

Stanton, “Speech to the Anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society,”
1860

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This is generally known as the platform of one idea – that is negro slavery. In a certain sense this may be true, but the most casual observation of this whole anti-slavery movement, of your lives, conventions, public speeches and journals, show this one idea to be a great humanitarian one. The motto of your leading organ, “The world is my country and all mankind my countrymen,” proclaims the magnitude and universality of this one idea, which takes in the whole human family, irrespective of nation, color, caste, or sex, with all their interests, temporal and spiritual – a question of religion, philanthropy, political economy, commerce, education and social life on which depends the very existence of this republic, of the state, of the family, the sacredness of the lives and property of Northern freemen, the holiness of the marriage relation, and perpetuity of the Christian religion. Such are the various phases of the question you are wont to debate in your conventions. They all grow out of and legitimately belong to that so-called petty, insignificant, annoying subject, which thrusts upon its head everywhere in Church and State – “the eternal nigger.” But in settling the question of the negro’s rights, we find out the exact limits of our own, for rights never clash or interfere; and where no individual in a community is denied his rights, the mass are the more perfectly protected in theirs; for whenever any class is subject to fraud or injustice, it shows that the spirit of tyranny is at work, and no one can tell where or how or when the infection will spread. . . .

It was thought a small matter to kidnap a black man in Africa, and set him to work in the rice swamps of Georgia; but when we look at the panorama of horrors that followed that event, at all the statute laws that were enacted to make that act legal, at the perversion of man’s moral sense and innate love of justice in being compelled to defend such laws; when we consider the long, hard tussle we have witnessed here for near a century between the spirit of Liberty and Slavery, we may, in some measure, appreciate the magnitude of the wrong done to that one, lone, friendless negro, who, under the cover of darkness and the star-spangled banner, was stolen from his African hut and lodged in the hold of the American slaver. That one act has, in its consequences, convulsed this

Union. It has corrupted our churches, our politics, our press; laid violent hands on Northern freemen at their own firesides; it has gagged our statesmen, and stricken our Northern Senators dumb in their seats; yes, beneath the flag of freedom, Liberty has crouched in fear.

That grand declaration of rights made by WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON, while yet a printer's boy, was on a higher plane than that of '76. His was uttered with the Christian's view of the dignity of man, the value of the immortal being; the other but from the self-respect of one proud race. But, in spite of noble words, deeds of thirty years of protest, prayers, and preaching, slavery still lives, the negro toils on in his weary bondage, his chains have not yet melted in the intense heat of the sun of righteousness; but in the discussion of this question, in grappling with its foes, how many of us have worked out our salvation; what mountains of superstition have been rolled off the human soul! I have always regarded Garrison as the great missionary of the gospel of Jesus to this guilty nation, for he has waged an uncompromising warfare with the deadly sins of both Church and State. My own experience is, no doubt, that of many others. In the darkness and gloom of a false theology, I was slowly sawing off the chains of my spiritual bondage, when, for the first time, I met Garrison in London. A few bold strokes from the hammer of his truth, I was free! Only those who have lived all their lives under the dark clouds of vague, undefined fears can appreciate the joy of a doubting soul suddenly born into the kingdom of reason and free thought. Is the bondage of the priest-ridden less galling than that of the slave, because we do not see the chains, the indelible scars, the festering wounds, the deep degradation of all the powers of the God-like mind?

I do not believe that all history affords another such example as the so-called "Garrison Conspiracy" – a body of educated men of decided talent, wealth, rank and position, standing for a quarter of a century battling a whole nation, Church and State, law and public sentiment, without the shadow of ever wavering, turning or faltering, as if chained to the great Gibraltar-truth of human freedom and equality. This unheard-of steadfastness can only be accounted for in the fact that woman too is represented in this 'conspiracy'. Yes, the Marys and Marthas have gathered round the prophets of our day. With noble words and deeds, and holy sympathy, they have cheered these exiles from the love and honor of their own false countrymen. At their family alters they have been

remembered, and unseen spirits of the brave and good have hovered over them, and rejoiced in these true sons of earth.

Yes, this is the only organization on God's footstool where the humanity of woman is recognized, and these are the only men who have ever echoed back her cries for justice and equality. I shall never forget our champions in the World's Anti-Slavery Convention; how nobly [Wendell] Phillips did speak, and how still more nobly Garrison would not speak, because woman was there denied her rights. Think of a World Convention and one half the world is left out! Shame on the women of this nation who help to swell the cry of 'INFIDEL' against men like these! All time would not be long enough to pay the debt of gratitude we owe these noble men, who spoke for us when we were dumb, who roused us to a sense of our own rights, to the dignity of our high calling.

No the mission of this Radical Anti-Slavery Movement is not to the African slave alone, but to the slaves of custom, creed and sex, as well; and most faithfully has it done its work. . . . As we rejoice this day in our deliverance from the sad train of fears and errors that have so long crippled and dwarfed the greatest minds of earth. . . . , let us see a new and holier baptism for the work that lies for each of us in the future.

The last fear from which man may hope deliverance is the fear of man. To his glorious freedom did the immortal John Brown arrive. He feared neither man nor God; he was made perfect in love, the future was bright and beautiful to him! . . . Noble John Brown! Thou wert true to thyself and thy race, and loyal to thy God. I ask no higher honor in the gift of this nation for any sons of mine than a gallows and a grave like thine! As these sons now gather round me, and ask questions about different nations, governments and laws, and late judicial decisions on great questions of human rights? Ah, no! . . . it is with the deepest sorrow that I check the budding patriotism in their young hearts – that I unveil to them our falsehood and hypocrisy, in the face of those grand and glorious declarations of freedom and equality which, when first proclaimed at the mouth of the cannon, raised us head and shoulders above the nations of the earth. It is all-important, in a republican government, that our laws be always on the side of justice. Here where we have neither Pope nor King, no royal family, crown or scepter, no nobility, rank or class, nothing outward to cultivate or command our veneration,, Law, the immutable principles of right are all and everything to us.

See to it, you have the best interests of our Republic in your care, that your laws keep pace with public sentiment. If you would have us teach our sons a sacred reverence for law, so frame your constitutions and your codes that, in yielding obedience to their requirements, they are not false to the holy claims of humanity – that they degrade not the mothers who gave them life. No one can be more awake than I am to all the blessings of a republican form of government, nor, as a mother, mo43 apprehensive lest her sons should confound liberty with license. Here, where individual responsibilities are so great, and the influence of one so all-powerful, I fain would have them lovers of law and order, and meekly to suffer wrong themselves, if need be, to preserve it; but when the panting fugitive throws himself in our generosity and hospitality, I dare not check the noble, God-given impulses of their natures to place man above all law. Yes, I must ever teach them that man alone is divine; his words and works are fallible; his institutions, however venerable with age and authority, his constitutions, laws and interpretations of Holy Writ, may all prove false. That alone is sacred that can fully meet the wants of the immortal soul – that can stand the test of time and eternity

Eloquently and earnestly as noble men have denounced slavery on this platform, they have been able to take only an objective view. They can describe the general features of that infernal system – the horrors of the African slave trade, the agonizing sufferings of the middle-passage, and auction-block, the slave-pen and coffle, the diabolism of the internal traffic, the cruel severing of family ties, the hopeless degradation of woman; all that is outward they can see; but a privileged class can never conceive the feelings of those who are born to contempt, to inferiority, to degradation. Herein is woman more fully identified with the slave than man can possibly be, for she can take the subjective view. She early learns the misfortune of being born an heir to the crown of thorns, to martyrdom, to womanhood. For a while the man is born to do whatever he can, for the woman and the negro there is no such privilege. There is a Procrustean bedstead ever ready for them, body and soul, and all mankind stand on the alert to restrain their impulses, check their aspirations, fetter their limbs, lest, in their freedom and strength, in their full development, they should take an even platform with proud man himself. To you, white man, the world throws wide her gates; the way is cleat to wealth, to fame, to glory, to renown; the high place of independence and honor and

trust are yours; all your efforts are praised and encouraged; all your successes are welcomed with loud hurrahs and cheers; but the black man and the woman are born to shame. The badge of degradation is the skin and sex – the “scarlet letter” so sadly worn upon the breast. Children, even, can define the sphere of the black man, and the most ignorant Irishman hiss him into it, while striplings, mere swaddlings of law and divinity, can talk quite glibly of woman’s sphere, and pedant priests at the altar discourse most lovingly of her holy mission to cook his meat, and bear him children, and minister to his sickly lust.

In conversation with a reverend gentleman, not long ago, I chanced to speak of the injustice done to woman. Ah! said he, so far from complaining, your heart should go out in thankfulness that you are an American woman, for in no country in the world does woman hold so high a position as here. Why, sir, said I, you must be very ignorant, or very false. Is my political position as high as that of Victoria, Queen of the mightiest nation on the globe? Are not nearly two millions of native-born American woman, at this very hour, doomed to the foulest slavery that angels ever wept to witness? Are they not doubly damned as immortal beasts of burden in the field, and sad mothers of a most accursed race? Are not they raised for the express purpose of lust? Are they not chained and driven in the slave-coffle at the crack of the whip of an unfeeling driver? Are they not sold on the auction-block? Are they not exposed naked to the coarse jests and voluptuous eyes of brutal men? Are they not trained up in ignorance of all laws, both human and divine, and denied the right to read the Bible? For them there is no Sabbath, no Jesus, no Heaven, no hope, no holy mission of wife and mother, no privacy of home, nothing sacred to look for, but an eternal sleep in dust and the grave. And these are the daughters and sisters of the first men in the Southern states: think of fathers and brothers selling their own flesh on the auction block, exposing beautiful women of refinement and education in a New Orleans market, and selling them, body and soul, to the highest bidder! And this is the condition of woman in republican, Christian America, and you dare not look me in the face, and tell me that, for blessings such as these, my heart should go out in thankfulness! No, proud priest, you may cover your soul in holy robes, and hide your manhood in a pulpit, and, like the Pharisee of old, turn your face away from the sufferings of your race; but I am a Christian – a follower of Jesus – and “whatever is done

unto one of the least of these my sisters is done also unto me.” Though, in person of the poor trembling slave mother, you have bound me with heavy burdens most grievous to bear, though you have done all you could to quench the spark of immortality, which, from the throne of God, brought me into being . . . yet can I still speak to him. . . . I have asked the ever lasting hills, that in their upward yearnings seem to touch the heavens if I, an immortal being, though clothed in womanhood, was made for the vile purposes to which proud Southern man has doomed me, and in solemn chorus they all chanted, NO! I have turned my eyes within, I have asked this bleeding heart, so full of love to God and man, so generous and self-sacrificing, ever longing for the pure, the holy, the divine, if this graceful form, this soft and tender flesh was made to crawl and shiver in the cold, foul embrace of Southern tyrants; and in stifled sobs, it answered, NO! Thin you, oh Christian priests, meekly I will take your insults, taunts and sneers? To you my gratitude is due for all the peculiar blessings of slavery, for you have had the morals of this nation in your keeping. Behold the depths into which you have plunged me – the bottomless pit of human misery! But perchance your head grows dizzy to look down so far, and your heart faint to see what torture I can bear! It is enough.

But . . . I rejoice that it has been given to woman to drink the very dregs of human wretchedness and woe. For now, by an eternal law of matter and of mind, when the reaction comes, upward and upward, and still upward, she shall rise. Behold how far above your priestly robes, your bloody alters, your foul incense, your steeped synagogues she shall stand secure on holy mounts, mid clouds of dazzling radiance, to which, in your gross vision, you shall not dare even to lift your eyes! (Applause.)