



historians – often fall prey to transforming historical figures into heroines or villains. The larger issue is simple: Do we really learn anything about the past when we rely on heroic narratives, or do such stories merely make us feel warm and fuzzy about great women in the past? The truth is often messier than tales of heroines convey. Historical figures looked at the world quite differently than we do, and recreating that alien world of the past requires a sensitive ear. We must pay attention to the literary resonances and rhetorical strategies of Grimké and Beecher – and decode their specific meanings – while remaining sensitive to the context they knew.

A missing piece to the story of their debate is the petition campaign against Indian Removal. In 1829, Beecher assumed a pivotal role as the initiator and organizer of the women’s antiremoval campaign. Beecher was also a leading defender of the colonization movement, which called for free blacks to migrate to Liberia as a solution to the slavery problem.

Offering a careful reading, Portnoy sees Beecher’s rationale for opposing Indian Removal as novel, but not radical or proto-feminist. In her 1977 book, *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels, 1820-1860*, Portnoy analyzes Beecher’s petition circular as a Christian appeal: women had a moral duty to express their “wishes and feelings” to save the Indians from being forcibly expelled from their native lands,

and she believed

power when they used affection to sway their human hearts. I was



Portnoy shows how Beecher defended her version of Christian democracy. Gentle persuasion was the only means of real reform, she contended, while the violent ultraism of abolitionism shut down all rational debate, making southern slaveholders angry and intransigent. The act of women sending petitions to Congress only underscored the fear of disorder. Beecher saw herself as a moderate; she believed that change must be gradual, southerners must take the lead, and above all, northern white women had to avoid

petition, just as long as they did not sue their right to speak to foment factions, divisions, and inflict deadly wounds on the body politic.

My feeling here is that Beecher drew on two metaphors: women were either positive vessels of Christian benevolence and persuasion, or dangerous harridans akin to the fiery dames of French Revolution – it was the French Revolution that best conjured Beecher's image of violent disunion and it appears in her writings. There is a class-based elitism in Beecher's vision of womanhood, and she had no interest in equality. To her, equality was a ridiculous idea when applied to free blacks, Indians, or women.

Interestingly, however, Beecher viewed abolitionists as promoters of factionalism, in a significant way echoing what James Madison wrote in Federalist #10.<sup>2</sup> Equality had to be sacrificed for unity, which meant that factions striving for greater equality had to be quelled if they threatened national unity. Beecher was less of a mere conservative than a Federalist. On the other hand, Grimké captured a more modern sense of democracy, in which rights were natural, and Madison

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