

The Unexceptional Eloquence of Sarah Josepha Hale's Lecturess

GRANVILLE GANTER

ONE OF THE STANDARD conventions of Jacksonian historiography is the premise that women were strongly discouraged from public speech. Such a broad claim, though a generally accurate measure of the standards of white middle-class propriety, can be misleading. Like the restrictions of the women's sphere, the social prohibitions against women's oratory during the period were contingent on class, situation, and content.¹ There were many exceptions, even for women who aspired toward genteel respectability. In addition to school exhibitions, theatrical performances, speeches to women's groups and literary societies, and religiously oriented oratory (such as Anna Braithwaite's sermons or Maria Stewart's lectures), women were frequently complimented for lecturing to mixed groups of men and women on historical, scientific, and educational topics

1. For nineteenth-century commentary that the rhetoric of the spheres was often class-based, see the series of columns and letters on the women's sphere in the 1853 volumes of Paulina Davis's journal, the *Una*, especially May. The central idea of C. I. H. [Clarinda Irene Howard] Nichols's October 15, 1851, speech, 'On the Responsibilities of Woman,' is criticism of the class-based definition of the spheres. It was reprinted various times, among them in a pamphlet series entitled *Women's Rights Commensurate with Her Capacities and Obligations*. No. 6 (Syracuse: J. L. Masters, 1853).

The author would like to thank the American Antiquarian Society for a Peterson Fellowship that supported the research for this essay.

GRANVILLE GANTER is assistant professor of English at St. John's University.

Copyright © 2004 by American Antiquarian Society

from the 1790s through the Civil War.² One instance is the highly successful speaking tour of Deborah Sampson Gannett in 1803.³ Other examples, less well known today, include Fanny Newell, a Methodist exhorter of the second decade of the nineteenth century, and 'Miss Clarke,' who was among the first professional lecturers—male or female—to tour the east coast speaking to mixed audiences from 1825 to 1827.⁴ Although it is commonly asserted that most female orators were met with re-primation prior to the Civil War, complaints, if any, were prompted by the content of their performances, not simply by their transgression into men's domain. Thus, many female orators, including Frances Wright, were commended for their ideas, eloquence, and deportment, despite occasionally prurient remarks about their physiques.

The recovery of a tradition of women's successful public speech in the early republic is ongoing and promises to reshape our

2. For text and background on Stewart's lectures, see Shirley Wilson Logan, ed., *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995). For Braithwaite, see *A Sermon and a Prayer by Anna Braithwaite, Delivered in a Friends' Meeting* (Philadelphia: S. Potter and Co, 1825); and Larry H. Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 33.

3. For informative discussions of Deborah Sampson Gannett, see Judith R. Hiltner's three essays, "Like a Bewildered Star": Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, and *Address, Delivered with Applause*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 29 (1999): 5–24; "She Bled in Secret": Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, and *The Female Review*, *Early American Literature* 34 (1999): 190–220; and "The Example of Our Heroine": Deborah Sampson and the Legacy of Herman Mann's *The Female Review*, *American Studies* 41 (2000): 93–114. See also Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2000), 246–57.

4. To my knowledge, I am the first to identify Clarke as the first female lecture series speaker in the United States. For complementary newspaper notices of Miss Clarke's lecture tour of Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Albany, see the *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser*, January 9, 1826; the *New York Mirror*, January 28, 1826; and the *Albany Argus*, November 8, 1826. In Albany, Clarke charged a standard rate of \$3 for a course of fourteen lectures, and was advertising a second series of lectures in Albany scheduled for January 1827 (*Albany Argus*, December 26, 1826). For a background on Fanny Newell, see *Memoirs of Fanny Newell, Written by Herself, and Published by the Desire and Request of Numerous Friends. Third Edition. With Corrections and Improvements to Which Are Added Numerous Interesting Letters* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1833). Her memoir was published in several editions during the early national period, beginning in 1825.

understanding of women's lives.⁵ Given past scholarly beliefs that, prior to 1848, women's participation in early nineteenth-century speech culture was virtually nonexistent save for exceptional women, this essay examines Sarah Josepha Hale's 1839 novel *The Lecturess, or Woman's Sphere* from the angle that women did give public speeches without generating controversy.⁶ *The Lecturess* has generally been read as a mirror of the period's conservatism, a text that reflected and reinforced the prohibition of women's speech because its heroine, Marian, apologizes for her behavior on her deathbed.⁷ The novel's apparent censure of women's oratory is paradoxical, however, because Marian's oratory

5. One of the best surveys of the contemporary state of research on women's oratory in the early national period is Louise W. Knight, 'An Authoritative Voice: Jane Addams and the Oratorical Tradition,' *Gender and History* 10 (1998): 217-51. See also Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, ed., *Women Public Speakers in the United States: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook, 1800-1925*, vol. 1 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993); Glenna Matthews, *The Rise of Public Woman: Woman's Power and Woman's Place in the United States, 1630-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Anne Mattina, 'I am as a Bell That Cannot Ring: Antebellum Women Oratory,' *Women and Language* 16 (1993): 1-7; and Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortenson, *Imagining Rhetoric: Composing Women of the Early United States* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002). The standard reference texts, now becoming dated because of new research, are Doris G. Yoakam, 'Woman's Introduction to the American Platform,' in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, ed. William Norwood Brigrance, 3 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1943), 1:153-93; and Lillian O'Connor, *Pioneer Women Orators: Rhetoric in the Ante-Bellum Reform Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954). For approving coverage of the Grimké sisters' debating tour, see the Amesbury, Massachusetts, *Morning Courier* for July 14, 1837; Larry Ceplair, ed., *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings, 1835-1839* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); and Keith E. Melder, 'Forerunners of Freedom: The Grimké Sisters in Massachusetts, 1837-1838,' *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 103 (1967): 223-49. For praise of Frances Wright's speeches, both before and after her infamous third lecture at Masonic Hall in late January 1829, see William Randall, *Frances Wright* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924); and Celia Morris, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984). For positive newspaper reviews of Wright, see also Carolyn Eastman's well-researched dissertation, "'A Nation of Speechifiers': Oratory, Print and the Making of a Gendered American Public, 1780-1830' (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2001). By the 1850s, many women were routinely complimented for their speaking abilities as well as their ideas. See numerous newspaper excerpts in the 1853-54 issues of the *Una*, such as the accounts of Ernestine Rose and Harriet K. Hunt in April and May 1854.

6. Sarah Josepha Hale, *The Lecturess, or Woman's Sphere* (Boston: Whipple and Darnell, 1839). On the title page the attribution of authorship reads: 'By the Author of "My Cousin Mary."' Lyle H. Wright identified Hale as the author.

7. See Caroline Field Levander, *Voices of the Nation: Women and Public Speech in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

is otherwise highly compelling. In my reading, the novel censures her selfishness more than her speech itself. The rhetorical triumph of Hale's *Lectress* is that it validates women's public speech, provided that it is genuinely done on behalf of the social welfare. Central to Hale's message is her advocacy of what I will describe as an 'unexceptional' eloquence grounded in humility and protected by the doctrines of the separate spheres.

The erasure of women's public speech from scholarly notice is partially due to a tendency to interpret the content of women's discourse as more important than its public nature. Many women were quick to broadcast their deference to men concerning commerce and politics in the wake of Frances Wright's vocal criticisms of the clergy's influence on government. The content of these Catharine Beecher-esque repudiations of women's speech, however, is only part of their significance. As Michael Warner notes, the publicity of women's declarations of their happiness in the home, discussed as commonly in speech and print as Wright's transgressions, tended to transform the meaning of women's domesticity.⁸ For example, there was no public outcry when one 'Lady' took to the podium to criticize Wright in New York City in 1829.⁹ In this

8. Michael Warner notes this paradox in Beecher's discourse, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2000), 27. Oddly, however, he mistakenly takes Beecher's comments to be representative of what most people said about women's speech. As a result, he has to posit the notion of a women's separate 'counterpublic' existing alongside a men's 'public,' an act that, if multiplied for every public position, rapidly becomes an awkward tool for cultural analysis. A cursory perusal of the accounts of the reviews of women's speeches between 1790 and 1845 shows that women were often recognized as powerful practitioners of 'public' speech in a domain traditionally associated with men. For example, note the following review of Abby Kelley's performance at an antislavery lecture in Ohio in 1845. Kelley spoke after her husband, Stephen Foster, and another man, John Stebbins, had harangued the audience for several hours: 'We have heard Abby twice—she chased Foster off the floor this morning, and spoke about two hours and a half. Her beauty is nothing to brag of, and yet she has an intellectual expression which while speaking makes her appear interesting and attractive. Her manner of delivery is eloquent and forcible. Although extremely sarcastic—and by no means mild in her "denunciations"—she does not stoop to the use of harsh and vulgar epithets. She is more argumentative than either of the others, and seems to be the perfect master of her subject.' (*Cascade Roarer*, August 5, 1845.)

9. See the advertisement for a public lecture by a woman at Union Hall Academy, both men and women invited, entitled 'A Lecture on Wisdom and True Knowledge, in Opposition to the Opinions of Ms. Frances Wright,' in the *New York Commercial Advertiser*, March 5, 1829.

sense, the women's sphere was also public business. As recently shown by many scholars, including Mary Ryan, Carolyn Lawes, and Elizabeth Varon, women exerted recognizable political power through petition drives, participation in benevolent associations, and church membership, all of which occurred within the ostensible jurisdiction of the women's sphere. Women also extended their civic influence and public notoriety through literary publication, journalism, and public speech at the same time they proclaimed their modesty.¹⁰

It is thus important to interpret the evidence of women's support for the domestic sphere with a sense of the collateral effects such statements might also perform. Linda Kerber, among others, has drawn attention to the way the rhetoric of the separate spheres allowed women to define a jurisdiction of their own, a strategy with both confining and liberating results.¹¹ Even further, I would add that discussion of the spheres also functioned as women's ticket into public debates from which they might otherwise have been excluded. The rhetoricity of the spheres, its remarkable popularity as a convention of nineteenth-century discourse, suggests that women's public advertisement of their submission to men's political dominance paradoxically advanced their ability to participate in the cultural debates of their day. Catharine Beecher's frequently invoked authority as a critic of

10. For women's civic activism, see Mary P. Ryan's two works, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), and *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Carolyn J. Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000); Elizabeth R. Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History* 82 (1995): 494-521; and Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). For more on women's publication, see Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

11. See Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 9-39.

Frances Wright and Sarah and Angelina Grimké is an underappreciated example of this paradox at work.¹²

The stronger public presence created by separate spheres of discourse could take a number of different forms. In some instances, women proclaimed their breach of the spheres with masculinized or defiant tones. Speakers such as Wright and Abigail Kelley were well known for this strategy, although both were sometimes complimented for an appealing feminine assertiveness, too. More often, however, women adopted a quieter but still compelling rhetoric: the eloquence of humility. In reference to the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Lawrence Buell has referred to this Catonic mode as an aesthetic of anti-eloquence, something of a misnomer considering it simply describes the most successful feat of eloquence—the apparent absence of artifice.¹³ This voice pleads no trickery, and little right to declaim. Virtuous intent and submission to proper authority are its validating credentials. Anti-eloquence, or, in what could be described in less binary terminology as unexceptional eloquence, is as much a man's speaking technique as a woman's, but women in the nineteenth century excelled in this self-effacing mode of social reform and civic critique.

One author who was aware of the compelling virtue (in a classically republican sense) of unexceptional eloquence was Sarah Josepha Hale. Hale was no radical, at least in terms of the political spectrum of her own day. She had no interest in ultraism, the then-fashionable term for northeastern fanatical reformers ranging from free-lovers and vegetarians to abolitionists. Rather, as the matronly editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* for forty years, she served as a gentle arbiter of taste for northern middle-class white

12. See Beecher's 1836 remarks on Wright in her *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion in The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere*, eds. Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 236–37. See also Beecher's 1837 critique of the Grimkés in her *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837).

13. Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 155.

women, an advocate for their professional development, and an emblem of general respectability.¹⁴ Present scholarly consensus is that Hale was a social conservative, but an active one, a protofeminist who nonetheless advocated very limiting roles for women.¹⁵ Although Hale was a proud historian of women's achievements, by the 1850s some of her more radical peers, such as Paulina Davis, criticized Hale's genteel moralism for its politically repressive consequences for women.¹⁶ Hale apparently discouraged women orators who had overstepped the bounds of what she called 'woman's sphere.' Her anonymously published novella, *The Lectress*, severely punishes its female protagonist who pursues a career as a lecturer.

However, Hale's book only reproduces the paradoxical cultural realities of its period: although its prohibitions against women's public speech seem obvious, the text simultaneously acknowledges women's talent and popularity of women's speech. Indeed, Hale's text documents that by 1839, female lecturers in the United States had often met with popular approbation and success. Even further, although Hale's novel seems to advocate women's silence, Hale's decision to publish the text itself promotes

14. For more on Hale's relationship to Godey, see Isabelle Lehuu, 'Sentimental Figures: Reading *Godey's Lady's Book* in Antebellum America,' in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 73-91; Lawrence Martin, 'The Genesis of *Godey's Lady's Book*,' *New England Quarterly* 1 (1928): 48-49; and Nicole Tonkovich Hoffman, 'Rhetorical Power in the Victorian Parlor: *Godey's Lady's Book* and the Gendering of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric,' in *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Gregory Clark and Michael S. Halloran (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1993), 158-83.

15. For strong discussions of Hale's work, see Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett, *Declarations of Independence: Women and Political Power in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); and Ruth Finley, *The Lady of Godey's* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1931).

16. For Hale and history, see Nina Baym, 'Onward Christian Women: Sarah Hale's History of the World,' *New England Quarterly* 63 (1990): 249-70. See Paulina Davis's reviews of Hale's 1853 *Woman's Record* in the February and March 1853 issues of the *Una*. Although she applauds Hale's recovery of women's historical achievements, she is dismayed by the 'tangled web of theology and philosophy' evident in Hale's moralistic censure of the habits of earlier ages.

assertive ideals of republican motherhood, a term historians have coined to describe several aspects of women's political agency from the 1790s onward.

Although Hale's affinities for the ideology of republican motherhood have been noted, until recently, neither Hale nor this philosophy has been much associated with progressive activism in a modern, feminist sense.¹⁷ As described by Kerber, the republican mother served her children as the central repository and teacher of moral civic virtue. Although the nation's civic health depended on women performing this job, they were not welcome to take part in political debates unless dire circumstances required it.¹⁸ As Laura McCall and others have argued, however, republican motherhood was far from a simple ideology of passive and obedient housewifery—it also encompassed assertive and forthright codes of social and religious obligation, at least as expressed by popular writers such as Susanna Rowson and Harriet Beecher Stowe.¹⁹ Furthermore, the abolition controversies of the 1830s contributed to a sense of national crisis that precipitated a conviction among many northern women that it was their civic duty to do something, however small, for the public benefit. Under the pretext of simply performing her duty as a Christian citizen within the woman's sphere, Hale's unexceptional eloquence testifies to an

17. See Bardes and Gossett, *Declarations of Independence*; Hoffman, 'Rhetorical Power in the Victorian Parlor'; and Okker, *Our Sister Editors*.

18. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1980; New York: Norton, 1986), 11.

19. For the more radical aspects of republican motherhood, see the forum in the *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (2001), which includes essays by Mary Kelley, 'Beyond the Boundaries,' 73–78; and Laura McCall, "'Shall I Fetter Her Will?' Literary Americans Confront Feminine Submission, 1820–1860,' 93–113. See also McCall, "'The Reign of Brute Force is Now Over': A Content Analysis of *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1830–1860,' *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (1989): 217–36; and 'The Seduction Novel of the Early Nation: A Call for Socio-Political Reform,' *New England Quarterly* 73 (2000), 521–23, where McCall applauds going beyond the 'cult of true womanhood.' Rowson's active ideals of republican motherhood are evident in her 1794 play *Slaves in Algiers, or A Struggle for Freedom*, ed. Jennifer Margulis and Karen M. Poremski (Acton, Mass.: Copley Publishing, 1999). Harriet Beecher Stowe's civic activism is well expressed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly* (1853). For important alternatives to passive ideals of nineteenth-century womanhood, see also Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

influential republican practice whose feminist consequences most of its middle-class practitioners and audiences did not completely grasp.

Raised in the heart of Calvinist New Hampshire where post-millennial ideals of religious freedom were commonly associated with duty, not with personal volition, Hale was educated by her brother, a Dartmouth graduate.²⁰ In comparison to politically conservative colleges such as Yale, Dartmouth's literary societies at the time were known to support the heady egalitarian republicanism inspired by the American and French revolutions.²¹ Hale studied from the same textbooks used at Dartmouth, and it is likely that her brother exposed her to the same political ideals shared by other Dartmouth graduates, such as Caleb Bingham and David Everett (writers and compilers of the *Columbian Oration*), Daniel Webster, and Stephen S. Foster (the ultraradical abolitionist, and future husband of Abby Kelley).²² In light of this educational background, Hale's social activism, long thought to be at odds with her celebrations of women's domesticity, makes more sense. From the 1830s to the 1850s, Hale raised funds to

20. For Hale's education, see Okker, *Our Sister Editors*, 39–41. For a good background on postmillennialism, the belief that it is the duty of Christian citizens to prepare actively the way for Christ's millennium, see David Moorhead's essay, 'Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800–1880,' *Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 524–42; and David Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

21. For more on the radical republicanism practiced by Dartmouth literary societies in the early national period, see Granville Ganter, 'The Active Virtue of *The Columbian Oration*,' *New England Quarterly* 70 (1997): 463–76. For excellent studies of the democratic-republican societies of the period, see Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); Eugene Perry Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790–1800* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965); and Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic-Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763–1797* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967).

22. Carla Mulford in her introduction to the joint edition of William Hill Brown's *Power of Sympathy* and Hannah Webster Foster's *Coquette* (New York: Penguin, 1996), xiv–xv, has usefully distinguished between three different types of republicanism in the early national period: 1) the elitist classical republicanism of propertied landowners such as John Adams; 2) industrious, commercial republicanism of the type advocated by Benjamin Franklin and Adam Smith; and 3) the radical egalitarian philosophy of the democratic-republican societies of the 1790s. For a bibliography of early American radical republicanism, see the previous note.

complete the Bunker Hill monument, lobbied for rent control to benefit single women, and successfully campaigned for the appointment of women to the faculty of Vassar College.²³

The evidence of Hale's active republicanism (as opposed to passive republican nostalgia) has been recently discovered in the pages of *Godey's*, as well. For a long time, Hale's magazine was considered an ideological vehicle of submissive piety and benign Victorianisms. As McCall has demonstrated, however, the contrary is actually true. *Godey's* did not market female submission, piety, and domesticity as ideals of conduct. Rather, the women featured in the magazine were assertive, independent, and often heroic.²⁴

Hale's republicanism is also evident in *The Lecturess, or Woman's Sphere*, which explores the limits of women's public discourse. Her 1839 novella was apparently written in response to Frances Wright's, and Angelina and Sarah Grimké's, speaking tours of the Northeast during 1836–38. The short novel describes the rise and fall of Marian Gayland, an abolition and women's rights speaker. It concludes with the wasted heroine on her deathbed, repenting her life on the platform and acknowledging that a woman's place is in the home at the side of her husband. Read in conjunction with its fragmentary epigraph (from *Titus* 2:5, for aged women 'to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed'), the novel's purpose is fairly clear: the place of woman is in the home, not on the stage. But as her novel's bifurcated title suggests, Hale conjoins the two spheres of women's conduct and never discredits her protagonist's talents as a speaker. Curiously, the novel spends little time depicting the joys of home life, briefly alluding to the happiness of the heroine's friends, and seldom discussing the details of those lives. Rather, the novel focuses on Marian's public activities and the problems those activities create in her marriage.

23. Okker, *Our Sister Editors*, 69–70.

24. McCall, 'Reign of Brute Force,' 218, 232.

As the novel repeats several times, Marian's great sin is her pride. At thirteen years of age, Marian insults her mother's achievements by telling her she will not wear out her own life sewing (13). She brutally compares her friend's happy marriage to slavery and accuses her of deluded bliss (27, 37-39). Equally disturbing is the hauteur with which she repeatedly defies her spouse's wishes. She explicitly repents her headstrong behavior at the end of her life, aided by the voice of the narrator, who also declares her faults to be those of insensitivity and pride (83).

Like Milton's Satan, Marian is a dynamic and exciting character on the page, far more interesting than her submissive friend, Sophia, but Marian's logic is warped by her ambition. After Sophia defends the reciprocal restraints of her marriage to her husband, Marian responds in passionate oratory: 'O! woman, woman when will you be true to yourself, when will you tear away the veil of superstition that enshrouds you, and dare to stand forth the being your creator designed you, and asserting your rights, dare to be free?' (27). Marian's enthusiasm is attractive but not very practical. When Sophia suggests that Marian heed her husband's requests for greater harmony in the home, Marian sarcastically rejects her friend's advice:

Upon my word, Sophia, I think *you* have taken up the lecturing business in good earnest. Why will you not publish your thoughts for the benefit of all naughty wives, who presume to have opinions of their own? Pray do. It is really a duty to society to enlighten poor, foolish women upon their duty to their husbands; for some will maintain that *mutual* concessions are requisite to render married life happy. Think, my dear Sophia, what a renown would attend any person who might aid in proving the folly of such an idea, and in convincing the *soft* sex how incumbent it is upon them to yield to their lords, upon all occasions and at all times. I will promise to subscribe largely to such a work. I know I can *venture* to promise that without referring to my husband. Good-by. Let me know when your 'Treatise upon the Duties of Wives' is ready for publication. (72)

Hale's rhetorical strategy in this passage is highly sophisticated. On one level, Marian accurately diagnoses the excesses of domestic ideology. Contemporary audiences probably would have read Marian's speech as a sassy rebuke of Catharine Beecher's recent essay on the *Duty of American Females* concerning abolition. This powerful criticism seems uncharacteristic of Hale, who popularly situated herself in league with Beecher's ideals of femininity, but Hale is simultaneously demonstrating the antisocial consequences of Marian's arrogance. Marian's selfish temper sours her relationship with both her friends and spouse. Despite Sophia's weaknesses, the narrator seems to be sympathetic to her life choices, suggesting that the rewards of a close family life are preferable to the spectacular isolation of a firebrand stump speaker.

Although the general thrust of the novel thus seems to dissuade women from public lecturing, in a curious twist, the narrator often indulges in oratorical rhetoric. In apostrophes to the reader, Hale's narrator exclaims, 'O I would rather never, never again see those I have loved, and whose remembrance is twinned about my heart, than to meet the averted eye of changed affection' (44). The narrator lectures readers throughout the text with self-consciously inflated discourse, and Hale also scripts Marian with several compelling speeches that plead her own case. In these ways, Hale's novel also undermines the complacent message it ostensibly sells: a critique of women's desire to be public lecturers. The novel is itself a woman's lecture made acceptable by its benevolent intent. Although Hale is clearly not engaging in actual oratory, she is drawing on generic forms generally reserved for men and quietly adapting that discourse for women's purposes in print. Even further, Hale's anonymous publication of the novel allows her to speak without falling prey, as Marian does, to charges of selfish vanity.

The means by which Hale accomplishes this rhetorical sleight-of-hand are based in nineteenth-century political philosophy. Like the American seduction novels of the late eighteenth century, Hannah Foster's *Coquette* and Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*,

Hale's novel uses gender as an allegory to discuss the contending civic ideologies of republicanism and liberalism, or, as might be expressed in nineteenth-century terms, 'fellow-feeling' versus 'selfishness.' Barbara Bardes and Suzanne Gossett have pointed out that Hale 'preached the necessary sacrifice of the individual will to the good of the whole.'²⁵ In their brilliant examination of the differing political agendas of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* and Hale's *Northwood*, Bardes and Gossett demonstrate Hale's consistent nostalgia for the disinterested collectivism of the early republic: in times of strife, individuals must sacrifice themselves for the good of the family and nation. In this paradigm, the role of women is clearly scripted—for the good of the family, they need to express unselfish love to balance the intrinsic selfishness of their husbands. Marian herself explains this philosophy to Sophia at length:

Woman is a creature of the affections. From her cradle, her dream is love, for that she barter all else. She loves devotedly, disinterestedly, and she asks but love in return. She marries, and her visions of happiness are as pure as the thoughts of angels. She measures her husband's heart by her own, and that is the rock upon which her peace is wrecked. Man, by nature selfish, has no conception of the self-denying love of women, and soon, very soon, the predominant trait in his character becomes visible. (74-75)

Marian both proclaims the power of women's self-denying affections and struggles against them. As Hale is fully aware, the subtext of Marian's speech on love is a debate in political philosophy between republican 'disinterest' and economic self-interest, presented here as a gendered allegory in which women, the true source of republican spirit, tame the commercial self-interest of their mates. Marian, remarking that her sex is the true fount of

25. Bardes and Gossett, *Declarations of Independence*, 32. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in her study of Hannah Foster's *Coquette*, both confirms and complicates the common association of women with republican virtue. See Smith-Rosenberg, 'Domesticating Virtue: Coquettes and Revolutionaries in Young America,' in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 160-84.

disinterested civic virtue, decides that if she does not speak her conscience, she, the family, and the republic will be crushed. Although it appears that Marian is justifying her own selfish behavior, her motives are clearly derived from a republican tradition: the right to speak one's conscience for the good of the nation.

The central irony of Marian's apparently individualistic pride is that she is the logical product of republican upbringing, and as such, Hale does not entirely censure her behavior. Marian's mother, like Hale herself, brought up fatherless children by stressing the importance of religion, industry, and independence. Indeed, Marian's first lecture in the novel is a clear example of republican active virtue, where 'she knew all that she had to encounter; but strong in the consciousness of right, she would brave it all' (11-12). Marian truly represents the expressive—and faintly antinomian—legacy of New Light evangelism (from Solomon Stoddard, to Jonathan Edwards, to Samuel Hopkins, to Lyman Beecher) when she declares: 'I do not, when I appear before the public, merely echo the opinions of others, learned from books. Every word I speak is dictated by my heart, by the wish to raise my sex, to establish that equality between them and man which justice calls for' (35).

Hale complicates Marian's republican instincts, however, by turning Marian's inner voice against her. After her breakdown in Charleston, the 'still, small voice' of her conscience—the trump card of New Light theology and republican patriotism—speaks a different message:

During her illness, Marian had leisure for reflection; and the still, small voice of conscience, unheard or unheeded amid the noisy shouts of popular approval, or the excitement of opposition, now found its way to her heart, exposing by its truth-searching power every motive and principle of action. Marian shuddered at the view thus presented; to find that her actions, instead of flowing from a pure desire to benefit her fellow-beings, were in fact the result of obstinate, unyielding pride, and a craving for popularity. (57)

Recognizing her own ambition and self-interestedness, Marian has no moral choice but to resign. When she does not, the narrative condemns her with regret. But the central point is that her desire to speak and her righteousness are not the objects of Hale's censure—in fact, they are the building blocks of the collectivist republicanism Hale endorses. The message is not for women to keep silent; rather, it is that benevolence is more important than a 'craving for popularity.'

Following Hale's caveat in *The Lectress*, one of the most noticeable strategies of antebellum women's oratory is its attempt to avoid charges of vanity and self-interestedness. Unlike the cults of personality that occasionally augmented the effects of male speakers, most female orators were well trained in the classical advice that in controversial situations too much ego could turn audiences against them. Counterexamples, such as Wright's charismatic speeches against the Bank of the United States in 1838, or the Grimké sisters' public debates against men, were sensational exceptions to the norm.²⁶ Rather, women often chose a self-effacing style, and, as a result, United States history has not always remembered their carefully calculated achievements. For example, in 1825 Anna Braithwaite began one of her sermons in Philadelphia by declaring her anxiety at exposing herself to public criticism and the importance of speaking with a humble heart. After such apologies, however, she defended her obligation to speak out against wrongdoing with fearlessness and 'Christian boldness.'²⁷ As Sojourner Truth had done at Seneca Falls in 1848, C. I. H. Nichols, in her speech to the Worcester Women's Rights Convention in 1851, exploited her modest country upbringing as a means of establishing her right to speak. Apologizing for her own Vermont 'mountain growth,' she told a story about a poor neighbor whose enfeebled husband needed her help clearing

26. See Frances Wright [D'Arusmont], *What Is the Matter?: A Political Address as Delivered in Masonic Hall, October 28th, 1838* (New York: published for the author, 1838).

27. Braithwaite, *Sermon*, 4-7, 14-15.

trees from a field for planting. Nichols sympathized with her plight, saying, 'I felt in my heart that, if I were a wife, and loved my husband, I too would help him when he needed help, even if it were to roll a log; and what true hearted woman would not do the same.'²⁸ In a speech reprinted in Amelia Bloomer's newspaper, the *Lily*, Mrs. A. Gregory makes similarly effective use of 'if' and 'would' to suggest her own shortcomings in a women's rights speech in Ithaca, New York:

If I had the time and talents of Harriet Beecher Stowe or of a Mrs. Bloomer, I would take this rare chance, and portray, or at least touch upon a 'slavery,' that exists in our northern region, among many societies, and in many families particularly, as galling and far more unnatural as negro servitude: and I would deplore that dearth of spirit our sex generally suffer in consequence of our limited sphere and cramped [*sic*] energies, and the bondage we tamely acquiesce in; and I would send out a cry to awaken women's slumbers, and stimulate her mind to those intellectual pursuits she might gracefully wear, and the proper and purer adorning of her mind. I would plead for the elevation of women in all the relations, ranks, and conditions of society. I would have her taken into true companionship with man. . . .²⁹

Here, Gregory shrewdly expresses the very ideas she claims to be incapable of articulating. In bestowing laurels on other female reformers, such as Stowe and Bloomer, Gregory lets them figuratively speak for her. Although the appeal of the disadvantaged has never been the exclusive domain of female orators, it provided antebellum women with a powerful means of vocalizing radical ideas. From this perspective, the didactic message of Hale's novel is not as conservative as it first seems. Rather than dissuading women from the study and practice of elocution, Hale is modeling rhetorics in which their oratory can be made acceptable, and even celebrated by a broad audience.

28. Nichols, 'On the Responsibilities of Woman,' 2.

29. *Lily*, November 15, 1853.

Hale's subtle advocacy of special codes for female expression in a masculinist political environment is also evident in her editorship at *Godey's*. Although Ruth Finley finds Hale's silence on the Civil War within the pages of *Godey's* strong evidence for her conservatism, she also points out that Hale had little alternative: Louis Godey vowed that his magazine would never discuss controversies of religion or politics. Finley also points out that Hale attempted to repair sectional distrust through historical fables. Hale's 'Heroic Women of the Revolution' series often gave credit to Southern women. She published tales of marriages between residents of the North and South. For four years prior to the war, she published articles praising colonial and federal loyalty to the South. Most of all, Hale believed the main cause of animosity between North and South was economic tension between industrial and agricultural interests. In her eyes, the issue was who would dominate the other, not slavery. Thus, as Finley concludes, from the 1840s to 1860, Hale often used the word *union* with a double meaning. Writing on a post office act in 1845, Hale argued:

Domestic associations are not of trifling importance. . . . It is this union of hearts and memories which must preserve and perpetuate our political union. When feelings of kindly interest are cherished by all . . . there will be no danger of discord between the states. The narrow split that sees a rival or enemy in every different section will yield to the ties of relationship or good feeling, binding individuals and families to cherish and extend the familiarity of intercourse which may now be maintained in every part of our common country.³⁰

Hale's attempt to defuse the political competition among the states is explicit, but softened with its emphasis on domestic harmony. Although Hale's bid to make the political personal may seem like an inverted feminism (even antifeminist, with its faith

30. Finley, *Lady of Godey's*, 176-94, especially 180-81. See also Hale's columns in the March 1856 issue of *Godey's*.

in a toothless domesticity to cure national strife), it can also be read as an example of Hale's strategies of political commentary through domestic metaphor.

Hale also used coded language in *Godey's* to address squarely the issues of women's rights and abolition. Just prior to the publication of *The Lectress*, Hale upheld women's right to speak within the pages of *Godey's*, just on the heels of Angelina Grimké's speeches in Boston and Philadelphia. Although Hale never editorialized in the magazine about the Grimké sensation, she did publish a five-act allegorical closet drama entitled 'Esther' between June and December of 1838. The play, which follows the Biblical story closely, describes Esther's decision to speak out to King Assuerus against the persecution of the Jews. Given the date of its publication, however, when Boston was still reeling from the Grimkés' tour, the play is charged with typological significance: the need for women to speak out for their rights and for abolition. As some of Hale's readers would be aware, Garrison's *Liberator* had recently published one of Angelina Grimké's speeches to the Massachusetts legislature, where she explicitly compared her situation to Esther.³¹ Three months later, 'Esther' appeared in *Godey's*. Hale's 'Esther' explicitly introduces the problem of women's activism within the framework of the separate spheres. In the July 1838 issue of *Godey's* magazine, Esther seeks to forget the political problems of the Jews and dallies with her lover, claiming: 'I thank my God / That he has placed me in a humbler sphere, / Where peace and love, and sweet affections grow.' Her father, Mordecai, however, demands that she go to the king's palace to help her people:

But *self* must yield to duty's higher call [. . .]
 [Your heart] has noble chords untouch'd till now,
 Which may respond to the high notes of joy,
 That like the swelling of the ocean waves,

31. For a detailed account of Grimké's speech to the legislature, see the *Liberator*, March 2, 1838.

When the bright moon rides o'er them in her might,
Shall burst responsive from a nation's voice,
And hail thee their deliverer!³²

Following the congressional gag rule of 1836, when Congress refused to accept any more petitions from women protesting slavery, the play's allegory is significant. Esther first shrinks from speaking to the king uninvited, fearing for her life, but her father charges her with words that would have cheered any female political activist:

Tell [Esther] 'tis she who must avenge our wrongs,—
For this cause she went forth,—for this was rais'd,
To greatness, by her God, to queenly power,—
And now she must stand forth, and nobly dare
Danger and death, if peril wears that form,
To compass her designs, and save from wo
The persecuted remnant of her race.
And tell her, too, nor spare one warning word
That if by fear of mortal vengeance sway'd,
Or if, with woman's weakness, clinging still
To that vain shadow, life,—she hesitates,
And tremblingly holds back her ready aid
From those who supplicate in vain for life,
Their blood, which she has suffered to be shed,
Shall cry to her aloud from the cold earth.³³

As in the biblical story, Esther finally overcomes her fear and pleads her case before the king, an act that allows the Jews to rise up and slay many of their oppressors—an allegory that promises slave revolution.

Although Hale has often been accused of fostering highly restrictive roles for women, her publication of the lightly veiled

32. *Godey's Lady's Book*, July 1838, 3-5.

33. *Godey's Lady's Book*, August 1838, 79.

conceit of 'Esther' suggests the influence of far more radical beliefs than those she has been associated with to date. Rather, her validation of Wright and Grimké's civic activism and public speech in the play points to her awareness of the dangers of such practices, and the need to perform them with discretion. Similarly, in *The Lectress*, published several months after 'Esther,' she provided careful rhetorical instruction about how to advance controversial ideas. The anonymous publication of the novel suggests that she herself preferred to work outside of controversy, maintaining an undisputed pulpit in the women's sphere that few men would dare to challenge. But Hale did take personal credit for one sentence in *The Lectress*: the epigraph to Chapter 3 reads: 'The wish to promote the reputation of my own sex and my own country were among the earliest mental emotions I can recollect.—MRS. S. J. HALE.' This is the chapter in which Marian declares: 'No, no, I will not abandon the cause. I will never acknowledge the inferiority to which so many of my sex assent. I will publish my opinions; if they avail nothing more, they may lead some few to *think*.'³⁴ Although Hale's political aspirations did not always find polemical expression within the pages of *Godey's*, she did write in codes that women could hear.

In her preface to the 1998 issue of *American Literature*, 'No More Separate Spheres,' Cathy Davidson examines several shortcomings of viewing women's history through the critical instrument of separate spheres. In particular, she notes that many feminist scholars have demonstrated the inseparability of the spheres, and even further, the inadequacy of that model to elucidate other sociological and political dramas of the nineteenth century. Still, however, Davidson expresses regret at abandoning the ideology of the spheres because women's history seems to get lost in the bargain, overshadowed by other questions that concern ethics, race, or a variety of other cultural issues.³⁵ One of the benefits of

34. Hale, *Lectures*, 23, 25.

35. Cathy Davidson, 'No More Separate Spheres!' *American Literature* 70 (1998), 459.

continuing to focus on the women's sphere as a crucially important nineteenth-century rhetoric, rather than simply a historically debatable reality, is that it acknowledges the effects of performance and publicity when interpreting people's descriptions of their social relations. The rhetoric of the spheres protected women's cultural agency without necessarily consigning its spokespersons to the home and kitchen. The separate spheres were a sophisticated political discourse, as popularly debated as the questions of states' rights, manifest destiny, or abolition. As a public rhetoric, the separate spheres open up the connections between women and men, family and government, sentiment and ethics, and between talk of the hearth and United States imperialism, as several scholars have brilliantly demonstrated.³⁶ As speakers, writers, teachers, and mothers, American women made extensive and complex contributions to the political life of the antebellum period. Examination of the spheres promises to remain an important avenue of early American feminist consciousness at the same time that it seems to foreclose upon women's freedoms. Sarah Josepha Hale's work is an instructive lesson in the paradoxes of unexceptional eloquence.

36. See Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Amy Kaplan, 'Manifest Domesticity,' *American Literature* 70 (1998): 581-606.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.