

Claire Goode
Writing Sample

Lucretia Mott's Femininity

Lucretia Coffin Mott is often credited as one of the pioneers of the woman's movement in the United States. She lived from 1793 to 1880¹, and in her lifetime was a renowned Quaker minister, advocated strongly against slavery, and fought for women's increased equality, specifically for legal equality. Her upbringing on Nantucket, and within the Quaker faith molded her views on women's capabilities. In 1811 she married James Mott and together they became prominent members of the abolitionist movement. In 1848, she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention, spearheading the women's rights movement. Throughout her life, Mott engaged in a number of unwomanly pursuits. As a Quaker preacher, she was denounced for addressing both men and women. Her active role in the abolitionist movement was regarded as unfeminine due to its political dimension. By leading the women's movement and urging for an increase in their rights, specifically the right to vote, she openly questioned the theory of separate spheres. Mott attempted to widen women's sphere, arguing that women, though still mothers and wives, needed to be educated and allowed to participate in the public sphere. Though Mott redefined femininity within the existing framework of piety and domesticity, her message was radical for its time, clashing with the prevailing middle class notions of femininity.

Mott was raised on Nantucket, the second oldest of a large family. Quakerism was the prevalent faith on Nantucket and as many of the men engaged in maritime pursuits, their wives were often left to transact business for themselves.² Mott remarked on the duties of Nantucket

¹ A. Cheree Carlson, "Defining Womanhood: Lucretia Coffin Mott and the Transformation of Femininity," *Western Journal of Communications* 58 (1994): 86.

² Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott*, (New York: Walker and Company, 1980), 9.

women saying, “At that time it required some money and more courage to get to Boston- they were obliged to go to that city, make their trades, exchange their oils and candles for dry goods... set their own price, keep their own accounts; and with all this, have very little help in the family...”³ She went on to say “Look at the heads of those women; they can mingle with men; they are not triflers; they have intelligent subjects of conversation.”⁴ Women’s impressive responsibilities as well as the island’s near universal commitment to Quakerism instilled in Mott the spiritual equality of men and women in the sight of the Lord⁵ as well as demonstrating a social circle where women were considered capable individuals, required to leave their domestic sphere for the survival of their family. Mott’s own father, Captain Coffin, was often away at sea on whaling trips for many months at a time. This left her mother in sole control of their home, children, and finances. When her father’s ship mysteriously disappeared for 3 years, her mother was forced to open small parlor shop out of economic necessity.⁶ Her father’s ship had been taken captive and he was forced to make an arduous journey back from Brazil to Nantucket.⁷ His adventures taught him to value a more stable life, and he relocated the family to Boston 1804.

Captain Coffin gave his daughters a better education than many men received, insisting that they attend the Friends’ boarding school at Nine Partners, New York.⁸ There she taught as an assistant teacher from 1808 to 1810.⁹ She wed James Mott, a fellow teacher at the school, in

³ Dana Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman” in *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 221.

⁴ Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman”, 221.

⁵ Bacon, *Valiant Friend*, 9.

⁶ Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott’s Heresy: Abolition and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 17.

⁷ Faulkner, 21.

⁸ Ira V. Brown, “Cradle of Feminism: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833-1840,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102, no. 2 (1978): 147.

⁹ Beverly Wilson Palmer, “Introduction: Lucretia Coffin Mott- Wife, Mother, Quaker, Activist” in *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xiii.

1811 and settled in Philadelphia.¹⁰ By all accounts their marriage was a happy one, based in equality and mutual regard.¹¹ Within her Quaker community Lucretia Mott was incredibly well respected, becoming licensed as a minister in 1821. Her early sermons went unrecorded, but as her influence in the abolitionist and women's movement grew, her speeches grew to be increasingly well-documented. These, when compared to her personal letters, reflect a uniformity of intentions that were deeply connected with her dedication to Quaker values. However, in 1827 the Religious Society of Friends underwent one of a series of schisms which had a profound impact on the Motts.¹² Many meetings within the Society began circumscribing women's authority and voice in meeting. These "orthodox" Friends sought to increase the importance of original sin and atonement, rather than the inner light, whereas the "radical" branch sought to retain the gender equality of meetings and to continue their acceptance of women as ministers based on their belief that both men and women were granted God's inner light in equal measure.¹³ After some initial reluctance, the Motts joined the "radical" Hicksite Quakers, thus becoming heretics within their own faith.

Like the Motts, the Hicksite Quakers had a greater interest in reforming society than their "orthodox" brethren.¹⁴ She partook in the formation of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 as its first corresponding secretary. Initially, the society was mainly engaged in circulating and subscribing to abolitionist literature, but as their membership grew, so did their aspirations.¹⁵ In 1837 she was elected president and assisted in chairing the first Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. Her work brought her in contact with such abolitionists as

¹⁰ Brown, 147.

¹¹ Faulkner, 34.

¹² Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America*, (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1986), 93.

¹³ Carlson, 88-89.

¹⁴ Bacon, 93.

¹⁵ Brown, 149.

Angelina Grimke and William Lloyd Garrison.¹⁶ In 1838, the society held a second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in Philadelphia. Both men and women, black and white, attended the convention, mixing freely outside the Hall. These facts incited the violence of some of the town's men who hurled rocks at the windows while Angelina Grimke fearlessly continued to address her uncharacteristically diverse audience. The Convention met again the next afternoon, and as the violence escalated the mayor begged them to leave.¹⁷ They acquiesced, and shortly after their departure, members of the mob broke in and burned the hall to the ground. The rioting spiraled further, but such discord was not uncommon in Philadelphia of the 1830s and 40s.¹⁸ Despite the violence, they decided to hold the convention again in 1839. The issue of women's participation in abolitionist societies was again brought to a head in 1840 when Mott, among other women, was appointed as a delegate to partake in the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London. Unfortunately, upon arrival she and her fellow female delegates were denied seats on account of their sex. Here she met Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and formed an enduring friendship that would lead them both to the forefront of the fight for women's rights in the United States. Their experiences at the convention alerted them to the need of a campaign for women's rights to combat prejudices within the abolitionist movement, as well as without.

As Mott's and Stanton's case demonstrates, the abolitionist movement gave women the tools to organize a women's movement.¹⁹ The antislavery societies in which many of the forerunners of the women's movement partook gave them the language of equality, a bureaucratic framework, and the connections necessary to launch a movement for increased gender equality. Eight years after the World Convention in London, a women's rights

¹⁶ Ibid, 148-151.

¹⁷ Ibid, 158-160.

¹⁸ Ibid, 159.

¹⁹ Ibid, 165-166.

convention was planned at a tea party attended by both Mott and Stanton in Seneca Falls.²⁰ Five days later, on July 9th, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 took place, whereat the women crafted their Declaration of Sentiment based on the Declaration of Independence. In this work they included a demand for suffrage. The Convention debated the prudence of so bluntly demanding the vote, many fearing that they would not be taken seriously, and instead be labeled as radicals. However, Frederick Douglas and Stanton insisted, and it was passed by a majority vote. Of the 300 people present, 68 women and 32 men put their name to it, earning them censure and harassment when papers made the proceedings of the convention public.²¹

Mott departed from the 19th Century notion of femininity in very marked ways. Constantly described as a sweet, though assertive, she disregarded the need for submissive deference to men.²² She voiced her opinions freely, often contradicting men with whom she disagreed. When Richard Henry Dana gave his *Address on Woman* attacking the woman's rights movement, Mott attempted to discuss the speech with him afterwards, but was slighted.²³ Instead, she publically refuted his arguments in her *Discourse on Woman*, delivered on December 17th, 1849 in Philadelphia. She expressed her wish "to see woman occupying a more elevated position than that which custom for ages has allotted to her."²⁴ This communication indicates that she viewed women's oppression as an adverse habit, rather than a precedent ordained by God's law. She echoed these thoughts in her address, *The Principles of the Co-Equality of Woman with Man*, delivered at the Women's Rights Convention of 1853, in which she stated "Woman has long been the mere slave of social custom, the unreasoning victim of

²⁰ Jennifer Chapin Harris, "Celebrating Women's Herstory: The Story of Seneca Falls," *Off Our Backs* 28, no. 7 (1998): 9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brown, 144.

²³ Carlson, 90.

²⁴ Dana Greene, "Discourse on Woman" in *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 143.

conventional cruelty. Her voice has been suppressed, or fixed down to the slenderness of her cambric needle.”²⁵ Allowing that nothing but mere custom held women back, and certainly not innate inferiority, she forcibly argued for the expansion of women’s sphere of influence.

Mott found the subjugation of women on religious grounds deplorable. Aggravated that the sins of the women in the Bible were used as a basis to deny her a voice, the veneration of biblical women became a common theme in her speeches. She noted that “Numbers of women were the companions of Jesus...Philip had four daughters who did prophesy...Phebe is mentioned as a *servant* of Christ, and commended as such to the brethren...”²⁶ and so forth. She was also careful to note that “Women *professing* godliness should be translated to *preaching*.”²⁷ After showing her facility with the text used to denounce her and her ministries, she would often state how little precedence she set by it. “I do not want to dwell too much upon scripture authority. We too often bind ourselves by authorities rather than by the truth.”²⁸ In keeping with Quaker beliefs, she preferred to seek her own knowledge of God, using the Bible as a secondary source authority open to interpretation, rather than a given truth. In another speech, she remarked “My education has been such that I look to the Source whence all the inspiration of the Bible comes...I love the Bible because it contains so many truths; but I was never educated to love the errors of the bible.”²⁹

As a Quaker minister, she was permitted to speak to audiences of both sexes, in what amounted to instruction on the realms of spirituality and piety. Aware that this was viewed as considerable breach in propriety, she defended herself by saying that she “may be prepared to

²⁵ Dana Greene, “The Principles of the Co-Equality of Woman with Man” in *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 204.

²⁶ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 146.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman”, 217.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

meet the assertion, so often made, that woman is stepping out of her appropriate sphere, when she shall attempt to instruct public assemblies.”³⁰ Mott decried “the mournful prospect”³¹ women faced when they wished to do good for society and forcibly denied “that the present position of woman is her true sphere of usefulness; nor will she attain to this sphere, until the disabilities and disadvantages, religious, civil, and social, which impede her progress, are removed out of her way”³² Unequivocally denying that women’s position was her natural lot in life, she refused to submit to being “the mere plaything or toy of society”³³.

Mott decried the “effeminacy”³⁴ and “female delicacy”³⁵ at which proper women of the 19th century were arrived. “When a woman now leaves the immediate business of her own education, how often, how generally do we find her sinking down into almost useless inactivity. To enjoy the social circle, to accomplish a little sewing, a *little* reading, a little domestic duty, to while away her hours in self-indulgence”³⁶ It was her opinion that women must be educated to a higher standard. She considered those brought up with no better aim prone to neglect serious reading, or to peruse that which was unedifying. She deplored the “sickly sentimental novel and pernicious romance”³⁷ that flooded the market for a middle class female audience, charging it with keeping women emptyheaded and unable to think upon serious issues. She read few novels, but was thoroughly up to date on all abolitionist literature and many biographies of a heretical nature.³⁸ Her favorite work was by Joseph Blanco White, a Spanish Catholic priest turned

³⁰ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 147.

³¹ Ibid, 148.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 149.

³⁷ Ibid, 150.

³⁸ Nancy Isenberg. “ “To Stand out in Heresy”: Lucretia Mott, Liberty, and the Hysterical Woman,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 127, no. 1 (2003): 8.

Anglican, Unitarian, and ultimately denouncing organized religion.³⁹ She admired his spiritual journey of constant searching and discovery. She viewed female education as the means to awaken women to their state of servitude. She declared that “The time is coming when educated females will not be satisfied with the present objects of their low ambition.”⁴⁰

Mott actively disliked the model of true womanhood requiring women to keep the home a sanctuary to which men could return from the ravages of the hard world. A strong proponent of equality in marriage, she argued that men and women each had a duty to each other to be loving, honest, and open. “In marriage, there is assumed superiority, on the part of the husband, and admitted inferiority, with a promise of obedience, on the part of the wife. This subject calls loudly for examination, in order that the wrong may be redressed.”⁴¹ In such terms, she frequently discussed the inequality of contemporary marriages, but perhaps nowhere so pointedly as in *The Argument that Women Do Not Want to Vote*, which she delivered to the American Equal Rights Association in 1867. In this address, she elucidates the Quaker marriage ceremony, distinct from other religious ceremonies because the bride and groom say their vows before the meeting and then settle into meeting for worship, the ceremony having been witnessed and approved by the meeting. She states that the marriage is entered into “with no assumption of authority on the one hand or promise of obedience on the other; but entire reciprocity, and a pledge of fidelity and affection until death should separate them.”⁴² She eschews the notion that men do not have the same responsibilities of fidelity and devotion as their wives. In a time where women were expected to remain faithful and loving towards the men in charge of their

³⁹ Ibid, 8-9.

⁴⁰ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 149.

⁴¹ Ibid, 154.

⁴² Dana Greene, “The Argument that Women Do Not Want to Vote” in *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 289.

lives, with no guarantee of reciprocity, Mott argued that men should be equally obligated. She held them to an equivalent moral code, disregarding the 19th century sexual double standard.

Mott actively challenged the idea that women must remain passive. She openly “encourage[ed] women to go on and advocate their claims.”⁴³ She denounced a system of government which based its authority on the will of the people while it ignored the entirety of the female population. She remonstrated the government observing that “[A woman] is deprived of almost every right in civil society, and is a cypher in the nation”⁴⁴ She urged women “not to be governed by laws in the making of which she has no voice.”⁴⁵ Her unwillingness to entrust to men the assurance of her rights, as well as the rights of others, led her to take on active roles in both the abolitionist and the women’s movements. Her insistence that women should have the right to greater political activity was rooted in her belief, as A. Cheree Carlson terms it, of women’s “edge in piety”⁴⁶ over men. Thus, her description of proper womanhood displays a woman embodying “true nobility in a refined and purified moral nature.”⁴⁷

This belief that women had the advantage of greater morality demonstrates the crux of her adherence to traditional 19th century gender expectations. She desires to elevate women, and have them “come forth and walk in a higher sphere”⁴⁸ Such compliance with innate morality displays her acknowledgement of the idea that women and men were unequal in that women were more pious and had a greater tendency to do good. In her *Discourse on Woman* she queries “who knows, but that if woman acted her part in governmental affairs, there might be an entire change in the turmoil of political life.”⁴⁹ This remark showcases a belief that women had the

⁴³ Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman”, 213.

⁴⁴ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 154.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Carlson, 93.

⁴⁷ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 151.

⁴⁸ Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman”, 220.

⁴⁹ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 156.

ability to purify politics. Yet Mott was uneasy in these assertions of greater morality. In direct contradiction to her past speech, as well as the prevailing notions on female piety, she claimed that “It has sometimes been said that if women were associated with men in their efforts, there would not be as much immorality as now exists...But we ought, I think, to claim no more for woman than for man; we ought to put woman on a par with man, not invest her with power, or claim for her superiority over her brother.”⁵⁰ She exemplifies the uneasiness with which reforming women asserted their equality with men, and by extension, their right to vote, based on a natural inequality between the sexes.

Throughout her time encouraging women to take action in the male dominated spheres, Mott cautioned women not to forsake their domestic roles for public ones. She reminded them to “cultivate all the graces and proper accomplishments of her sex.”⁵¹ She advised the pursuit of female accomplishments, provided that the lady in question did not devolve into a simpering dilettante. She asserted that “By proper education, [a woman] understands her duties, physical, intellectual and moral; and fulfilling these, she is a help m[ate], in the true sense of the word”⁵² Her insistence on female education is, in part, to encourage compatibility between husbands and wives. Thus, she adhered to the notion that women were the “faithful companion[s]”⁵³ of men. She would rather women engaged in both the public and private sphere, tending a home in an orderly manner and raising children in a moral way, at the same time as participating in political matters where they was disrespected, undervalued, and viewed as stepping outside their bounds. Such requirements would seem a heavy burden to anyone. For those of her audience fearing that

⁵⁰ Greene, “The Laws in Relation to Woman”, 218.

⁵¹ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 148.

⁵² *Ibid*, 155.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 151.

women would be forced to compromise their “womanly dignity”⁵⁴ in fulfilling all those tasks, she reassures them saying “Nor will her feminine character be impaired”⁵⁵ by exercising her political rights. Instead Mott expected her to remain a “fitting mother to her children”⁵⁶ and helpmate to her husband.

Mott was an exceptional woman in that she managed to raise 5 of her 6 children to maturity and oversee the running of a household, all the while participating actively in reform movements.⁵⁷ She managed to correspond with all the leading anti-slavery and women’s rights activists, keep up to date on their various publications, preach on a number of issues at a variety of places, and organize and run conferences on the pressing issues of the day. Mott presented an updated version of traditional femininity in which women were on a more equal footing with men and allowed to exercise political rights, while still responsible for all the labor of the domestic sphere. Fortunately she had the support of her husband in all her endeavors, which many women did not. It is to be conjectured that did she not have his acquiescence, her abilities would have been circumscribed by his disapproval.

James Mott, was uniquely accepting of his wife’s endeavors outside of the domestic sphere. Despite a quiet nature, he too participated in reform movements, and their work often overlapped. Both were chosen as delegates to the London Anti-Slavery Convention, though only James could actively participate. In 1848, none of the women who planned the Seneca Falls Convention trusted themselves to chair it. Due to his familiarity with the structure and program of conventions, they offered James the position, which he accepted. Lucretia Mott’s ringing endorsement of Quaker marriage in many of her speeches attests to the fulfillment and affection

⁵⁴ Greene, “Discourse on Woman”, 151.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Palmer, xiv.

they found within their own. His great regard for her is everywhere evident. At the Women's Rights Convention of 1853, responding to a man who had disrupted the proceedings, she tartly remarked "If he lay stress on his Scripture argument, that the wife must obey the husband, it may in some cases come to cut the other way; as in mine, for example, because *my* husband wishes me to vote, and therefore, according to the Scripture, the gentleman must, even in his own reasoning, allow me the right to vote."⁵⁸

After her Mott's death, her granddaughter, Anna Davis Hallowell, published the book James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters. This work, completed as it was in 1884, attempted to make Lucretia a more accessible model of femininity to her female, middle class, reforming audience by softening her heretical side.⁵⁹ Regardless, Lucretia was a radical woman. An outspoken Quaker minister, a prominent abolitionist, and an organizer of the women's movement, she hardly fulfilled the mid-century ideal of femininity. Guided by her Quaker faith and her intense sense of justice, she thought for herself and acted of her own accord, failing to show the proper deference or submission that society thought requisite. She actively demanded a place in politics and a right to pursue her reform work. She uneasily justified her demands by claiming women's innate morality. She also insisted that women would retain all the duties of their domestic sphere. She must be considered within the confines of her time and place, and though her piety and dependence on women to balance both public and private spheres seems restricting to modern audiences, the notion that women could be involved in the public at all, was a truly liberating sentiment.

⁵⁸ Greene, "The Principles of the Co-Equality of Woman with Man", 209.

⁵⁹ Faulkner, 3.

Bibliography

- Bacon, Margaret Hope. *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America*. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1986.
- Bacon, Margaret Hope. *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott*. New York: Walker and Company, 1980.
- Brown, Ira V. "Cradle of Feminism: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833-1840." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 102, no. 2 (1978): 143-166.
- Carlson, A. Cheree. "Defining Womanhood: Lucretia Coffin Mott and the Transformation of Femininity." *Western Journal of Communications* 58 (1994): 85-97.
- Greene, Dana. *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980.
- Harris, Jennifer Chapin. "Celebrating Women's Herstory: The Story of Seneca Falls." *Off Our Backs* 28, no. 7 (1998): 9.
- Faulkner, Carol. *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- Isenberg, Nancy. "'To Stand out in Heresy': Lucretia Mott, Liberty, and the Hysterical Woman." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 127, no. 1 (2003): 7-34.
- Palmer, Beverly Wilson. *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.