WAYS OF SEEING. PROBLEMS OF PERCEPTION -

THE ANTEBELLUM CASE

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Part 1

One of the major difficulties in approaching women's experience in the antebellum period has been presentism - what from our perspective we perceive ought to have been 'success' for those women in that time.\(^1\) Perceptions of 'success' have tended to structure both what we have studied and the currents of social development we have highlighted. Hence, 'success' has been broadly conceived as the movement by women towards a feminist consciousness and participation in a 'public sphere' outside the home in both political and labour terms on an equal basis with men. Flowing from this, in order to chart the precursors of the small group of women who were advocating women's rights and who held their first official meeting at Seneca Falls in 1848, attention has been paid to certain female associations above others which were prevalent at the time. Antislavery, and more recently moral reform and temperance groups, have been studied in detail because we perceive them as struggling into the public sphere to address social problems and issues of particular relevance to women, and confronting head on opposition to female participation in that public sphere. One only need think of the Grimké sisters and how conflict with the orthodox Calvinist clergy in the 1830s over female lecturing on antislavery issues caused them to speak eloquently against male hierarchy and monopoly of religious and social importance and power. Again, the early development of industry has been marked out for intensive study since much of the original workforce in America was young Yankee women. They have been perceived by us to have gained a measure of autonomy and disposable income by leaving their largely rural, agrarian homes to labour in manufacturing towns such as Lowell. Those who agitated directly for women’s political rights - such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott - have been hailed as heroines who defied a patriarchal consensus against such activity and in the long term fought for the rights of all women.

In our view, the attitudes of the majority of women appear to have been at best anomalous. Our definition of 'success' does not allow any easy understanding of women such as Sarah J. Hale or Catharine E. Beecher. Whilst they did fight for female education and vocations, they appear to have advocated and helped construct a distinct female sphere, juxtaposed with the male, which featured the embracing of purity, piety and submission to male authority as natural female qualities and attitudes. The domestic activities and duties of women became elevated by such individuals into a Cult of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood which has been deemed repressive both socially and sexually, as well as intellectually and spiritually. In this scenario, domestic women, women who participated in associations based on religious conviction, women who actively agitated against the feminists, are not only perceived as 'unsuccessful' in our terms, but also as forces of regression and retardation. They appear as either apologists for male doctrines and attitudes, or women too weak and oppressed both mentally and physically to construct action against their own repression. Hence, on an admittedly simplistic level, we find the reality of the antebellum period divided for us into, on the one hand, the 'successful', familiar, understandable group of women who appear to have approached the espousal of our own value-systems, and on the other, 'unsuccessful', unfamiliar, unfathomable women who did not.

This paper critiques 'presentism' in approaches to writing about the experience of women in the Antebellum period of American history. It was presented in April 1991 and elaborated on work undertaken for my PhD thesis ("Women's Sphere and Religious Activity in America, 1800-1860: Dynamic Negotiation of Reality and Meaning in a Time of Cultural Distortion," University of Manchester, 1992). Footnotes and references were not included at the time as the paper was not published. Full references appear in related sections of the thesis, as does a comprehensive bibliography. The research which made this thesis (and hence this paper) possible was undertaken with the financial support of postgraduate scholarships awarded by the University of Manchester and the ESRC. (Dr Alison Newby, November 2016)
Part 2

The issue of what we judge to be 'success' for people in different times has already been highlighted concerning both periods under discussion. Our perceptions about 'success' are surely determined by:

a) the analytical structures we choose to employ,
b) the parameters we bring to our research,
c) and the definitions we choose to apply within our work.

In this section of my paper, I would thus like to elaborate upon what I see as problems in our perceptions - particularly as regards women - in the antebellum period. Time is very short, so I will limit myself to two main areas:

a) firstly, the tendency for us to dichotomise the public and workplace from the private and domestic, considering the effects such an analytical structure has on our understanding of how women lived and understood the reality around them in the period,
b) secondly, what exactly 'equality' would mean in the period as perceived by women themselves.

Many of our analyses concentrate on movements towards 'public' female participation in politics and workplace. These are usually evaluated as 'progressive' in a way which the 'private' and domestic are not. One effect of this is that what we might term 'male' activities are valued above the 'female'. Thus, if women agitated for what we might deem 'male' prerogatives in political and public life, we would value that activity above their domestic existence and the activities orientated around it. Often, that domesticity would be seen as a distraction from and handicap to their wider public profile. As noted before, many women during the era would not have understood such a construct. Sarah Hale and Catharine Beecher, though they moved within the professional arenas of lecturing and writing, above all else advocated the value and near-sacredness of women's domestic role. They perceived wife and motherhood as the cement which bound the disparate elements within society together into a cohesive whole by ensuring the existence and survival of strong family units from which individuals could venture to fulfill their public and social duties. They realised that the domestic role of women was devalued by many, but their answer was not the espousal of what they saw as male ideas and values by demanding a public political voice and public professional careers for most women. Rather, they chose to attempt to professionalise the domestic sphere and gain respect for it as a career-path in itself. The popular advice literature of the time written by such women as Beecher, her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Lydia Maria Child, as well as by men such as William A. Alcott, was not intended to set limits upon female activity despite the restrictive tone some of it took. On the one hand, these were attempts to help young women cast adrift by the geographic and social mobility so characteristic of the era by training them in essential domestic tasks. On the other, and most importantly, they were designed to inculcate the same sense of professionalism and pride in female work that was being advocated both in the factories and new white collar work which the males were undertaking. To Hale, advocating otherwise was not only to negate pride in female achievements and identity, but also to invite the destabilisation of society itself. Commenting on the work and ideas of Lucretia Mott in her *Woman's Record* of 1853, Hale suggested that Mott saw the "true dignity of woman" in her ability
to do "man's work" and become more and more like a man. Hale believed this to be degrading rather than progressive. Within her own worldview, it would elevate the physical and mundane above the spiritual and religious values and nature she felt were the particular virtues of women. Only these spiritual qualities and 'moral influences' could unite American society and end what she and Beecher perceived to be the atomisation of their nation's social fabric.

Hale and Beecher have usually been seen as anomalous, and their ideas as retrogressive because they emphasised the domestic role of women. However, what they espoused can only be understood if the religious context of the time is taken into account. Yet, another of our problems in accessing the many streams of thought prevalent in the era is our tendency to devalue the religious by highlighting as progressive any tendency towards secularisation in attitudes. Religion has long been judged to be a manifestation of patriarchy which served to oppress women's legitimate needs and limit their journey towards full autonomy and social participation. Such predetermined parameters and attitudes fail to consider the reality of the antebellum era.

When Beecher and Hale resisted female 'public' representation, they were not restricting women to a narrow domestic private arena. The early years of the nineteenth century were characterised by religious upheaval and revival which resulted in the phenomenal growth of a third arena: what Sandra Sizer has termed the 'social' and Mary P. Ryan has identified as the 'informal public'. The Second Great Awakening saw the spread of the outstandingly successful Methodist ideas of lay representation and participation. They filtered into the older denominations via the work of New Lights such as Charles Grandison Finney. His 'right use of means' in fomenting revival demanded the activity of lay women and men in voluntary organisations - beginning with prayer meetings (the spiritual powerhouses of revival) and lay Bible classes. The emphasis later spontaneously extended to church-based organisations attempting to alleviate the effects of poverty and social excess in a time of rapid change. Women were the prime movers in this development. Ryan has noted that in Utica in western New York State in the 1820s and 1830s, more female voluntary societies were listed in the city directories than formal 'male' institutions. Most significantly, however, this voluntarism could be termed neither private nor public. Women were pioneering a new social arena in which they had real influence on an informal basis at a time when formal institutions were still only in embryonic form in many areas of the nation. Women funded missionaries, trainees for the ministry, teacher-training for women, provision for destitute persons, houses for the rehabilitation of prostitutes. Much of this was undertaken in societies begun and run by the women themselves. Women also came to agitate for the abolition cause and equal female rights, but these, too, were on the whole extensions of a millennial missionary zeal to establish female moral influence and spiritual equality via action in an extended social arena. For the most part, they were not movements towards female autonomy in the way we understand the term. Rather than autonomy and individualism being the motivating forces, or a resentment of an all-encompassing patriarchal oppression, the majority of women recognised certain problems within society and sought to alleviate them by recourse to religious values and convictions, and associational, communal action. Few would have wholly agreed with the women who met at Seneca Falls in 1848, and many would have felt angered by what they perceived as a betrayal and devaluation of their dearly held values and identity. Women such as Beecher and Hale did advocate female advancement, but not an advancement based on what they felt to be a spurious notion of 'equality' with men.

Touching on ideas of sexual equality leads into my second area of analysis. Although we tend to assume that progress for women was associated with co-education and the break-through of women into erstwhile male careers and work, the majority of women in the antebellum period would not have viewed the matter this way. The pioneers of formal female education - women such as Mary Lyon, Emma Willard, and Catharine Beecher - founded specifically female
institutions to train women in morality and religion as well as intellectual, academic subjects. All three advocated the widest possible curriculum, but none suggested that this ought necessarily to prepare women for the same careers and roles as men. Women were to function as the cement of society, the 'civilisers' of the frontiers, the missionaries of religion and social good, the teachers, and the physicians for their female peers. They were to form the vanguard in social advancement without undertaking political or public work which was the province of men. Their role was in the expansive 'social' arena: that geographic space already discussed which often occupied the same topography as the public, but which antebellum ideology was at such pains to distinguish from it. Many groups of women valued this distinction. As Anna C. Lowell put it in a work devoted to explaining the best education for girls in 1853, "She [woman] has a world to work in which no man enters, and which must not be encroached upon." She was thrusting women into important social activity, but not at the expense of trying to be the same as men.

The most interesting aspect of attitudes to equality in the antebellum era is that there were so many of them. It is as if disparate groups honed their views and ideas in a discourse of opposition to others. Hence, women such as the Grimké sisters loudly proclaimed a belief in the spiritual and social equality of women, wherein male hierarchies in church and state were to be deplored and opposed - incidentally, a position which was true of many millennialists. This was held in opposition to and conflict with women such as Catharine Beecher, who agreed that women were indeed the spiritual equals of men, but that they had their own, particular role to fulfil on the social level. She vehemently opposed female lecturing to mixed audiences, especially on the explosively divisive and controversial issue of slavery, because she saw it as women's place to negate and smooth over divisions in society. It was in written argument with the Grimkés in the late 1830s that both she and they came to articulate their positions so clearly.

Sarah Hale developed the idea of a discrete arena for female action to declare that women were the moral superiors of men and that their 'sphere' was more important than the male - supporting her argument with carefully constructed biblical exegesis.

Yet other ideas abounded. Hannah Reeves, a Methodist female itinerant preacher in Ohio, clearly advocated spiritual equality, and in her own life example showed that women who were called by God to preach could fulfil the same pastoral and spiritual roles of leadership as men. Nevertheless, she never sought to formalise this role by demanding formal ordination. Her life was spent in action and doing all she could within what she saw as her capacity and remit. She, too, agreed that there were some areas in which the legitimate roles of men and women differed. More and more viewpoints could be cited, but these only serve to indicate the extent of the heated debate amongst women themselves on what it meant to be female, and how femaleness translated into an acceptable social reality in their era. Each grouping, if their rationale is taken on its own merits, had reason for its standpoint. To preselect feminists and agitators for social sameness for the sexes as 'successful' and 'fully conscious' of reality is to misunderstand the context of the time. It relegates other women, whose primary motivation may have been religious or concerned with social cohesion and preservation of community, to the side-lines of history, as somehow retrogressive and retarding influences on social development for women.
**Conclusion**

These two points of discussion, I hope, have served to indicate that the way we see women in the past is dictated by problems with our own process of perception. The issues of dichotomising the social topography of the era into discrete 'public' and 'private' arenas may obscure both ongoing negotiation of social reality in which women were fully active, and other social structures which do not fit into our preconceived views. Preselecting particular ideas of 'equality' as 'better' or 'sounder' than others may obscure the richness of ongoing discourse between women and women, as well as women and men. It is this ongoing process of social existence, the negotiation and renegotiation of social reality that is so interesting within the antebellum era. To obscure it is to contribute again to the hiding of women from history.