

## Between Antislavery and Abolition: The Politics and Rhetoric of Jane Grey Swisshelm

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In recent years, historians have defined the Free Soil and Republican parties as combining antislavery views with concern for northern interests. The parties' platforms and candidates, historians have noted, recognized the constitutionality of slavery in the states where it already existed, and opposed slavery's expansion mainly because it threatened whites' prosperity and future hopes. Unlike abolitionists, antislavery politicians avoided moral arguments and calls for black equality.<sup>1</sup> The distinctiveness of these categories, however, is called into question by the example of Jane Grey Swisshelm, the combative and popular editor of a Free Soil paper in Pittsburgh and a Republican paper in Minnesota.

Even though Jane Swisshelm repeatedly endorsed Free Soil and Republican candidates, she wrote editorials that urged active resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, questioned the constitutionality of slavery throughout the country, and demanded that slavery be condemned in moral terms because of its effects on families and individuals, especially women.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic differences between Swisshelm's critiques of slavery and the arguments of her Free Soil and Republican allies throw into question the supposed uniformity of political antislavery ideology. They also demand investigation into why these differences existed. Ironically, it was Jane Swisshelm's willingness to accept a separate-spheres ideology of gender in the face of conservative criticisms of her political activity that served as the foundation for her most radical antislavery arguments.

Society's expectations for women affected the reception Jane Swisshelm received whenever she discussed political issues as a newspaper editor, first in Pittsburgh (1847-1856), then in St. Cloud, Minnesota (1857-1863). Her growing notoriety stemmed from her caustic writing style and by the fact that she was one of the first women to serve as the editor of a political paper.<sup>3</sup> Recalling in her autobiography the reaction her first issue inspired, she created a hypothetical press room that illustrated the problems women faced in being taken seriously as opinion shapers.

A woman had started a political paper! A woman! Could he believe his eyes? A

woman! Instantly he sprang to his feet and clutched his pantaloons, shouted to the assistant editor, when he, too, read and grasped frantically at his cassimeres, called to the reporters and pressmen and typos and devils, who all rushed in, heard the news, seized their nether garments and joined the general chorus, 'My breeches! oh my breeches!' Here was a woman resolved to steal their pantaloons, their trousers, and when these were gone they might cry 'Ye have taken away my Gods, and what have I more?'<sup>4</sup>

Swisshelm outlasted the initial protests, perhaps even gaining something by the publicity they created. She could soon claim a prominent place in the ranks of American reformers, becoming as one biographer describes her, "one of the best-known women in the United States."<sup>5</sup> For a reform journal, her paper's circulation of between three and six thousand was large. However, Swisshelm's reputation derived mostly from the extensive reprinting of her work in both friendly and hostile newspapers. As the Cooperstown *Freeman's Journal*, an opposition paper noted, "she is a most zealous and powerful propagandist, and is wielding a vast influence in the promulgation of her radical opinions. . . . Her editorials are extensively copied, and thus her spirit is communicated to multitudes of readers."<sup>6</sup>

Swisshelm claimed to have been "brought up an abolitionist." The Covenanter church in which she was raised had declared in 1800 that slaveholding was incompatible with Christianity, and she apparently never doubted the church's position.<sup>7</sup> As a result, she "was still a child" when she first collected petitions to ban slavery from the District of Columbia.<sup>8</sup> Her theological teachings and her childhood memories of Pennsylvania slavery were later reinforced by an unhappy two year residence in Louisville, Kentucky, shortly after her marriage at the age of 21. Despite this "abolitionist" upbringing, however, Swisshelm did not join the radical abolitionists, nor did she fully embrace the most radical elements of the woman's rights movement despite her own oppressive marriage and her public advocacy of a majority of its goals, including suffrage. It is impossible to know why she rejected the radical movements. Perhaps, like Julianna Tappan, she was daunted by the public insults and slanders abolitionists—especially female abolitionists—often encountered.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Swisshelm thought, as she often claimed, that moderate reforms were the best and quickest way of achieving results.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reason, Swisshelm chose not to enlist with the radicals, and instead joined a small but highly visible list of women writers who openly supported the moderate antislavery parties in the years before the Civil War.

The writings of Jane Swisshelm contain crucial elements of both the "antislavery" and the "abolitionist" categories. Swisshelm, for example, endorsed

Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.



Jane Grey Swisshelm in 1852.

the Free Soil candidacies of Martin Van Buren and John P. Hale. In 1860, she pronounced that Republican Abraham Lincoln "suits us admirably." She endorsed the ticket of Lincoln and Hamlin, observing that "any honest able man who had ranged himself against the spread of slavery when the battle of Freedom was a doubtful one, will answer our purpose; and the Chicago Convention has selected a pair of them."<sup>11</sup> If the Republicans sometimes fell short of her ideal, they were still "the only hope of our nearly ruined country. Therefore we have hoped for its success."<sup>12</sup> Together with members of her extended family, she helped found the Republican party in rural central Minnesota; eventually her house became a stop for campaigning Republican dignitaries. Her contact with the political process,

together with her well-known animosity towards the radical leadership of the abolitionist and woman's rights movement, mark her as a typical "antislavery" leader.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Swisshelm's rhetoric was distinctly abolitionist. For all of her protestations of support for Van Buren, Hale, Lincoln, and the parties they represented, Swisshelm's antislavery rhetoric is more like that of a morally concerned abolitionist. Three elements of her rhetoric distinguish her in particular from the economic, legal, and historical arguments male antislavery leaders used to call for the limitation of slavery's expansion. First, Swisshelm endorsed the notion of a Higher Law, the idea that individual conscience, not a law or the Constitution, should dictate a person's behavior. Second, she explicitly assailed slavery's corruption of the morals of individual southerners she had known. In addition, she concentrated her critique of slavery on its effects on enslaved women, a subject commonly found in abolitionist speeches but only rarely in those of antislavery politicians. All of these rhetorical stances stemmed from Swisshelm's position as a white, middle class woman in nineteenth-century America, and provided her with an antislavery argument that came much closer to abolitionism than the rhetoric of the male politicians she supported. Simultaneously both antislavery and abolitionist, Swisshelm and the other moderate antislavery women call into question the categories historians have established for opponents of slavery. In large part this is because of the special constraints and opportunities that they experienced because of society's expectations of how women should act on political issues.

Swisshelm's use of the Higher Law argument demonstrates how she converted her society's gender stereotypes into a powerful political statement. According to increasingly widely held notions of domesticity, women, not men, served as the moral guardians of society. In this, Swisshelm concurred. The gap between the behavior of religiously motivated women and politically debased men was such that, she asserted, "men are the link between monkeys and women."<sup>14</sup> Many of Swisshelm's quarrels with male antislavery leaders resulted from her willingness to follow the dictates of her Higher Law rather than the Constitution. By contrast, male politicians found themselves forced by the very nature of their careers to obey earthly laws. The furor evoked by William Seward's evocation of a "Higher Law" in 1850, for example, earned him a reputation as a radical that damaged his campaign to win the Republican Presidential nomination in 1860.<sup>15</sup> Other prominent antislavery politicians, like Charles Sumner, faced similar controversy when they urged disobedience to the law.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, for politicians, opposition to the law proved a dangerous tactic. Women, however, were at greater liberty to follow the

dictates of their own consciences. Not only did antebellum society hold them to be morally more sensitive than men, but they also were not in danger of losing political honor, office, or favor. Already excluded from traditional political rewards by virtue of their sex, women like Jane Swisshelm could assert their opinions without fear of party discipline or the awkwardness of being a lawless lawmaker. Swisshelm's use of the Higher Law doctrine to attack the Fugitive Slave Law and slavery in the states where it already existed enabled her to debate political issues with men, even if she had to employ a different language.

Swisshelm used the Higher Law doctrine to inspire resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, which she argued contravened the will of God. The result was a powerful, but socially acceptable, female antislavery rhetoric. Her chief target during the Fugitive Slave Law crisis was Robert Riddle, an antislavery Whig in Pittsburgh, who urged obedience to the law while he called for its repeal. Swisshelm rejected this appeal to legality in the face of what she perceived as a moral issue. In October 1850 she pictured Riddle obeying an imagined act "requiring every editor in their domain to cut his mother's throat with an oyster shell, catch the blood in a basin, distil[l] and use it for ink."<sup>17</sup> Later, Swisshelm described Robert Riddle and a local pro-slavery minister on a fictitious hunt for "an old woman with a baby in her arms." An angry Riddle responded that citizens or government officials could easily evade the law in practice, the latter by resigning. But Swisshelm had Riddle boxed, for in Riddle's male, Whig world, a law was a law, and she demanded that obedience meant that he must "run down and capture some runaway nurse, or laundress."<sup>18</sup> As Swisshelm framed the controversy: "The question is, ought the people to obey an act of the Legislature, whether it be in accordance with right or subversive of right?"<sup>19</sup>

Swisshelm believed that the Higher Law doctrine was especially applicable when the sanctity of the woman's sphere, the home and family, was threatened. When the Woodson case, Pittsburgh's first Fugitive Slave trial, was decided in favor of the slaveholder, she stated in Garrisonian tones that "this old 'union with death and with Hell,' could scarcely have required more from its devotees." This was because of the harm it did to the family.<sup>20</sup> Swisshelm's treatment of the Woodson case is dominated by family imagery. Her editorial contrasted the Woodson household, in which the children are asking their mother for their father, with the northern judges, priests, and authorities who had done this to the Woodsons. The northern man, Swisshelm predicted, will go home, "there to take his baby upon his knee, to look into the face of his wife and forget the family ties that their hands

have broken.”<sup>21</sup> The solution to this threat to the family, Swisshelm reasoned a week later, lay in action from every member of the northern household. Every member of a household should act to ostracize a supporter of the law who visited them. As she instructed: “Every husband or father who values his right to live with his wife and children, should spit upon or thrust such an arrival from his path—every wife and mother who feels the value of a husband’s love, should spurn him from her door, and every child who loves its father, should taunt and mock him when he shows his face.” Ultimately, Swisshelm argued that family unity was worth more than political Union:

Do the people of Pittsburgh endorse the doctrine that a man shall not live with his own wife and support his children? Is the family relation no longer to be sacred in our midst? Can any one be torn from his family on the oath of one man, and consigned to helpless slavery, and is there no redress? What is our union worth that is to be maintained at this price?<sup>22</sup>

The centrality of family imagery in Swisshelm’s writing enabled her to describe the Fugitive Slave Law as a natural target for a woman’s moral condemnation, which in turn allowed her to proclaim herself and every man, woman, and child capable of judging the morality of legal obedience and disobedience.

Swisshelm extended the Higher Law doctrine beyond the controversy over the Fugitive Slave Law to the supposed Constitutional guarantee of perpetual slavery in the southern states. Almost alone among her fellow Free Soil and Republican editors, Swisshelm thought that the Constitution outlawed slavery throughout the country.<sup>23</sup> During her brief assignment as a Washington correspondent for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* in 1850, Swisshelm challenged the prevailing notion that the compromises of the Constitution secured the legality of slavery. Every speech, even antislavery ones, Swisshelm complained to Greeley, praised “‘Our glorious constitution’—its compromises—its wisdom.” Such speeches, she wrote, made her recall the face of a slave woman she had seen on a boat on the Ohio river. The woman had been sold to cover her owner’s debts and “had left father, mother, brother, sisters, a husband and three small children, one of them an infant.” She continued:

I looked on her face with its haggard grief,  
Where “Compromises” were written in brief,  
And counted her tears as they fell amain,  
Saying “compromises” again and again.

Now, walking through the capitol building, Swisshelm finds that “before me at every turn flirts up the shadowy apparition of that sorrow stricken face. I see the

humble form of that servant woman skulking hither and thither as she would escape to her children." She closed her letter by attacking Greeley, her employer, accusing him of endorsing these same compromises. The attack divided society along gender lines. "It is easy for you, or any other Northern gentleman" to make compromises with slavery, she wrote, when "it is the mother and her children who are called upon to foot the bill."<sup>24</sup> Again, the Higher Law of the inviolability of the family took precedence over the law of the land.

Swisshelm extended her dislike of the supposed constitutional guarantee of slavery's safety to the parties and candidates she endorsed. Safe from political exile because, as a woman, she already stood, unaided, on the margin, Swisshelm tenaciously held her own constitutional interpretation against the proclamations of the Free Soil and Republican platforms. In fact, she frequently attacked them in editorials, vigorously pressing the antislavery moderates about the moral inconsistencies of their platform. Three months after she had endorsed their presidential candidate, she complained that

The Free Soil party occupies a ridiculous position, canting about the enormous wickedness of slavery in New Mexico and its sacred guarantees in South Carolina, as if eternal laws of right and wrong were what Jedadiah Scratchgravel calls 'wicy wercy' in different states. They may look upon it as an evil which in one place they have not the power to touch, while in another they can curb it; but then we beg to be delivered from homilies on the 'sacred' character of that barrier which they suppose stands to defend monster villainy!<sup>25</sup>

Swisshelm's attack on her own party amplified what Free Soil editors normally tried to downplay: the moral issues raised by families under slavery. Swisshelm pressed further, declaring that "we do not believe the Constitution guarantees the selling of women and the stealing of babies." Further, any constitution which would allow such behavior "is not worth straw enough to burn it," and she assured her readers that editors of all parties would agree if it were their families up for auction.<sup>26</sup> Even if the Constitution did not protect the family, Swisshelm reasoned, a Higher Law should. But this exemplified an irreverence towards the Constitution that few politicians could espouse without damaging their political careers. As a result, Swisshelm felt compelled to note in 1858 that "it has ever appeared to us that Anti-Slavery lecturers do not generally use the Higher Law with the force and directness it ought to be used, while very many permit the enemy to use both it and the Constitution as though they were engines of oppression."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the abolitionist implications of her use of woman's moral authority to claim a Higher Law, Swisshelm embraced the traditionally abolitionist

rhetorical tactic of telling personal narratives based on her own experiences with slavery. When Swisshelm discussed slavery's evils, she almost always wrote of slaves and masters she had actually met, just as she personalized her complaint about the compromises of politicians by contrasting them with the enslaved mother. This has led historian Peter Walker to criticize Swisshelm for her "rudimentary attempt at analyzing slavery." According to Walker, her "critical thrust against slavery was framed in the most general *ad hominem* moral terms. Descriptive rhetoric served as analysis."<sup>28</sup> But Walker's own analysis ignores the importance of gender in framing Swisshelm's rhetorical choices, despite her unique position as the sole woman among the six antislavery reformers he studies. Swisshelm left the analysis of slavery as a political and economic system to men, because that fell within their sphere. For women, participation in public discourse depended heavily on their ability to frame an issue in moral or personal terms, and Swisshelm succeeded in doing this with slavery. Swisshelm's statement that "of slavery in the abstract I knew nothing" was not an admission of fault or weakness.<sup>29</sup> Her *ad hominem* citations of slavery's individual moral failings, far from the source of rhetorical weakness Walker suggests, allowed her to develop a moral criticism of slavery that male Free Soilers failed to provide. By presenting only what she had seen or heard of individuals, she positioned herself as a woman concerned with the welfare of distinct individuals, not political or economic systems. Because women had been involved in public benevolent work for decades in the North, Swisshelm could claim to be acting within accepted gender boundaries.<sup>30</sup> Thus, by narrating her personal encounters with Kentucky slaves and masters, Swisshelm protected her status as a female writer, even as that same technique permitted her to launch effective and highly political attacks on the immoral aspects of slavery.

Swisshelm's personal knowledge of slavery stemmed from her experience living in Louisville, Kentucky, with her husband James in 1838-39. Here, she later wrote, she learned about slavery's ill effects on blacks and whites.<sup>31</sup> Most of her recollections hinge not just on families divided on the auction block, but on the sexual misdeeds of white male owners.<sup>32</sup> Swisshelm's indictment of Louisville's slave system centers on its abuse of a woman's domestic role as a wife and mother; she tells of a bachelor merchant who sold the children he had had by "a large and very ugly negress." According to her, "one of the wealthiest men in the city" presented "every one of his three legitimate daughters" with an enslaved half-sister to serve as a waiting maid.<sup>33</sup> Swisshelm also describes the horrors of the



white women who married such slaveholders, as typified by the manager of her boarding house, a woman whose maid "had been seduced by her husband when the child was only fourteen." This rape made the white marriage a sham:

She [the wife] was nervous and irritable, had lived with her husband long after all trace of affection or respect was obliterated, and was not very careful about speaking of his faults. Still she had no idea the crime she thus betrayed was anything very uncommon or very heinous. No one appeared to consider men as amenable to divine law; the most bestial sensuality was only gentlemanly. A crime that here would render a man the horror [sic] and execration of a neighborhood, and make him liable to imprisonment for life, was scarcely a peccadillo there. Women scarcely appeared to think of the moral turpitude of their husbands, fathers and brothers becoming the forcible violators of female chastity.<sup>34</sup>

Swisshelm relates various other examples of slavery's violence and sexual abuses, but her condemnation of slavery's effects on women was not limited to the rape of slave women. Slavery, as Swisshelm saw it, corrupted the morals of women in a variety of ways. She noted that some black women in Louisville, deprived of religious instruction by slavery, cared nothing "of their own degradation," and willingly served as prostitutes in order to purchase nice clothes.<sup>35</sup> White women, aside from marrying husbands who conducted obvious sexual liaisons outside of marriage, had to live within a social structure that encouraged immorality rather than disciplined domesticity. Swisshelm advocated opening up professions to women in the North, but in the South, the question was even more basic: could white Kentucky women earn money as anything other than discreet, high-class prostitutes? One out of every six women, Swisshelm wrote, wore "a badge of infamy," and any one who accidentally dressed in similar attire "was liable to open insult anywhere, or at any hour."<sup>36</sup> She found that among the population of Louisville it was "generally conceded [sic] that a white woman would secretly sell her honor, rather than submit to the disgrace of working for a living. Certainly hundreds did so."<sup>37</sup> Even marriage itself in the South reminded her of prostitution. While in Kentucky, she had seen "women who were hawking themselves and their female relatives in the matrimonial market, asking for bids."<sup>38</sup> Although historians have focused on the scare tactics of antislavery agitators who cited slavery's production of numerous mulatto children, they have been less responsive to the dramatic charge that slavery resulted in white adultery.<sup>39</sup> The prevalence of adulterous behavior in the southern patriarchal household could be an equally effective argument for the abolition of slavery, and one that an antislavery woman could best advance.

Even southern men who did not own slaves proved a threat to virtuous women in Louisville. Southern men's sexual attitudes, Swisshelm wrote, "made it highly imprudent, if not dangerous, for a lady to go out of the door after night-fall without protection."<sup>40</sup> After reminiscing about her youth in rural Pennsylvania when she "ran wild in the woods, with company or without, as suited our fancy, talked philosophy with our beau, if we had one, or gave him a bit of sugar and bade him go home, as suited our humor," Swisshelm reflected upon her imprisonment as a woman in Louisville. The matron of her boarding house, she relates, would have tied her to the bed before she allowed her to fetch her own water from the pump. Instead of roaming the fields and woods of Pennsylvania, she faced a constricted social world:

We might walk alone in daylight any place in the square, bounded by Market and Walnut streets, first and Eighth; but the suburbs, with its beautiful walks, groves and private residences, was forbidden ground. When the sun was far down, we were forbidden to go to the door without a protector, or outside of this charmed square with one. We could not go on the street without being stared out of countenance by Kentucky gallantry.<sup>41</sup>

While she largely ignored slavery as a political and economic system, Swisshelm freely and effectively critiqued slavery on social and moral grounds.

When Swisshelm attacked slavery without first grounding it in personal experience, she based her objections on slavery's impact on slave women as a group. As historians have noted, most female abolitionists justified their entry into antislavery work by citing the enslavement of their "sisters," a cause that seemed to fall within woman's sphere.<sup>42</sup> Swisshelm's first series of public lectures, entitled "Women and Politics," delivered in the late 1850s in Mennnesota, followed this pattern. As Swisshelm recalled the speech, it "gave an account of the wrongs heaped upon women by slavery, as a reason why women were then called upon for special activity."<sup>43</sup> In print, she justified her public presence by stating that "we are up here in a corner contending for the rights of the American Women who are bought and sold and whipped and scourged and robbed of their children." The rights of slave women became her dominant theme: "our business in public life is to labor for the enslaved women in America. We labor in behalf of the women who are bought and sold, and scourged, and robbed of all that makes life worth the living."<sup>44</sup> By 1860, she was focused on "but one idea in politics viz: no more woman whipping, no more baby stealing under the shadow of the stars and stripes."<sup>45</sup> The pages of Swisshelm's papers are replete with references to divided families, raped women, and sold children.

Swisshelm's editorials about slave women's lives, and the rights of their owners, display both the range of her writing style and the emphasis she placed on the suffering of enslaved women, a topic largely ignored by male antislavery writers. When a Mississippi paper reported that a white man would be tried for murder after torturing a slave woman and killing a male slave, Swisshelm was indignant. Her focus, however, was on the abused woman, not the murdered man. "Now, suppose this well known citizen of the county of Clark had been pleased to end his *amusement* on that occasion with the negro woman, what would have been done or said about it?" Swisshelm asked. "What provision is made in the laws of Mississippi for punishing his crime? None!"<sup>46</sup> Southern indignation about the possible admission of Utah as a State, with its legal recognition of polygamy, aroused her sarcasm. Noting that "we like variety, and as these thirteen States have all one kind of polygamy, and the Mormons another, we want the Salt Lake folks, to make up a collection," she foreshadowed the 1856 Republican platform, which named polygamy and slavery "those twin relics of barbarism." Swisshelm hated the concept of polygamy, but admitted that the Mormon patriarchs at least "educate and support all their offspring," unlike the slaveholders. "To our mind a plurality of wives is decen[t] and proper compared to purchasing mistresses like sheep," she concluded.<sup>47</sup> Her identification of black women as the primary victims of slavery becomes apparent in her extended description of Maryland as a black woman. Noting the exhausted soil of the state, she compared it to an old, enslaved mother:

Maryland! poor Maryland! how disconsolate she lies, with shackled limbs and cold and joyless bosom. . . . Maryland, like a second Rachel, was weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted; not that they 'are not,' but that they are worse than if they had never been. The poor, old, desolate mother! . . . For long years she had lain in an apathy of grief, as the thousands of her children have cast themselves upon her bosom to utter their agony of prayer to the God of the oppressed, who seemeth not to hear. Many thousands of them have dragged their manacled limbs away, away to return no more; and as the mother lay, the springs of her bosom have been dried up by sorrow's fires, and her children are torn from her, and sent to seek the sustenance she can no longer give. Premature old age has come upon her.<sup>48</sup>

As a woman in the extremely gender-conscious atmosphere of the nineteenth century, Jane Grey Swisshelm was constrained in how she could criticize slavery. She did not attack the Slave Power Conspiracy's control of the political process, nor did she analyze census and trade figures to prove mathematically the relative

unprofitability of slavery to free labor. However, Swissshelm's status as a woman gave her opportunities to open rhetorical fronts against slavery which were closed to men by virtue of their legal and political positions. Secure in her knowledge that middle-class culture believed women to be more religious than men, and knowing that she could not be pushed out of office for rejecting the accepted interpretation of the Constitution, Swissshelm frequently placed moral concerns over legal ones. Using personal testimony rather than statistical evidence or historical research to prove her points, she was able to illustrate the human effects of slavery, and she did so under the shield of traditional women's benevolent work for individuals. In addition, by focusing on slavery's effect on women, she depicted slavery as a legitimate field in which female reformers could work. In short, society's gender constructs not only offered her a slim opening to speak and write on the slavery issue, they also allowed her certain rhetorical freedoms denied to moderate antislavery men.

Yet we need to take Swissshelm's affiliation with moderate antislavery politicians seriously. There is every reason to believe that her contemporaries, both friends and foes, took her self-identification with antislavery politics at face value. Swissshelm and others like her added a new and different dimension to the rhetoric of the Free Soil and Republican parties. Traditionally described as seeking primarily to limit slavery's expansion, and as arguing against slavery in terms of the rights of white men, the Constitution and economics, the antislavery political movements were in fact broader. Allied with those movements were women like Swissshelm who provided the kind of morally sharp, personally-grounded attacks on slavery that ultimately demanded the extinction of slavery throughout the country. The established categories of antislavery and abolition fail to provide a place for women who were both abolitionist in their rhetoric and explicitly antislavery in their political allegiance. Recognition of the existence and importance of this female wing of political antislavery not only helps historians to understand figures like Jane Swissshelm and Harriet Beecher Stowe, but also helps to explain the secession of the lower South states following the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Southerners, who concentrated a disproportionate amount of their attention on women who wrote on political topics, realized the inherent radicalism of this important element of the Republican coalition. Southerners may have been responding as much to the threateningly "abolitionist" moral arguments of antislavery women as to the constitutional assurances of Lincoln's "antislavery" first inaugural when they chose to secede rather than face a Republican adminis-

tration. Unlike later historians who focused exclusively on the male side of the Free Soil and Republican parties, they understood that the often hazy division between antislavery Republicans and abolition never existed at all for women like Jane Swisshelm.

## Notes

1. Much has been made of the differences between abolition and antislavery. For example, Dwight Dumond writes that "there was a vast difference between antislavery and abolition," and Gerald Sorin that "the abolitionists . . . differed markedly from the antislavery people." David B. Davis adds that "we clearly need to distinguish the man who devoted his life to the eradication of slavery from the man who believed slavery to be harmful for the nation and who hoped that it could be geographically contained and gradually abolished." See Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery Origins of the Civil War in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 24; Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 17; David Brion Davis, "Antislavery or Abolition?" *Reviews in American History*, 1 (March 1973): 97. More definitions of antislavery and abolition are in James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 3; and Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. ix. For antislavery ideology, see Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics, 1848-1854* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); and William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
2. Swisshelm herself has been treated as an abolitionist in Peter F. Walker, *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); and Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
3. While Swisshelm's newspapers were often

owned by other people, she described her editorial control as absolute. In an 1859 obituary for Robert Riddle, she noted that at first "he printed the *Visiter* then he became part proprietor and one of the editors. Then WM. SWISSHELM [her husband, from whom she was divorced by 1859] took his place for some years and finally Mr. RIDDLE purchased it, and gave us a salary for editing; but all the time it was directly opposed to him in politics, and on many questions." *St. Cloud Democrat* (hereafter cited as *Democrat*), January 20, 1859.

4. Swisshelm, *Half A Century* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Company, 1880), p. 113.
5. Abigail McCarthy, "Jane Grey Swisshelm: Marriage and Slavery," in Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter, eds., *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), p. 34.
6. The lower circulation figure is Swisshelm's own. See *Pittsburgh Saturday Visiter* (hereafter cited as *PSV*), August 7, 1852. The larger estimate is from Arthur J. Larsen, ed., *Crusader and Feminist: Letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm* (St. Paul: The Minnesota Historical Society, 1934), p. 8. Cooperstown, *Freeman's Journal*, April 20, 1850. Louis Filler notes that Swisshelm's Pennsylvania paper "rapidly acquired thousands of readers and was widely quoted." Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 234. Swisshelm also noted how widely copied her newspaper was, claiming in her autobiography that "It was quoted more perhaps than any other paper in the country, and whether for blame or praise, its sentiments were circulated." Swisshelm, *Half A Century*, p. 123. Other biographical sketches include Margaret Farrand Thorp, *Female Persuasion: Six Strong-Minded Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949); Helen Beal Woodward, *The Bold Women* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1953); Lester Burrell Shippee, "Jane Grey Swisshelm: Agitator," *Mississippi Valley Historical*

Review, 7 (December 1920): 206-227; Rev. S. J. Fisher, D.D., "Reminiscences of Jane Grey Swisshelm," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 4 (July 1921): 165-174.

7. Swisshelm, *Half A Century*, p. 34. Covenanter opposition to slavery, pp. 19, 34.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 34. While the largest petition campaign against slavery in the District of Columbia occurred in 1835 when Swisshelm would have been 20, James Brewer Stewart notes that petitions, including ones against slavery in the nation's capitol, were sent throughout the 1820s. James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), pp. 81-82. For the role of women in circulating antislavery petitions, see Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 84-85, 90-93; Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 270-75; and Wendy F. Hammand, "The Woman's National Loyal League: Feminist Abolitionists and the Civil War" *Civil War History*, 35 (March 1989): 39-58.

9. 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), pp. 28-32.

10. See, for example, Swisshelm's claim that women's rights legislation, including the suffrage, would have passed by 1880 had it not been for the radical woman's rights campaign. Swisshelm, *Half A Century*, pp. 144-145.

11. *St. Cloud Democrat*, May 31, 1860, both quotations.

12. *Democrat*, September 1, 1859.

13. James M. McPherson, for example, has complained that "members of the Free Soil and Republican parties have often been called abolitionists, even though these parties were pledged officially before 1861 only to the limitation of slavery, not to its extirpation." By making participation in politics

a means of excluding people from abolitionist ranks, McPherson effectively places Swisshelm in the antislavery camp. McPherson, *Struggle for Equality*, p. 3.

14. *Democrat*, September 22, 1859.

15. Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 226.

16. Charles Sumner's refusal in 1854 to pledge himself to obey the Fugitive Slave Law brought down an angry barrage of protests from his fellow Senators. David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), pp. 263-264.

17. PSV, October 12, 1850.

18. PSV, February 22, 1851; PSV, March 1, 1851. Later, in Minnesota, Swisshelm returned to the image of Fugitive Slave Law supporters pursuing "some frantic mother who clasps her infant to her bosom and flies from him who would deprive her of 'this little one. The last.' " *St. Cloud Saturday Visiter*, February 18, 1858.

19. PSV, November 16, 1850.

20. The Woodson case went to court on March 13, 1851, and it was decided that Woodson, whose first name has not survived, was the property of a woman in Kentucky. A resident of Beaver at the time of his capture, Woodson was a preacher, mechanic, and, as Swisshelm suggests, a homeowner. Returned to Kentucky, he was in turn purchased with money raised by donation in Pittsburgh and Beaver and he returned to Pennsylvania sometime in April, 1851. Irene E. Williams, "The Operation of the Fugitive Slave Law in Western Pennsylvania, from 1850 to 1860," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, 4 (July 1921): pp. 154-155; Ann Greenwood Wilmoth, "Pittsburgh and the Blacks: A Short History, 1780-1875" (Ph D. Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1975), pp. 111-115.

21. PSV, March 22, 1851.

22. PSV, March 29, 1851, March 22, 1851.

23. See PSV, October 12, 1850; August 28, 1852;

also the Prospectus for her *St. Cloud Saturday Visiter*, December 24, 1857, in which she declared that "the Bible, and the Constitution of the United States are antislavery; and human chatteldom is unconstitutional in any association professing to receive either as fundamental law."

24. *New York Tribune*, April 15, 1850. Also copied into Mary Grew's *Pennsylvania Freeman*, May 2, 1850. Grew, who helped Swisshelm during a campaign for passage of the Pennsylvania Married Women's Property Act, frequently reprinted Swisshelm's most aggressive and eloquent editorials.

25. *PSV*, February 17, 1849. No less harsh was her later condemnation of the Republican party: "Republicans [sic] have not the manhood the decency the humanity the christianity to oppose this 'covenant with death and with hell.' " *Democrat*, December 29, 1859.

26. *PSV*, February 17, 1849. Swisshelm's commitment to the antislavery interpretation to the Constitution and the part of the Liberty party that pledged itself to that interpretation is shown by her desire in 1853 to sell her paper to "some well known Liberty man," not just a Free Soiler. *PSV*, June 11, 1853.

27. *Democrat*, November 25, 1858.

28. Walker, *Moral Choices*, pp. 149, 150.

29. Swisshelm, *Half a Century*, p. 93.

30. Anne M. Boylan, "Women and Politics in the Era Before Seneca Falls," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Fall 1990): 363-82; Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*; Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change*.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-65. While its content is apparently lost at this time, Swisshelm also frequently delivered a public lecture entitled "Slavery as I have Seen it in a Slave State" in antebellum Minnesota. *Democrat*, March 8, 1860.

32. There are considerable similarities in how Jane Swisshelm and the English actress and writer, Frances Anne Kemble, experienced and reacted to southern slavery. Both women were raised to be

strongly antislavery, yet moved south in the late 1830s shortly after marrying. Kemble, married to Georgia slaveholder Pierce Butler, most strongly objected to the harsh treatment of female slaves on Butler's plantations, including the separation of families, the short time mothers were allowed with their infants after birth, the indecency of men whipping women, and the alarming number of mulatto children fathered by Butler's overseers, Mr. King and his son. Unlike Swisshelm, however, Kemble avoided outright calls for the abolition of slavery, and even questioned the wisdom of a federal ban on slavery in the District of Columbia. Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

33. *PSV*, February 19, 1853.

34. *PSV*, November 10, 1849.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *PSV*, November 3, 1849.

37. *PSV*, November 3, 1849. Swisshelm's remarks about Louisville in the November 3 and 10, 1849 issues were reprinted in the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, November 15 and November 22, 1849.

38. *St. Cloud Saturday Visiter*, June 17, 1858. The lives of white southern women are analyzed in Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress; Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

39. For abolitionists and miscegenation, see Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 73-76; and Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women & Sisters: The*



*Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 70-75.

40. *St. Cloud Saturday Visiter*, June 17, 1858.

41. *PSV*, November 3, 1849.

42. Mary Van Vleck Garman, "'Altered Tone of Expression': The Anti-Slavery Rhetoric of Illinois Women, 1837-1847" (Ph. D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1989); Yellin, *Women & Sisters*; Dorothy Sterling, *Ahead of her Time: Abby Kelley and the Politics of Antislavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991); Hersh, *Slavery of Sex*.

43. Swisshelm, *Half*, 214. This lecture also appears to have been lost. However, Swisshelm did write in 1860 that "it is worth while to have lived and

suffered, to have labored and waited, long years for such an opportunity of pleading for the slave mothers of our land, before such an audience." *Democrat*, March 8, 1860.

44. *Democrat*, September 29, 1859; *Democrat*, February 24, 1859.

45. *Democrat*, April 26, 1860.

46. *PSV*, February 5, 1853, both quotations.

47. *PSV*, November 26, 1853; For the Republican platform of 1856, see *Proceedings of the First Three Republican National Conventions of 1856, 1860 and 1864* (Minneapolis: Charles W. Johnson, 1893), p. 43.

48. *New York Tribune*, April 12, 1850.