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# The Beecher Sisters as Nineteenth-Century Feminist Icons of the Sameness-Difference Debate

Tracy A. Thomas



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***The Beecher Sisters as Nineteenth-Century Feminist Icons  
of the Sameness-Difference Debate***

*by Tracy A. Thomas\**

THE BEECHER SISTERS. By Barbara A. White. New Haven and London:  
Yale University Press 2003. 399 pages. \$35.00

Barbara White, a professor emeritus of women's studies at the University of New Hampshire, has given the field of women's legal history a boost with her interdisciplinary contribution to the social and legal history of women.<sup>1</sup> In *The Beecher Sisters*, White weaves together the lives and accomplishments of three great women of the nineteenth century into a saga of the personal, religious, and legal trials of the era. As one of a number of recent popular and academic books on women's legal history,<sup>2</sup> this book adds to the growing volume of herstories that fill the existing gaps of knowledge about women's role in American history. White's excellently researched and written book provides the casual reader with a glimpse into woman's sphere of the nineteenth century, while providing the scholar with a solid foundation for launching further research.

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<sup>1</sup> BARBARA A. WHITE, *THE BEECHER SISTERS* (2003). For other works by Barbara White, see EDITH WHARTON: *A STUDY OF THE SHORT FICTION* (1991); *GROWING UP FEMALE: ADOLESCENT GIRLHOOD IN AMERICAN FICTION* (1985); *The Lives of Nineteenth-Century American Women*, 15 NAT'L WOMEN'S STUDIES ASSOC. J. 137 (2003) (Book Review); *Three Feminist Mother-Daughter Pairs in the Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century United States*, in *GENERATIONS: ACADEMIC FEMINISTS IN DIALOGUE* 274 (1997).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., ELEANOR CLIFT, *FOUNDING SISTERS AND THE NINETEENTH AMENDMENT* (2003); GAIL COLLINS, *AMERICA'S WOMEN: 400 YEARS OF DOLLS, DRUDGES, HELPMATES, AND HEROINES* (2003); ANN D. GORDON, *THE SELECTED PAPERS OF ELIZABETH CADY STANTON & SUSAN B. ANTHONY: VOLUME 3, NATIONAL PROTECTION FOR NATIONAL CITIZENS, 1873-1880* (2003); JOELLE MILLION, *WOMAN'S VOICE, WOMAN'S PLACE: LUCY STONE AND THE BIRTH OF THE WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT* (2003).

In *The Beecher Sisters*, White introduces us to each of three famous Beecher sisters: Catharine Beecher (1800-1878), known for her advocacy of women and education; Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), famous for her literary works against slavery including *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and their half-sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker (1822-1907), famous for her work as a cohort of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the women's suffrage movement (p.ix). Also discussed in the book, is a fourth sister, Mary Beecher Perkins, who focused her life on home labor, and of particular interest, was the grandmother to radical literary feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (p. 326).<sup>3</sup> Mary commented on her homemaking, stating that "I could not perform any of my duties if I gave way to my feelings and allowed myself to attend meetings and become as much interested as I easily could (p.39)." The three famous daughters of preacher and reformer Lyman Beecher continued his good works, though each in a different vein. Yet, this is not a story about Lyman or the Beecher family,<sup>4</sup> but rather is a detailed foray into the social, legal, and familial ties of three feminists intertwined with the emerging women's movement.

The trilogy of female lives presented by White reveals the polarization of the sisters on views ranging from feminism to religion to their brother's veracity. The book highlights the

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<sup>3</sup> CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, *HERLAND* (1915) (telling the fictional story of a female utopia in which cooperation rather than competition prevails); CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, *WOMEN AND ECONOMICS: A STUDY OF THE RELATION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN AS A FACTOR IN SOCIAL EVOLUTION* (1898) (articulating a philosophy of female housekeeping collectives); CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, *THE HOME: ITS WORK AND INFLUENCE* (1903) (accord); CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN, *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER* (1899) (depicting the fictional story of woman's struggle to survive the "rest cure" popular in the medical profession of imposing isolation and rest to treat gender issues).

<sup>4</sup> Thus, I take issue with the newspaper reviews that describe this book by its ancillary remarks about Lyman Beecher and the male family members, rather than highlighting the predominant focus of the book on the lives of these extraordinary women. See Arianne Chernock, *Agitation Begins at Home*, N.Y. TIMES BOOK REV. 25 (Jan. 11, 2004) (a "key if underdeveloped theme" of the book is the support the sisters and the early women's movement received from progressive-minded men including their fathers and brothers); Vivian Gornick, *The Beechers and Their God: The Beecher Sisters*, L.A. TIMES R11 (Feb. 1, 2004) (describing the religious legacy of Lyman Beecher and his daughters' development of similar "evangelical personalities to serve their particular causes."). For books on the Beecher family, see MILTON RUGOFF, *THE BEECHERS: AN AMERICAN FAMILY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY* (1981) and SAMUEL A. SCHREINER, JR., *THE PASSIONATE BEECHERS: A FAMILY SAGA OF SANCTITY AND SCANDAL THAT CHANGED AMERICA* (2003).

dichotomy of Isabella as the liberal equality feminist versus Catharine as the anti-feminist and advocate of the domestic sphere. It compares Catharine's religious orthodoxy to Harriet's Christian ideology to Isabella's spiritualism and séances. And it explores the sisters' views of the innocence of their brother, Henry Ward Beecher, in the infamous Beecher-Tilton adultery trial,<sup>5</sup> which was the OJ Simpson trial of the century. The book contrasts Catharine and Harriet's unflinching support of their brother with Isabella's criticism and affiliation with the feminist opposition against her brother.

These contrasts among the three famous sisters mirroring the historical, social, religious, legal experiences of women in the nineteenth century call for more comparative analysis. The juxtaposition of the three sisters -- Isabella the equality advocate, Catharine the anti-suffragette, and Harriet the vacillating feminism -- call for explanation and comment. The stark differences in some of the sisters' views were previously identified in the 1988 book, *The Limits of Sisterhood*.<sup>6</sup> *Limits* collects archival writings of each of the three sisters and organizes them into parallel "conversations" to depict the differences among the sisters.<sup>7</sup> White could have provided more of this parallelism, providing analysis and insight into the distinctions and commonalities among the philosophy of the three sisters. The book however, stops short of this comparative analysis, preferring instead to provide the descriptive groundwork for others' analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> The infamous sex scandal played out in the media involved an accusation by controversial feminist Victoria Woodhull who believed in free love (that is sex outside of marriage), against the Beecher sisters' brother, Henry Ward Beecher, the leading minister of the time, of hiding an affair with one of his parishioners, Elizabeth Tilton. Woodhull, Beecher, and the Tiltons were all proponents of woman's suffrage, and thus the scandal played into the anti-feminist position of conflating women's rights and sexual promiscuity (p. 205-231). See White, *Lives of American Women*, *supra* note 1, at 138. For more on the trial, see Laura Hanft Korobkin, *The Maintenance of Mutual Confidence: Sentimental Strategies at the Adultery Trial of Henry Ward Beecher*, 7 YALE J.L. & HUMANITIES 1 (1995).

<sup>6</sup> JEANNE BOYDSTON, MARY KELLEY, AND ANNE MARGOLIS, *THE LIMITS OF SISTERHOOD: THE BEECHER SISTERS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND WOMAN'S SPHERE* (1988).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 7.

However, the resulting story provides ample foundation for a reader to draw these conclusions for herself.

The most vivid conclusion from White's book is the embodiment of each Beecher sister as one particular school of thought within the larger umbrella of feminism. It is clear that at the most general level, all three sisters shared a feminist ideology of women's empowerment.<sup>8</sup> As White notes, they "all had successful careers at a time when few women entered the public sphere," and each devoted her life's work to improving the lot of women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton made the same observation in 1897, noting in her autobiography that "the women of the Beecher family, though most of them wives and mothers, all had a definite life-work outside the family circle, and other objects of intense interest beside husbands, babies, cook stoves, and social conversations."<sup>9</sup> Stanton saw the work of each sister fitting into the feminist agenda, including Catharine's:

Catharine said she was opposed to woman suffrage, and if she thought there was the least danger of our getting it, she would write and talk against it vehemently. But, as the nation was safe against such a calamity, she was willing to let the talk go on, because the agitation helped her work. 'It is rather paradoxical,' I said to her, 'that the pressing of a false principle can help a true one; but when you get the women all thoroughly educated, they will step off to the polls and vote in spite of you.'<sup>10</sup>

White's book provides evidence that the distinctions of the sisters' individual approaches to women's rights do not reflect a disagreement with feminist principles, but instead situate their philosophies within different strands of feminist thought. Isabella represents the classic equality feminist arguing that women are the same as men for purposes of voting and marital rights.

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<sup>8</sup> LIMITS OF SISTERHOOD, *supra* note 6, at 3 ("During a century when people were almost continuously at odds over the proper place of females, Beecher, Stowe and Hooker shared a commitment to women's power. Each in her own way . . . devoted much of her adult life to elevating women's status and expanding women's influence in American society.").

<sup>9</sup> ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, EIGHTY YEARS AND MORE: REMINISCENCES, 1815-1897, 264 (1897) (describing meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine Beecher at Dr. Taylor's water cure while Harriet was writing her second paper on the Byron family and Catharine was preparing papers for a school board meeting).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

Catharine symbolizes the difference feminist and the focus on a different voice and focus for women. And Harriet epitomizes the pull and tug between these two schools of thought, resulting in the ultimate adoption of a theory of individual choice akin to the libertarian feminists of the twenty-first century.

### *The Liberal Feminism of Isabella Beecher Hooker*

Despite the book's title, *The Beecher Sisters* focuses predominantly upon the life of Isabella Beecher (p. ix). This contribution in and of itself is significant, for unlike her sisters, Isabella has not yet been the subject of her own biography.<sup>11</sup> White fills this void by drawing on a surprising amount of original source material from the existing collection of Isabella's own journals, letters and writings that have survived.<sup>12</sup> Using the lens of Isabella herself, White discusses the other sisters, Catharine and Harriet, and in so doing, reduces these women to less than their full dimensions. Instead, we meet these women as satellites of Isabella's experience, which provides another view of these sisters only when placed in the context of prior scholarship on their lives.

Isabella was the fourth daughter of eleven children born of the second of three wives of evangelist Lyman Beecher. She spent her first forty years in matrimony and motherhood before emerging in the public sphere advocating for women's rights. Yet these years of home labor were not without analysis or feminist critique. White's book describes Isabella's conversations with her then-fiancé, John Hooker, as they contemplated marriage (p.32). John, a law clerk and

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<sup>11</sup> In contrast, several biographers have explored Catharine's life, and many more have chronicled Harriet's life and literary works. See, e.g., KATHRYN KISH SKLAR, *CATHARINE BEECHER: A STUDY IN AMERICAN DOMESTICITY* (YALE 1973); MAE ELIZABETH HARVENSON, *CATHARINE ESTHER BEECHER, PIONEER EDUCATOR* (1932); JOAN D. HEDRICK, *HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: A LIFE* (1994); EDWARD WAGENKNECT, *HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN* (1965); ROBERT FORREST WILSON, *CRUSADER IN CRINOLINE: THE LIFE OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE* (1941); CHARLES EDWARD STOWE AND LYMAN BEECHER STOWE, *HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: THE STORY OF HER LIFE* (1911).

<sup>12</sup> See Anne Throne Margolis, *The Isabella Beecher Hooker Project: A Microfiche Edition of Her Papers* (1979).

then lawyer, corresponded with an eighteen-year-old Isabella regarding her reluctance to marry. She assured him that she objected to the institution of marriage, and not him, and that her feelings “are such as, to a certain degree, would come to the mind of every thoughtful, delicate woman on first contemplating seriously the change of relation & situation which wedded life presents.” (p.32). Once married, Isabella and John began a daily practice of reading and study in which John read law books to Isabella during the day to advance her stunted education and she read literature to him by night to save his eyes weakened by a prior injury. In particular, Isabella described her horror at reading Blackstone’s commentaries of the common law of marriage and learning that her identity as a married woman was collapsed into that of her husband’s under the law of coverture (p.33). She noted later in life that her “interest in the woman question” began with her consternation at reading Blackstone (p.36).

Woven into the fabric of White’s social and legal history of Isabella’s feminism are her eccentricities. Frankly, Isabella was a little weird. She was a strong believer in spiritualism and conducted séances in her house. She had premonitions of events, and involved the police in one particular incident believing that a burglary was to take place at her son’s home that night (p. 243-44). Isabella kept a diary that she called her “spirit journal” that modern-day commentators have dubbed her “demented” diary (p. 242). She recorded self-aggrandizing visions in which Jesus Christ would establish a maternal government on earth, head by Isabella who was to be Christ’s vice regent on earth (p. 243). She would rule personally with the aid of a group of female apostles and a cabinet of relatives and neighbors. Many of Isabella’s communications with spirits were self-serving in that they justified many of her actions towards friends and family and never resulted in the deaths of her two most beloved family members, John and her son Ned (p. 243). White does a good job of revealing these oddities without judging them or

using them to discount Isabella as has been done in the past. Instead, she uses them to humanize Isabella and to provide a three-dimensional depiction of this woman placing her in an emotional and spiritual context.

When the Hooker children were grown, Isabella entered the women's rights movement with a bang. White notes how Isabella justified her assertion of a public role for herself and other women by her mothering experience (p.74). Mothers, she argued, possessed superiority moral attributes derived from their experience which enabled them to contribute to the management and discussion of public issues (p.146).<sup>13</sup> Isabella believed that her role as a mother and wife evened out the women's movement which was led in part by the unmarried Susan Anthony, who she believed could not appreciate the significance of women's mothering responsibilities. Like other contemporary feminists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Isabella advocated a notion of maternal superiority that attributed power to women based on their strength gained through childbearing and childrearing.<sup>14</sup> White emphasizes the conclusion of another historian that this "special-capacity-of-mothers" argument did not necessarily contradict the egalitarian view of women. Instead, the argument served as rhetoric appealing to the mothers of about fifty like Isabella to draw them into political action (p.128).

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<sup>13</sup> See Isabella Beecher Hooker, *Shall Women Vote? A Matrimonial Dialogue* (1860) (essay containing a discussion between a husband and wife in which the wife agrees that mothers rearing a family should stay out of public affairs, but arguing that women whose children are grown have life experience qualifying them for public work superior to that of men); Isabella Beecher Hooker, *A Mother's Letters to a Daughter on Woman Suffrage* (1868) (detailing the argument that mothers have a special capacity for the art of government because of their experience in the family).

<sup>14</sup> White explains:

It was not just sisters Catharine and Harriet who glorified motherhood. Even the feminists or "strong-minded" women who would soon become Isabella's colleagues saw motherhood as the pinnacle of women's existence. "That function gives women such wisdom and power as no male ever can possess," said the ordinarily unsentimental Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In her autobiography, she [Stanton] presents herself as a kind of supermother, stressing the ease with which she bore and cared for children. She is full of kindly maternal advice and anecdotes about her curing sick babies on trains; clearly Stanton made use of a maternal image to soften and legitimize her radical social philosophy.

White, *supra* note 1, at 110.



At the same time, White details Isabella's personal struggles with mothering her three children expressed in a children's journal she kept, indicating fears of their death, guilt over discipline, and frustration with the self-sacrifice demanded of mothers (p.44-45). The book describes the estrangement of Isabella's two adult daughters, including their provocation of their mother, for example, when a twenty-something Alice takes a part in a play entitled "The Coming Woman" satirizing women's rights just as her mother begins working for the movement (p.114). White traces Isabella's disappointment that neither of her daughters continued her work as did the daughters of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone.<sup>15</sup>

Isabella entered the women's movement in 1869 just as the suffrage organization split into two associations: The National Women's Suffrage Association lead by Stanton and Anthony, and the more conservative American Women's Suffrage Association lead by Lucy Stone (p.133-34). The split primarily resulted from a disagreement over the women's support for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.<sup>16</sup> During the abolitionist period, women had worked alongside anti-slavery activists for equal suffrage for women and African-Americans. However, after the Civil War, the male leaders of the slavery movement found it politically viable to insert the word "male" into the rights guaranteed by the new constitutional amendments. Stanton and Anthony felt betrayed by their former colleagues, and refused to support the constitutional amendments that for the first time expressly provided for "male" only suffrage. Other feminists

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 298-99. White places some of the blame for this loss on Isabella by distinguishing her from other women's rights advocates like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone and Ida Wells -Barnett (p. 69-70). These other leaders of the women's movement all developed feminist tendencies while they were raising their young children and pushed their daughters beyond their own educational attainment in order to prepare them for public work and professions. In contrast, the education of the Hooker children was haphazard as they only occasionally attended school and Isabella did not come to her feminist views until her daughters were teenagers.

<sup>16</sup> The feminist movement remained splintered due to the conflict over Stanton's "radical" notion of no-fault divorce, personal antagonisms such as Lucy Stone dislike of Anthony, disagreements over the proper form of organization, and the role of men in the movement. White, *supra* note 1, at 134-35 (citing Robert E. Riegel, *The Split of The Feminist Movement in 1869*, 49 MISS. VALLEY HIST. REV. 485-96 (1962)); *see also* ELLEN CAROL DUBOIS, *FEMINISM& SUFFRAGE* 176-184 (1978).

like Lucy Stone strongly disagreed and believed it was important to support Negro suffrage and then wait their turn for women's suffrage.

Twenty years later, the two organizations would eventually merge back together, in part due to Isabella's efforts. White chronicles Isabella's efforts to prevent the split in the organizations and her subtle and express efforts over the years to unite the factions (p. 152, 163). For example, Isabella organized a state suffrage association meeting in Connecticut at which both Catharine and Harriet shared the stage, along with leaders from both sides of the split including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone (p. 141, 159). Stanton recalled how Isabella directed her to tone down her rhetoric, and how Stanton complied, but in so doing, delivered the weakest speech of her career (p.147). In another attempt at unification, Isabella wrote an article for Stanton and Anthony's newspaper, the *Revolution*, in which she pled for tolerance between the factions, arguing that while their views may disagree, they must be patient with one another "since we cannot be sure that all wisdom is ours (p. 152)." Ultimately forced to choose sides, Isabella rejected her sisters' choices of anti-suffrage (Catharine) and conservative suffrage of the AWSA (Harriet) for the encompassing equality platform of Stanton and Anthony's National Association.

White plays out Isabella's decision as she carefully reasoned through the process of entering the women's movement (p.135-141). White describes how each side courted Isabella, anxious to snare one of the Beechers with a possible link to the bigger catch of world-famous Harriet Beecher Stowe (p.130, 135). All logic would have supported Isabella's choice of association with the more conservative American association. She initially joined the movement upon the encouragement of friends like Caroline Severance who were aligned with the AWSA. She deplored the idea of easy divorce advocated by Stanton, was shocked by Stanton's

promotion of the bloomer clothing, and disagreed with the exclusion of men as leaders of the women's movement. However, Isabella ultimately aligns herself with Stanton and Anthony. Some historians have seen this choice as inexplicable, but White provides several well-reasoned arguments supporting Isabella's choice of the more radical organization. On a personal level, Isabella had friends like Olympia Brown in the National organization and responded to the warmth of Stanton in contrast to the reserve of Stone. But Isabella herself indicated that he made the choice on the basis of her research into the causes of the split and found the American group more at fault (p.137). She interviewed people on both sides of the schism and sifted through a mass of correspondence about the quarrel. Isabella concluded, correctly, that Lucy Stone's accusations against Stanton as a "free lover" and Anthony as the cause of the negative association of the women's movement with racist, self-promoter George Train, were false and hid Stone's own original support for no-fault divorce and Train's financial support of women's suffrage in Kansas. Isabella thus believed that joining Stanton and Anthony placed her on the right side and allowed her to be of service consistent with her reformer upbringing.

Isabella Beecher Hooker contributed to women's legal history on two significant fronts: the national suffrage movement and the Connecticut state feminist reform.<sup>17</sup> Her legacies to federal and state women's rights have found a place in recent legal scholarship exploring constitutional history and the lasting impact of feminist movement.<sup>18</sup> White provides the details

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<sup>17</sup> Isabella's sole book, *Womanhood: Its Sanctities and Fidelities* (1873), was not a particular success (p. 218-19). The book consists of three separate parts, the first on sexual restraint for men as a form of birth control entitled "Motherhood," the second containing her correspondence with English feminist John Stuart Mill, and the last entitled "State Patronage of Vice" excerpting arguments against the licensing of prostitution in the United States.

<sup>18</sup> See Reva B. Siegel, *She the People: The Nineteenth Amendment, Sex Equality, Federalism, and the Family*, 115 HARV. L. REV. 947, 972-73 (2002) (citing Isabella's testimony before the 1872 Senate Judiciary Committee seeking the vote for women); Adam Winkler, *A Revolution Too Soon: Woman Suffragists and the "Living Constitution"*, 76 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1456, 1490 (2001) (describing Isabella's Congressional lobbying efforts and endorsement of civil disobedience to advance women's right to vote); Jill Elaine Hasday, *Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape*, 88 CAL. L. REV. 1373 nn. 233, 238 (2000) (discussing Isabella's allegiance with Stanton and Anthony and her written work on motherhood); Jules Lobel, *Losers, Fools & Prophets: Justice as Struggle*, 80 CORNELL L.

of these legal efforts, giving the organizational and personal details to complete the story of Isabella's legal contributions. White describes how Isabella advanced the cause of women's suffrage at the national level in conjunction with Stanton and Anthony by lobbying representatives in Washington, D.C., obtaining congressional access for the women leaders, organizing national conventions, and testifying before Congressional hearings.<sup>19</sup> Stanton recounted Isabella's executive success in the *History of Woman Suffrage*:

The third Annual National Woman's suffrage Convention . . . was an unprecedented success. Its leading spirit was Mrs. Isabella Beecher Hooker . . . [whose] zeal, activity, and amiability gave her the power to make an easy conquest wherever she carries the banner of the good cause. Her generalship in Washington marshaled hosts of new and ardent friends into the movement. . . .<sup>20</sup>

Isabella strongly believed that women's suffrage was legally required under an interpretation of women as "citizens" under the privilege and immunities clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (p. 165). Even when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected this argument in the case of *Minor v. Happerstat*,<sup>21</sup> Isabella continued to hold strong to this argument, somewhat diminishing her credibility in Washington (p.287). In addition, Isabella's husband John supported the national movement, and for example, provided Susan Anthony's legal defense when she was arrested for illegal voting in an election.

The culmination of Isabella's public career came in her speeches to the House Judiciary Committee and the Committee on Privileges and Elections in 1878 on her fifty-sixth birthday. The *Washington Post* noted that "Mrs. Hooker, with the fervor and eloquence of her family,

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REV. 1331 n. 233 (1995) (utilizing Isabella's congressional testimony on the federal right of women to vote); Reva B. Siegel, *Home as Work: The First Woman's Rights Claims Concerning Wives' Household Labor, 1850-1880*, 103 YALE L. J. 1073 (1994) (discussing Isabella and John Hooker's contributions to the joint marital property law in Connecticut and describing correspondence to Isabella regarding housework).

<sup>19</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 155, 163, 166-67, 170, 193, 252, 291-93. See, e.g., Isabella Beecher Hooker, *The Constitutional Rights of the Women of the United States: An Address Before the International Council of Women*, Washington, D.C. (March 30, 1888.)

<sup>20</sup> White *supra* note 1, at 166. See ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, SUSAN B. ANTHONY, MATILDA JOSLYN GAGE, EDITORS, *HISTORY OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE*, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (1878).

<sup>21</sup> 88 U.S. (21 Wall.) 162 (1874).

reviewed all the popular arguments against woman suffrage.”<sup>22</sup> However, White comments that Isabella’s speech was notable for the amount of time she spent discussing questions only tangentially related to suffrage:

The Indian question would have been peacefully and righteously settled long ago without any standing army, if Lucretia Mott could have led in the councils of the nation, and the millions spent in fighting the Indians might have been used in kindergartens for the poor, to some lasting benefit. Down with the army, down with appropriation bills to repair the consequences of wrong-doing when women vote. Millions more women would ask for this if it were not for the cruelty and abuse men have heaped upon the advocates of woman suffrage.<sup>23</sup>

According to the *Post*, she also reviewed the Chinese question, the labor question, the subjects of compulsory education, reformation, police regulations, and the social evil as topics which mainly attempt to legislate without the loving wisdom of mothers, sisters, and daughters.

At the state level, Isabella worked for reform within Connecticut for voting and marital property rights for women. In Connecticut, Isabella organized state suffrage associations and advocated for voting reform (p.253). She went on speaking tours of the state on behalf of women’s rights. In 1870, Isabella and her husband John utilized his legal expertise to propose state legislation of a married woman’s property act that encompassed the idea of joint property rights arising out of marital property.<sup>24</sup> When the bill finally passed in 1877, the Hookers received commendations for their untiring efforts in promoting the legislation (p.250). John Hooker also successfully argued the 1882 case on behalf of Mary Hall that gained her admission as the first woman law in the Connecticut state bar (p.270).<sup>25</sup> In the 1890s, Isabella embarked on a frenzied course of state work proposing four bills to the legislature regarding taxation of women without representation, striking the word male from the state constitution, school

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<sup>22</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 254.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 145; see Siegel, *Home as Work*, *supra* note 18.

<sup>25</sup> *In re Hall*, 50 Conn. 131 (Conn. 1882).

suffrage, and suffrage regarding prohibition (p. 293). She reported that one legislator was so impressed with her speech on the constitutional deletion that “he listened to me with his mouth wide open and in the public debate last Tuesday said that Mrs. Hooker was fit to be President of the U.S.”<sup>26</sup>

White’s uncovering of the details of Isabella’s life and activism helps to place her squarely within the historically significant emergence of equality feminism. As part of the first generation of feminism, we see how Isabella helped to advance the arguments for equality of rights and participation of women in law and society. White’s depiction of Isabella, then contrasts this equality feminist with the perceived anti-feminist of her sister, Catharine Beecher.

### *Catharine Beecher as a Difference Feminist*

The eldest Beecher sister, Catharine, is commonly identified as an anti-feminist who argued against an expansion of women’s rights and for restriction of women to the domestic sphere at home (p. 260).<sup>27</sup> She is described as conventional and anti-suffrage -- sort of the Phyllis Schlafly of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Catharine argued that women were properly subject to the “chief magistrate” of the husband in the home and that they should avoid participation in politics that might corrupt them (p.75).<sup>29</sup> She argued that because men had the power, the safest

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<sup>26</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 293. The constitutional bill lost ninety to forty-four, and the suffrage bills were defeated by a strong liquor lobby. *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> WILLIAM L. O’NEILL, *FEMINISM IN AMERICA: A HISTORY* 14, 26, 56 (1969) (noting that Catharine opposed equal suffrage for fear that women would misuse the ballot); Winkler, *supra* note 18, at 1521-22 (“Women’s opposition to enfranchisement was embodied by Catherine [sic] Beecher . . . and the women antisuffragists [who] insisted that Holy Scripture dictated for women a sphere ‘apart from public life,’ and that women’s nature rendered them unfit for politics.”); JoEllen Lind, *Symbols, Leaders, Practitioners: The First Women Professionals*, 28 VAL. U. L. REV. 1327, 1332 (1994) (“Beecher was not a feminist.”).

<sup>28</sup> White, *supra*, at 260-61.

<sup>29</sup> See CATHARINE BEECHER, *THE DUTY OF AMERICAN WOMEN TO THEIR COUNTRY* (1845); CATHARINE BEECHER, *THE TRUE REMEDY FOR THE WRONGS OF WOMEN* (1852) (arguing that women had endured wrongs because they were neither educated, honored, or appreciated, and advocating the true remedy of education rather than suffrage); CATHARINE BEECHER, *WOMAN’S SUFFRAGE AND WOMAN’S PROFESSION* (1871); CATHARINE BEECHER, *WOMAN’S PROFESSION AS MOTHER AND EDUCATOR, WITH VIEWS IN OPPOSITION TO WOMAN SUFFRAGE* (1872). White notes

and most effective course for women was to try and influence and persuade men rather than seeking their own rights (p.162). In 1871, controversial feminist Victoria Woodhull attacked Catharine and her philosophy for women:

If the Catherine [sic] Beechers who now clog the wheels of progress, and stand forth as the enemies of their sex, and therefore of the human race, doing their utmost to cement the chains of their degradation, giving to man the same power over them as he possesses over this horses and dogs, and other chattel property, if we say they consider this to be their mission, and they are satisfied to be the puppets of man's caprice . . . let them do so, but not at the expense of other women.<sup>30</sup>

Some commentators have been more kind to Catharine noting that her philosophy of elevating women's education and domestic experience was the necessary first step in the incremental evolution of feminism.<sup>31</sup> White seems to agree with this convention noting that Catharine "sometimes sounded like a feminist," but overall was not.<sup>32</sup>

White's book, however, illustrates Catharine in a way that suggests that she could be considered a difference feminist. Long before Carol Gilligan, Catharine Beecher was articulating the notion of women's voice and women's experience.<sup>33</sup> Much like Gilligan, Beecher integrated her perception of women's different relational and moral focus with educational self-development to argue for the elevation and appreciation of women's

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that near the end of Catharine's life, she seemed to soften, admitting that it would not be terrible for women as a class to vote (p.252). See CATHARINE BEECHER, EDUCATIONAL REMINISCENCES AND SUGGESTIONS (1874).

<sup>30</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 185; see also O'NEILL, *supra* note 27, at 26-27 (citing Victoria Woodhull, *To Horace Greeley*, WOODHULL & CLAFLIN'S WEEKLY 8-9 (Aug. 26, 1871) and Victoria Woodhull, *Editorial*, WOODHULL & CLAFLIN'S WEEKLY 10 (Jan. 14, 1871)).

<sup>31</sup> ELLEN CAROL DUBOIS, FEMINISM & SUFFRAGE 16 (1978) ("Until the development of women's rights and woman suffrage politics, the major approach to improving women's status came from domestic reformers, such as Catharine Beecher. . . . Domestic reformers called for an elevation of women's status in the family, and for increased recognition of the contribution that domestic relations made to community life in general. They did not challenge the relegation of women to the domestic sphere, but only the relationship between that sphere and the rest of society."); LIMITS OF SISTERHOOD, *supra* note 6, at 5 ("Domestic ideology thus offered one rationale for expanding woman's sphere and increasing female influence. Indeed, by encouraging women to see themselves as a separate group and by providing the aegis under which women learned organizational skills and assumed an enlarged role in social reform, domesticity may well have functioned as a precondition for nineteenth-century feminism.").

<sup>32</sup> White, *supra* note 1 at 75, 162, 260-61.

<sup>33</sup> CAROL GILLIGAN, IN A DIFFERENCE VOICE (1982) (arguing that women psychologically have a "different voice" regarding relationships and moral problem solving). Cf. NICOLE TONKOVICH, DOMESTICITY WITH A DIFFERENCE: THE NONFICTION OF CATHARINE BEECHER, SARAH J. HALE, FANNY FERN, AND MARGARET FULLER (1997).

differences.<sup>34</sup> White identifies Catharine's feminist tendencies: "Many of her beliefs are held by women who call themselves feminist today – for instance, that women should be economically independent, that 'posts of honor and emolument' should be open to them, that the work of housewives and mothers is terribly underrated," and fought against the numerous prejudices against unmarried women like herself (p. 74). Unfortunately, White provides only a one-dimensional caricature of Catharine as the spinster, and thus the potential exploration of her contribution to difference feminism does not materialize.

White does document most of Catharine's professional accomplishments, if in a somewhat rote manner. Catharine worked for education for women early in the nineteenth-century.<sup>35</sup> She established female colleges, advocated academic and physical education for girls, and authored books on female education.<sup>36</sup> She espoused teaching as a profession for women, arguing that women's moral nature made them better teachers.<sup>37</sup> Yet the surprising irony revealed by White is that Catharine hated teaching. She described it as "drudgery" and conscripted two of her sisters, Mary and Harriet, into teaching at her schools prior to their marriages (p.9, 13). Instead, Catharine liked running the school in the position of power and authority (p.13). Thus, contrary to her own doctrine, Catharine rejected a subordinate role for herself and instead chose for herself a dominant, public persona.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See GILLIGAN, *supra* note 32, at 129, 149 (relating some historical feminist developments of the nineteenth century to her conclusions of different voice).

<sup>35</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 260 ("Fifty years after her death, however, the tide turned and historians began to recognize the breadth of Catharine's educational efforts – that is, her influence was all the greater because she hadn't confined her efforts to one institution or one idea. In the history of education her role in improving the educational opportunities of women and establishing teaching as a female profession is now well recognized.").

<sup>36</sup> CATHARINE BEECHER, SUGGESTIONS RESPECTING IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATION (1829); EDUCATIONAL REMINISCENCES AND SUGGESTIONS (1874).

<sup>37</sup> CATHARINE BEECHER, AN ESSAY ON THE EDUCATION OF FEMALE TEACHERS (1835).

<sup>38</sup> COLLINS, *supra* note 2, at 99 ("Catharine Beecher was a public woman herself, although she would have denied it. She traveled all around the country, raising funds for projects, founding schools, writing about all the great issues of the day. She took part, with her pen, in all the great debates. She testified before Congress. But because she was arguing against a public role for women, she presumably felt her activities didn't count.").



After the publication of her numerous books on education in the early 1800s, Catharine was accepted as a commentator on national affairs (p.16). She spoke on a range of subjects from education to slavery to religion (p.15, 63).<sup>39</sup> In 1835, Catharine engaged in a debate over slavery through essays with Angelina Grimke, the Quaker abolitionist and daughter of a slave holder.<sup>40</sup> Grimke argued for complete abolition, whereas Catharine, like the majority of reformers at the time, argued against abolition, preferring instead less radical means such as colonization (p.15-16). Even as late as 1852, her sister Harriet was advancing the Beecher view of reform, disappointing her abolitionist readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by sending runaway slave George Harris to Africa at the end of the story.

White also calls Catharine the “Martha Stewart and Doctor Spock” of her century (p. 43).<sup>41</sup> Following her success with books on female education, Catharine wrote many homemaking books, including the enormously popular *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) and the post-Civil War *The American Women's Home or Principles of Domestic Science* (1869).<sup>42</sup> These books dealt with the routine details of housekeeping such as ironing, dressing an infant, administering first aid, or folding a gentleman's coat, but also presented an overarching philosophy that motherhood was a supremely important profession (p.44). These books became standard manuals and home economics texts of the time period guiding the daily lives of most women in the domestic sphere. Again, the irony noted by White is that Catharine, the great advocate of the domestic sphere, did not have a family or home of her own (p.41):

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<sup>39</sup> CATHARINE BEECHER, *COMMON SENSE APPLIED TO RELIGION; OR, THE BIBLE AND THE PEOPLE* (1857).

<sup>40</sup> See ESSAY ON SLAVERY AND ABOLITIONISM WITH REFERENCE TO THE DUTY OF AMERICAN FEMALES (1837); Angelina Grimké, *Letters to Catherine [sic] E. Beecher* (1838).

<sup>41</sup> See also SARAH A. LEAVITT, *FROM CATHARINE BEECHER TO MARTHA STEWART: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF DOMESTIC ADVICE* (2002).

<sup>42</sup> See also CATHARINE BEECHER, *MISS BEECHER'S DOMESTIC RECEIPT-BOOK* (1842); CATHARINE BEECHER, *LETTERS TO THE PEOPLE ON HEALTH AND HAPPINESS* (1855).

But her life was still a tangle of contradictions. . . . she was an expert on domestic economy, but had no home of her own; she was a writer on the moral education of children, but had no children herself; she was a competent religious writer, but had never experienced conversion; and she urged young women to become teachers, but was herself not willing to teach.<sup>43</sup>

In this respect, Catharine's elevation of the science and responsibility of women in the domestic sphere mirrors the modern philosophy that has pejoratively been called "new momism." In their book, *The Mommy Myth*, Professors Douglas and Michaels argue that the twenty-first century cultural expectation of the good mother is an unattainable image created and perpetuated by the media and conservative right to keep women in the domestic sphere.<sup>44</sup> "New momism" is a highly romanticized and demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet.<sup>45</sup> "New momism insists that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children."<sup>46</sup> This motherhood image, they argue, is created by those who do not themselves effectuate the image, for example advertisers, men, and women like Dr. Laura and Phyllis Schlafly who have careers even as they excoriate working mothers.<sup>47</sup> Like Catharine Beecher's domestic edicts that she herself did not follow, today we see Martha Stewart proclaiming do it yourself decorating as her work is done by a staff of interior decorators<sup>48</sup> and celebrity moms advocating the joys of full time mothering as they hire

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<sup>43</sup> See also COLLINS, *supra* note 2, at 92 (noting that Catharine's "nesting instinct was so lightly developed that Harriet referred to her as 'wandering like a trunk without a label.'").

<sup>44</sup> SUSAN J. DOUGLAS AND MEREDITH W. MICHAELS, *THE MOMMY MYTH: THE IDEALIZATION OF MOTHERHOOD AND HOW IT HAS UNDERMINED WOMEN* 4 (2004).

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 309. See also DANIELLE CRITTENDEN, *WHAT OUR MOTHERS DIDN'T TELL US* 113-143 (1999) (arguing that women should stay home with their children even as the author continued her chosen career as a writer).

<sup>48</sup> DOUGLAS & MICHAELS, *supra* note 44, at 205, 225-29 ("[W]e also saw the rise of the new sun-drenched domesticity – i.e., the Martha Stewartization of America – in which impossible images of uncluttered, immaculate, breeze-filled, lavender-scented, voile-curtained homes invited women to pour themselves into decorating and crafts,

nannies, personal assistants, and secretaries to care for their children. Just as in Catharine Beecher's days, the elevation of women's domestic experience through new momism validates women's different experience and relational focus in a way that empowers rather than demeans the caretaking function. Yet the new momism contains the same message as that professed by Catharine Beecher, which is that women should confine themselves to this different sphere.<sup>49</sup>

Overall, White's book provides evidence to suggest that Catharine was something more than an anti-feminist caricature, but rather was a difference feminist who believed in a female difference that should be empowered and celebrated (p. 260-61). Through her work on female education and female work in teaching and homemaking, Catharine attempted to elevate woman's work to provide empowerment and fulfillment for women within the domestic sphere. Her prescriptions mirror some of those advocated today, such as in *The Price of Motherhood*, where Ann Crittenden argues for societal recognition of the value of women's domestic professional contributions in the home including compensation or other economic benefits.<sup>50</sup> Thus, perhaps history has failed to recognize the import of Catharine's feminist philosophy and the relevancy of some of her arguments to women of today.

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and to see the home as the one, true, most rewarding domain to master."'). As the authors of *The Mommy Myth* note, Martha Stewart was simultaneously feminist and antifeminist. On the one hand, she rescued domestic work from sexist dismissals of it and elevated it to a profession. On the other hand, Stewart contributed to the backlash against working women (even though she was one of the most successful ones in the country) because she reasserted domesticity as central to women's lives and identities. *Id.* at 227.

<sup>49</sup> See Claudia Wallis, *The Case for Staying Home*, TIME 51 (March 22, 2004); White, *supra* note 1, at 261 ("Beecher's strategy for the empowering of women was fundamentally divisive and defensive – excluding more women than it included, confining women to a single sphere of action even as it aimed to enlarge their choices. In that respect, too, Catharine Beecher's legacy survives into the late twentieth century.").

<sup>50</sup> ANN CRITTENDEN, *THE PRICE OF MOTHERHOOD* (2001).

### *Harriet Beecher Stowe and Libertarian Feminism*

The third story in White's book is that of Harriet. Harriet is known predominantly as the author of the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which depicted the evils of slavery in a way that energized the public at the time.<sup>51</sup> The surprise success of the novel catapulted Harriet into the public sphere and into the inner chambers of the abolitionist movement. White's account effectively weaves Stowe's many novels with her life and the political times, concluding with a poignant account of her Alzheimer's disease. But perhaps the more interesting account emerging from the book is that of Harriet as the equivocal feminist who moves back and forth according to the magnetic pull of the polar opposites of her sisters.

White's book first highlights Harriet's individual career drive which ultimately leads her to a feminist perspective. Harriet had seven children, four of whom were born within the first four years of marriage. Harriet wrote how she eventually arranged it so that a housekeeper and caregiver managed the household so that she had "about three hours per day in writing and if you see my name coming out everywhere – you may be sure of one thing, that I *do* it for *the pay* – I have determined not to be a mere domestic slave (p. 35)." In her own quest for life's work, Harriet became the leading female writer of the nineteenth-century, initiating "the women's tradition of local color realism in the United States" in writing a series of novels about New England.

Writing was a career and economic empowerment to Harriet more than an art or political statement. She was proud of her skill, and she used it. We get a sense of Harriet the professional writer, struggling with deadlines and critical reviews. White provides a glimpse of some of the

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<sup>51</sup> Other books by Harriet include, *DRED* (1856); *THE MINISTER'S WOOING* (1859); *PEARL OF ORR'S ISLAND* (1862); *AGNES OF SORRENTO* (1862); *OLDTOWN FOLKS* (1869); *MY WIFE AND I* (1870); *PALMETTO-LEAVES* (1873); *WE AND OUR NEIGHBORS* (1874); *WOMEN IN SACRED HISTORY* (1874) (originally published as "BIBLE HEROINES"); *POGANUC PEOPLE* (1878); *see also*, John Michael Moran, Jr., *COLLECTED POEMS OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE* (1967).

sexism of the nineteenth-century work place, for example detailing a business dinner of the Atlantic Monthly magazine for which Harriet wrote (p. 73). The men conducted literary business during dinners at Boston taverns and hotels to which no women were invited, although Harriet should have been included in these business meetings. Harriet was invited to only one, during which she and the one other woman in attendance were segregated in a separate parlor while the men socialized, and then subjected to a dinner of male jokes, drinking, and discourse on the origination of swearing (p.73). White's two-dimensional portrayal of Harriet provides only these external views of events, and fails to dig into her internal motivations or reactions in the way that the work rounds out the third dimension of her sister Isabella.

What does emerge brilliantly from White's novel is a sense of Harriet struggling with the nascent feminist ideology as each of her sisters exposes her to new and often conflicting ideas. Elizabeth Cady Stanton accurately sums up Harriet's equivocal embracing of feminism: "George Sand has done a grander work for women . . . than any woman of her day and generation; while Mrs. Stowe has been vacillating over every demand for her sex, timidly watching the weathercock of public sentiment and ridiculing the advance guard."<sup>52</sup>

White does a superb job of tracing Harriet's change as she vacillates between precepts of difference and then sameness feminism. Harriet begins in Catharine's camp, teaching in female schools, "speaking" in public at lectures on her books through her husband, and co-authoring a book on domestic economy with her sister.<sup>53</sup> But as White notes, "Harriet had always stood somewhere between Catharine and Isabella on the question of women's rights, but after the war she leaned increasingly toward Isabella's side (p. 141)."

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<sup>52</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 160.

<sup>53</sup> See HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, A FIRST GEOGRAPHY FOR CHILDREN (1855); CATHARINE E. BEECHER & HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, THE AMERICAN WOMAN'S HOME: OR PRINCIPLES OF DOMESTIC SCIENCE: BEING A GUIDE TO THE FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF ECONOMICAL, HEALTHFUL, BEAUTIFUL AND CHRISTIAN HOMES (1869).

In a series of sketches in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1869, Harriet had her persona, Christopher Crowfield, discuss with his family the changing roles and status of women (p. 141)<sup>54</sup> Harriet retains Catharine's premise that the most important gain for women would be to elevate the status of women. Harriet endorses teaching domestic economy and the important duties of women as wives and mothers. And she makes the difference based argument in support of women's activism that the public sphere needs women's voices:

I think that a State can no more afford to dispense with the vote of women in its affairs than a family. Imagine a family where the female has no voice in the housekeeping! A State is but a larger family, and there are many of its concerns which equally with those of a private household would be bettered by female supervision (p. 142).

However, the Crowfield commentary makes clear that Harriet departed from Catharine's confinement of women to the domestic sphere. Harriet articulates three abstract rights for women: 1) the right to hold independent property, 2) the right to equal pay for equal work, and 3) the right of any woman to do any work for which by natural organization and talent she is peculiarly adapted. In addition, Harriet discussed the woman question in another series written for the *Hearth and Home*, a domestic magazine she was co-editing (p.142). She argues in Stanton-like form that the position of married women under English common law "is precisely similar to that of the negro slave" and went on to enumerate many civil rights that married women lacked including the right to her own body.

Harriet was drawn further into feminism as Isabella joined the women's movement and influenced her developing thought (p.143). Isabella exposed Harriet to the history of the women's movement and the new writings of British feminist John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* (p. 145). She suggested that she and Harriet become editors of Stanton and Anthony's new *Revolution* newspaper. The magazine was a "thorn in Isabella's side" because every time

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<sup>54</sup> The series was later published as HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *HOUSE AND HOME PAPERS* (1896).

Stanton published a radical idea, Isabella was bombarded with complaints from her friends and relatives about her new associations (p. 149). Susan Anthony agreed that Harriet should be paid for their efforts because the movement needed literary women: “If cash will bring Mrs. Stowe to the Rev. with her deepest holiest Woman, wife & Mother struggle – clothed in her inimitable story grab – then it is cash that must be (p. 149).” Anthony believed that Stowe had not yet given the world her very best because she had not written from her own experience. Stowe’s story on woman, Anthony envisioned, would be serialized in the *Revolution* and have the same galvanizing effect on the nation as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Catharine interceded however, focusing the publicity-conscious Harriet on the title of the newspaper (p. 152). Catharine convinced Harriet that editing a magazine with the fiery title of “*Revolution*” would be too militant. Was the revolution in question a rebellion against men? Backtracking quickly, Harriet requested that the journal named be changed to the “*True Republic*” and makes that a condition of her editorship. Anthony considered the title change, but Stanton reacted strongly against the suggestion:

The establishment of woman on her rightful throne is the greatest revolution the world has ever known or will know. To bring it about is no child’s play. . . . A journal called the *Rosebud* might answer for those who come with kid gloves and perfumes to lay immortal wreaths on the monuments which in sweat and tears others have hewn and built; but for us . . . there is no name like the *Revolution*.<sup>55</sup>

Harriet thus declined the editorship of the *Revolution*, but agreed to contribute articles to the journal. However, Harriet’s contributions never materialized.

The back and forth of Harriet’s views continued, this time at Isabella’s expense. One year later, in 1870, Harriet wrote *My Wife and I: Or Harry Henderson’s History* which was full of feminist ideas, likely influenced by Isabella (p. 182). The narrator, Harry Henderson expresses his opinion that women and men should not be restricted to their own separate spheres

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<sup>55</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 152.

of action, that women have to feel responsible for the welfare of the state, and men need to be trained to be good husbands (p. 182). However, halfway into the book, the tone changes as two feminists are introduced caricaturing Isabella and her support of the notorious and controversial Victoria Woodhull. Harriet took this opportunity to publicly chide Isabella's for her continued support of Woodhull and radical feminism.<sup>56</sup> But Isabella's character, Stella Cerulean, appears on only thirty pages of a five-hundred page novel as if Harriet did not want to transcend the bounds of sisterly satire.

Ultimately, at Harriet's seventieth birthday celebration, her brother Edward gave a speech emphasizing her efforts on behalf of women. His speech emphasizes as feminist contributions *both* Harriet's affiliation with Catharine's difference work and her affinity for Isabella's suffrage work (p. 273-74). As the *Atlantic Monthly* described the speech,

Rev. Edward Beecher spoke at some length of the bearing of the works of Mrs. Stowe upon the woman-suffrage question. He told of her work with the late Miss Catherine [sic] Beecher at Hartford to extend the education of women, and affirmed that the course of God's events is upward and onward to a perfect coordination of the sexes in the work of the race.<sup>57</sup>

Viewing Harriet's life and work as a whole, it seems to evince a feminist individuality rather than a political or organizational feminism. Similar to modern libertarian feminists, Harriet espoused a pure equality theory believing that women should have equal rights legally and professional to men. Like libertarians, she believed in theory of individual choice in which women could choose for themselves any combination of professional or personal work. In this way, she diverges from Catharine in expanding the professions and rights available to women.

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<sup>56</sup> Harriet wrote a friend that she could not understand the secret of Woodhull's "influence over my poor sister – incredible infatuation continuing even now. I trust that God will in some way deliver her for she was and is a lovely good woman & before this witch took possession of her we were all so happy together." White, *supra* note 1, at 175. For a discussion of Isabella's political relationship with Victoria Woodhull, see White, *supra* note 1, at 179, Chapter 8, "Free Love and 'Mrs. Satan,' 1871-1872."

<sup>57</sup> White, *supra* note 1, at 273-74.



Yet she shies away from Isabella's organizational and rhetorical feminism, preferring a "do my own thing" approach. In her experience, Harriet was able to carry out any choice she made – from mothering to writing to speaking to public service. She believed in a more "I" centered approach, rather than a group dynamic as seen today in libertarian or "Ifeminism."<sup>58</sup> Ifeminists decry modern feminism that depicts feminists as men-haters and single, sexual predators, and instead embraces a notion of equal choice for women professionally balancing the equally important life's work of mothering.<sup>59</sup> In this way, White's portrayal of Harriet depicts a real feminist struggling at the individual level to find the right balance of family, work, and ideology.

### *Conclusion*

At the end of the book, the picture is one of the Beecher sisters together as the depiction of the state of feminism in the twenty-first century. The modern approach is to avoid one essential view of women and feminism, and instead to recognize a variety of different strands of approaches woven together into the fabric of feminist theory. *The Beecher Sisters* provides a historical foundation for this multiple-strand theory supplying evidence of a nineteenth-century origin of three strands of feminist theories – sameness, difference, and libertarian feminism. White's excellent work delving into the intimate lives of Isabella, Harriet, and Catharine triggers the interest in thinking about these women and others of the nineteenth-century who contributed so much to feminist legal theory and women's rights. Kudos to Barbara White for her carefully

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<sup>58</sup> Ashlie Warnick, *Ifeminism*, 101 MICH. L. REV. 1602 (2003) (Book Review); WENDY MCELROY, ED., *LIBERTY FOR WOMEN: FREEDOM AND FEMINISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* (2002). "Ifeminism, or Individualist Feminism, is a branch of feminism based on classical liberal philosophy. Ifeminism advocates repeal of many laws concerning women's issues. Ifeminists view individual autonomy as paramount and believe that laws restricting women's choices do more harm than good." Warnick, 101 MICH. L. REV. at 1602.

<sup>59</sup> Warnick, *supra* note 58; MCELROY, *supra* note 58.

researched and entertaining book that illuminates the contribution of three significant foremothers and opens the door to further exploration of women's legal history.