

"To Stand Out in Heresy": Lucretia Mott, Liberty, and the Hysterical Woman

What feeble steps have yet been taken from Popery to Protestantism! Our Ecclesiastics, be they Bishops, or Quaker Elders, have still far too much sway. Convents we have yet, with high walls, whose inmates having taken the veil, dare not give range to their free-born spirit, now so miserably cramped, & shrouded.

—Lucretia Mott to Nathaniel Barney, 1852

LUCRETIA MOTT (1793–1880) is an underappreciated nineteenth-century thinker who deserves closer examination for the way her political activism was linked to the books she read.¹ A leading abolitionist, women's rights activist, and prominent Quaker minister, Mott forcefully lent her support to a wide range of reforms, all of which depended upon a flourishing literary public sphere. She numbered among the "ultra" reformers who published newspapers, hawked pamphlets, and sold books at antislavery fairs. These reformers constantly wrote each other about the conventions they attended, the speeches they had heard, or else they participated vicariously by reading about these events in

I would like to thank Andrew Burstein and Chris Ruane for their suggestions, Sharon Holt for inviting me to the "Liberty on the Anvil" symposium at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and Tamara Miller and the outside readers for their helpful advice.

¹ Dana Greene made a similar observation when she published Mott's sermons and speeches, writing: "Mott, heretofore principally considered a woman of action, is the subject of numerous juvenile and two scholarly biographies, yet the breath and consistency of her reformist philosophy have not to date been explored." See Dana Greene, ed., *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (New York, 1980), 1. Two scholarly biographies of Mott have been written: Otelia Cromwell, *Lucretia Mott* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); and Margaret Hope Bacon, *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (New York, 1980). Even those who admired Mott were often dismissive of her intellectual abilities, calling her reasoning "unsystematic," and claiming her ideas lacked the sublimity of poetry—the mark of true genius. See Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 63.

printed transcripts.² Thus Mott and her ultra peers saw reading as a radical act. Mott revealed this conviction in 1858, when she recalled the visit of abolitionist Sarah Grimké to her home twenty years earlier. One book, the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, rested on her center table, causing her surprised guest to remark, "Lucretia, I admire thy independence."³

Mott was bookish. The prized volumes she shared with friends and wrote about in her private letters offer historians a new way to think about how reading contributed to the process of constructing political identity. Literary scholar Cathy Davidson has argued that reading fiction was a subversive act of self-fashioning in the early nineteenth century, especially for women.⁴ Mott disparaged fiction, and even dismissed with faint praise the works of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen.⁵ She confessed that she had never developed "much taste" for novels or "purely imaginative books."⁶ Her intellectual passions lay elsewhere.

One writer, Joseph Blanco White, a defrocked Spanish priest turned radical religious dissenter, became her "pet author," her "loved ultra author."⁷ White's special place in Mott's library means more when we reflect upon her understanding of heretical liberty—a vision she often expressed, most notably in her famous 1849 "Discourse on Woman."⁸ For

² For the importance of the literary public sphere to antebellum ultra reformers, see Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship*, 55–64.

³ Mott to Elizabeth Neall Gay, May 7, 1858, in *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer (Urbana, Ill., 2002), 272.

⁴ Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986), esp. 44.

⁵ Mott wrote to a friend who was a printer: "When you meet with anything else you like, do recommend it—not fiction, we have enough of that sort—even tho' it be from Dickens' pen & the author of Jane Eyre. I only know these works from hear[ing] their praises sung by others." See Lucretia Mott to Richard Webb et al., Sept. 10, 1848, William Lloyd Garrison Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, Mass.; I would like to thank Beverly Wilson Palmer, editor of the Lucretia Mott Correspondence, for sending me a copy of this letter.

⁶ See *James and Lucretia Mott: Life and Letters*, ed. Anna Davis Hallowell (Boston, 1884), 252.

⁷ Mott refers to White in this way in her letters. See Mott to George W. Julian, Nov. 14, 1848, and Mott to Martha Coffin Wright, Dec. 5, 1861, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 176, 318.

⁸ For the full text of the speech, "Discourse on Woman," see Greene, *Speeches and Sermons*, 143–62; all citations of the speech in this article are from Greene. Anna Davis Hallowell also acknowledged that this "discourse has generally been considered one of her best"; Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 301. It was reprinted as part of the Salem, Ohio, Woman's Right Convention Proceedings as well. See *The Salem, Ohio, 1850 Women's Rights Convention Proceedings*, ed. Robert W. Audretsch (Salem, Ohio, 1976), 44–51.

Mott, "to stand out in heresy" was a revolutionary assertion of free will based on rejecting dogmatic ways of knowing God and truth.⁹ Her intellectual engagement with White's radical religious philosophy confirmed her commitment to Protestant and Enlightenment notions of liberty, celebrating independence in terms of breaking free of mental fetters. Yet White also reflected her choice of language in a less progressive way in her use of allusions to Catholic practices of enclosure (convents) and idolatry (worship of statuary) to symbolize mental tyranny. Mott's vision of intellectual freedom thus presents to us a double-edged legacy, demonstrating the inherent contradictions in the language of liberty in antebellum America.

In her "Discourse on Woman," Mott commented on the elusiveness of true liberty for antebellum women. Women themselves stood as a barrier to liberty, she said, because a false understanding "ensnared" them. Liberty demanded that women smash false and fanciful images that obscured truth. Fancy and flattery made women feel artificially content, while enclosed minds trapped them in their delusive understanding. Her characterization of human perception and free will drew on three overlapping traditions: the radical Protestant emphasis on reason over idolatry (or false images); the Platonic and enlightened critique of art, fancy, and imagination; and the liberal Protestant and enlightened rejection of enclosed spaces and closed, imprisoned minds.¹⁰

Mott's theory is hampered by an unintended limitation. At the heart of an otherwise penetrating commentary is what critics have called a

⁹ Mott used this phrase in her remarks at the Anti-Sabbath Convention. See "Progress of the Religious World (Remarks Delivered to the Anti-Sabbath Convention, March 23–24, 1848)," in Greene, *Speeches and Sermons*, 62.

¹⁰ For the importance of iconoclasm in the Protestant Reformation and England (and the emphasis on reason and lay biblical literacy over Catholic "idolatry"—the worship of saints, relics, and statues), see Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge, Eng., 1986); Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Eng., 1988); and Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London, 1994); for the Platonic critique of the seductive charm of art and illusion, see Alain Basançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago, 2000); for the enlightenment argument against fancy, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992); and for the liberal Protestant emphasis on release and the association of Catholicism with confinement and "despotic interiors," see Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994).

"blind spot."¹¹ In disputing liberty's opposite, the force of tyranny and oppression yet to be overcome, Mott derives her model from what Jenny Franchot refers to as the "imaginative category" of Catholic enclosure.¹² As the epigraph at the head of this essay reveals, Mott laments that her world still has "convents," "with high walls" and "inmates" who "dare not give range to their free-born spirit." The subjects of her lament are "now miserably cramped, & shrouded." In fact, Mott's notion of heresy, or "iconoclasm"—the act of demolishing all false images, releasing women from their mental prisons—was premised on her image of the debilitated and deranged nun. Thus Mott is unable to explain heresy without its opposite: the mad recluse, the hysterical woman. Mott ironically attacks one version of womanhood, on the way to envisioning another.

The reference to convents was not incidental. It connects Mott to a longstanding intellectual pattern among Protestants of using "Popery" as the "other," the antithesis of liberty and freedom.¹³ Mott's relationship to this tradition is complicated. It is, in part, borrowed from her "pet author," Blanco White, a former Catholic priest, who presented a compelling refutation of the value of convents. Her use of this metaphorical allusion further reflected Mott's connection to antebellum print culture, which had popularized stories of escaped nuns and novices. Like White's account of his own life, most of the convent captivity narratives were written as memoirs. Some were purportedly autobiographical, while others intentionally imitated this confessional style of writing.

Mott's use of the hysterical nun was only a starting point. Her purpose

¹¹ In Freudian terms, the blind spot is something repressed, a horrifying memory, a latent thought, that emerges from the unconscious and appears in dreams. I am not suggesting that Mott's reliance on the hysterical nun is literally a blind spot. Instead, as Jane Gallop suggests, the blind spot is not only something that "cannot be seen," but it is "a crisis-point crying, begging for analysis." For Mott, the nun is a hidden trope embedded in her discourse; she cannot speak about "liberty" without reference to its opposite, the absence of liberty, which is represented by the hysterical nun. Gallop, "The Father's Seduction," in *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robin R. Warhol and Diane Prince Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991), 415.

¹² Franchot more broadly defines anti-Catholicism as an imaginative category of discourse, which she sees as developed through the "rhetorical construction of Romanism." However, her point applies to the notion of enclosure as well. Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xvii, xxiii.

¹³ As Joseph Casino argues, the "more enduring and fundamental element in anti-popery was the intellectual component" that "cherished the values of reason and intellectualism" and saw popery "as an absolute method for organizing people and holding fast to their thoughts, allegiances, and even their conscience." See Joseph J. Casino, "Anti-Popery in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 105 (1981): 281.

was to offer a larger cultural critique of all women's mental oppression. Enclosure was a trope that she applied to all religions, decrying what she called the "sectarian enclosure" on "woman's mind."¹⁴ She would go on to challenge popular notions of womanhood, drawing on the rich metaphorical legacy of iconoclasm, and providing a fairly sophisticated view of what we would label "ideology." Mott cleverly pulled back the layers that constructed gender identities, and debunked the notion that there were rigid sexual differences. Even so, Mott's own critique demonstrates the "slippage" in all discourse, how words are embedded with latent and multiple meanings which can be subversive and reactionary. Given her radical agenda, Mott's perspective on heresy called forth more than one enemy. She sought to dismantle the hegemonic Protestant and male culture, with a less visible, but just as important, metaphorical enemy: the cloistered nun.

Joseph Blanco White is a fascinating and almost entirely forgotten religious radical who became Mott's most "loved ultra author." His major work, *The Life of Joseph Blanco White, Written by Himself, with Portions of his Correspondence*, in three volumes, first appeared from a London press in 1845. There was no better symbol of radical religious reform in the early nineteenth century. Born in Spain in 1775, White left for England in 1810. His pilgrimage paralleled his more dramatic move from the life of an ordained Catholic priest to that of an outspoken critic of religious indoctrination. After rejecting Catholicism, he converted to Anglicanism, only later to espouse Unitarianism—which he would eventually reject as well.¹⁵

Most likely, Mott borrowed the book from a friend sometime between 1846 and 1847. Then she quickly convinced her son-in-law to rush out and buy the last available copy in Philadelphia. In a letter to her transatlantic friend Richard Davis Webb, she humorously chided him for daring to circulate such a radical book among his Dublin friends. Mott had met Webb while attending the London Antislavery Convention in

¹⁴ Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 348.

¹⁵ See *Life of Joseph Blanco White, Written by Himself, with Portions of his Correspondence*, ed. John Hamilton Thom (3 vols., London, 1845). For the most complete study of White's life, see Martin Murphy, *Blanco White: Self-Banished Spaniard* (New Haven, 1989).

1840. As an Irish Quaker printer, Webb shared Mott's love of books, and they established a lifelong correspondence on intellectual matters, reform, and religious controversy.¹⁶

In 1847, Mott confided to Webb that she read White's life story "with intense interest, and regard[ed] it the best radical or heretical work that has appeared in our age." Hardly a passive reader, she proudly told him she had taken three "little volumes" of notes. Mott also began to let the book "go to rounds," lending to interested activists, promising it to others, and avidly promoting White's story better than most booksellers.¹⁷

The book did cause a stir in the United States. One reviewer declared it was "a very extraordinary book; we think the most extraordinary book of the kind in the English language."¹⁸ Many reviewers, Mott observed, called its author the "Unhappy Blanco White," because he failed to find a "resting place" in any established religious faith.¹⁹ Yet his willingness to keep searching for the truth, to question all dogmas, and to stand "firm on every advance tread" elicited Mott's admiration. His solitary quest displayed a rare courage and "honesty," she believed, "that forbade all compromise or conservatism."²⁰ Through personal reflection and reading (Mott highlighted that he read all the major Quaker writers), White had come to rely on "rational belief in spiritual guidance." He moved beyond all organized religion, renounced all superstitious and "idolatrous" practices, and yet, she claimed, he never lost his "devotional spirit."²¹

White's writings pertain to her thinking during the period 1847–53.

¹⁶ Mott to Richard D. Webb, Apr. 26, 1847, in Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 288. For biographical information on Webb, see Palmer, *Selected Letters*, xix, 83, 91 n. 3; also, see Richard S. Harrison, *Richard Davis Webb: Dublin Quaker Printer, 1805–1872* (Skeagh, Ireland, 1993).

¹⁷ Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 287–88. In an 1848 letter to reformer George W. Julian, Mott wrote that her son-in-law's copy cost seven dollars, and that an American edition had yet to appear, adding: "If thou would like the loan of it at some future time, I would gladly send it to thee by some safe conveyance, to be soon returned, as it is in demand, the few copies being sent over [from England] being bought up." *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁸ See "The Autobiography of a Rationalist; or Life, Correspondence, &c. of Rev. Joseph Blanco White," *The New Englander* 4, no. 14 (April 1846): 238–51.

¹⁹ Mott to Richard D. and Hannah Webb, May 24, 1849, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 183.

²⁰ Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 288.

²¹ Mott to James L. Pierce, Jan. 15, 1849, *ibid.*, 317, esp. 318. Mott made a similar point in a letter to Richard Webb, writing that this "holy book," as Mott called White's autobiography, was "more anti-sectarian than the Unitarian can bear, and more religious or devotional than Infidels w[oul]d respond to." See Mott to Richard Webb, Sept. 10, 1848; for full citation see, footnote 5.

He became her "pet author" in part because of her growing disillusionment with the "existing or rather expiring Church establishment," which, she wished, "could be overthrown" or "die out." Throughout the decade of the 1840s, her letters are filled with references to the "sectarian shackles" of her own Hicksite Society, and "bigotry" in general. She watched close friends and respected reformers disowned by the Hicksites, while her church was "rocked to its center" with divisions and schisms.²² In 1848, Mott further proved her commitment "to stand out in heresy," by supporting the Anti-Sabbath Convention. This reform—deemed anti-religious—was so controversial that many "ultra" activists and abolitionists refused to sign the call or attend the meeting.²³

What was it that so attracted Mott to this Spanish thinker? It was, in a word, his complete dedication to *heresy* as a way of life. A closer look at Mott's thinking suggests that she used White's "beautiful testimonies" to crystallize her own views.²⁴ She was drawn to his philosophical principles (those firmly rooted in Protestant and Enlightenment notions of God and human knowledge), and she responded to the metaphorical force of his prose. His writing, she confessed in one letter, has given "a coloring to my preaching."²⁵ Even Mott's motto, "truth for authority, not authority for truth," echoed that of White, who offered a comparably potent adage for reading scripture: "The Bible is subject to Conscientious Reason, not Reason to the Bible."²⁶

In three significant ways, White's views accorded with Mott's own beliefs: (1) religion had to adhere to the law of reason or what White called "conscientious reason"; (2) idolatrous ideas caused men and women to worship images (superficial "appendages" of religion) rather than "walk in the way called heresy" to find the truth; and (3) religious indoctrination relied on a childlike dependence that was based on "paralyzing" fears of "superstition" and a credulous faith in the "miraculous"; moreover, the process began with children, thus demanding a new system of education,

²² Mott to George and Cecilia Combe, Sept. 10, 1848, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 169–70.

²³ "Progress of the Religious World," in Greene, *Speeches and Sermons*, 62; for Mott's defense of her reasons for signing the call, and plea to her friend to support the Anti-Sabbath Convention, see Mott to Nathaniel Barney, Mar. 14, 1848, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 159–60.

²⁴ Mott to James L. Pierce, Jan. 15, 1849, in Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 318.

²⁵ Mott to George Combe, Apr. 16, 1847, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 149.

²⁶ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:383.

one free from religious dogma.²⁷

All of these ideals (as I will show below) were based on a longstanding theological and intellectual critique of Catholicism. It was significant that Blanco White had been a Catholic priest. This was part of his appeal. His remarkable conversion process represented for readers like Mott the historical transformation from popery to the Protestant Reformation. His story, in her words, traced the "progress of his mind from the darkness of Catholicism to more than Unitarian light."²⁸ By escaping his Catholic past, White demonstrated why all Christians had to struggle against "retrograde" tendencies. Even Protestant leaders, Mott noted in an 1849 letter to Richard Webb, might go "clean back to Catholicism or Romanism."²⁹ Quite clearly, Mott measured religious progress in terms of its distance from Catholicism; she even praised Catholic reformers (those intent on making the church more Protestant) as the true "breakers of images," who were heralding a "new era."³⁰

Liberty and idolatry began in the mind. "The human mind," as the sixteenth-century Swiss theologian John Calvin famously phrased it, "was a perpetual forge of idols." Like Calvin, White argued that God was

²⁷ For Mott's reference to "conscientious reason" as a "favorite term of his"; and White's rejection of the "miraculous," which, she quotes him as saying, "will be the last mental infirmity that true Christians will conquer"; and his advocacy for the "mental rights of children"; and her desire to "walk in the way called heresy," see Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 312, 318–19; for her statement that she felt compelled to attack and challenge "everywhere" all such "mistaken and paralyzing dogma," see Mott to Richard D. and Hannah Webb, Apr. 2, 1841, and for her reference to the "dogmas of sects" as the "gloomy appendages of man," see Mott to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mar. 23, 1841, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 90, 91.

²⁸ Mott to George Combe, Apr. 26, 1847, Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 148–49.

²⁹ For her references to "the Newman's and Pusey's are going clean-back to Catholicism and Romanism," see Mott to Richard D. and Hannah Webb, May 14, 1849. John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and Edward B. Pusey (1800–1882) were Oxford professors and leaders of the Oxford movement, which aimed to defend the Church of England (Anglican) against liberals. Newman had converted to Catholicism in 1845. For references to "retrograde" tendencies, see Mott to Nathaniel Barney, Mar. 19, 1852, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 178, 184 n. 9, 213.

³⁰ In two letters to George Combe, Mott discussed Johannes Ronge (1813–1887) who called for reform of the Catholic Church in Germany. He called for "freedom of opinion" for the laity and freedom from clerical domination. He essentially wanted to eliminate the Catholic hierarchy, and to restructure the church along lines similar to the Protestant model. See Mott to George and Cecelia Combe, Mar. 2, 1846, and Mott to George Combe, Sept. 10, 1848, Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 140 n. 4, 141, 168.

unlimited and any attempt to define him (or tailor the divine in the image of man) limited the true meaning of religious faith. For White, the only way to liberate a "mental idolater" was to make the mind into a "Sanctuary without an image," one devoted to the "God of pure reason."³¹

Yet no matter how abstract the conception of idolatry, critics always had a concrete image in mind: the Catholic practice of worshipping saints and relics. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, statues of saints were sumptuous in appearance, ornately decorated with gold, jewels, and paint. Under Plato's influence, Calvin held that ornate surfaces were pleasurable yet dangerous distractions from the truth. Weak minds, he argued, were easily tempted by the "snare of novelty," taking a childish delight in such illusions.³² Because statues of saints were literally dressed in fashionable attire, Calvin claimed that Catholic devotion to such images involved worshipping the "accessory"—"garments, vests, and swaddling-clothes." Women played a prominent role in adorning such statuary, making them appear to be particularly vulnerable to the lure of idols.³³

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the same language of idolatry persisted. What Calvin called "figment" became "fancy," but the basic concern remained the same: the seductive power of the imagination over reason. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), English feminist Mary Wollstonecraft persuasively argued that the exaggerated cultivation of sentiment, fancy, and fashion had stunted women's development of reason, because women had devoted themselves to a superficial adornment of their minds and bodies. White, too, compared the "God of fancy" to the God of "pure reason," denigrating "nervous excitement," or sensibility, as "pernicious"; for him, sentiment agitated the mind, relying on "mere feeling" rather than "conscientious reason."³⁴

From Calvin to White, excessive emotional fervor, or an unyielding devotion to idolatrous worship, generated spiritual retardation. For most Protestant thinkers, religious hysteria was pathologized and feminized.

³¹ Eire, *War against Idols*, 198, 201, 232; Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 436; and *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:147–48, 432.

³² Eire, *War against Idols*, 211; Besançon, *Forbidden Images*, 32–33, 35.

³³ Eire, *War against Idols*, 211; Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 108.

³⁴ See Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, xxviii–xxx, 1–3; *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 2:63, 104; 3:383, 432.

What was seen as a wasteful and irrational devotion to Catholic saints and relics in the sixteenth century became universalized, for many enlightened philosophes, as the "natural" excess of sensibility found in all women. By waging a rhetorical battle against female religiosity, Protestant theologians sought to replace an idolatrous form of worship, dependent on external show and emotional excess, with an invisible, internal reliance on the voice of God in the soul. The ear listening to preaching, Protestant reformers believed, would ultimately train weak minds and discipline eyes too easily dazzled and seduced by "dumb and dead images."³⁵

Not surprisingly, such issues remained paramount in Mott's thinking, making mental liberty into an intellectual, religious, and, ultimately, a gender problem. In this way, Mott borrowed from a much older debate, while expanding its meaning. She, too, analyzed how the mind conditioned human knowledge as well as sexual identity, and she explored such tensions as fancy versus reason, bodily versus spiritual knowing, and external, fashionable surfaces versus internal sources of the truth. Self-knowledge and human perception, Mott contended, defined the "truth" about sex in antebellum America.

On December 17, 1849, Mott gave a long extemporaneous speech in Philadelphia that became her most renowned work, "Discourse on Woman." It was published the following year as a phonographic report. She gave the speech in response to a lecture by Richard Henry Dana, which she had attended only a few days earlier. As a poet and essayist, Dana toured the country giving lectures on Shakespeare, devoting one to the female characters in the bard's plays. Not only did he warn against women unsexing themselves, like Lady Macbeth, but he celebrated the "innocence, tenderness and confiding love in man" of Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona. He poetically praised an idealized version of Womanhood—demure, submissive, and far from the clamor of the public stage. Using satire and sarcasm, Dana intentionally ridiculed female reformers like Mott herself, while she sat quietly in the audience. After he finished the

³⁵ Eire, *War against Idols*, 41, 57, 228–32; Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 129, 403, 440–41, 467; Hill, *The English Bible*, 14, 111, 257; Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 7, 23. Early Protestant reformers compared the Catholic Church to the "whore of Babylon," equating idolatry with spiritual fornication, and attacking statues of Saints as painted "harlots."

lecture, Mott approached Dana and pointedly told him she disagreed with his views on women. Shocked by her directness, he blushed, turned away, and was unable to answer her.³⁶

In her "Discourse," Mott offered a critique of Dana's orthodox attitude toward "True" Womanhood.³⁷ She argued that "Woman"—as we know her in the nineteenth century—was a contrivance, a distortion, a mental idol largely fashioned in the male mind. Hearing Dana's poetic musings on Woman's finer qualities, Mott recognized the way in which sexuality had adopted the idiom of religious adoration. Elevated on her pedestal, womanhood was turned into an iconic ideal. It was the external trappings—dress, demeanor, voice, and gestures—that men worshipped and praised in their litanies on the weaker sex. It is entirely fitting that historian Barbara Welter labeled this faith the "cult of true womanhood." Indeed, despite its secular overtones, this male devotion directly mimicked the cultic worship of Catholic saints and the Virgin Mary.³⁸

Employing White's concept of mental idolatry, Mott identified how sexual identity suffered from the same irrational impulses as religious delusion. Fancy, flattery, and fulsome adulation encouraged women to exaggerate their sexual differences from men even more. Enthrilled by the surface image, women had lost touch with their truer selves. Mott considered that women were divorced from their "primitive" selves (a self unencumbered by cultural distortions); and their higher and holier selves

³⁶ Richard Henry Dana (1787–1879) was a poet, journalist, and one of the founders of the *North American Review*. For a review of Dana's speech, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists* (New York, 1989), 71–73; for Mott's reaction, see Bacon, *Valiant Friend*, 134.

³⁷ Although it appears that no copy of Dana's lecture exists, his earlier writings on "domestic life" captured his view of women as "angels" of the household: "Women have been called angels, in love-letters and sonnets, till we have almost learned to think of them as little better than angels. . . . With all the sincerity of a companionship of feeling, cares, sorrows, and enjoyments, her presence is as the presence of a purer being, and there is that in her nature which seems to bring him nearer to a better world. She is, as it were, linked to angels, and in his exalted moments he feels himself held by the same tie." Dana reinforced the cultic worship of womanhood as well, writing that: "The dignity of a woman has a peculiar character; it awes more than that of man. His is more physical, bearing itself up with an energy of courage which we may brave, or a strength which we may struggle against; he is his own avenger, and we may stand the brunt. A woman's has nothing of this force in it; it is of the higher quality, and too delicate for mortal touch." See Dana, *Poems and Prose Writings* (New York, 1850), 2:428–30; also, see Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, 72.

³⁸ See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1800–1860," in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976), 21–41.

(motivated by the voice of God in the soul—the “inner light” or “conscientious reason”). To uncover this lost identity, every woman had to become an “iconoclast.” Only a heretical stance was capable of shattering what Mott called the “image of man’s lower worship, so long held up to view.”³⁹

Mott began her speech by highlighting the dangers of “mere fancy and imagination.” She contended that the desire for affection and acceptance from others “ensnare the young,” and that flattery and adulation—as the kind found in Dana’s lecture—was “fraught with sentiments calculated to retard the progress of woman.” As she explained, fancy undermined women’s sense of right and their reliance on reason:

The minds of young people generally are open to the reception of more exalted views upon this subject. The kind of homage that has been paid to woman, the flattering appeals which have too long satisfied her—appeals to her mere fancy and imagination, are giving place to a more extended recognition of her rights, her important duties and responsibilities in life.⁴⁰

Mott also quoted a long passage by educational reformer Catharine Beecher⁴¹ to underscore the connection between “fancy” (the power of imagination over reason) and women’s “fancy work.”⁴² Instead of the

³⁹ Mott, “Discourse on Woman,” 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 143–44.

⁴¹ Campbell identifies the passage as taken from Catharine Beecher’s pamphlet, *Suggestions Respecting Improvements in Education, Presented to the Trustees of the Hartford Female Seminary, and Published at their Request* (Hartford, 1829), 54–55. Catharine Beecher (1800–1878) was a prominent author, religious and educational reformer. See Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, p. 80 n. 5; also see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973).

⁴² Home sewing was considered a necessary feminine occupation in the antebellum period. It would continue to be throughout the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the sewing machine was first patented in the United States in 1846. See Amy Boyce Osaki, “A ‘Truly Feminine Employment’: Sewing and the Early Nineteenth-Century Woman,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 23 (1988): 225–41; Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (Oxford, Eng., 1999); and Bruce K. Stewart, “A Stitch in Time,” *American History* 31, no. 4 (Sept.–Oct. 1996): 63–64; Mott was not the only female public critic in the 1840s to rebuke women for the time they wasted sewing. See Linda A. Morris, “Frances Miriam Whitcher: Social Satire and the Age of Gentility,” *Women’s Studies* 15 (1988): 99–116. Fashion was a cultural device (and source of contention) in the antislavery and women’s rights movements. See Lee Chambers-Schiller, “Maria Weston Chapman: Fashionable Abolitionist” (Paper presented at the Mid-America Conference, Oklahoma State University, Sept. 19, 2001; copy in personal possession of the author); and Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship*, 48–55. I would like to thank Chambers-Schiller for letting me read her paper. Her work inspired me to reevaluate Mott’s reference to fancy work as a political category.

trivial pastime of a "little sewing," women had to acquire "durable and holy impressions" by cultivating their "immortal minds" in the "precincts of learning and wisdom." Unlike the shallow sentiment of fancy and flattery, or the lure of accessories like fancy work, women who developed their minds gained something permanent, solid, eternal. Adding a poetic touch that played off the theme of statuary, Mott quoted Beecher who claimed that women who possessed reason held something that "shall never be effaced or wear away."⁴³

As a Quaker, Mott understood the value of plainness and simplicity in dress—Friends saw this as a defining feature of their religious practice.⁴⁴ Yet there was as well a potent mental link between the mind and the eye. Fancy affected how one conceived a mental picture of oneself, an image in the mind that corresponded with a person's outward appearance. With the power to shape a mental picture in the mind, fancy perverted how men and women presented themselves to the world. Here was the crux of problem:

As it is desirable that man should act a manly and generous part, not "mannish," so let woman be urged to exercise a dignified and womanly bearing, not womanish. Let her cultivate all the graces and proper accomplishments of her sex, but let not these degenerate into a kind of effeminacy, in which she is satisfied to be the mere plaything or toy of society, content with her outward adorning, and with the tone of flattery and fulsome adulation too often addressed to her.⁴⁵

Mott's choice of words was even more revealing, especially her metaphor for describing women as a "plaything or toy of society." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Catholic idols were compared to dolls or "foolish toys," and their worship a kind of child's play. A common wordplay linked popery and puppetry, reinforcing the early Protestant notion that idols were truly "dumb and dead images."⁴⁶

Mott had a distinctly contemporary image in her mind when she

⁴³ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 149–50.

⁴⁴ See Frederick B. Tolles, "Of the Best Sort but Plain": The Quaker Aesthetic," *American Quarterly* 11 (1959): 484–505; J. William Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America: A Portrait* (New York, 1973), 194–97.

⁴⁵ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 148.

⁴⁶ The invented word was "popetry." See Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, 403.

describes women as playthings. The useless woman, the toy of society, was none other than the "woman of fashionable society" whose only vocation was her "daily promenades and nightly visit to the theater and ballroom." The civilized lady of leisure was the model of torpor; she was intellectually lethargic, "sinking down into almost useless activity," in Mott's opinion, "to while away her hours in self-indulgence, or to enjoy the pleasures of domestic life."⁴⁷

The Bourgeois Lady was vacuous; she appeared elegant, lavishly adorned, enchanting, but she was nothing but a *tromp l'oeil*—an illusion, a painted surface—or a hollow puppet, empty on the inside, spiritually dead, and mentally limited. It is not at all surprising that Mott preferred women as iconoclasts. This term had specific historical and religious meaning, referring to the actual destruction of religious images in the eighth and ninth centuries, and the later desecration of Catholic statuary by reformers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Replacing real hammers, Mott conceived a new breed of heretical women who wielded verbal hammers to shatter the cultural veneer that enshrined popular, if not rigidly calcified, ideas of womanhood.

Mott found her ideal iconoclast in the Bible. She paraphrased the story of Jael, in the song of Deborah, found in Judges 7:24–27: "Blessed above woman shall Jael, the wife of Heeber, the Kenite be; blessed shall she be above women in the tent . . . She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workman's hammer; she smote Sisera down dead."⁴⁸ Inspired by a primitive faith in which belief translated into action, Jael stood in sharp contrast to the lethargic Bourgeois Lady. Nor was Mott's selection of Jael unimportant. During the seventeenth century, Jael came to justify tyrannicide, suggesting Mott's added purpose: to invoke female heresy against the presumptive male right to rule the female mind.⁴⁹

The right of resistance began in the mind. Heresy or iconoclasm was an obligation, an ongoing struggle, which required men and women to break out of their molds. Mott made the point that bodily styles were cultivated, crafted, but in the "immortal mind," unmoored from cultural illusions, sex was in fact remarkably fluid. Exaggerated sexual differences were distortions of fancy rather than facts of nature.

⁴⁷ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 149.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁹ Hill, *The English Bible*, 190, 407.

Excesses of display, the indulgence of fancy, and mindless and unreflective behavior, ultimately made men "mannish" and women "womanish." Mott observed that modesty was not a trait restricted to women, nor should it be treated as such. She praised the "retiring modesty of William Ellery Channing," as "beautiful," and asked: "if this modesty is not attractive also, when manifested in the other [male] sex?"⁵⁰ In fact, Mott argued that every individual had to look inward, so as to develop his or her immortal mind and engage in self-examination. By dismantling mental idols, and cleansing the mind of accretions and distortions, individuals could resist fashion or custom, thereby releasing themselves from predictable sexual roles. Neither bold resistance nor retiring modesty would be seen any longer as gendered styles of behavior. In taking this kind of action, both men and women would be liberated from the sexual prisons in their minds.

Mott and White occupied common ground in celebrating iconoclasm. In a letter to William Ellery Channing (whom Mott praised for his modesty), White unhesitatingly asserted that the "Imaginative Faculty—that faculty which clothes every idea in matter—is the arch-enemy of . . . true spiritual enjoyment." He advised Channing to eliminate all the decorative trappings of religious faith. "If the Deity is to take seat" in the mind, White warned, you must "cleanse the internal sanctuary from idols." Simply put: a mind unsullied by "mental idols" and "material images" could produce a purified soul. His letters reveal that absolute belief in reason (over fancy) lay at the core of his faith.⁵¹

But no one can communicate without imagination. White's strident tone concealed his past reliance on the "Imaginative Faculty." In 1822, he had violated his own rather ascetic rationalist code of faith by anonymously publishing a novel, *Vargas: A Tale of Spain*. In this novel, he blended elements from his own life with a popular Spanish anti-clerical novel about the Inquisition. *Vargas* displays all the fanciful flourishes of a gothic romance. The plot centers on an exiled hero, like himself, who only returns to Spain to rescue his lover from the lascivious clutches of the evil

⁵⁰ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 151.

⁵¹ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:118–23.

Archbishop of Seville. Several years later, White published another revealing short story, "The Alcazar of Seville." Part fable and religious parable, this story details the plight of a young girl who is buried alive in a dark vault under the family's former home—after having been led there by her mother. The tale ends with her desperate cry, "Mother! Dear Mother! Leave me not in the dark!" Here White's imaginative world led down the familiar path of most nineteenth-century fiction, highlighting both the romantic fantasy of escape and the gothic horror of entrapment and enclosure.⁵²

White's fictional vision influenced his heretical theology and his autobiographical voice. To retell the story of his life, he employed narrative conventions such as the hysterical nun trapped in the oppressive world of the convent. The story of the young girl locked in the vault, trapped in the "darkness" by her mother, conjured familiar themes, metaphorically conveying what White believed were the twin evils of enclosure: the "vault" that represented sexual repression, and "darkness" that stood for religious indoctrination. The common denominator was mental enslavement.

By conflating images of the nun and the child, White's religious critique led him to a surprisingly modern perspective on child psychology. Drawing on the educational theories of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Johann Pestalozzi, White emphasized that parents, teachers, and religious instructors had the power to mold as well as "maim" a child's mind. He wrote:

The indignation of civilized mankind is roused at the idea of parents who distort or mutilate their children . . . but alas! The distortion of the mind, in its most helpless infancy, is considered a duty on the part of parents, whatever the direction, character, and tendency of the distorting and maiming may be.⁵³

Like Pestalozzi, he believed that a child's education should be based on pleasure—not pain. The child should be encouraged to seek knowledge, and the parent should not inhibit curiosity. Fear and loathing of one's body, White felt, suppressed a child's understanding of physical pleas-

⁵² Murphy, *Blanco White*, 120–22, 128. The story, "The Alcazar of Seville," was published in Spanish and in English and appeared in a popular Christmas album, *Forget-Me-Not* (1825); it was intended for a South American readership.

⁵³ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:409.

ure—a fear that censored normal desires well into adulthood. “A horror of our body, and the laws [by] which it is produced and preserved,” he contended, made pleasurable feelings “the mortal enemy of virtue.”⁵⁴

It is revealing, too, that White compared the dogmatic indoctrination of children to the “inquisition.” “Grotesque images” filled their minds from infancy. Indoctrination replaced children’s real memories with vivid dogmatic images “engraved upon the reproductive fancy.” A false consciousness—or what White labeled “mental slavery” and “spiritual kidnapping”—made it impossible for children to learn how to think on their own. White’s theory thereby refashioned Rousseau’s “tutor” into a far more ominous figure: he or she became a parent who played the role of priest or Mother Superior, and whose main educational goal was to transmit “parental prejudice” and perpetuate “religious error.”⁵⁵

Mott endorsed White’s radical proposal for “the mental rights of children.” In her 1849 letter to reformer James Pierce, she explained that White opposed the “hierarchical principle, which claims [children’s] minds to be shaped and molded according to some theological model.”⁵⁶ She observed that even Quaker families were not immune to oppressive forms of childrearing. She disparaged the practice of reading the Bible like a “religious rite in the family,” and of using “solemn style” and the peculiar sing-song tone of Quaker speaking, because such rites oppressed the minds of children. Mott also criticized the Quaker ministers who behaved like a “Hicksite priest,” or an elder who acted like the “Pope of the day.” She felt their rigid enforcement of church discipline dissuaded young people from supporting “the benevolent efforts of the day.” She worried about a backlash, especially among the children of parents who withdrew from the Quakers, noting how such young people often “connected themselves with sects far behind the intelligence and light of her parents.” A specific case represented this trend: “a daughter of enlightened

⁵⁴ For the influence of the Pestalozzian system on White, see Murphy, *Blanco White*, 38–39; for White’s critique of the instilled fear of the body, see *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:268–69. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) was a Swiss educator who developed the “Pestalozzi method” at his school in Yverdon (opened in 1805). He emphasized self-activity and creativity; that is, children should learn through activities and draw their own conclusions. See K. Silber, *Pestalozzi: The Man and His Work*, (2d ed., London, 1965).

⁵⁵ *Life of Blanco White*, 3:407, 402, 409; also, see Murphy, *Blanco White*, 181.

⁵⁶ Hallowell, *Life and Letters*, 319.

parents, who withdrew from us 15 years ago, has lately joined the Catholics, and has in view to become a 'sister of charity.'"⁵⁷

It is significant that White and Mott both equated religious indoctrination with a Catholic version of child abuse. White's theory, with its emphasis on parental abuse, sensory deprivation, and sexual repression, resembled the formula found in most of the popular anti-Catholic literature of the antebellum period. Confessional narratives of escaped nuns and ex-novices flooded the market between 1830 and 1860, all employing the same motifs of seduction, entrapment, and mental enslavement. These convent captivity tales, like White's personal story, relied on the theme of resistance born of the desire for liberty.⁵⁸

One bestseller, Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835), concerns a young Protestant girl whose imagination leads her to join a convent. Fancy (the image in her mind of a romantic life as a cloistered nun), provides the initial inclination, and flattery adds another powerful enticement: the bishop, mother superior, and her Catholic friends ply the girl with gifts and books, while praising her for ladylike accomplishments, such as her fine ornamental needlework.⁵⁹ Josephine Bunkley's *The Escaped Nun* (1855) is a treatise on freedom, and has a feminist ring to it. Coerced to take vows by her father, Bunkley (a devout Protestant) finds herself abandoned by her family and trapped in a nunnery. Despite so desperate a situation, she dedicates her life to resistance and defies her abusive mother superior, while keeping a secret journal as evidence of her

⁵⁷ Mott to Richard D. and Hannah Webb, Feb. 25, 1842, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 107; also see her letter to the Webbs, Apr. 2, 1841, *ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁸ For the emphasis on resistance and overcoming obstacles (such as mental enslavement, entrapment, and sexual exploitation) as prominent themes in the convent captivity genre, see Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 112; James R. Lewis, "Mind-Forged Manacles": Anti-Catholic Convent Narratives in the Context of the American Captivity Tradition," *Mid-America* 72, no. 3 (1990): 146-67; Susan M. Griffin, "The Dark Stranger": Sensationalism and Anti-Catholicism in Sarah Josepha Hale's *Traits of American Life*," *Legacy* 14, no. 1 (1997): 13-24; and for the connection to antislavery literature, see Tracy Fessenden, "From Romanism to Race: Anglo-American Liberties in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Prospects* 25 (2000): 229-68.

⁵⁹ See *Six Months in a Convent, or, the Narrative of Rebecca Theresa Reed, who was under the influence of the Roman Catholics about two years, and an inmate of the Ursine Convent on Mount Benedict, Charlestown, Mass., nearly six Months, in the years 1831-2* (Boston, 1835), 50-51, 55, 65-66. For the most astute analysis of Reed's motivations, see Daniel A. Cohen, "The Respectability of Rebecca Reed: Genteel Womanhood and Sectarian Conflict in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (1996): esp. 426, 433-34, 451.

mistreatment. She even hires a lawyer to release her from her vows.⁶⁰

Far more racy "true" confessions, such as William Hogan's *Popery! As it Was and As It Is* (1853), painted convents as fashionable finishing schools in which young women were seduced by sexually frustrated priests. Hogan's tale was typical of a certain genre in which, during confession, young women became "easy prey." Possessing "the secrets of a woman's soul," the "spiritual director" gains complete control; the priest "animates that woman with his own ideas, moves her with his own will, fashions her according to his own fancy." Hogan employs an allusion similar to that of Mott, in describing women as playthings or toys. A priest is the master puppeteer: "She was wax in her spiritual director's hands; she has ceased to be a *person*, and she is become a *thing*."⁶¹

Virtually all convent captivity tales defined liberty through the process of escape, often comparing religious orders to "horrible prisons of delusion." These accounts typically focused on young girls (though there were comparable stories of boys sent to monasteries), locked away by unfeeling parents, who blindly (or willingly) allowed their children to be indoctrinated and physically abused. Most of these accounts provided detailed reports of physical mistreatment and mental abuse: they highlighted the rigorous punishments, solitary confinement, lack of healthy exercise, and improper nourishment.⁶²

⁶⁰ [Josephine N. Bunkley], *The Escaped Nun: Disclosures of Convent Life; and Confessions of a Sister of Charity* (New York, 1855).

⁶¹ William Hogan identifies himself as a former priest. Hogan, *Popery! As It Was and As It Is; Also, Auricular Confessions; and Popish Nunneries* (Hartford, 1853), 237, 254, 258–59. The character of the debauched priest—part Svengali, part Lovelace—was a common fictional device. See Marie Anne Pagliarini, "The Pure American Woman and the Wicked Catholic Priest: An Analysis of Anti-Catholic Literature in Antebellum America," *Religion and American Culture* 9 (1999): 97–128.

⁶² For the best example of this kind of thinking see Andrew B. Cross, *Young Women in Convents or Priests' Prisons to be Protected by Law, or the Prisons to be Broken Up. A Lecture Delivered at the Maryland Institute, on Monday Evening, February 25th, 1856* (Baltimore, 1856), 6, 20–22. Cross published another pamphlet, *Priests' Prisons for Women, or A Consideration of the Question, whether unmarried foreign priests out [ought] to be permitted to erect prisons, inot [into] which, under pretense or religion, to seduce or entrap, or by force compel young women to enter, and after they have secured their property, keep them in confinement, and compel them, as their slaves, to submit themselves at their will, under penalty of flogging or the dungeon? In Twelve Letters to T. Parker Scott, Esq., member of the Baltimore Bar, and Vice Consul of the Pope* (Baltimore, 1854). For a discussion of Reverend Andrew Cross's anti-Catholic activities in Baltimore in the 1830s, see Joseph G. Mannard, "The 1839 Baltimore Nunnery Riot: An Episode in Jacksonian Nativism and Social Violence," *Maryland Historian* 11, no.1 (spring 1980): 13–23, esp. 16–18.

Over and over, these stories emphasized efforts to deprive inmates of their individuality. Mother superiors and reverend fathers appeared as manipulative surrogate parents; they used a system of rewards and punishments to exact submission. Novices were forced to wear strange dress—the habit; they were cut off from the outside world, subjected to mental tortures, and “strangely altered” by a series of unnatural restraints. As Raffaele Ciocchi explained in his 1845 narrative of life in a monastery, he had watched his companions, once “vigorous in health, ruddy and joyous,” transform before his eyes: they soon displayed “pallid countenances, sunken eyes, and attenuated forms.”⁶³

Convent captivity narratives were best at detailing the deprivation of liberty. They were both prison memoirs and case studies of child abuse. As captivity narratives, they connected what Ciocchi described as “mental anguish and corporeal suffering.”⁶⁴ He meant, simply, that the condition of the body conditioned the mind. Enclosed spaces were places of wasted talents, monotonous routines, and Pavlovian conditioning. Such treatment left inmates passive but skittish, and like rats in a cage, creatures of habit. When accompanied by extreme repression and chronic mistreatment, sensory deprivation provoked illness and resulted in physical disabilities. Whether portrayed as dying of consumption or driven mad, cloistered nuns and monks, as tortured adolescents, were fashioned into potent symbols of child abuse.

According to White, before the age of reason, children were more susceptible to mental abuse than adults. Ciocchi voiced a similar complaint, announcing that his own fears during six years in the monastery were rooted in his childhood education. A “noxious plant,” he felt, was placed in him when he was a child. Catholicism instilled “superstitious terror” at an early age, and as latent, recurring images, these terrorizing feelings forcefully reemerged during his later religious indoctrination by the monks.⁶⁵ By the time repressed childhood memories returned, the mind was already had been conditioned to fear and to believe a variety of absurd notions. White concurred with Ciocchi. He, too, saw the child’s

⁶³ Raffaele Ciocchi, *A Narrative of Iniquities and Barbarities Practiced at Rome in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1845), 24–25, 29, 31, 44, 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

docile mind as fertile ground for the "transmission of parental prejudices and the consequent perpetuation of religious error."⁶⁶

Mott was unable to resist employing the imaginative category of the cloistered life in her own prose. In her most vivid convent allegory, in 1852, she drew on several common allusions:

What feeble steps have yet been taken from Popery to Protestantism! Our Ecclesiastics, be they Bishops, or Quaker Elders, have still far too much sway. Convents we have yet, with high walls, whose inmates having taken the veil, dare not give range to their free-born spirit, now so miserably cramped, & shrouded.⁶⁷

She utilized several of the familiar tropes: "high walls" (enclosure); "inmates" (imprisonment); circumscribed mental mobility (they "dare not give range to their free-born spirit"); and physical restraints, describing nuns as "miserably cramped" and "shrouded." It is equally telling that in a sermon Mott gave just six days after her "Discourse on Woman," she specifically mentioned convents and monasteries. In this instance, she accentuated the enclosure theme, referencing monks and nuns who were "virtually shut out from that intercourse with their fellow beings"; they were living in "darkness," rather than benefiting from the diffusion of "light, knowledge and instruction" found in the public sphere.⁶⁸

In her "Discourse on Woman," Mott directly identified inherited religious error ("delivered from sire to son") as the source of women's oppression. She drew on the image of a cloistered mind, shut up, enshrouded, blighted by the absence of social intercourse; such a mind was so out of touch with the meaning of liberty that, in Mott's phrase, "oppression has so darkened the mind that it cannot appreciate it." Constant repression and unnatural restraints had combined to deform woman's mental mobility; "She has so long been subject to disabilities and restrictions . . . she has become enervated, her mind to some extent

⁶⁶ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 3:400, 407–8.

⁶⁷ Mott to Nathaniel Barney, Mar. 19, 1852, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 213.

⁶⁸ See "To Improve the Condition of our Fellow Being," a sermon delivered at Cherry Street Meeting (Dec. 23, 1849), in Greene, *Speeches and Sermons*, 166.

paralyzed. . . ." The captivity theme reemerged, as woman was nearly comparable to an "abject slave." Both were "so degraded by the crushing influences around them" that they were insensible—in an unconscious state, which resembled being buried alive.⁶⁹

Perhaps the dominant themes in Mott's cloistering prose were shrinkage and paralysis. The effect of cramping, the stifling confinement behind actual or mental convent walls, suppressed the desire for liberty. If fancy operated like a camera or mirror (reflecting and distorting images in the mind), then middle-class women were entrapped in a house of mirrors—drawn to dazzling surfaces. But the convent motif suggested something different: the mind as an enclosed space, a dark cell, a tortured and isolated mind prone to fear. Nuns "dare not give range to their free-born spirit," Mott wrote, implying that they censored themselves out of some haunting fear that they would be punished.

While fancy (distracting the mind from the truth) generated an indolent life style, severe physical confinement led to paralysis—a mind frozen and incapable of action. Mott saw convents as prisons, and "solitary confinement," she observed, did "violence" to the "nervous system," leading to mental disease, possibly insanity.⁷⁰ These are bodily metaphors, stressing the physical atrophy of the mind, slowly draining women of energy to think, act, and seek the blessing of liberty. It was akin to a living death. Although women might be breathing, they were shrinking, if not disappearing, into a dark corner of their minds.

Such language reveals that the key to Mott's thinking on convents was hysteria—a common theme used in conjuring the deteriorating sanity of the reclusive nun.⁷¹ Mott made a point of mentioning that Blanco White

⁶⁹ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 155.

⁷⁰ For Mott's discussion of a prison pamphlet, in which she notes the detrimental effects of solitary confinement, see Mott to George and Cecilia Combe, Mar. 24, 1843, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 127. To compare prisons to monasteries was common. The first penitentiary, opened in Philadelphia in 1829, duplicated the monastic model. Here a prisoner was stripped of his identity, given a number, sent to his solitary cell, and left in isolation to contemplate his guilt. See Michael Kerrigan, *The Instruments of Torture* (New York, 2001), 28; and Norman Johnson, *Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions* (Philadelphia, 1994).

⁷¹ The mad nun was a common motif. Bunkley described a fellow inmate as follows: "One day, a nun . . . happened to escape from the cell from which she was confined. I saw her. I never saw anything so frightful. Her hair was disheveled, and her body almost naked; she dragged iron chains; her eyes were wild, she torn her hair, she beat her breasts with her fists; she ran, she roared; she imprecated upon herself and others the most dreadful curses; she wanted to throw herself out the window."

had left behind two "lovely sisters who ended their days in a convent," and one died at an early age.⁷² White was horrified by the cloistered existence, pitying young women, who at the age of fifteen, were "shut up for life," with "no object to occupy their minds but the practices of complicated and formal religion." He described this mode of living in terms of a "lingering disease," that often led to "derangement." "The poor prisoners," he wrote, lived lives of "dull monotony," haunted by an "agitated state of the soul troubled with all the fears of a morbid conscience." This confirmed the formula of most escaped nun tales: disease, derangement, and haunted minds.⁷³

The pathology that Mott and others were describing fit the "morbid condition" known as hysteria. In the nineteenth century, the term hysteria referred to a supposed nervous disorder, "usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties." It was an illness commonly associated with the uterus, easily applicable to nuns for two culturally-conditioned reasons: first, as White suggested, nuns lived tormented lives, haunted by their "morbid conscience," with no access to social intercourse to relieve their overwrought minds; second, their celibate state made them likely candidates for the uterus-centered physiology of the nineteenth century.⁷⁴ In fact, White's

See Bunkley, *Escaped Nun*, 29. Insane nuns also appeared in escaped nun tales based on real events. Rebecca Reed's narrative contributed to the mob attack against the Charlestown Convent in 1834. One incident that sparked the violence was the escape of another nun, Sister Mary Johnson (Elizabeth Harrison), who the bishop described as suffering from "Hysterics." In his pamphlet, Reverend Andrew Johnson referred to the story of Sister Isabella Neale (Olevia Neale), a young woman kept in the Carmeline Convent in Baltimore. Her escape on August 18, 1839, provoked a riot. Johnson claimed that afterwards she was "irrecoverably insane" and implies that her stay in the convent weakened her mind. Insanity and hysteria—or the mad nun—was a potent symbol of female entrapment in the antebellum period—so powerful that it led to violent riots during the 1830s. Philadelphia experienced anti-Catholic riots in the next decade. See Nancy Lusignan Schultz, *Fire and Roses: The Burning of the Charlestown Convent, 1834* (New York, 2000), 154–57; also see Cross, *Young Women in Convents or Priests' Prisons*, 18; and Mannard, "Baltimore Nunnery Riot," 14.

⁷² Mott to George Julian, Nov. 14, 1848, in Palmer, *Selected Letters*, 176. For the death of his sister, see *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 1:110.

⁷³ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 1:66–67.

⁷⁴ The word hysteria comes from hysteric, which in Latin and Greek means "belonging to the womb, suffering in the womb." By 1812, the term hysteria had come to connote a medical pathology, as defined in Dr. Hazleton's medical textbook; hysteria was also colloquially referred to as "hysterics." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1971), 1:1363. For the womb-centered medical theory of female illness, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The

outspoken criticism of celibacy inspired an English colleague to write *The Nun of Arrouca*, a poem that captured the horror of enforced chastity.⁷⁵

Yet it is equally true that White painted a "one-sided" view of convent life. The polemical and fictional purposes of his writings made him erase any of the memories of nuns who were not deranged, diseased, and suffering from the burden of sexual sacrifice.⁷⁶ Mott's hysterical nun, like White's, though less exaggerated than most convent captivity tales, transformed all cloistered sisters into a symbol of all women's repressed desires and unused talents. For Mott, the language of enfeeblement, debility, physical misery, and mental isolation implied a complete, irretrievable loss of liberty. When women lost control of their intellectual faculties, they were forever trapped in a cell from which there was no escape: a physically broken body, and a diseased mind.

As a Quaker minister, Mott understood the dangers of repression, especially that of enforced silence. The greatest "affliction," in Friends tradition, was understood to be an inability to speak. According to an eighteenth-century Quaker female preacher, this condition was often compared to being "shut up in a close prison."⁷⁷ Hysteria implied a loss of reason and speech, a condition Mott associated with the image of the cloistered nun. In Franchot's assessment of antebellum culture, Americans repeatedly equated Catholicism with "disease, death, and decomposition." They celebrated the "progressive and cleansing powers of

Female Animal: Medical and Biological View of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Women and Health in America*, ed. Judith Waltzer Leavitt (Madison, Wis., 1984), 12-27.

⁷⁵ Murphy, *Blanco White*, 120.

⁷⁶ Murphy writes: "Even if later, in his polemical writings, he painted a one-sided picture of convent life, making no mention of those who found in it serenity and fulfillment, there is no reason to doubt what he says of the trapped and despairing." *Ibid.*, 20. My point is that White's polemical (and fictional) perspective constructs his memories; it is impossible to separate the autobiographical from the fictional.

⁷⁷ These are the words of Susanna Morris, a Quaker minister who lived from 1682 to 1755. At the age of forty-three, she wrote in her journal that she had experienced "a trial indeed never by me to be forgotten." She explained how the Lord had "put me in a prison a long year and I never had in that time to open my mouth by way of testimony." She further described this "grievous state of affliction" as an "unspeakable trial." Margaret Hope Bacon, the editor of the journal, notes: "Likening oneself to a prisoner was a frequent Quaker expression at this time." See Margaret Hope Bacon, ed., *Wilt Thou Go on My Errand?: Journals of Three Eighteenth-Century Quaker Women Ministers*, Susanna Morris, 1682-1755; Elizabeth Hudson, 1722-1783; Ann Moore, 1710-1783 (Wallingford, Pa., 1994), 47, 115.

the Protestant voice" over the "corruptions of the Catholic body."⁷⁸ For White, for Mott, nuns are dying bodies; enclosures in effect augur death—spiritual silence—loss of speech. To White, to Mott, they are interconnected.

Mott blended two different, yet complementary metaphors of liberty. From the notion of mental idolatry, she pointed to the seductive dangers of fancy, flattery and self-delusion. Preoccupied with surfaces and images, the mind's eye could not cultivate the "immortal mind." (This was Mott's critique of the Bourgeois Lady, the aspiring middle-class woman, praised in the "cult of true womanhood.") But there was another, more debilitating side of women's loss of freedom, a political condition of captivity, viscerally felt. This condition, enforced by the law and institutionalized, was upheld by indoctrination. Young girls, subject to a "despotic education," inherited the prejudices of their parents. Superstitious fears, implanted in female minds, induced women to censor their own thoughts, to shrink from view, and to mute their voices.

The image of the nun was at the heart of this dual view of women's oppression. White neatly summarized the contrasting meanings in society's understanding of the value of the nuns:

Nuns are at once sacred and ludicrous objects in the eyes of the public. The idea of Nunnery (as Coleridge in his Platonic language would call it) is most exalted, pure, poetical—in a Sermon, or work on Divinity. The *real* Nunnery is a byword for weakness of intellect, fretfulness, childishness. In short, NUN is the superlative of *old woman*.⁷⁹

This disturbing duality of sacred and profane that White ascribed to the nun, paralleled the sacralized "cult of true womanhood" in its devaluation of women's political value. As Mott observed, women's present legal and political value was that of a "cipher."⁸⁰ In poetry, woman was praised and flattered, called the "angel of the household," while in state laws and constitutions, she was reduced to a weak and intellectually inferior being, at once child, dependent, and nonentity.

Mott's "Discourse on Woman" remains a powerful statement of

⁷⁸ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 7, 23.

⁷⁹ *Life of Joseph Blanco White*, 1:68–69.

⁸⁰ Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 154.

women's liberation, and at the same time a vivid reminder of the complicated nature of religious language. Despite the appeal of liberty as a political ideal, it is not universally understood; it is not a singular concept. Liberty conjures powerful associations, a linguistic heritage, as does its counterpart—the absence of liberty. In the antebellum period, that absence was most readily conveyed in terms of willing compliance or forced submission. Women represented both extremes: they could be lulled into inactivity through worshipping false signs of material pleasure, or they could be contained in mental enclosures, cut off from freedom or truth. Self-delusion or madness twisted the mind, and made it impossible for women to be truly free to think and act on their own.

"Sectarian enclosure" conjured images of physical entrapment, enclosed spaces, manacled bodies, shut minds. It also conjured the image of the convent. For Mott and her "pet author," perhaps the most powerful symbol of woman without liberty was the nun. The hysterical nun was a dialectical antithesis to the liberated woman, a trope, an "image," that Mott sought to smash. There is no escape from metaphor, and for Mott, whose aim was to "stand out in heresy," no escape from the hysterical woman.⁸¹

Ironically enough, Mott herself became an icon. She would be cast in marble, along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, by the female sculptor Adelaide Johnson for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Her head later graced the Capitol in Johnson's more famous work, *The Woman Movement*, the only national monument to the suffrage campaign.⁸²

Much earlier, Mott's engraved image appeared in the antislavery gift book *The Liberty Bell* (1844). By the next decade, she was being

⁸¹ See "Progress of the Religious World," in Greene, *Speeches and Sermons*, 62.

⁸² Adelaide McFayden Johnson (1859–1955) prepared three separate busts of Mott, Stanton, and Anthony for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Her later sculpture, "The Woman Movement," copied the earlier busts, but displayed the three heads and torsos emerging from an eight-ton block of white marble. This work was presented to the nation's Capitol and Congress as a gift from the National Woman's Party in 1921. The sculpture was placed in storage until 1996, when it was relocated to the Capitol Rotunda. As a true testament of fame, the portrait sculpture of Anthony was used as a model for a three-cent postage stamp in 1936. See Jeanne Madeline Weimann, *The Fair Women* (Chicago, 1981), 289–95; and Edith Mayo, "Adelaide Johnson," *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 380–81.



Fig. 1. Stimulated by her intense love of books, Lucretia Mott posed for this photograph (neg. ca. 1860, printed ca. 1875). Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia.

photographed. Images of her were distributed as tokens of friendship, but among reformers they also became collectibles, celebrity icons. In an 1860 photograph, Mott wears a plain dress, a simple Quaker cap, white shawl, and she is seated in silence (fig. 1). Here she represented the contradiction posed in "Discourse on Woman." Appearing unable to voice her opinions, she is a mute surface. But if one looks closely, in the same picture she holds a book, and is pointing her finger at the text, saying to us: in knowledge lies the secret to women's liberty—the "stronger and more

profitable food" of understanding and truth. But that modern "truth" came with a Protestant blind spot: the figure of the hysterical nun, reflecting the richly metaphorical language of Catholic repression. Paradoxically, Mott's reliance on the crucial female "other" of the nun allowed her to articulate her feminist image of freedom.⁸³

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⁸³ Both the 1844 engraving and 1860 photograph (negative ca. 1860, printed ca. 1875) are available in the print department collection, Library Company of Philadelphia. Two other photographs of Mott, one ca. 1865, the other ca. 1866, are housed in their collection. An earlier daguerreotype of Mott was displayed at a gallery in Philadelphia in 1856. Mott's clothing in the photographs reflected her Quaker background. For a study of how Philadelphia Quakers used and interpreted such images (daguerreotypes), and a brief reference to Mott's photographs, see Anne Ayer Verplanck, "Facing Philadelphia: The Social Function of Silhouettes, Miniatures, and Daguerreotypes, 1760-1860 (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1996), 194, 219-20, esp. 238. For Mott's reference to "stronger and more profitable food," see Mott, "Discourse on Woman," 144.