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<sup>44</sup> Cross, Whitney R.. *The Burned-over District; the social and intellectual history of enthusiastic religion in western New York, 1800-1850.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Whitson, Robley Edward. *The Shakers: two centuries of spiritual reflection.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 5.

The Declaration of Independence holds the truths of white men's equality with one another to be self-evident—and, implicitly, the inferiority of women and non-white men was just as self-evident. As freeing as the Revolution was, it only tightened the bonds of both race and gender roles, which were somewhat more lax in the uncertain frontier-world of colonial America. States followed suit with their individual laws—where once voting laws allowed anyone who owned a certain amount of property to vote, laws began to describe the voter explicitly as white and male. The Martha Ballards of America vanished into what many historians view as almost completely divorced worlds of the masculine and the feminine, the public and the private, as we discussed in the previous chapter, and the “cult of true womanhood” arose as the defining tenets by which women were supposed to live.

Those tenets included a certain amount of control over domestic spaces, and would expand over the nineteenth century into a certain amount of control over the economics of the household—women became consumers to their husbands' producers—but seemingly no room at all for travelling outside of the home, for the kind of individuality and independence necessary for the life of the itinerant preacher. Recently, however, some historians have begun to address those things that don't quite fit either into either category. Between the public and the private, between the political and the domestic, was a shared social space in which men and women spent much of their lives. Catherine Brekus calls this the “informal public,”<sup>46</sup> and it was in this shared space that many of the battles over propriety and gender roles took place. The founding documents

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<sup>46</sup> Brekus, Catherine A. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.

of the United States, rather than removing that space, expanded it enormously through the creation another essential principle of American life: the separation of church and state.

The First Amendment never actually uses that phrase, nor was it interpreted in 1800 in the way that it is today, i.e. that there is no state or national religion, that citizens of the United States are able to worship in whatever way they see fit. This meaning existed in the wake of the Revolutionary War as well—indeed, it was established decidedly in the Treaty of Tripoli<sup>47</sup>—but more important were the actual structural changes it caused: churches themselves were no longer state-sponsored and political. In colonial America, many churches were state-sanctioned and legally able to collect taxes. The Puritans had created a deep-rooted Protestantism entangled entirely with politics, hoping that America would become a “redeemer nation”, a religious force on a national level. The Christian church was placed firmly in the masculine world, both political and patriarchal in nature, with preachers and statesmen occupying very similar societal roles as leaders and moral centers of their communities. After the Revolution, church became instead a communal space, familial, a space for both public worship and private belief, and as such suddenly there was more room for feminine actors within it. Women were able to gain a foothold in the business of the church itself.

The patriarchal structures remained, however, and that foothold was pushed into the realm of helpers, of Sunday school teachers and moral guides rather than preachers

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<sup>47</sup>The Treaty of Tripoli was an agreement between the pirates of the Barbary Coast and the United States government. Piracy became an increasing problem for American shipping after the Revolutionary War, when Britain stopped providing warships to protect American vessels. Article 11 of the treaty states that “the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This was to prove that there was no religious ground for conflict between America and the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

and proselytizers. There was a long tradition of religious and moral women, but always they were as companions and helpers to the political preachers who led the congregation.

As such, female preaching was by nature an individual and isolating experience, and those preachers who travelled the country spreading their interpretation of the word of God needed great courage and enterprise to do so. This was especially the case for African-American women. Zilpha Elaw's autobiography is longer, and offers a much more complete account of her life, but she was preceded by the journals of Jarena Lee.

Jarena Lee was born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1773, one year before Ann Lee died. She had little to no religious education until the age of 21, when she attended a Presbyterian meeting at a schoolhouse near the house in Philadelphia where she worked as a servant. There she was first struck with a sense of her own sinful nature, and over the course of the next several years both converted to the Methodist faith and was sanctified. For five years, this seemed to be enough: she was content to live a simple, devout life, until "on a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon [her]":

I stood as if some one was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart. But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understood, which said to me, "Go preach the Gospel!" I immediately replied aloud, "No one will believe me." Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say, "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends."<sup>48</sup>

The last line is reminiscent of other biblical prophets being called to preach; in particular Exodus 4:11 ("I will help you speak and teach you what to say,") and Luke

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, Jarena. "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel." 1836. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 35.

21:14 (“I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist”).

After resolving that the voice she heard was in fact God and not Satan tempting her to sin<sup>49</sup>, she went to her minister in Philadelphia, Richard Allen, only to be rebuffed. Exhortation and home prayer, Allen said, were right and proper for women’s work. “But as to women preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing about it—that it did not call for women preachers.”<sup>50</sup>

Richard Allen was the founder of the African Methodist Church, and although later he would endorse Lee’s preaching career, in his initial hesitance he heralds the growing opposition to female preachers within the AME. In 1936, the General Conference of the AME formally separated the roles of preachers and exhorters, allowing women to practice the latter but not the former. The move was part of a masculinization of the black church in general and the AME in particular, a phenomenon that must be placed within the context of both race and gender relations in the nineteenth century. The same “all men” of the Declaration of Independence that excluded women also excluded black men, and growing tensions between black and white Americans had black men struggling to find some foothold of superiority and humanity. As Julius H. Bailey puts it, “The prospect of women preaching illuminated the fragility of the black male psyche at mid-century.”<sup>51</sup> A hierarchy was solidifying over the course of the century: white men

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<sup>49</sup> Satan as a force is very present in Lee’s memoirs; in the time between her conversion and call to preach she made several suicide attempts, and describes each as Satan exerting his will upon her. (See pages 28 and 30, with a description of a vision of Satan on 31).

<sup>50</sup> Lee, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Bailey, Julius H. "Masculinizing the Pulpit: The Black Preacher in the Nineteenth-Century AME Church." *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black*

were superior to black men, who were superior to black women. Richard Allen and his contemporaries, by excluding Lee from the profession of preacher, were not necessarily doing so because they didn't believe in her skill or in her faith—indeed, Allen later described Lee as one of the most powerful orators in the church<sup>52</sup>—but because they were protecting their own status and respectability.

Allen was not the only thing preventing Lee from setting off to preach, although he was the most clear and explicit. In 1811 she married Joseph Lee<sup>53</sup> and moved out of the city to the nearby town of Snow Hill, where she felt very isolated and alone; at first she is miserable, imploring her husband to move back to the city, but after dreaming that he was meant to protect the people of Snow Hill from the “wolf” by serving as their Pastor, she agreed to stay. This is the second obstacle that masculinity had set in her path—her own religious mission and needs, although perhaps greater than those of her husband, were sublimated to his.<sup>54</sup> Kept in her place by these forces, she settled into married life, at least temporarily.

Unlike Lee, Elaw was raised in a religious household until the age of twelve, when her mother died. Her father sent her to live with her aunt and uncle, who were Quakers, which meant, “their religious exercises, if they observed any, were performed in the secret silence of the mind”. Here, without formal religious education, she briefly fell into “sin”. Like Lee, she considered herself vile and ignorant: “I felt myself exceedingly sinful, that I was certain of meeting with condemnation at the bar of God.” She even went

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*Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature, 1820-1945.* ed. Timothy R. Buckner and Peter Caster. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>53</sup> We have no record of either her maiden name or Elaw's, so both are referred to by their married names even before they were married.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, 39.



so far as to take the Lord's name in vain in order to impress her friends. "It well pleased their carnal minds, and they laughed with delight at my profanity."<sup>55</sup> However, immediately afterward she had a dream in which the angel Gabriel appeared and pronounced judgment upon the world. Struck by the idea that Rapture could come at any point and find her entirely unprepared for it. This dream galvanized her, and she took her religious education upon herself rather than relying on outside influence.

Her moment of conversion was a personal one, not prompted by any minister but by a holy visitation. She acknowledged the fact that her readers might disbelieve her, but said that she could not have been imagining it, because the cow she was milking also bowed to the figure:

As I was milking the cow and singing, I turned my head, and saw a tall figure approaching, who came and stood by me. He had long hair, which parted in the front and came down on his shoulders; he wore a long white robe down to his feet; and as he stood with open arms and smiled upon me, he disappeared. I might have tried to imagine, or persuade myself, perhaps, that it had been a vision presented merely to the eye of my mind; but, the beast of the stall gave forth her evidence to the reality of the heavenly appearance; for she turned her head and looked round as I did; and when she saw, she bowed her knees and cowered down upon the ground.<sup>56</sup>

This vision foregrounded Elaw's very personal relationship with God, and wrought a great change in her. Where before she had been "pert" and answered her mistress back when she was rebuked, now she suffered in silence with her mind on God. She became obsessed with religion, dedicating herself to her study at every free moment. She joined the Methodist Episcopal Society and was baptized by Reverend Joseph

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<sup>15</sup> Elaw, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 57.

Lybrand and, after seven years, attended the meeting described at the outset of this chapter.

The vision she had there took her “far above earthly things”, and when she returned, several members of her society approached her, asking her to pray for them. “It was revealed to me by the Holy Spirit, that like another Phoebe, or the matrons of the apostolic societies, I must employ myself in visiting families, and speaking personally to the members thereof, of the salvation and eternal interests of their souls”.<sup>57</sup>

Note, however, this is not a call to preach, *per se*, and in fact recalls the kind of exhortation and prayer allowed to churchwomen even after 1836. Where Lee’s call to preach referred to the male prophets of the Bible, Elaw’s focused on the few female precedents she had for the sort of work she knew it was her duty to do. Her journey to understanding her purpose was a longer one, not from a lack of confidence in herself—indeed, she was supremely confident in her relationship with God, referring to Jesus as “a dear friend”<sup>58</sup> and confidant. Rather, she was slow to recognize her purpose because of a kind of socialized meekness, an underestimation of her capabilities as a woman taught to her as social truth.

Lee and Elaw, in their very existence, serve as a challenge to the growing system of patriarchal control. However, when we think of them we should not be picturing radicals or women that were, in their sensibilities and beliefs, at all at odds with the times in which they lived. If anything, these women tended to be less progressive than their secular sisters. Certainly one would be hard-pressed to find a female preacher who would agree with the feminism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton or her others like her. If they argued

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 60

for female equality at all, they did it only in the context of their right to preach, or on the basis of biblical evidence as opposed to any natural rights, and their feminism, such as it was, was always secondary to their faith.<sup>59</sup> Like their male contemporaries, these churchwomen clung to simpler times, before the swift rise of free markets. They advocated conservatism, condemning materialism and individualism as divergent from traditional Christian values.

Elaw in particular is stridently conservative. She moved to England in 1840, and wrote her memoirs from there. They begin with a Dedication to her English friends and worshippers, thanking them for their support and prayer, and warning them against temptation—specifically in the form of reading. The following is reproduced in full, so that we may understand not only her fervor but also her impressive command of language:

Take heed what you read: as a tree of knowledge, both of good and evil, is the press; it oftentimes teems with rabid poisons, putting darkness for light, and light for darkness; extolling earthly grandeur and honour, spurious valour and heroism; fixing reputation and character on a false basis; and frequently appearing as the panegyrist of the rankest principles, and the basest vices. Above all, shun an infidel, obscene, or disloyal newspaper press, which is the scavenger of all slander, and the harlequin of character; the masquerade of morals, and the burlesque of religion; the proteus of sentiment, and the dictionary of licentiousness; the seminary of libertines, and the hot-bed of sedition.<sup>60</sup>

The above would not seem out of place in the hellfire-and-brimstone sermons of some male preacher of the Burned Over district; coming from an African American woman with little formal education, it is impressive and surprising. It also speaks of a

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<sup>59</sup> Brekus, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Elaw, 52.

deep disdain for the emerging carnival of capitalism and the whirl of news and gossip that went along with it.

Her vitriol was not limited to the press, however. In 1810, she married Joseph Elaw, who was “a very respectable young man, in the general acceptance of the term”, but not a Christian. Being married to an unbeliever is a constant trial and vexation to Elaw, and she “affectionately warns” her fellow Christian women to avoid it at any cost. It’s a warning that goes on for two full pages of unbroken paragraph that cites multiple instances of scripture. Inevitably, she says, both parties will believe that they can change the other, but it won’t happen. It would be better, she said, to tie a millstone around your neck and drown in the sea than to “plunge yourself into all the sorrows, sins, and anomalies involved in a matrimonial alliance with an unbeliever.”<sup>61</sup> It cannot have been easy for her husband, either; in one memorial instance he took her into Philadelphia so they could go dancing, presumably hoping to please her, but to her severe, Godly mind all the lights, music, and pleasure seemed like sin incarnate, like “awful peals of thunder”<sup>62</sup>. She hated it so much she cried.

But not getting married was no solution. Indeed, Elaw railed against independence in women above all else, citing it, along with pride and consequential haughtiness, as among the worst vices of humanity. She described the proper path of a woman’s life as a shift in dependencies, a movement from relying on her parents, in particular her father, to relying on her husband. This is the source of much of her frustration with her own husband—she didn’t feel that she was able to rely on him in spiritual matters, and the course of her life was entirely focused on the spiritual. Her

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 63

marriage, and her conception of the proper role of a wife, informed her perception of how to fulfill the call to preach that she had experienced.

Shortly after Elaw's experience at the camp meeting, her sister<sup>63</sup> fell very ill, and she went to her bedside to pray for her. When she began, however, her sister warned her not to pray, but told her instead that she had to preach. According to Elaw, an angel had visited this sister, a woman by the name of Hannah, and told her to send Elaw to the house of a nearby Quakeress. Elaw reassured her, but didn't go; partially because it was very late at night and partially because she couldn't believe that she was actually chosen for the duty.<sup>64</sup> Several other similar incidents urged Elaw to travel and preach, but she continued to hold back, hindered by self-doubt—"I could not believe that any such line of duty was enjoined upon me"—and the responsibilities of family and household.

The boundaries dividing proper gender roles prevented Lee and Elaw from immediately taking up their ministerial duties. For Lee, those boundaries were external, exemplified by Richard Allen and the religious gatekeepers he represents. For Elaw, they were internal, and internalized: she, as a black woman, could not elevate herself enough in her own mind to see herself as worthy of the task, and as a wife and mother could not convince herself to step out on the road and travel. Because she had no knowledge of the successful female preachers before her, she had no reassurance that she would be listened to, or even that she could withstand the dangers of the road. Her respect for the dangers of the American wilderness was clear; she repeatedly expressed a wish that her English

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<sup>63</sup> It's unclear whether Elaw means her familial sister or simply her sister in Christ; she mentions no siblings growing up but calls the woman her only living sister, implying a closer and more specific bond between them than someone she had converted or prayed with.

<sup>64</sup> Elaw, 76.

audience could see the state of American roads in comparison to the relative safety of the English countryside. As discussed in the first chapter, a woman alone risked much when she set out on her travels, and Ballard was only travelling within her small community. It was clear that if Elaw would take up her mantle, it would take her far away from Philadelphia and the surrounding areas.

Both women did break free of their societal roles, however, and they were not alone in doing so. The internalization of values that Elaw underwent was an enormous obstacle to women living out lives in spheres other than the domestic, but it could be overcome; as Brekus says, “An ideology of domesticity may have shaped women’s self-perceptions, but it did not determine their destinies.”<sup>65</sup> Lee and Elaw could step out of their indoctrinated domesticity, but they knew that that was what they would be doing, and suffered great guilt at the idea of betraying or leaving behind their families.

This guilt and insecurity was the greatest weapon that defenders of the masculine-defined church had against them and others like them, and it continued to be so throughout the century. Daniel Payne, who would become sixth bishop of the AME church, wrote in a letter to the *Christian Recorder* that preaching interferes with the “sacred relationships which women bear to their husbands and children, by sending them forth as itinerant preachers, wandering from place to place, to the utter neglect of their household duties and obligations.”<sup>66</sup> Payne went on to write a history of the AME church with no mention of Lee beyond the question of whether or not to publish her memoirs, and also published a “Treatise on Domestic Education” in 1885. He stressed the

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<sup>65</sup> Brekus, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Payne, Daniel Alexander, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. (Nashville: Publishing House of the A. M. E. Sunday School Union, 1891).

importance of a religious upbringing and a thorough education for ministers, the latter being something that was certainly more available for black men than for black women.<sup>67</sup>

The startling similarity of their lives—conversion, divine inspiration, and then marriage, both to men named Joseph—continued. Both women, stalled in their pursuit of their religious mission, fell deathly ill. Elaw framed it immediately as a catalyst for her preaching: “As all other means had failed to move me to proceed upon my appointed duties, the Lord used other means to move me; for when gentle means do not answer, the rod must be applied to bring us into subjection to our Master’s will.”

Her use of the word *subjection* was telling. Perhaps even more than being improper for a woman and an abandonment of the domestic sphere, traveling to preach would be an act of independence, which Elaw saw as sinful in itself. This paradox—the Lord told her to preach, but to preach would be a sin—was solved by the onset of her disease.

On one occasion when in conversation with my husband about my death, which seemed to be fast approaching, I could not forebear from weeping, from the thought of leaving behind me, in this evil and stormy life, my poor little girl who was then about seven years of age. It then occurred to my mind, that this natural anxiety which I felt, did not comport with an absolute submission to the will of God; and evinced the inordinate strength and force of those ties by which I was still bound to this earth. I then, in prayer, pledged myself afresh to God, begging that he would effectually wean me from all the excesses of nature’s ties; and that my affections and will might be brought into due submission to the will of my heavenly Father.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Uneducated black men also struggled with AME gatekeepers for acceptance during the nineteenth century; during the rise of the Millerite movement, when the case for female preaching was strongest, many lower-class black men allied themselves with churchwomen in their fight for the pulpit.

<sup>68</sup> Elaw, 76.

She lay sick for two years, and when she recovered she began to preach to her neighborhood. With this new clarity of vision, it didn't matter that independence was a sin, because to preach would not be an act of independence. Rather, the sin is to let the earthly ties—bonds of familial affection—turn her from her destined purpose. This also ameliorated Elaw's frustrations with her husband; she no longer had to cope with submitting to an unbeliever, because her true submission was not to him but to God. This was made clear when someone told him that she was a preacher—and it's an indication of what modern readers might call independence on Elaw's part that he did not already know—and he denied it, but then, when she told him it was true, promised to hear her speak. Elaw was hopeful at first that this might convert him; instead, he found it troubling. He asked her to stop. "I was very sorry to see him so grieved about it," Elaw comments, "but my heavenly Father had informed me that he had great work for me to do."<sup>69</sup> The hierarchy had clearly shifted—Elaw had moved from being dependent on her parents to being dependent on her husband, and then, in a completion of the natural order of things as she described them, to being dependent on God. As such, although she would never place herself above her husband in any way, she no longer felt that his opinions about her lifestyle and career have any real bearing other than that she would give to a close friend.

In 1823, illness struck again, this time killing Joseph Elaw. Although now Elaw was free to preach as she liked without the constraints of her duties as a wife, she still had to have the means to support herself and her daughter, and the next few years of her life were concerned with financial, rather than spiritual, matters. She opened a schoolhouse

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 84



out of her home in Philadelphia and began teaching black children to read and write, which won her the appreciation and respect of many black families in the area. White schoolhouses could deny education to black children with no consequence, and education opportunities were few and far between. As Elaw puts it, “the pride of a white skin is a bauble of great value with many in some parts of the United States, who readily sacrifice their intelligence to their prejudices, and possess more knowledge than wisdom.”<sup>70</sup> She was lucky enough to be educated, and saw it as part of her duty to spread that education to others who were not so lucky.

Briefly, she considered whether the schoolhouse was where she belonged, rather than the open road. Again, she was held back by the constraints of acceptable gender roles, but again, she overcame them, and at last set out on her journey. The last bond was broken when her daughter, seeing her crying at her inability to fulfill her duties to God, releases her: “If I were you, I should not mind what any person said, but I should go just as I had arranged to go, and do not think any thing about me, for I shall do very well.”<sup>71</sup>

Lee was freed from her domestic duties by similar tragedy. “Five, in the course of six years, fell by his hand: my husband being one of the number, which was the greatest affliction of all.”<sup>72</sup> Supported emotionally and financially by friends, she was able to take on the other obstacle to her preaching, the need for which was “a fire shut up in [her]

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>71</sup> Elaw, 89.

<sup>72</sup> Lee, 41.

bones.”<sup>73</sup> At a service at Bethel Church, eight years after she first experienced the call to preach, she delivers an exhortation on Jonah 2:9.<sup>74</sup>

I told them I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach the gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam’s race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord, and warn those who are as deeply guilty as were the people of Nineveh.<sup>75</sup>

After being released from her divine inspiration, she was immediately terrified of being expelled from the church, but Richard Allen, who was attending the service, then got up and spoke. He said that while he had denied Lee’s petition to preach before, but now he believed in her as much as “any of the preachers present.”<sup>76</sup> This elevation of Lee to the status of the male preachers in the room reassured her about the “indecorum” of her exhortation. Her reputation grew. She began to be invited to preach at local churches and meetings, venturing further and further afield. She had proven herself with her voice, and it is thanks to her voice, in the form of her memoirs, that she has been remembered.

Once achieved, the status of preacher had to be defended, and the most powerful defense either of these women had was the publishing of their writings. Both Lee and Elaw, as well as preachers following them, make reference to Joel 2:28 in their memoirs, both Lee and Julia Foote<sup>77</sup> beginning with it (emphasis theirs): “And it shall come to pass...that I will pour my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons, and your *daughters* shall

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>74</sup> “But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay *that* that I have vowed. Salvation *is* of the LORD,” King James Version. It is worth noting that this is the verse that causes Jonah to be released from the mouth of the whale, a moment of both victory and freedom.

<sup>75</sup> Lee, 44.

<sup>76</sup> Lee, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Another African American preacher, travelling and preaching between 1844 and 1900. She was the first woman to be ordained a deacon.

prophecy.” The title of Elaw’s autobiography makes explicit the fact that she is “An American Female of Colour” almost defensively. As they describe their struggles to prove themselves to the masculine church world, they are also defending themselves to their readers, as women, as black, and as poor. Lee ends her memoirs by acknowledging that her readers may “sneer” because she is not educated, but describes her ability to preach as being like the heightened senses of the blind or the deaf; where she was deprived of education, she was compensated in inspiration.<sup>78</sup>

Elaw came into her preaching at a point where many sects of the church were beginning to actively seek female support. In the 1830s, William Miller interpreted the prophecies of Daniel to mean that the Second Coming of Christ was to take place in approximately ten years. Working with Boston pastor and publisher Joshua Vaughan Himes, he created the newspaper *Signs of the Times*, whose frontispiece declared, “THE TIME IS AT HAND.”<sup>79</sup> It was one of dozens of different newspapers the two would print, some of which were aimed specifically at women. Although they assumed those women were helpers and teachers as was deemed acceptable, they still treated them with respect and catered to them as valuable and influential members of the churchgoing public.

In an example of the power of publishing, he gained thousands of followers, nationally and internationally, over the course of ten years. When 1843 came and went with no obvious Second Coming, he pushed the date back a year, and then another, finally culminating in what is referred to as the Great Disappointment. His followers left

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<sup>78</sup> Lee, 48.

<sup>79</sup> *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, ed. Joshua V. Himes. (Boston: Dow & Jackson, 1840), frontispiece.

him in droves, and with them went the support for the femininity of the church. The Daughters of Zion and other female-led religious groups collapsed in on themselves as the Second Great Awakening came to an end, and if Zilpha Elaw did return to the United States as she indicated in the dedication to her autobiography, she would have found a reception much more like the initial resistance that Jarena Lee had to overcome. The story of religion and gender in the nineteenth century was not a straightforward one; rather, it was a story of constantly shifting forces, of masculinity continuously reasserting itself and femininity constantly pushing against it. But after Zilpha Elaw and her sisters in the written word, it was no longer an undocumented struggle. Finally, there was an established precedent, something for women fighting for their chosen (or perhaps destined) place to look back on and find themselves not alone, but in the company of women like them who had succeeded in the same kind of goals. In a sea of masculine historical voices, these women stand out against the homogenization of their sex.



*Chapter Three: Sojourner Truth*

At the second National Women's Convention, held in a church in Akron, Ohio in May of 1851, a tall, thin black woman stood up, ascended the steps of the pulpit and delivered the following speech:

“I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart – why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, – for we can't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble. I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.”<sup>80</sup>

Or, possibly, she delivered this one instead:

“Wall, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin' out o' kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place! 'And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered

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<sup>80</sup>Truth, Sojourner, as transcribed by Marius Robinson in the June 21, 1851 issue of the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Quoted by Jeffrey C. Stewart in the introduction to *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* by Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxxiii.

into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear de lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it?" ("Intellect," whispered someone near.) "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? Den dat little man in back dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wan't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him. If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em."<sup>81</sup>

The woman was Sojourner Truth, and the second version of the speech, as transcribed by white feminist and abolitionist Frances Gage, is the version that has survived and gained notoriety, so much so that the speech is known as “Ain’t I a Woman?” But Gage published her version twelve years after the events, as opposed to the version released a month later, and the dialect she gave Truth made no sense in light of the woman’s background. She also described the white women at the convention as speaking disparagingly of Truth and discouraging her from speaking, quoting one woman who entreated her, “Don't let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced.” But other reports of the Convention have no indication that this was true - there seemed no outcry or opposition to Truth speaking up, and her presence at the Convention itself spoke of the respect that at least some of the assembled women held for her, despite her race.

In fact, it may have been Truth’s very blackness that allowed her speech to have such an impact. Her religious and ministerial background allowed her to be comfortable

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<sup>81</sup> Truth, Sojourner, as transcribed by Frances Gage. *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 1. (Rochester: Charles Mann, 1889).

speaking in front of large groups of people, and unlike many of her white contemporaries, she was not raised to value and uphold the cult of true womanhood that they, however unwittingly, still supported. even if it were only through their belief in chivalry, ladylike behavior, and “proper” domesticity.<sup>82</sup> She was not allowed the luxury of being wife or mother; her journey from enslaved farm girl to travelling preacher and activist never passed through lady of any kind of household. Nevertheless, she lay claim to her womanhood, something that, according to bell hooks<sup>83</sup> in her book named after Truth’s speech, women in the 20th century Civil Rights Movement couldn’t do:

Contemporary black women could not join together to fight for women’s rights because we did not see “womanhood” as an important aspect of our identity. Racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us to devalue our femaleness and to regard race as the only relevant label of identification. In other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves—and we did.<sup>84</sup>

Bell hooks points to the writings and speeches of Anne or Anna Cooper, who published *A Voice from the South* in 1892, as evidence that the women working to emancipate themselves in the 19th century were asserting womanhood in a way that she could not. Cooper pointed out the importance of the black female voice in civil rights: “‘Tis woman’s strongest vindication that *the world needs to hear her voice*. It would be subversive to every human interest that the cry of one-half of the human family be stifled.”<sup>85</sup> The voices of black women in the nineteenth century were heard, as well. The history of black publishing is alive with female voices—with a few notable exceptions, such as the church histories discussed in Chapter Two. The first imaginative book written

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<sup>82</sup> Stewart, Introduction to *Narrative*, xxxvi.

<sup>83</sup> Gloria Jean Watkins, who styles her pen name in the lower case.

<sup>84</sup> hooks, bell. *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>85</sup> Cooper, Anna J.. *A voice from the South*. (Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.



by a black American was Phyllis Wheatley's book of poems, and she remained the only published black writer of imaginative literature for 56 years. The first book of essays written by a black person was Ann Plato's *Essays*, and the first novel was either Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* or Julia C. Collins' *The Curse of the Caste*.<sup>86</sup> As Cooper asserts, through publishing black women were elevating the status of the race as a whole; Phyllis Wheatley was called before a board of white men to prove that she had written the poems as she claimed, and the interview conducted there made many of the men present reevaluate not only the intellect of black enslaved females but of all enslaved individuals.<sup>87</sup>

Yet the majority of the white women speaking in 1851 were using their voices to distance themselves from the black woman. Slavery and abolition were discussed at length—almost exclusively as metaphors. Regardless of the reasons for the effect of Truth's speech, we know it came on the heels of many which compared the “bondage” of womanhood to the more literal bondage of slavery, most of which treated the two as mutually exclusive. A Mrs. Emma Coe spoke of the condition of women, which

had frequently been compared with that of the slave, and she thought with considerable justice. She found a very striking analogy in many instances. The master exacts the labor of the slave, so the husband has the right to exact the labor of his wife. The master may chastise the slave, so may the husband chastise his wife. The master may restrain the liberty of the slave, so may the husband that of the wife.<sup>88</sup>

By defining feminism and civil rights (with abolition as its focus) as separate entities, the women of the convention defined “feminism” as pertaining only to white

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<sup>86</sup> *Curse of the Caste* was first published in 1865 and *Our Nig* in 1859, but critics have argued that *Our Nig* is too autobiographical to be considered a novel.

<sup>87</sup> Stewart, xi.

<sup>88</sup> Proceedings of the 1851 Woman's Convention in Akron, Ohio. Retrieved online at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/nawbib>

women and “civil rights” as pertaining only to black men. “The condition of women” and the “condition of slaves” are two concepts which Coe must bring together in her rhetoric, rather than lived experiences embodied by a significant percentage of Americans. Black women naturally fell into a strange, third space, with neither group willing to recognize them as worthy of their cause. It was against this backdrop that Truth stood up and spoke. Although not as bald and obvious as the “ain’t I a woman?” refrain that Gage apparently added, Truth’s “I am a woman’s rights” makes the same statement, only more nuanced. Truth was not just trying to elevate herself to the level of her white contemporaries, but show that she was deserving of the same further rights that they were fighting for—i.e. that by fighting for the rights of the white woman they were also fighting for the rights of the black woman.

The main source of modern knowledge about Sojourner Truth is the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Bondswoman of Olden Time*, published in 1878 along with Truth’s “Book of Life”, a collection of correspondence and the “history of her labors”. Although it’s unclear whether or not Truth was literate, she never wrote about her own life, instead dictating to her friend Olive Gilbert. This lends her narrative a strange, third-person style, with Gilbert’s own additions regarding Truth’s emotions in the telling. Gilbert, an abolitionist herself, often interjects her own politics into the narrative, the effects of which we will examine later on in the chapter.

Sojourner Truth was born into slavery on a Dutch farm in Ulster County, New York, in 1797. Her mother named her Isabella, and when asked later in life about her

surname, Truth answered, that it had been “whatever my master’s name was.”<sup>89</sup> When she was born this was Hardenbergh, but she would be sold away from them—and hence away from her parents and remaining siblings—by the time she was eleven years old. She was sold several times, sometimes to English masters who beat her for not speaking their language. By the time she was in her teens, she was bilingual in Dutch and English, very strong—she reports her own physical prowess repeatedly, including in the above speech—and nearly six feet tall.

Colonial New York was the North’s largest slave destination, with traders sailing up and down the Hudson trading enslaved men and women for the bountiful agricultural products of the Hudson Valley. Between 1750 and 1770 the slave trade increased by 70 percent, until even the poorer Dutch families in Ulster County owned several slaves, although they would often be employed alongside white workers in the fields and orchards. The selling of children away from their mothers was standard practice everywhere that slavery took root; often children born in the North were sold down the Mississippi and vice versa, so that there could be no establishing of large families or communities that might give the enslaved a foothold towards escape. To justify the inhumanity of this severance of family ties, a “common wisdom” arose that black women had no love for their children. Truth addresses this fiction directly in her *Narrative*, when speaking of her next-oldest siblings being sold away from them at three and five:

She wishes that all who would fain believe that slave parents have not natural affection for their offspring could have listened as *she* did, while Bomefree and Mau-Mau Bett,—their dark cellar lighted by a blazing pine-knot,—would sit for hours, recalling and recounting every endearing, as well as harrowing

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<sup>89</sup>Washington, Margaret. *Sojourner Truth's America*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.

circumstance that taxed memory could supply, from the histories of those dear departed ones, of whom they had been robbed, and for whom their hearts still bled.<sup>90</sup>

Bomefree was Isabella's father, from whom she got her towering height; her nickname for him was her approximation of the Dutch word for tree. Her mother was referred to children both black and white as Mau-Mau Bett and by their masters and mistresses as Betsy, Elizabeth perhaps being too sophisticated for an illiterate enslaved woman. Isabella, similarly, was referred to simply as Bell.

Isabella's first masters were believers in Dutch Pietism, a New Light Calvinist religion and part of the First Great Awakening. Pietism emphasized an inner kind of spirituality, focused on oneness with God and striving for personal perfection. Isabella's maternal grandparents were likely from Kongo, where Saint Isabella was revered by African Catholics, and Elizabeth, Isabella's mother, practiced a kind of hybrid religion of Pietism mixed with Catholicism and BaKongo spirituality, which combined to see God as a kind but all-powerful patriarch, the sun and the moon were aspects of His being, and salvation was available to all sinners. For the white servants in the Dutch households of Ulster County that applied across all class levels—and for Isabella and her fellow enslaved it applied across racial boundaries as well. However, the ministers and preachers of the Dutch churches of Ulster County disagreed. Baptism, according to Dutch law, conferred certain legal and social rights that many believed black Americans—and certainly enslaved black Americans—should not hold. Official policy allowed the baptism of the enslaved, but it would be years after Isabella's birth until that policy had any bearing on the practice of churches in the area.

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<sup>90</sup> Truth, 16.

Not only did Isabella remain unbaptized, but also she was given no formal religious education. As she put it, “I knew God, but I didn’t know Jesus.” Her religious education began through Mau-Mau Bett, who, when their work was finished, would “ca[ll] her children to her, [and] would talk to them of the only Being who could effectually aid or protect them.”<sup>91</sup> Heaven and the sky were heavily linked for Elizabeth, and later Isabella; she became convinced that if she were to petition God “under the open canopy of heaven, speaking very loud,” He would never leave her prayers unanswered. The times she was beaten for speaking Dutch only took place because she could not find a private, open space to speak with God and ask him to prevent them. Like Lee and Elaw, her lack of formal religious education led to a very personal relationship with God. Elizabeth’s BaKongo beliefs only heightened the link between God and the sky; she would tell Isabella that “those are the same stars, and that is the same moon, that look down on your brothers and sisters [...] though they are ever so far away from us, and from each other.”<sup>92</sup> Family and community became sanctified in Isabella’s mind, even after she was sold away from her mother and father. Between 1815 and 1826 she bore five children, one to her lover Robert, an enslaved man from a neighboring farm, and four to Thomas, whom she was forced to marry so that any further children would legally belong to their shared master. Thomas had been married twice previously, and according to Gilbert it was “more than probable that he was not only allowed but encouraged to take another [wife] at each successive sale.” This, like the selling away of children, was common practice. The section concerning Isabella’s children was one where Gilbert’s voice was most clearly heard, and she used Isabella’s life in the same way that many

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 18

abolitionists used slave narratives:

[Isabella] rejoiced in being permitted to be the instrument of increasing the property of her oppressors! Think, dear reader, without a blush, if you can, for one moment, of a *mother* thus willingly, and with *pride*, laying her own children, the ‘flesh of her flesh’, on the altar of slavery—a sacrifice to bloody Moloch! But we must remember that beings capable of such sacrifices are not mothers; they are only ‘things’, ‘chattels’, ‘property.’<sup>93</sup>

In her hands, Truth’s life becomes a living illustration of the evils of slavery and the reasons it should be abolished. Her *Narrative* becomes a book to be placed beside Oloudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* and Truth’s contemporary Frederick Douglass’ own story of slavery and freedom in the arsenal of abolitionists throughout America. But like Douglass, her life’s work does not end with her freedom; unlike him, neither does her *Narrative*.<sup>94</sup> By writing—or rather dictating—from late in her life, Truth was able to tell a much larger and more complex story. Her time in bondage only takes up 40 pages of the 125-page *Narrative*.

New York slowly enacted emancipation between 1799 and 1827. Isabella was two years too old to be emancipated in 1799, and although her last master, John Dumont, promised to free her a year before official emancipation, he changed his mind, claiming that she had been rendered less useful by a hand injury. Furious at what she considered to be an illegal and unjust breaking of promises, she fled. Her master pursued her, and when they met they had the following conversation:

When her master saw her, he said, ‘Well, Bell, so you’ve run away from me.’ ‘No, I did not *run* away, I walked away by daylight, and all because you had promised me a year of my time.’ His reply was, ‘You must come back with me.’ Her decisive answer was, ‘No, I *won’t* go back with you.’

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>94</sup> Douglass does write a longer autobiography detailing his life and activist work after emancipation, but it is his first *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* that remains his most influential work.

Dumont had reason to value Isabella. Her later claims that she had “as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man” seemed to be in no way exaggerated. Everyone who described meeting the adult Sojourner Truth described her height and great stature, and it was in these years of work that she built that muscle. She was by far Dumont’s most valuable slave, and according to some historians, it is possible the two were in a sexual relationship.<sup>95</sup> Certainly Dumont’s wife was overwhelmingly jealous of Isabella. This relationship has largely been passed over or labeled as speculative by early historians, only being mentioned in recent works. This was partially because Truth herself didn’t shed much light beyond her enormous desire to please him and her view of him “as a *God*,” under his rule she believed wholeheartedly in the goodness and morality of slavery, answering those who criticized it “with contempt, and immediately [telling] her master.”<sup>96</sup> This possible sexual (and romantic) relationship may have complicated Truth as a symbol of activism and freedom in the eyes of her contemporaries, pulling her into a more earthy, womanly space than they might have liked. Black women were often demonized for their sexuality; the stereotype of the temptress or the Jezebel was something Isabella would encounter later in her life, and something her early biographers may have wanted to distance her from.

Despite whatever her feelings for Dumont may have been, however, she was unwilling to let injustice lie. Conditioned as she was to the state of enslavement and dismissive as she was in her conversation about it with others, in her mind Dumont had no legal or moral right to bring her back to him and so she did not go. She found asylum with the Van Wagenen family, who paid her master \$20 for her services for the rest of the

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<sup>95</sup> Washington, 40.

<sup>96</sup> Truth, 33.

year until she was freed, after which she spent a year employed by them. Her children were legally bound to Dumont until they had worked for him for 20 years. However, Dumont illegally sold Isabella's son Peter to a plantation in Alabama, and Isabella took him to court. It was only the second time a black woman sued a white man in court and won, the first being Elizabeth Freeman in 1781, and the first time in New York state. Elizabeth had been suing for her own freedom; Isabella's case was the first to involve a black woman asserting rights of freedom over her children.

After this victory, Isabella took the Van Wagenen last name. It was as Isabella Van Wagenen that she came into her own in her religious life. It was an incident reminiscent of both Lee and Elaw's experiences. She saw "her soul, which seemed but one mass of lies" and she feared she might be "extinguished" like a candle by the sheer size and overwhelming presence of God. Prevented by her own sinful nature from speaking directly to God and expect that her prayers would be fulfilled as she always had done, she now needed a "friend"<sup>97</sup> to stand between her and God and speak to God for her. That friend came.

'Who are you?' was the cry of her heart, and her whole soul was in one deep prayer that this heavenly personage might be revealed to her, and remain with her. At length [...] an answer came to her, saying distinctly, 'It is Jesus.'<sup>98</sup>

According to Gilbert, before this Isabella had only heard Jesus' name without understanding, and thought of him only as an important, perhaps historical, personage (she cites Washington and Lafayette as similar distant, respected men). Now, though, he became God's love personified, tempering the awful power of God himself. She was

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 67



bathed in happiness. The world, which had seemed purposeless and dull, was brought to life. But she was still ignorant of the true nature of Jesus, for she assumed that he knew and loved only her, and felt jealousy whenever anyone mentioned knowing him. She was eager to learn, however, and remained so after she left the Van Wagenens with her son and daughter and moved to New York City.

It was this eagerness that led her to participate in what Gilbert refers to as “one of the most extraordinary religious delusions of modern times”.<sup>99</sup> In May of 1832 she met Robert Matthews, better known as the Prophet Matthias. Matthias was a man of colonial America, disadvantaged by the market economy arising after the revolution and set against the easy, freewheeling, individualistic ways of the inner-city businessmen of New York City; he “detested the emerging Yankee middle class and its new moral imperatives.” The Second Great Awakening brought the rise of Finneyism, which emphasized personal perfection and the sanctity of freedom of choice for all sinners, dismantling somewhat the patriarchal social structure of both church and family. Men began to look to their wives for religious guidance and advice in spiritual matters. Matthias set himself against this trend, as did others—including Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church. The two men did not get along; Smith writes that “my God told me that his God was the devil,”<sup>100</sup> but they both saw themselves as “defenders of ancient truth against the perverse claims of arrogant, affluent, and self-satisfied enemies of God.”<sup>101</sup> Matthias was a zealot, pronouncing, among other things, that no man who shaved his beard could be a true Christian, that all government but that of God was

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, Paul E., and Sean Wilentz. *The kingdom of Matthias*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 9.

illegitimate, and that God himself had sent him to “take possession of the world in the name of the King of Kings.”<sup>102</sup> He left no writing behind himself, but his encounter with Joseph Smith was recorded in the latter’s journals, and some of his followers wrote about his beliefs. His wife was also a very valuable source of information, as she wrote extensively to his sympathetic biographers, condemning him both for his beliefs and for his abandonment of herself and their children.

Isabella was working for a similarly zealous man, Elijah Pierson, whose beliefs matched those of Matthias. When Matthias called on Pierson, Isabella answered the door, and was struck by his intensity, his religious fervor, and the length of his beard; “her early impression of seeing Jesus in the flesh rushed into her mind.”<sup>103</sup> When the two met to discuss ideas, Isabella was privy to their conversation; not because they had any interest in her religious or intellectual input, but because as a black woman she could fade into the background, as much a piece of the background of the household as the furniture. Gilbert notes that “persons who have travelled in the South know the manner in which the colored people, and especially slaves, are treated; they are scarcely regarded as being present.”<sup>104</sup> The two self-styled Prophets discussed their religious impulses and came to the conclusion that Matthias was the reincarnation of God, and Elijah was the reincarnation of John the Baptist.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Isabella was present for the inception of the Kingdom of Matthias. She went on to work for Matthias, and be drawn fully into his religious fervor.

Matthias named himself after the apostle chosen to replace Judas after his betrayal

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<sup>102</sup> Truth, 89.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>105</sup> Johnson and Wilentz, 27.

of Christ,<sup>106</sup> and it was in those terms that he thought of himself. By the time he met with Elijah Pierson he'd gone beyond condemning Finneyism to condemning Christianity itself.

The state of things in 1832 was the result of eighteen hundred years of Christian misrule. At the center of Christian devilry was a system of preaching and teaching that destroyed Truth. The Spirit of Truth, Matthias explained, was the spirit of male government. God wanted women to have none of it.<sup>107</sup>

Through Matthias, Isabella entered into the purest form of patriarchy. When she ran from Dumont, she left her husband Thomas behind in captivity, and he died of disease shortly after being emancipated; any goals they had for starting their own household “went into the repository of unfulfilled promises and unrealized hopes.”<sup>108</sup> Kept from the subtler cult of domesticity that many of her sisters, white and black alike, were experiencing, Isabella ended up in an extreme version of those bonds. This was patriarchy in its absolute—Matthias was in fact dismissive of the new domestic focus for giving too much power to women, and rejected even Jesus as a false patriarch. His ultimate goal was to “crown heavenly Father, not Son, as king of a restored patriarchal world.”<sup>109</sup>

Towards this end, he set up the Zion Hill kingdom. Taking the Pierson family and Isabella, he set up on the Folger family's country estate in Sing Sing, New York. Isabella went, although she reports later that she was there not because of any deep belief, but out of a fascinated curiosity for what she recognized as a unique historical moment. This may be a moment of self-editing, for the perseverance she showed when the commune began to fall apart showed deeply-held beliefs of some kind. It is possible she simply wanted to

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<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 95.

<sup>108</sup>Truth, 82.

<sup>109</sup>Johnson and Wilentz, 10.

distance herself from an episode of her history that turned unpleasant and casts her in a role of ignorance.

Certainly she did not originally plan to stay long, as she would not be paid for her services at Zion Hill, although there would be no expenses either.<sup>110</sup> This period of Isabella's life was not reported in Sojourner Truth's *Narrative*, which supports the idea that Truth may have been separating herself from Isabella's mistakes. Olive Gilbert instead directed her readers to a book entitled *Fanaticism* by Gilbert Vale, who drew heavily on Isabella's testimony. At the beginning of the text Vale was careful to note that he understood the dangers involved in basing an account on "the credit of a colored woman,"<sup>111</sup> but that he had verified her information with "white evidence"<sup>112</sup> as much as possible. He also included testimonials to her honesty and goodness from Dumont.

Utopian communities, first gaining a foothold during the First Great Awakening with religious sects like the Shakers, were on the rise again. Community living appealed to Isabella, who, after escaping from the only pleasant master she'd ever had, had constantly been fighting to hold on to her family and friends, living a kind of rootless existence she was not yet ready to embrace. Instead, she became unofficial matriarch of a community that was doomed to collapse in on itself. Matthias, Pierson, and Folger made various business deals to increase the wealth of the community as a whole, and Isabella ran the agricultural side of things. Accustomed to the various work required to run a

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<sup>110</sup> Washington, 106.

<sup>111</sup> Vale, Gilbert. *Fanaticism; Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the Simple Narrative of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c. A Reply to W. L. Stone, with the Descriptive Portraits of All the Parties, While at Sing-Sing and at Third Street. - Containing the Whole Truth - and Nothing but the Truth.* (New York: The Author, 1835, Retrieved online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/vale/menu.html>), 13.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

farm, she adapted easily to the simple life of the religious commune. However, the structure of her little world began quickly to collapse. Ann Folger, who technically ran the household, hated Isabella, objecting to the status and power she commanded, although every individual in Matthias' "family" was supposedly equal, regardless of race. Ann took it upon herself to become Mother as Matthias was Father. She seduced Matthias, insisting they were "match spirits", and the two claimed that they had shared dreams. Without divorcing her husband Benjamin—after all, theirs was a Christian marriage, not the Gospel marriage recognized by Matthias and his family—she assumed power over Isabella and the rest of the family. She also entirely distracted Father Matthias. The two "spent much of their time in bed", which meant that no one else could go to meals; all the meals were taken together by the Family, and no one could eat without Matthias' presence. Isabella's schedule was in disarray, and her workload increased as both Ann and Matthias ignored their duties.<sup>113</sup>

Although Isabella believed in Matthias himself, she had nothing but disdain for Ann and the concept of "match souls." It was clear to her that the Family was falling apart around her, and several times she threatened to leave Zion Hill. But the community offered more than just spiritual satisfaction; it offered physical safety. Manhattan in the 1830s was in turmoil, with racial violence breaking out all over the city. The Turner rebellion<sup>114</sup> in 1831 had white southerners on their toes and caused a ripple of other slave rebellions throughout the south. Efforts by the American Colonization Society to return freed blacks to Africa caused enormous tension, with slaveholders and abolitionists on

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<sup>113</sup> Washington, 112.

<sup>114</sup> Nat Turner, a Virginian slave, organized over 70 other enslaved and free men and turned on their owners, killing more than 60 white slaveholders.

both sides of the debate. Interracial abolitionist societies were forming all along the East Coast, and the first black convention was held in Philadelphia in June of 1834. What little family Isabella had in the city were threatened by mobs of angry whites, who destroyed her old church and attacked interracial couples, black businesses, and the homes of black organizers.<sup>115</sup> As fragmented and fraught as the Zion Hill community was, she had no other place to go.

It was clear that the commune was on its last legs, however, and in July Elijah Pierson became very ill. The Family didn't believe in medicine, so Isabella was left to tend to him herself, and was unable to treat his disease. When he passed away, it became clear that his financial matters—and by extension those of the commune—were in total disarray. Isabella, Ann, and Matthias were forced to move back to New York City. Matthias grew madder, and fights between him and Benjamin Folger grew worse; eventually Matthias kicked Ann out of his bed and claimed she was no longer fit to be Mother of the Family. The Folgers, breaking entirely with Matthias and the others, began to push an investigation of Pierson's death, and accused Matthias of fraud and extortion, backed by the suspicious fact that Pierson had given Matthias his land in his will. The fraud charges came to nothing—as raving as Matthias was, there were still those in the Family willing to vouch for him and attest that the money and goods given to him had been given freely. But the investigation of Pierson's death revealed “a large quantity of unwholesome and deadly substance”<sup>116</sup> in his stomach, and the charges changed to murder. Rather than implicating only Matthias, however, they implicated Isabella as well.

The Manhattan riots had been concerned with black licentiousness, black excess,

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<sup>115</sup> Washington, 115.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

and fanaticism, and the Zion Hill scandal, with its complex sexual undercurrents, large amounts of money, and cult-religious mysticism took off in the public consciousness. As the one in charge of feeding the Family, suspicion landed square in Isabella's shoulders and the bonds of public prejudice began to tighten.

There is no evidence that Isabella was ever sexually involved with any of the men of the Family. All of the sexual drama centered around Matthias, the Folgers, and Catherine, Benjamin Folger's Irish servant and mistress. But Isabella—a young black widow living in close proximity to an older white man—was a perfect target for the rage that New York City had been struggling to express all summer. She was never formally charged, but was often called in for questioning, and the press exploded with rumors of her “jezebel” or “wench”<sup>117</sup> nature.

So Isabella found herself involved in legal matters for a second time, and like the first, she was fighting against the stereotyping of black women to reclaim an essential piece of her womanhood. Then, it had been about asserting and reclaiming her role as mother; this second legal battle was over her sexual agency and respectability. She set about saving her reputation and establishing her personal truth: she gathered testimonials from white churchmen who had known her in New York and several of her former owners, including John Dumont, all of whom swore to her total honesty and integrity. The physician who examined Pierson admitted under cross-examination that there was no conclusive evidence that Pierson had been murdered. It became clear to the accusers that if Isabella were allowed to speak on the stand, backed up by all the white testimony she had gathered for herself, their case against Matthias would collapse. To silence her, they

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<sup>117</sup> A common character in minstrel shows: the crude, extremely sexual black woman who seduced the hapless white man.

cut a deal behind the scenes<sup>118</sup>. Matthias was acquitted, but Isabella had no chance to reestablish herself as a respectable member of the community.

It was at this point that she sought out Gilbert Vale. *Fanaticism* was not just a testimonial against Matthias and the religious commune in general, it was the first time that Isabella took it upon herself to really be heard. The courts attempted to silence her, so she stepped around them and told her story directly to the public.

Vale was a British editor clearly aligned with Abolition, anti-evangelicalism, and the female cause. He had previously published Mary Wollstonecraft, and would go on to publish the paper *Mirror of Liberty*, written by young black Abolitionist David Ruggles. Supported by the testimony Vale and she published, Isabella authored and won a slander suit against Benjamin Folger and received financial compensation for the publication of her narrative as well. Freed both financially and ideologically from the kingdom of Matthias—whose downfall came not from false association with God, for Isabella believed herself to have a personal relationship with God as close as any that Matthias claimed, but his “maleness and vain, egotistical susceptibility to the charms of a deceitful woman.”<sup>119</sup>

The *Narrative* picks up after the slander suit. Isabella had become disillusioned with the city, and felt called eastward to lecture. “About an hour before she left,” Gilbert says without preamble, “she informed the woman of the house where she was stopping that her name was no longer Isabella, and that she was going east. And to her inquiry, ‘What are you going east for?’ her answer was, ‘The Spirit calls me there, and I must

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<sup>118</sup> Washington, 124.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.



go.”<sup>120</sup> She continued to refer to herself as Sojourner as she travelled eastward, finding lodging where she could, either on the kindness of strangers or in exchange for prayer, work, or occasionally money. Her great physical stature and experience with an enormous variety of physical labor allowed her to make herself useful wherever she ended up. She attended several camp meetings as she found them, either sitting as observer or preaching herself. In one notable instance, “a party of wild young men, with no motive but that of entertaining themselves by annoying and injuring the feelings of others” attacked the camp meeting. The camp organizers tried to reason with them, failed, and resorted to threats, at which point the young men left and returned with friends, “to the number of a hundred or more.”<sup>121</sup> At first Sojourner was frightened—she was the only black woman there, and was worried that their anger would come down especially hard on her—but soon she overcame her fear, and went out to speak with the young men instead.

“Shall I run away and hide from the Devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob, when I know it is written—‘One shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight?’”<sup>122</sup>

She left her hiding spot and began to sing hymns. The young men surrounded her, closing in on her, but they didn’t hurt her. Instead they grew quiet and listened to her song, and when she asked them to back up to give her room they agreed. She sang and talked and prayed for them, and they seemed enthralled; by her presence, perhaps, the novelty of her, or her words themselves. Gilbert lingers on the effects of her voice itself, describing it as “powerful”, “deep”, and “sonorous”. Eventually Sojourner promised them one more song in exchange for their peaceful departure, and by the time the constables arrived she had sent

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<sup>120</sup> Truth, 100.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 116.

them on their way.<sup>123</sup>

She began attending political rallies as well as religious meetings. Her close association with Gilbert Vale had built upon her natural convictions to make a strong Abolitionist of her, and she took a pragmatic, active approach to both that cause and women's rights. Several times she stood up at meetings and asked variations on a theme, that of not waiting around for men to give women rights, but for women to take them themselves. She was not always welcomed, but she was always heard. Her speech at the Women's Convention was an extension of the repertoire she had been building for years.

The *Narrative* ends before the Woman's Convention. The rest of her life is summarized in small statements between the newspaper reports, letters, and anecdotes provided in *The Book Of Life*. Among them is an incident that proved that Sojourner's remarkable voice did not always fall on friendly ears. She had been asked to leave woman's rights meetings before because of the color of her skin, although by 1851 she was well-known enough that there were too many who wanted to hear her speak. She was used to defending both her right to speak in a woman's space and her right to speak in a black space. But in 1858 her identity was called directly into question in a different fashion: she was accused of being a man.

The rumor spread when she held a series of anti-slavery meetings in Indiana. William Hayward, who told the story in a letter to his friend W. L. Garrison, described the accuser as "the mouthpiece of the slave Democracy", and said that they suspected Sojourner of being hired by the Republican Party to impersonate a woman. He described the scene:

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 119.

Confusion and uproar ensued, which was soon suppressed by Sojourner, who, immediately rising, asked them why they suspected her of being a man. The Democracy answered, ‘Your voice is not the voice of a woman, it is the voice of a man, and we believe you are a man.’<sup>124</sup>

Sojourner’s voice had, as we’ve seen above, been described as “deep”. But the implications here were deeper than the physical attributes of her voice itself. Sojourner’s voice was not that of a woman because a woman could not be saying the things she had been saying. She was not acting as a woman acts, and “the Democracy” as a whole had labeled her as wrong, not simply a few men suspicious of the tenor of her voice. As telling as the accusation, however, was Sojourner’s response:

Sojourner told them that her breasts had suckled many a white babe, to the exclusion of her own offspring; that some of those white babies had grown to a man’s estate; that, although they had suckled her colored breasts, they were, in her estimation, far more manly than they (her persecutors) appeared to be, and she quietly asked them, as she disrobed her bosom, if they, too, wished to suck!<sup>125</sup>

Rather than agree to a physical examination to prove her womanhood behind closed doors, Sojourner used the accusation as an opportunity to not only defend her gender and her truth, but to make the point that she wished to make at the meetings in general. Blackness was no disease, nor filth that could be transmitted to white children; black mothers were mothers nonetheless; and manhood came from womanhood, black or white, and from living lives in service of truth and freedom. These were themes she never deviated from, ever since she first laid them out in that contested speech at the Woman’s Convention seven years earlier.

It doesn’t seem necessary to debate which report of the “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech is more accurate; all knowledge we have of Sojourner’s life, as well as the speed with

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<sup>124</sup> Hayward, William in a letter to W. L. Garrison, reprinted in *Sojourner Truth’s Book of Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 138.

<sup>125</sup> Hayward, *Book of Life*, 139

which Robinson's version was released and the delay in Gage's, points to Robinson's being accurate. The more fruitful line of inquiry is that of the purpose Gage's editing of Sojourner's voice serves and the reasons that it, rather than the earlier, more accurate version, is the one that survived.

In the introduction to the Schomburg Library<sup>126</sup> edition of Sojourner's *Narrative*, Jeffrey C. Stewart speculates that "perhaps this is the way Gage *heard* her."<sup>127</sup> It's a possibility that bears some analysis. If Truth spoke, as we now imagine, with little to no colloquialism or dialect, Gage's unthinking addition shows instead her prejudices, and those of her contemporaries in abolition and feminism. The fact that Truth was allowed to stand up and speak indicates that she was not unsupported at the Convention. Her message was, by all accounts, well received. And certainly her Book of Life, attached to her *Narrative*, proves that she was well-loved and respected in her lifetime. But the changing of her words does the same thing that the removal of her possible relationship with [slaveowner] and her involvement in the Kingdom of Matthias does. It simplifies the complex history of a human woman into a symbol to be used by various movements for their own purposes. A woman who had once been young and driven by sexual desire, who had once been ignorant and taken in by a fanatic, makes a much less effective figurehead than a pure and pious woman who strode forth, strong and tall, from the externally-imposed limitations of slavery and discrimination.

Certainly Sojourner Truth lends herself easily to symbol and legend—indeed, it is possible to look at her life as her journey into crafting herself into such a symbol. A woman who names herself Truth is not attempting to avoid symbolism; nor is a statement

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<sup>126</sup> The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers.

<sup>127</sup> Stewart, Introduction to *Narrative*, xi.

such as “I am a woman’s rights” anything less than an invitation to symbology. However, the latter half of her life was devoted to being true to herself and to not letting anyone chip away at who she was. She resisted both attempts to cut her off from her activism as a woman and as a person of color, and by the same token resisted being distilled down to either. Gage’s rewriting of her speech is a distillation of her down from a complicated northern woman with a past clear in her voice to a stereotype, the “wise old mammie” figure that progressive white America was more comfortable with. Readers comparing the two versions at the time would perhaps have assumed that it was Robinson’s version, not Gage’s, that was edited; that he, cleaning up the copy for his publication, hadn’t transcribed her accent, or perhaps that, as he was friends with Truth, he had edited her to make her sound more sophisticated. What matters is that because of the internal prejudices of the readers, Gage’s version of the speech remained, and the image of Sojourner Truth that prevails in the modern discourse is an image much more bound up in stereotypes and assumptions of ignorance than the woman herself was. The Book of Life also contains more and more evidence of the ways in which Truth was presented to the world by her white contemporaries; newspapers, letters to the editor, and articles about her various public appearances. A paper from Topeka, Kansas called her a “peculiar, imaginative, yet strong and stalwart daughter of the tropics” at the same time as it claimed she was “childish”.<sup>128</sup> Another stated, “That she is a remarkable woman, all who have kept pace with the history of the last thirty years know”, but also called her “not very intelligent” and labeled the cause she was lobbying for a “pet petition”.<sup>129</sup> The mix of respect and condescension puts Sojourner Truth in her place in history: a remarkable woman, but not

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<sup>128</sup> Newspaper from Topeka, Kansas. Reprinted in *Sojourner Truth’s Book of Life*. 247.

<sup>129</sup> Newspaper from Topeka, Kansas. Reprinted in *Sojourner Truth’s Book of Life*. 246.

white.

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That repainting of someone's image is the natural process of biographical history. Every time a historian writes about a person, that person is overwritten with the historian's biases. The more one figure is written about, the more the truth of that person is clouded by a thousand different angles and explanations. Undoing that clouding is the greatest benefit of returning to the words written and spoken by the women themselves. In that sense, of all the persons addressed in this project, Sojourner Truth is the woman we know the least about. The details of her life are the least pure, not only because we only have access to them through the lens of Gilbert, Robinson, or Gage, but because she was narrating from the end of her life. By the same token as the authenticity of Robinson's report being more trustworthy because he reported so soon after the event, Sojourner Truth's report of her own life is less authentic than Zilpha Elaw's, who is writing from what was likely her middle-age, and far less than Martha Ballard's, who wrote every day. In terms of the lived experience of these women, Ballard is the one whose daily life we understand most, despite her bare-bones style. These women affected, and were affected by, their circumstances and their eras in ways that each generation of historian interprets differently. It is important not to rely simply on interpretations before us, but to examine the source of the matter and to draw as accurate a picture as our own biases allow. These women offer us the chance to understand the realities of female life, identity, and work in the nineteenth-century with a surety and a detail that would be impossible to achieve through consulting only secondary sources and works.



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