Introduction

Political Theory and the Founding of American Feminism

In his Second Inaugural Address, President Barack Obama made history with the following declaration:

Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well.¹

Obama was the first sitting president to mention—let alone endorse—gay marriage in such a historic context, a fact widely noted in contemporary accounts of the address. Yet in the same speech, Obama did another remarkable thing by connecting Stonewall, the bar that became the center of 1969 protests for gay rights in New York’s Greenwich Village, to Seneca Falls, New York, Selma, Alabama, and the National Mall, site of the 1963 March on Washington—landmarks where generations of Americans were “guided” by the “star” that is the belief that “all men are created equal.”² This would not be the first time Obama would portray these pivotal events as a constellation of reforms to advance equal rights for marginalized populations, including women, African Americans, and homosexuals, which in his view were necessary to make America “a more perfect Union.”

Adding to the distinctive nature of Obama’s view of history is that it connects disparate actors who contributed to American history in various ways—many of whom are relatively unknown or have languished in obscurity. Again alluding to the deep bond between women’s rights, civil rights, and gay rights in the Second Inaugural speech, Obama states that “our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts.”³ And at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches Obama connects
Sojourner Truth and civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, whose pivotal contributions had been overlooked in the conventional male-dominated narrative of the movement, with the well-known suffragist Susan B. Anthony, “who shook the system until the law reflected [the] truth” that these women “could do as much as any man and then some.” In the same speech Obama would connect Lewis and Clark with the hitherto neglected Sacajawea, and “gay Americans whose blood ran in the streets of San Francisco and New York” with civil rights activists whose “blood ran down” the Edmund Pettus Bridge.4

Obama would also devise an understanding of American exceptionalism that is fundamentally rooted in constant political transformation, “For we were born of change.” We should not rest on our laurels, but rather we should revere America’s ability to subject itself to intensive self-scrutiny for the sake of improvement, and its continuing awareness of its own imperfections and limitations.

What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this, what greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals? That’s why Selma is not some outlier in the American experience.5

Given the variety of events that have shaped America—and the diversity of the people who have shaped those events—for Obama, dissent is woven into the American project itself, which is a continually evolving process:

Being true to our founding documents does not require us to agree on every contour of life. It does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way or follow the same
precise path to happiness. Progress does not compel us to settle centuries-long debates
about the role of government for all time, but it does require us to act in our time.\textsuperscript{6}

I begin this book with these passages not because I plan to analyze the intricacies of the
Obama presidency, examine his rhetorical strategies, or defend or attack his political ideology.
Rather, his remarks indicate the broader theme of the work I present here. Obama’s view of the
America envisions a series of upheavals that advanced the rights and freedoms of marginalized
populations initially left out of the founding narrative. For many members of these groups, the
American project was a process whose fundamental principles were subject to constant scrutiny
and adjustment with a view to becoming “a more perfect Union.”\textsuperscript{7} As these previously neglected
Americans have been increasingly recognized, so too have their unsung advocates and
chroniclers emerged from obscurity and helped reshape the narrative of America.

The Jacksonian era was certainly one of those tumultuous periods in which the strain of
marginalized populations, especially women and enslaved persons, grew in severity to such an
extent as to raise fundamental questions about their enfranchisement.\textsuperscript{8} Foundational American
principles such as constitutional intent, federalism, citizenship and representation, equality and
freedom, came under close scrutiny, and the results have fundamentally reshaped the country.
Much of what we understand of this time of upheaval has come from historians, scholars of
literature, and others who have thoroughly examined the works of those whose efforts drove the
development of abolitionism and the early women’s rights movement. In the process, the
invaluable contributions of many early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists have come to
light and have been increasingly integrated into the historical and literary narratives of the
evolution of America.
In comparison, from the perspective of political theory, our understanding of two of the most serious challenges faced by the nation, slavery and the oppression of women, is still relatively limited. Many early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists still languish in obscurity largely because of the restrictions that persist in American political thought on the sources of information considered theoretically significant and legitimate objects of study. Many abolitionists and early women’s rights advocates were not professional philosophers and wrote no theoretical treatises. Although American political thought must by necessity include nontraditional theorists and unconventional modes of theorizing to accommodate pivotal figures such as the Founders and Abraham Lincoln, it does not extend the same recognition to many abolitionists and early women’s rights advocates. As a result, the contributions of the very people whose efforts directly shaped the arguments over essential questions about the American project have remained unexamined.

In fact, that the wealth of letters, speeches, pamphlets, and newspaper articles left behind by these figures contain important theoretical lessons. In particular, the works of seven influential early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists in the Jacksonian era who have largely escaped the purview of American political thought—Frances Wright (1795-1852), Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), Angelina Grimké (1805-1879), Sarah Grimké (1792-1873), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), and Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883)—offer significant theoretical insights into two of the most important developments in American history. Through close and careful analysis of their contributions, I bring their theoretical underpinnings to light. When necessary, using political theorists who have already been recognized as worthy of examination as frames of reference reveals that these advocates were not only engaging in many of the same theoretical debates and on many different levels but,
equally important, broadening and innovating on traditional mainstream theoretical concepts to better accommodate women and the disenfranchised. Although a few of these advocates have been characterized primarily as religious thinkers whose spiritual commitments overrode their political concerns, I show the relevance of their contributions by highlighting the political significance of their efforts.

Closer inspection reveals that the work of these women anticipates subsequent, more commonly known developments in abolitionism and early women’s rights. Their pivotal role as precursors to other thinkers and advocates has been so severely underestimated precisely as a result of their neglect. They help frame the work of other nineteenth century reformers such as Catherine Beecher (1800-1878), Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), Lucy Stone (1816-1893), Ernestine Rose (1810-1892), and Margaret Fuller (1810-1850). Popular writers who left indelible marks on the American conscience such as Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) and Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) are also deeply indebted to the insights provided by these women. The passionate appeals to the American Founding and the Declaration of Independence with which Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass are credited echo the appeals made by the women I discuss in the book, who continually refer to that bygone era while adapting its theoretical meaning to better accommodate the shifting needs of the American people. The same is true for the principles of self-ownership and self-rule articulated by Lincoln and Douglass for which they are renowned. The emphasis by these women on independent thought and action as the basis of true equality and freedom rests on similar theories of the self. The account of American civil society for which Alexis de Tocqueville is rightly celebrated should be seen as one among many elaborations offered by these women and others who, through keen observation of the state of democracy in America, sought fundamental change not just politically but morally, culturally,
socially, and religiously as well. The female travelers to the young nation whose works I explore were clearly and profoundly distraught by its failure to live up to its own founding principles when it came to slavery and the oppression of women, and focused their efforts on appealing to the best selves of the American people.\(^{10}\) By developing greater appreciation for the deep lineages and the variety of iterations of these important theories and ideas, we also better understand the theoretical upheavals of the Jacksonian era and the American project generally. We can begin to see the ways in which abolitionism and the early women’s rights movement properly understood in all their diversity are central to the development of American political thought.

More broadly, the efforts of these women lay the groundwork for “important twentieth-century constitutional doctrines, including universal suffrage, equal representation, and one person, one vote.”\(^ {11}\) Together they articulated “a vision of gender justice” that underpins feminist legal claims as well as racial justice. They developed a new view of citizenship that was based on a revised understanding of “We the People,” one that insisted on “voting as a fundamental right,” “one person, one vote,” and “the national enforcement of rights” that required an expansion of federal power.\(^ {12}\) Their participation in civic institutions expanded notions of freedom of speech, expression, and assembly, the right to petition government, and civil disobedience.\(^ {13}\) Their efforts, along with others, “helped elevate new conceptions of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination as principles of equality that prohibited arbitrary gender restrictions and male prerogatives.”\(^ {14}\)

The work of these women also represents a “constituent moment” in American history in which “the underauthorized” or marginalized individuals and groups, including the early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates I analyze, “seize the mantle of authorization, changing
the inherited rules of authorization in the process,” and thereby “invent a new political space.”

On this view, “enthusiastic” speech or action, such as religious, poetic, or literary speech that animates everyday life in civil society but is deemed illegitimate in the political realm—much of which is articulated by women reformers such as those I examine—takes on “transformative potential.” In their enthusiastic speech and in deed, the early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates in this book sought to create a transformative understanding of democratic citizenship.

Situating *An American Enlightenment* among Early Women’s Rights and Abolitionist Narratives

Despite the overall lack of consideration given to abolitionists and early women’s rights advocates in American political thought, recent scholarly trends spanning several disciplines have helped pave the way for the kind of detailed theoretical analysis I undertake. By showing how my work is indebted to and yet departs from other studies, I explain the structure of the argument and demonstrate the relevance and originality of my contribution.

For insights into political theory in the Jacksonian era, a major source continues to be Alexis de Tocqueville’s expansive treatise *Democracy in America*, not only because interpreters find his observations compelling, but also because there were relatively few comparable treatises of its kind produced in this period, and relatively few thinkers who devoted themselves to this type of theoretical work in America. In response to this challenge, American political thought has broadened its purview to include thinkers who were not formal theorists and sources that go beyond conventional modes of theorizing. Major figures such as Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln, for example, were pragmatic politicians and public figures, not professional philosophers or intellectuals. They left behind no extended treatises, yet their writings and
speeches clearly offer rich theoretical contributions about the fundamental questions that shape
government, and are therefore recognized as legitimate sources of political theory. The
development of American political thought has also been traced in works of American literature,
which similarly fall beyond conventional political theory genres, by authors such as Walt
Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and others. And by
acknowledging the political and theoretical contributions of religious writings, speeches, and
other forms of communication, American political thought has expanded its traditional focus on
secular sources.

A few abolitionists and early women’s rights advocates have been the focus of extended
study in political theory, including Frederick Douglass and, notably, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The
contributions of Frances Wright, Sarah Grimké, and Margaret Fuller have been situated
within larger theoretical movements such as utopian socialism, utilitarianism, Anglo-American
radical sectarianism, and Romanticism. One of the most influential figures on the early
women’s rights movement, Mary Wollstonecraft, has been firmly established as an important
political theorist in her own right, through examinations of her liberalism, radicalism,
Aristotelianism, and civic republicanism. Wollstonecraft’s considerable influence in both the
United States and Europe has been explored in detail as well.

Historical examinations of the early women’s rights movement have been instrumental in
opening new opportunities for analysis. Stanton and Anthony’s monumental work, The History
of Woman Suffrage traces the origin of the early women’s rights movement and Stanton’s own
emergence as a leader. Widely accepted as the definitive account of the movement, the History
has shaped the conventional narrative and provides the framework for a number of influential
studies. While greater attention to the early stages of feminism and the suffrage movement is
laudable, it has also led to unintended consequences. As the prominence of Stanton and other advocates was elevated, others were marginalized, mischaracterized, underestimated, or overlooked altogether, especially African American women, white and African American men, and advocates who predated Stanton such as Wright, Mott, and the Grimkés.

To address these concerns, the conventional narrative has been challenged by a number of path-breaking works that broaden our understanding of the movement by including a far more diverse set of actors and influences.\(^{27}\) Detailed historical biographies of the Grimké sisters, Mott, as well as Stanton herself, have recast their roles in the early women’s rights movement by calling attention to the multiple influences on their ideas and the complexity of their views.\(^{28}\) Now we see a transnational movement that begins not necessarily with Stanton in 1848 but perhaps even far earlier, with the French Revolution and the publication of Wollstonecraft’s pioneering treatise on women.\(^{29}\) The primary focus on the contributions of elite white American women in the narrative has been broadened by recent analyses that reveal interracial networks of men and women who worked together to end slavery and secure greater rights for women.\(^{30}\) Black and white men served as influential collaborators in the early women’s rights and abolitionist movements, including Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), David Walker (c. 1796-1830), Robert Purvis (1810-1898), James Forten (1776-1842), Wendell Phillips (1811-1884), Gerrit Smith (1787-1874), and William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879). Black women such as Maria Stewart (1803-1880), Harriet Forten (1810-1875), Sarah Louisa Forten (1814-1883), Harriet Tubman (1822-1913), Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) played pivotal roles in the abolitionist movement and advanced the status of women as well.\(^{31}\)
Tracing an early women’s rights movement that predates Stanton has also led to the reexamination of its relation with abolitionism. In the conventional narrative of the *History*, the women’s right movement begins in the 1840s, after the emergence of the leading abolitionist Garrison. Thus the prevailing view has been that the early women’s rights movement derived from American abolitionism.\(^3^2\) It is true that in 1829 Garrison explicitly invited American women who were already participating in various benevolent societies to join forces with him and end slavery. After controversy surrounding women’s newfound political role led to the 1840 split in the American Antislavery Society, female supporters remained aligned with Garrison and over the next two decades held several women’s rights conventions throughout the country, including the pivotal 1848 gathering at Seneca Falls.\(^3^3\)

If the origins of the early women’s rights movement is traced back to the 1820s and 1830s, however, we see a more complementary relation between the two causes.\(^3^4\) The inclusion of women in the abolitionist movement would challenge fundamental assumptions about American citizenship and women’s political participation.\(^3^5\) The female antislavery societies and petitioning campaigns that formed during this period would raise important questions about women’s political role as well as the relation between governmental and nongovernmental power.\(^3^6\) The connection forged by Garrison between natural rights and equal rights for slaves created a “liberalism of rights” that women reformers found sufficiently compelling to advocate for themselves.\(^3^7\) Not only did abolitionism play an important role in the formation of the early movement, but a number of political, social, and religious factors were deeply influential as well.\(^3^8\) Early women’s rights advocates were instructed in a variety of philosophical and ideological teachings and adapted these lessons for their own purposes.\(^3^9\)
Not only have the origins of the women’s rights movement been subject to more intensive scrutiny, the nature of Garrison’s influence itself has also been reexamined. Many of the early women’s rights advocates who precede Stanton have been categorized simply as Garrisonians, which understates the theoretical diversity among them. Whereas Garrison adhered to an anarchic “no-governmentalism,” others with ties to Garrison such as Frederick Douglass and Gerrit Smith supported the Liberty Party and with it the possibility of political reform through direct involvement. Closer examination reveals that another group of abolitionists “believed that human governments should be reordered to correspond with God’s democratic moral government” and “left a place for localized, voluntary external structures.” As I will show, several women’s rights advocates typically labeled “no-government” Garrisonians, including Mott and the Grimkés, actually fall into the latter, more politically engaged category. The complexity and diversity of the early women’s rights movement underscore the need for additional analysis from the perspective of political theory.

With the reconsideration of the conventional narrative, our historical understanding of the early women’s rights movement as a primarily secular phenomenon has also changed. Given the patriarchal nature of established religions, especially Christianity, it had been seen as necessary for early women’s rights advocates to move away from religious principles and embrace various forms of secular rationalism. The influence of Stanton’s deeply skeptical view of established religion, a lifelong preoccupation that culminates in one of her last major works, The Woman’s Bible, undoubtedly shaped the conventional narrative of the movement, which predictably grows more secular over time. However, a variety of religious principles permeated the early women’s rights movement and served a number of constructive purposes. Progressive Quakerism offered girls access to education that closely approximated the instruction of boys as well as
opportunities to speak before religious audiences.\textsuperscript{43} Equally important, many progressive Quaker reformers envisioned religion and reason as complementary.\textsuperscript{44} Religion was not relegated to the isolated realm of female domesticity, but instead occupied a prominent public position. As early women’s rights advocates “developed a critical perspective of religious castes, . . . church creeds,” and patriarchal hierarchies, religion became politically relevant as well.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, rather than posing insurmountable obstacles to reform, religion provided important entry points for early women’s rights advocates.

My analysis explores the influence of religion by examining the ways in which the theological convictions of early women’s rights reformers, rather than leading to political apathy or apolitical anarchism, were instead extended and reformulated into rich and complex views of political life. The progressive Quakerism that informed several of these advocates was based on a view of human nature and collective action that was deeply egalitarian and voluntarist. The progressive Quaker critique of religious dogmatism serves as the foundation for a view of active citizenship and a kind of participatory democracy. Progressive Quakerism is also the foundation for a theory of American constitutionalism. “Quaker constitutionalism” asserts an eternal or fundamental constitution that is apprehended through “synteresis,” an “inner voice” that is spiritual but also guided by the extensive application of human reason. This constitutionalism in turn informs the creation of political institutions as well as social and cultural practices. On this view, social ills arise when the fundamental constitution is misinterpreted or obscured. Reform is made possible by a return to first principles, which requires the combination of human reason and synteresis.\textsuperscript{46}

Although historical studies have greatly advanced our understanding of the early women’s rights movement and abolitionism, literary criticism has also contributed to our
knowledge in significant ways. Particularly helpful are efforts to explore the deployment and evolution of sentimental literature and related concepts of sympathy, sentiment, and empathy in nineteenth century literature. Sentimental literature, understood generally as a genre that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, appeals primarily to emotions and feelings rather than reason. Reform efforts in the nineteenth century sought to establish connections between those who are marginalized and those who are not and increasingly used sentimental literature to accomplish that goal. By encouraging greater understanding of or appreciation for the plight of enslaved persons and marginalized women, works of literature sought to motivate those who were in a position of influence to advocate for change.47 Abolitionist literature, including slave narratives such as Douglass’s autobiography and novels such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, relied heavily on sentimentality to gain support for ending slavery.48 Women’s rights advocates also tapped into the power of sentimentality, often through domestic fiction, to help others identify with the plight of women.

Much of the scholarly discourse surrounding sentimental literature falls into two general categories within what is widely referred to as the “Douglas-Tompkins Debate,” named after the two prominent scholars credited with defining its terms, Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins. Those in Douglas’s camp adhere to her critical view of sentimentality as “a fall from tough-minded . . . Calvinism into ‘rancid,’ individualistic emotionalism, the beginnings of a debased mass consumer culture.”49 These critics argue that sentimental literature often objectified the sufferers of oppression and failed to motivate audiences to channel their emotions into concrete action.50 Thus although Angelina Grimké sought to appeal to a general audience, her “rhetoric of sympathy” was geared primarily toward elite white women. As a result, Grimké “creates an authority for herself and other well-to-do white women while erasing the influence of other
women.” A similar claim can be made about Sarah Grimké’s graphic portrayals of cruelty against slaves. Although her work seeks to invoke a “vicarious sharing” of suffering, it ultimately “calls attention to the power imbalance between the person experiencing actual oppression and the sympathetic advocate” because her appeal is focused primarily on “white women who looking on, should be called to action.” Lucretia Mott deploys a “rhetoric of courtship” in which she appears “to accept the dominance of male leaders” and at the same time instills in her audience “a desire to identify with them, to temporarily transcend their differences in status.” Thus although Mott does not “question the hierarchy of gender,” she “nonetheless take[s] authority by evoking its influence.” Although such criticisms highlight the rhetorical prowess of these advocates, the analyses also undermine the legitimacy and theoretical importance of their appeals.

Adherents to Tompkins’s interpretations, by contrast, envision sentimentality in more constructive terms, as “a complex and effective affirmation of women’s power, a grass roots antipatriarchal politics.” Along similar lines, although typically understood as a kind of compassion or concern, sympathy can also be considered a cognitive process of “imaginative identification” that seeks to eliminate the ignorance caused by bias. As such, sympathy could be a “positive force in politics.” A related avenue of study has focused on the moral and philosophical concept of sympathy and its role in nineteenth century reform. Scottish Enlightenment moral theory is founded on the concept of sympathy which, depending on one’s perspective, supplemented or corrected Enlightenment individualism. For Scottish Enlightenment theorists, “emotions . . . assume a central place in moral thought” and “ordinary life comes to be affirmed as profoundly valuable.” This affirmation “sustains what is virtually a moral consensus of the modern world on the values of justice and benevolence.”
Adam Smith is perhaps the best known proponent of the moral theory of sympathy and the related concept of the impartial spectator, and his work influenced a number of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. Recent scholarship has explored the impact of Smith’s theory in particular and Scottish Enlightenment thought generally on the American founding. Nineteenth century American rhetoric was significantly shaped by popularized versions of Smith’s works written by George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and other Scottish Enlightenment proponents of “New Rhetoric.” These popularizers sought to combine classical rhetoric with “belletristic interests in ‘criticism and literary taste’ and epistemological approaches to rhetoric as a ‘science’ closely related to the study of the ‘mental faculties.’”

Given the pervasive influence of Smith and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers in American culture, it should not be surprising that early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists made extensive use of their theories as well. Smith’s moral theory of sympathy, for example, and Scottish Enlightenment philosophy more broadly helped shape popular views of Republican motherhood, thereby setting the stage for nineteenth century reformers. Indeed, Smith and Scottish Enlightenment thinkers are often included among the hybrid of moral theorists who helped shape abolitionism and the early women’s rights movement. Although the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres had not yet been published, popularizers of Smith’s teachings such as Campbell and Blair managed to impart many of the concepts it would advance through their own work, which in turn influenced the work of many activists. Elements of Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments can be seen in Stowe’s tour de force of sentimental abolitionist literature Uncle Tom’s Cabin via Archibald Alison, another influential popularizer whose work she studied in detail. Smith’s principle of sympathy reappears throughout nineteenth century novels by Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and others. His
theory of the impartial spectator is helpful in understanding antislavery appeals and the emergence of “humanitarianism” in the nineteenth century. Along with Smith’s moral principles and theories of rhetoric, his critique of commerce and the division of labor in the *Wealth of Nations* reemerges in abolitionist and early women’s rights rhetoric, as does the tension between the progress of commercial society and the persistence of slavery.

My work expands on these studies of Smith as a moral and political theorist whose concept of sympathy and views on rhetoric help us better understand the challenges to the American project waged by early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists. For example, I frame Wright’s theoretical contributions partly in terms of Smith’s idea of sympathy and his critique of commerce and the division of labor. I also show how Martineau innovates on Smith’s concept of sympathy in order to provide an understanding of America’s foundational principles that better accommodates the needs of an increasingly diverse society, which includes previously disenfranchised populations such as women and enslaved persons. To help explain Angelina Grimké’s moral rhetoric of persuasion and Stanton’s moral rhetoric of ridicule, I draw from Smith’s important yet relatively neglected *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.

As the examinations of sympathy and sentimentality overlap in literary studies and political theory, so too does the study of rhetoric and communication in the early women’s rights movement offer useful insights into the strategies used by women speakers and writers to carve out a public space and, ultimately, to create a political identity for themselves. Although American women made inroads into the male-dominated public realm as lecturers, students and producers of literature, activists in benevolent societies, petitioners, and organizers of reform activities, they still did not enjoy the full benefits of that sphere. Women were not granted rights to free speech, suffrage, private property, divorce, equal education, or extended vocational
opportunities that were enjoyed by most men. As part and parcel of the conventional early
women’s rights narrative, the influence of women typically was relegated to the “private sphere”
that was separated from the public political realm of men, and framed in terms of a “cult of (true)
womanhood” or “discourse of domesticity,” which emphasized values such as piety, chastity,
and submissiveness.67 Whatever rhetorical activity women participated in would by implication
be relegated to this separate and sequestered sphere as well. Thus the efforts of reformers were
characterized as inappropriate encroachments that threatened to upend cherished American
tradition and were vilified for failing to conform to its masculinist norms.68

However, the theory of separate spheres has been supplanted by interpretations that
acknowledge the “complex historical processes that weave” the two worlds together. Along
similar lines, the “discourse of domesticity” has proven an inadequate analytical tool because it
relies on an “unremarked, confusing elision between sentimentality and domesticity.” Because
domesticity is “the very home of consumer culture” that constructs a “packaged” version of
“emotion” that is ultimately “distasteful,” sentimentality, with which it is identified, has been
devalued.69 As sentimentality is devalued, so too are the contributions of reformers who rely on
sentimental literature to convey their ideas. Indeed, a closer look at the movement before Stanton
reveals that the boundary between the public and private realms in nineteenth century America
was far more porous and fluid than normally thought. In fact, women played a variety of roles in
public that, while not overtly political, were nonetheless deeply influential in political affairs.70
Moreover, women often used their personal and individual experiences to fashion a public
identity that was geared toward equally public activism.71 To better accommodate the
multifaceted nature of women reformers and the multidimensionality of their contributions, a
more nuanced understanding of the public realm is needed.
As a mediator between the political realm of the state, on the one hand, and the private
development of individual self-interest, on the other, Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois “public
sphere” has been helpful in providing a framework through which to study the rich and diverse
contributions of early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists. In Habermas’s public sphere,
“citizens behave as a public body when they confer . . . about matters of general interest” as if
they were male citizens because they do so “with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and
association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions” they do not otherwise enjoy.72
By definition, Habermas’s public sphere includes modes of communication that straddle the
political and private realms, such as political or “intellectual” newspapers, and have been
expanded to include sentimental literature, popular writings for women and freed slaves, which
expressed a view of “citizenship as a zone of protection against tyranny” and for “the
maintenance of liberty,” and even actual activities by freed black and women.73

Although Habermas’s public sphere is helpful in characterizing the unique status of
women in nineteenth century America, it still relies on and perpetuates masculinist norms, such
as an abstract ideal of the individual as utterly free to assemble and speak out at will, and a
“common moral and legal vision, which was derived from [men’s] class position as bourgeois
property owners.”74 The public sphere privileges rational and deliberate elements because it
relies on rational deliberation as the basis for mutual understanding in a democratic society. Thus
in spite of its apparent openness, the public realm by definition excludes the very people most in
need of “publicity” in the nineteenth century, namely, women and enslaved persons.75
Habermas’s theory fails to account for the “transformative potential” of enthusiastic speech or
action, such as religious, poetic, or literary speech, which animates everyday life in civil
society.76 As a result, the public sphere is inadequate in bringing together and defining “who
comprises the self-legislating people, that ‘pure original fountain of all legislative authority’” in
America.77

As an alternative to the single “public” realm that enforces and perpetuates masculinist
bourgeois values, critics have developed a realm of “counterpublics,” a system of “parallel
discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate
counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and
needs.”78 On this view, abolitionists and early women’s rights advocates formed a variety of
oppositional counterpublics that struggled against social and political norms.79 These recent
studies have included diverse American thinkers such as Benjamin Rush, Walt Whitman, and
Douglass.80 Others have begun to explore the ways in which reformers such as Child, Stowe,
Sarah Grimké, Stanton, and Anthony carved out a space within constitutional debates in which a
constitutionalism that abolishes slavery and provides greater rights for women could emerge.81
My study offers a significant contribution to this line of inquiry. By comprising a counterpublic
of their own, the words and deeds of the early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates
examined here form “constituent moments” in which “the underauthorized—imposters, radicals,
self-created entities—seize the mantle of authorization, changing the inherited rules of
authorization in the process,” and thereby “invent a new political space.”82 These women also
serve as “civic founders or cofounders of the U.S. constitution” because their efforts also help
advance vital constitutional doctrines on suffrage, representation, federal power, freedom of
speech, expression, and assembly, the right to petition government, and civil disobedience.83

Drawing from all of these trends in scholarly literature, I offer original theoretical
insights into the beginnings of the early women’s rights and abolitionist movements in America.
By beginning my study not with Stanton, but with the influential reformers who preceded her, I
underscore the view that the struggle for women’s rights began well before 1848. Several women analyzed here were affiliates of or sympathizers with Garrison, but each of their contributions was unique and not simply attributable to Garrisonianism. Their activities blurred the distinction between the public and private realms and were not merely expressions of the “cult of true womanhood” or “discourse of domesticity.” Although these women could not legally vote or serve in political office, their efforts proved politically relevant and formed a Habermasian public sphere of activism or, more accurately, a network of counterpublics of ardent reformers. Their views on human nature and human rights, many of which arose primarily from religious convictions, did not merely shape their private lives but also informed their conceptions of political citizenship. The activism of these women laid much of the groundwork for the suffrage movement and subsequent legal and political reforms in the United States that characterize the feminist movement, with which people tend to be more familiar.

Interpretative Approach

To highlight the important contributions these advocates make to American political thought, I develop an approach that helps address criticisms of political theory in particular and theorizing generally.

A broad overview reveals that the ideas of these early women’s rights advocates reflect schools of thought such as Enlightenment rationalism, utopian socialism, utilitarianism, Anglo-American radical sectarianism, and Romanticism. To this should be added the ubiquitous categories of civic republicanism and Lockean liberalism, which denote the tension between community, the common good, and public-spiritedness, on the one hand, and a more limited view of government designed to protect individual rights and liberties, on the other.
helpful in situating the ideas of early women’s rights advocates generally, these categories are also imprecise and, in some cases, highly contested. Equally problematic, these categories are ill-suited for fully capturing the innovative nature of the contributions of these women because they have been constructed with already existing political theories that were created by—and for—men. Civic republicanism, liberalism, socialism, utilitarianism, sectarianism, and Romanticism were not explicitly concerned with women’s rights or abolitionism, and were not equipped to provide a real space for feminist theory to emerge. Instead, mainstream theories were “ontologically committed to a reality in which ‘man’ is the measure of all things” and whose “manner of discourse within political theory has been structured, conceptually and methodologically, to favor or reflect men’s modes of intellectual practice.” To impose broad categorizations is to force substantive contributions—in this case, the unique contributions of early women’s rights advocates—into an “ideological paradigm” of mainstream ideas established by men for men, to “wrongly presume an equality of the speaking subject or a unified space of representation,” or to impose “an underlying (overlapping) . . . consensus” when there is none. By seeking “to integrate women into the very categories of political membership from which they had been originally excluded” essentially by “adding women into the mix,” we sidestep the important task of fundamentally “rethink[ing] core concepts of ‘maelstream’ political theory” and “altering the very framework of politics in which the concepts were first developed and the so-called woman question has been posed.”

Judicious use of these categories in analyzing the theoretical contributions of women can, however, be defended on feminist grounds. Feminist theorizing must take into account the historical, political, and philosophical context in which it arises to avoid the trap of portraying itself as an ahistorical conversation about eternal questions among professional intellectuals and
their successors—a conversation that has traditionally excluded women.91 “Comparisons between feminist theorists and their canonical male counterparts” continue to be useful because they help “build on knowledge we already have” in the history of political thought “as we discuss the unfamiliar” terrain of feminist political theory. Canonical thinkers function “as familiar means to the end of introducing and incorporating women thinkers with whom they contrast fruitfully.”92

To provide an analysis that works beyond problematic generalities and classifications, I bring the theoretical underpinnings of these reformers’ efforts to light by framing them from the perspective of specific contemporaneous political theorists such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Adam Smith, and Jeremy Bentham, whose significance has been firmly established in political philosophy. Although the same objections to employing male-dominated paradigms of thought can be raised to applying particular male theorists, I try to address these concerns in several ways. My work uses mainstream political theory to frame the contributions of marginalized thinkers, yet it does so without portraying early women’s rights theorists as derivative of their male counterparts.93 Nor is the goal to draw any direct or causal connection or to establish any kind of “transhistorical dialogue” between the ideas of male theorists and those held by early women’s rights advocates.94 I use the theories of Tocqueville, Smith, and Bentham as frames of reference to show how innovative early women’s rights advocates were, for it is only through detailed analysis and point-by-point comparison that similarities and differences appear. By applying the sort of detailed textual exegesis performed by political theorists to highlight the nuances in these works, I hope to demonstrate that political theory has an important role to play in understanding the original contributions of early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates, in addition to history, literature, and other disciplines.
There is of course considerable precedent in political theory and other disciplines for using thinkers to frame arguments without establishing causality or implying unoriginality. For example, my work builds on recent studies of Smith’s political thought that explore his contribution to the American founding and the American project, which significantly broaden the scope of his work beyond economic prescriptions to encompass moral and rhetorical theory and their political implications, but do not necessarily prove direct causation. Studies in history, literature, rhetoric, and communications also view Smith as representative of Scottish Enlightenment theory as it was popularized in America without necessarily claiming that Smith is the actual source of American doctrines.

Although the primary focus of the book is not on the political theories of Tocqueville, Smith, or Bentham, I do not wish to use these thinkers merely as props. Rather, I hope to offer some new insights into their ideas as well. For example, I demonstrate the relevance of Smith’s political theory in unexamined areas of nineteenth century American political thought and by analyzing previously neglected aspects of his work. In particular, I interpret the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, a work that is familiar to scholars of literature and rhetoric but relatively unknown to political theorists, as an extension of Smith’s moral and political thought. Because these investigations are relatively new, I devote considerable time to elaborating less familiar passages of Smith’s works and unexplored aspects of his theory. Along similar lines, less is known about Bentham’s account of political corruption in his late work *Constitutional Code* than about his theory of utilitarianism, and a better understanding helps frame the unique contributions of Wright. Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* has been analyzed extensively by political theorists, but few have noted the variety of sources—many of which were written by women—from which Tocqueville could have drawn to develop his
account of women in America, but did not. Tocqueville’s account of American slavery also emerges among a variety of competing abolitionist narratives that remain largely unnoticed by political theorists, including Tocqueville himself. Thus my book should be seen as presenting new findings not only on the works of early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates but on aspects of Tocqueville’s, Smith’s, and Bentham’s ideas as well. I want to help advance our knowledge of canonical thinkers in ways that scholars in mainstream history of political thought and American political theory should find useful.

My method also addresses a more general critique of the relevance of theorizing itself, namely, the charge that it lacks determinative value; that it plays no direct role in influencing political debates or altering political conditions. There is little evidence indicating that these reformists were aware of the theoretical underpinnings or the intellectual heritage of their ideas. Indeed, it is often difficult to determine the extent to which the advocates directly influenced each other. Equally important, there is no way to determine with certitude the practical effects of these theories on the reform efforts themselves, or the precise ways in which ideas were translated into practice. In this sense, it can be argued that abstract ideas are not clearly “determinative” in explaining human behavior. Interpreters have sought to address this problem by characterizing written works of a theoretical cast as either “the product of a complex set of social practices,” or by focusing on their use of a particular “political language” associated with the culture in which they are created.

This move away from abstract theory understood as a set of principles whose determinative value is difficult to ascertain, and toward a view of theory as constituted by social, cultural, and political practices, has led to a much broader critique of the very use of canonical theory to shed light on issues of gender, race, and class. On this view, the works of Tocqueville,
Smith, and Bentham cannot be expanded to accommodate the needs of women, African Americans, and other marginalized populations precisely because their theories are founded on and define themselves by the exclusion of these very groups, an exclusion which is itself an outgrowth of the social, cultural, and political practices about which they theorized. For instance, to varying degrees, their theories endorse the concept of the “subject as rational agent,” which in turn shapes their understandings of core political concepts such as “authority, rights, equality, and freedom.” However, critics note, their understandings of sovereignty and rationality are simply “fantasies” because they are founded on a kind of “dangerous masculinity” which “is productive of, and dependent on, the feminine subject as subjected.” By implication, these canonical theorists also rely on a kind of “dangerous” racism in which the racial subject is and must be subjected as well. Universalizing by abstraction masks the “exclusionary practices” on which such narratives are based, and erases the distinctions between individuals with unique identities and experiences, especially those who are marginalized.102

The broader “turn toward the subject” can also work against many of the women thinkers who are the focus of my book. For critics, their shared status as elite white women problematizes their otherwise marginalized position in American society. Virtually all of these women count themselves among “the culturally privileged” who seek to “humanize those subjects who have been excluded” and allow them to be “recognized as candidates for inclusion in the body politic.”103 Even Truth, a freed slave who spoke at women’s rights conventions, stands apart from other black women. Much like canonical theorists, their efforts to reach out to other marginalized groups, including poor and working-class white women, African American women, and African American men, rely on the concept of the subject as agent, and are premised upon universal truth claims about sovereignty, equality, freedom, and human rights. And yet, critics
observe that because these efforts are constituted largely from the perspectives of elite white privilege, they cannot help but recreate and reinforce the same power structures from which they arise. The “compassionate liberalism” that serves as the basis of early women’s rights and abolitionist efforts, for instance, is “at best, a kind of sandpaper on the surface of the racist monument” of nineteenth century American culture “whose structural and economic solidity endures.” The universal category of “woman” on which early women’s advocates rely, defined as a subject who possesses certain essential characteristics or shares particular experiences, conceals within “a kind of soft supremacy rooted in compassion and coercive identification [that] wants to dissolve all that structure [of racism] through the work of good intentionality, while busily exoticizing and diminishing the inconvenient and the noncompliant.”

Important insights have been gained by exposing the problematic assumptions on which canonical theories are based, and they have informed many aspects of my work, as subsequent chapters shall show. However, there are considerable risks involved in this approach that I want to address as well. Critics “seem to have lost sight of the classic and legitimate political concerns of the canonical authors.” As a result, critical theory leads us “away from questions of collective action and citizenship, indeed from any robust understanding of the public sphere altogether [and] away from broader questions about structures of power and economic justice.” Instead, “social change seems restricted to work on the self or micro-practices of self-transformation.” And yet, abolitionism and the women’s rights movement represent two of the most important examples in which “collective action and citizenship” raise important questions about “structures of power and economic justice” in America. As such, they must be understood in all their complexity, acknowledging the weaknesses of their advocates but also recognizing their strengths.
Although the intention of critical theory is not to “declare canonical theory bankrupt,” it is difficult not to conclude that because the canon is so deeply contaminated by sexism, racism, and classism, little, if anything, can be salvaged from it. In the process of exposing the power dynamics underlying the “inherited concepts” of canonical theory, critics risk creating a homogenizing narrative of their own in which a new set of abstract ideas—racism, sexism, classism—themselves contribute to the continued marginalization of oppressed peoples by glossing over important distinctions and missing opportunities to shed light on broader questions regarding political action. To portray theorizing as simply the product of a complex set of social practices is to offer a materialistic understanding of human affairs that cannot adequately account for the originality and novelty of ideas that transcend a particular time and place and lead to reform. Similarly, if theorizing is seen as merely employing the particular political language associated with the culture in which it is created, such a descriptive account of constituted subjects fails to explain why a particular political language was used or to what specific effects.

To address these concerns, I offer an alternative conception of what it means for abstract theories to be “determinative” that is not materialistic, reductionist, or merely descriptive. It is true that these early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates worked within the confines of the social, political, and cultural norms in which they lived. And yet they also tried to expand and ultimately transform those very same norms to accommodate a changing society. These women served as “civic founders” of an “American civic constitution,” an understanding of the “governing ideals of liberty, equality, and justice” that “did not spring naturally from the text of the original Constitution, were not envisioned by famous framers, and were not set in motion by judges or political leaders.” These reformers considered their efforts to be continuations of, not
innovations to, the American founding properly understood. And yet, they expanded the
fundamental principles of the American project to address the needs of the disenfranchised,
thereby laying the groundwork for “new constitutional rights and commitments.”107 As these
women reassert themselves in the present as they are uncovered and interpreted in books like this
one, they help America undergo the intensive self-scrutiny that is essential to its identity. The
seven early women’s rights advocates I examine can help guide and reshape the ongoing
American experiment as it works toward “a more perfect Union.” As abstract theories are
uncovered and analyzed, in examinations like mine and others, and as they continue to inform
generations of people, ideas reveal their truly transformative power.

Thus I seek to “innovate within a tradition” in order to explore “how we may speak
through a set of languages handed down to us by disciplinary conventions that may not
comfortably accommodate feminist politics” and “remake them for the present” as well as the
future. I count myself among those who “work within a canon of texts and textual practices” and
who seek to “produce the critical present as distinct from its past(s) by looking to those
moments, those texts, those ‘historical accidents’ [or countercurrents] where difference
emerges.”108 By offering an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates a significant amount of
scholarship from a variety of perspectives, I hope to contribute to the “feminist conversation”
that not only seeks to “disrupt the terms of the canonical one—premised as it is on women’s
absence” but also “to constitute a sense of political community” among theorists themselves,
“based in part on the practice of forming judgments about the canonical texts.”109

Plan of the Book
The book is organized chronologically, based on the publication dates of the works I analyze, to avoid imposing any developmental model on the movement. Given the difficulty in establishing causal connections between reform advocates at this time, such a model would likely be inaccurate or overly homogenizing. Instead, I want to allow the theories of these women to emerge in their own ways. Chapter 1 examines the contributions of Frances Wright, one of the most controversial free thinkers to visit the United States from Scotland and England. Unlike many of her female contemporaries, Wright did leave behind a considerable body of work and extended theoretical reflections. Yet they have eluded close theoretical analysis for several reasons. Like Wollstonecraft, whose philosophical work was long obscured by portrayals that emphasized her radical lifestyle, Wright’s scandalous reputation also distracted from the originality of her ideas. Wright has been seen as largely derivative of her male contemporaries, a popularizer of the theories of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and utopian socialist Robert Owen, and as a mere devotee of liberal rational Enlightenment thought or Scottish Enlightenment thought, which were established by male thinkers.

While the influence of Bentham on her worldview is undeniable, and her close association with Owen is beyond dispute, Wright’s theoretical contribution should not be reduced to a simplified version of Benthamite utilitarianism or Owenite utopianism. These elements of Wright’s thought, while significant, constitute a part of a larger and more complex whole. Wright expands and improves upon these theories to develop an insightful and original analysis of the American project and to propose solutions to the problems that plagued it.

Wright makes several major contributions to our theoretical understanding of the early women’s rights movement and abolitionism. She serves as an essential transitional figure from early republicanism to one of the earliest forms of socialism that would emerge in mid-
nineteenth century America, a development that has been largely unexplored in American political thought. Wright’s romanticized early view of America, and the working agrarian commune she established to enable slaves to purchase their freedom, Nashoba, were extensions of her republicanism. When Nashoba failed, Wright distanced herself from her idealistic republicanism and began to write and speak about American racism, sexism, and economic inequality as systematic forms of oppression that would require radical political and social change. In a series of widely publicized and well-attended lectures delivered in several states, Wright outlined a comprehensive system of reform based on an epistemological method of inquiry to help Americans live up to the fundamental principles of the Founding. Wright’s devastating critique of slavery in America also includes elements that would become part of critical race theory. Building on recent scholarship that identifies aspects of critical race theory in Tocqueville’s thought, I show that Wright’s ideas also include several key arguments of early “criticalists” such as Tocqueville. Wright and Tocqueville recognize racial identities as social constructions and not fixed biological categories. Both offer an early understanding of “interest convergence,” according to which efforts to promote racial equality occur only when the goal of racial equality “converges” with an overarching “interest” of the dominant elite. Both account for the backlash that often results when the privileged class resists efforts to roll back the advantages they enjoy. Finally, both trace the emergence of “negative externalities” that result when whites remain oblivious to the material and ethical price they pay in exchange for the perceived benefits they enjoy in a racist society.

Wright’s application of principles associated with critical race theory to the plight of American women constitutes another major contribution to what would become critical feminist theory. Although Tocqueville develops a relatively progressive view of racism in America, his
account of American women remains attached to the early republican principles of the past. Wright presents an early version of intersectionality by portraying the oppression of women, the enslavement of African Americans, and the injustice of economic inequality as fundamentally intertwined in an institutionalized system of corruption.

Wright’s fourth contribution is also found in her later lectures, in which she transforms what appears to be an empirical and materialist doctrine of knowledge and morality into a method of inquiry that forms the basis of a theory and practice of citizenship. Wright models free thinking and citizenship for others to emulate and make their own. Her speeches offer an experiential view of knowledge and morality that anticipate aspects of American pragmatism. By bringing together a pragmatic approach with a commitment to social reform, Wright anticipates additional elements of critical feminist theory, which begins not with abstract epistemological theories, but rather with the concrete experiences of women.

Chapter 2 focuses on Harriet Martineau who, like Wright, traveled to America and wrote extensively about her findings on slavery and the oppression of women. Martineau was cited by a number of early women’s rights advocates, as was Wright. In spite of the fact that Martineau remained in the United States far longer and met with more prominent political figures than her contemporary, Tocqueville, her work has been largely neglected by political theorists. Martineau’s original contributions have been obscured by the frequent characterization of her as a popularizer of mainstream economic and political doctrines developed by better known men. Thus in her examination of American society, Martineau is seen merely to echo the Garrisonian arguments against slavery and the oppression of women. Noting the passionate nature of her condemnations, scholars have classified her as one among the many writers who deployed a problematic version of sentimentality, which elicited pity from the audience as well as a degree
of condescension toward the suffering. The sheer volume of work she produced as a professional writer has also led some to accuse her of dilettantism. However, close analysis of her lengthy examination of American life, *Society in America*, and her methodological treatise, *How to Observe: Morals and Manners*, reveals that Martineau adapts Smith’s theory of sympathy to accommodate greater diversity among observers and observed. Her theory is better able to address the disenfranchisement of women and the oppression of slaves because it allows people to empathize with those who are radically different from themselves. As individuals connect to others in this way, they are in a far stronger position to realize the disparate treatment and injustices others face and to open themselves to the possibility of reform. Martineau’s innovative account of sympathy distinguishes her from the Garrisonians as well and further highlights the originality of her work.

Chapter 3 analyzes Angelina Grimké’s use of rhetoric in constructing a moral and political theory. Grimké was one of the first women who spoke in public to mixed audiences in the United States (the first being Frances Wright). Her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, along with Sarah Grimké’s *Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States*, served as the opening salvo unleashed by the sisters against the “sins of slavery” and contributed to the burgeoning women’s rights movement. The virulence with which Angelina’s efforts were criticized effectively drove her out of the public realm and into a private life of relative obscurity. The brevity of her career, combined with the deeply emotional and passionate nature of her appeals, has led commentators to emphasize her historical importance in the Garrisonian abolitionist movement and to highlight her rhetorical prowess, while minimizing her theoretical relevance within the abolitionist and early women’s rights movements. Grimké’s work has also been used as an example of the incendiary sentimentalist rhetoric whose excesses have been
widely criticized. The chapter focuses on the highly charged public interchange in 1837 between Grimké and education reformer Catherine Beecher over the abolition of slavery and the rights of women. To explore her unique theoretical contributions, I resituate Grimké’s work within Scottish Enlightenment political theory debates about rhetoric and its vital role in moral and political life. Grimké advances a powerful defense against Beecher’s critique by offering a sophisticated theory of sympathy that avoids charges of sentimentality by carefully balancing reason and emotion. Grimké’s understanding of sympathy and its role in rhetoric bears a number of striking similarities to Smith’s moral theory of rhetoric outlined in the Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. Employing various rhetorical strategies resembling those described by Smith, Grimké is able to convey a moral and political teaching that is crucial to abolitionism and the advancement of women. Yet she also expands Smith’s understanding by offering a number of poignant examples in which sympathy may forge closer connections between the enfranchised and the marginalized and thereby contribute to meaningful political change.

Sarah Grimké, author of Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the focus of chapter 4, has been recognized as “a major feminist thinker” and perhaps even as “the first woman to write a coherent feminist argument in the United States.” The exact nature of Grimké’s theoretical contribution, however, is less clear. Her work has been classified generally as a product of the liberal Enlightenment because of a reluctance among secular-minded interpreters to acknowledge Grimké’s strong religious convictions. There is some evidence for this view in Grimké’s later writings, in which she seems to turn away from her religious understanding of women’s rights and embrace a secular perspective. However, feminist theory has been criticized for selective interpretation by downplaying the importance of religion because of its role in imposing patriarchal worldviews.
To highlight the political implications of her theory, while not losing sight of its religious underpinnings, I frame Grimké’s work within recent research on Quaker constitutionalism exemplified by the contributions of frequently overlooked founding father John Dickinson. Grimké’s views on religion and women’s rights are deeply consistent with Dickinson’s constitutionalism, which also offers an alternative non-patriarchal understanding of the relation between religious teachings and political life. In this regard, Quaker constitutionalism differs from the secular Whig perspective characteristic of Enlightenment liberalism, on the one hand, and divine rights theories of natural law, on the other. Like Dickinson, Grimké believes that the word of God is accessible directly through individual synteresis, rather than through Scripture or religious doctrine, as traditionally believed. Divine teachings, however, can be understood only through human reason. On this view, an eternal fundamental constitution, apprehended through synteresis and guided by the extensive application of human reason, informs the creation of political institutions as well as social and cultural practices such as those in America. Because reason is fallible, however, the fundamental constitution in general and the American Constitution in particular are often misinterpreted and misunderstood. Reform is made possible only by a return to first principles through collective deliberation and discernment, which in turn relies on the combination of human reason and synteresis.

Grimké’s theory is clearly grounded in religious conviction and yet emphasizes the importance of human reason in realizing and achieving equality. Grimké’s critique of scriptural teachings about women and slavery itself demonstrates the very process of reform by rationally reconstructing those same teachings. And it is this rational reconstruction of women’s equality, not divine teaching per se, that she applies to the legal, social, and cultural prescriptions for women. Thus, like other progressive Quaker reformists of her time, Grimké differentiates herself
from the Garrisonian movement by refusing to abandon political life in favor of an anarchist “no-government” solution. In fact, Grimké contributes further to a deeply egalitarian, voluntarist view of political power that is rooted in progressive Quakerism. As Dickinson’s understanding of constitutionalism offers a compelling counterpoint to the received narrative of the American founding, so too do Grimké’s reflections offer an alternative narrative that was crucial to the early women’s rights movement.

Chapter 5 examines the works of Lucretia Mott, the widely recognized moral and spiritual leader of the abolitionist and early women’s rights movements. She has been characterized variously as a disciple of Garrison, a proliferator of Wollstonecraft’s ideas, and a religious promoter of human rights whose earnest efforts were surpassed by the more theoretically sophisticated and politically astute Stanton. These portrayals paradoxically elevate Mott’s status while understating the originality of her views. I analyze Mott’s speeches and writings in detail to show that her unique theoretical contributions are shaped by a combination of elements: a radically anti-dogmatic worldview rooted in her progressive religious faith, an unwavering commitment to autonomy for all people, and an egalitarian conception of power. Through her speeches and writings, Mott proposes a dialectical, self-reflective, critical approach that serves as the basis of political citizenship. By exposing the hidden sources of inequality, oppression, and injustice, her approach empowers human beings to shape an egalitarian, voluntarist political system that is based on authentic consent and philosophic reflection. Moreover, like Sarah Grimké, Mott also reflects important aspects of early Quaker constitutionalism by emphasizing the importance of human reason guided by the inner light and the role of debate and deliberation in fashioning a government based on true consent.
Of all the reformers examined in this book, Stanton, the focus of chapter 6, has been most widely recognized and analyzed by political theorists. Not only was she at the center of the *History of Woman Suffrage*, but unlike many of her contemporaries, Stanton also left behind a considerable body of work, including extended theoretical reflections as well as the more conventional sources of communication used by women reformers, such as speeches, letters, and newspaper articles. Given the complexity of Stanton’s political thought, it is not surprising that her works would include aspects of liberalism, republicanism, and ascriptive inegalitarianism. The rhetorical skills for which Stanton was renowned also reflect aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment theory of sympathy. Again using the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* as a frame, I demonstrate that in her speeches and writings Stanton employs indirect description and appeals to a form of sympathy similar to what Smith envisions as the key to moral instruction. Stanton induces shame and remorse in her audience by conjuring a version of the impartial spectator for which Smith is well known. Stanton leads her audiences through various stages of argumentation, leaving them to conclude, independently, that reform is necessary. In this chapter I offer an original interpretation of Stanton by comparing the role of ridicule in her work with Smith’s account. In the *Lectures* Smith devotes an unusual amount of attention to Jonathan Swift, whose writings employed ridicule in order to critique the society of his day. Interpreters of Smith have largely overlooked the significance of this powerful rhetorical tool in his moral theory, which induces shame, resentment, and desire for approbation, and which in turn opens the possibility for reform. Along similar lines, Stanton’s deployment of ridicule is an essential, though unrecognized, element of her political theory. By using ridicule, Stanton is engaging in a similar method of moral instruction as Smith, yet she expands Smith’s moral and political theory to specifically address women’s rights. Stanton’s versions of sympathy, indirect description, the
impartial spectator, and ridicule undergird her relentless and unwavering advocacy for early women’s rights in ways that have been unappreciated.

My analysis of Stanton raises important questions about the recent scholarly focus on her racism, exceptionalism, and elitism, which for critics severely compromise the effectiveness of her reformist message. To be sure, the controversial aspects of Stanton’s remarks should not be minimized. However, it is equally important to note that early versions of many of these comments are made in some of Stanton’s first writings, while she employs rhetorical strategies such as ridicule. The arguments critics find objectionable also predate the emergence of social Darwinism and, with it, theories of racism and sexism that were based on evolutionary constructions and biological categories— theories that have frequently been used in attacks against Stanton. I explore the possibility that Stanton’s comments are components of a broader rhetorical strategy that consistently argues for the equality of all people, male and female, poor and rich, black and white.

The final chapter presents a brief exploration of the important yet neglected theoretical contributions of Sojourner Truth. From the explorations of the early women’s rights advocates and abolitionists in this book, a rich analytical framework emerges with which to examine Truth’s life and work. Truth’s most frequently deployed rhetorical tactic is ridicule, the weapon of choice of her contemporary Stanton as well. Like Wright and Mott, Truth incorporates performative elements of theorizing, as she leads her audience through speech and deed to confront the persistent injustices against women and freed slaves that are deeply rooted in the American project itself. As a freed black woman of modest means, unhindered by the race, gender, and class privilege that tainted the contributions of other women’s rights advocates, Truth embodies the very concept of intersectionality about which those reformers could only
write and speak. In spite of the fact that Truth, who was illiterate, left behind no writings in her own hand, her influence was sufficiently powerful to leave an indelible impression on many who saw and wrote about her. Of all the sympathetic connections early women’s rights and abolitionist advocates sought to establish with their audiences, those forged by Truth were likely the most genuine and authentic.