

Women's Rights, Education, and the Uncollected Letters of William Ellery Channing in the *Christian Inquirer*

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Abstract

Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) was a progressive nineteenth century thinker keenly aware of the social ills of his time, including slavery and what came to be known as the "Woman Question," as the burgeoning Women's Rights movement began to occupy the national conscience. One New York Unitarian publication, the *Christian Inquirer*, followed and reported with particular interest on the development of this movement in New England. My research on the *Christian Inquirer* brings to light three previously uncollected letters written by Channing in 1827-1829 that were not published until 1849, when they appeared in the *Christian Inquirer*, with the permission of their unnamed female addressee. In these letters, Channing, long before the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, and before the editors of the *Christian Inquirer* brought attention to the subject, discusses the "superficial" nature of women's education in both Britain and the U.S., suggesting that these educational shortcomings stem from a larger social ill. This study discloses the existence, for 21st-century readers, of several of Channing's uncollected letters as well as of other articles from the *Christian Inquirer* (CI) to suggest that the influential minister's early progressive stance on Women's Rights. That commitment is indicated by the consistency of the movement with the emphasis in Unitarian theology on human dignity across gender, a crucial point in bridging the conceptual gap between orthodox and liberal Christians.

Keywords

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Introduction

Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) was a progressive nineteenth century thinker keenly aware of the social ills of his time, including slavery and what came to be known as the "Woman Question," as the burgeoning Women's Rights movement began to occupy the national conscience. One New York Unitarian publication, the *Christian Inquirer*, followed and reported with particular interest on the development of this movement in New England. One might have expected as much from a newspaper run by Unitarians, given their objections to Calvinistic outlooks on human turpitude and their quite contrary celebration of human potential¹

My research on the *Christian Inquirer* brings to light three previously uncollected letters written by Channing in 1827-1829 that were not published until 1849, when they appeared in the *Christian Inquirer*, with the permission of their unnamed female addressee. In these letters, Channing, long before the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, and before the editors of the *Christian Inquirer* brought attention to the subject, discusses the "superficial" nature of women's education in both Britain and the U.S., suggesting that these educational shortcomings stem from a larger social ill. Channing's letters intimate that the educational systems had failed their daughters because no specific end existed for which to educate them. Otherwise stated, women had at best an ambiguous social role with no definitive place in the public sphere; consequently, their educations were aimless and superficial. Because many of the objections to the Women's Rights Movement stemmed from traditional Christian views of the woman as the keeper of the home and a "helper to man," as ordained by God, a liberal-Christian perspective was critical to the advancement of the Women's Rights Movement, since Unitarians indicated that the enlargement of women's 'sphere' to include education

¹See Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism* (1932; reprinted Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1964); Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of*

Unitarianism in America (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).

and a career would not bring about, as many feared, the downfall of Christian society. This study discloses the existence, for 21st-century readers, of several of Channing's uncollected letters as well as of other articles from the *Christian Inquirer* (CI) to suggest that the influential minister's early progressive stance on Women's Rights. That commitment is indicated by the consistency of the movement with the emphasis in Unitarian theology on human dignity across gender, a crucial point in bridging the conceptual gap between orthodox and liberal Christians.

1. Channing's Letters and Women's Rights

The editor's introduction to an August 1849 article informs readers that Dr. Channing's letters, written two decades earlier, have been reprinted from the *London Inquirer*. The introduction details that the unnamed recipient of the letters has given the CI permission to publish their contents, but suggests that the editors were detained from doing so for proprietary reasons: "The remarks upon individuals which they contain rendered and earlier publication unsuitable...but in consequence of the much lamented death of the person chiefly referred to Mary L. Ware, (1798 - 1849)², there is no longer any reason for withholding them from the public." Though it is unclear whether the decision to delay publication was made by the addressee or the editors of the CI themselves, publication would have come at a fortunate time for the newspaper, the staff of which had just become attentive to the socio-political dialogue that would soon be the Women's Rights Movement. The CI often found itself torn between its duty to conserve the Christian ideals of woman as mother and homemaker, and more liberal and progressive ideas taking hold in the country, an enduring dialogue. Pertinent to that discussion are columns by Unitarian pastor Henry Whitney Bellows. Sometime editor of the CI and intellectual heir to Dr. Channing, he published columns titled "Secret Vice" (1850), which proclaimed, "What of good, what of holiness, what of hope, what of social security, what of progress is not bound up with woman's sanctity! Our homes, what is their cornerstone, but the virtue of woman, and on what does social well-being rest but our homes?"³ Though the article decries, in the main, vice of "licentiousness," this utterance captures the confusing dissonance Unitarians encountered when reconciling "progress" with "woman's sanctity," fearful that the "cornerstone" of the Christian home was in peril at the loss of woman's elevated-yet-powerless social status in 19th century America. This point is key to Channing's contribution to the evolution of Women's Rights dialogue.

Women of the time had already begun to push the boundaries of their assigned societal role, working in such diverse

positions as poets, astronomers, pastors, and political figures; they were, however, met with particular scrutiny from conservatives. In 1853, an article appeared in the CI reporting the proceedings at the Whole World's Temperance Convention, taking care to note that although the Reverend Miss Antoinette Brown gave an "eloquent" speech, there was "much confusion" when she "presented herself as a delegate and attempted to address the meeting."⁴ The report states that Miss Brown "withdrew" upon "the passage of the following resolution...That though we [the delegates] fully appreciate the value of the cooperation of our wives, mothers, and sisters, we are of the opinion that the platform is not the appropriate sphere of woman." Much was to be said in the coming decades about the appropriate "sphere of woman." In June 1856 the CI published an excerpt titled "American Women" that—from the popular travel narrative Madame Pfeiffer's *Second Journey Around the World*—espoused the conservative view on woman's sphere from a woman's own perspective.⁵ In response to "that uneasy longing for what they call emancipation" which "characterizes American women," Pfeiffer suggests:

In the exceptional cases, where girls have, at the same time, an aversion to feminine employments, and a strong vocation toward some art or science, and are likely to carry it to perfection, they should be allowed to pursue it; but then they should not do so by halves; but, if they desire to become doctors or professors, renounce all thoughts of being wives also; for it is difficult, if not impossible, to perform at the same time, the duties of man and woman; and let the advocates of this kind of emancipation not forget that there is no sphere of action more beautiful than the one they have turned away from.

Here the author makes clear the conservative mindset demarcating distinct and mutually exclusive boundaries between masculine and feminine employments and pursuits. The column concludes that "a wise and thoughtful housewife, and a rational and loving mother, will, after all, remain the ideal of feminine perfection." The religious roots of this idea find utterance in a CI article titled "Woman and the Woman's Movement," which argues that woman's holy "mission, as it is called, is not to promote the spread of science and art, is not to do battle with ignorance and superstition, is not to rest the great field of nature from the dominion of savage beasts," but, "simply, to refine and elevate man."⁶ After describing the great contrasts, both physical and mental, between women and men, the author claims that it is "the law of the contact of extremes" that attracts one to the other, meaning that man is not attracted to what is manly, and vice versa. Hence,

²Edward B. Hall, *Memoir of Mary L. Ware, Wife of Henry Ware, Jr.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1874).

³"Secret Vice," *Christian Inquirer* (Feb. 23 1849), p.2, col. 2-3. Special thanks to Dr. James Duban of the UNT Honors College for allowing me access to his personal archives of *Inquirer* columns.

⁴"The Whole World's Temperance Convention," *Christian Inquirer* (Sept. 10 1853), p. 3, col. 3-4.

⁵"American Women," *Christian Inquirer* (June 21 1856), p. 4, col. 2.

⁶"Woman and the 'Woman's Movement,'" *Christian Inquirer* (Mar. 19 185?), p. 1, col. 2-4.

woman becomes the wife, becomes raised to the fellowship or equality of man, and entitled to his tenderest homage. Not because of any claim based on her natural equality with him, but purely because of a claim based upon her natural inequality with him. Her natural equality would have formed no claim to his spiritual regard; on the contrary, it would have disclaimed it...[For] every man knows that any great development of passion or intellect in woman is sure to prejudice his devotion.

Such an argument was rooted in theology. The article cites “the grand old book” as evidence that man “was not created a help to her, but she to him,” implying that it is the grand and providential design of God that created different and intentionally unequal spheres for women and men. For reasons ideological as well as pragmatic, conservatives opposed the ideas of more rigorous education and equal opportunities in the workforce for women. In September of 1854 the CI ran an article titled “Despising Household Duties,” in which the author laments “American women who have not the slightest idea of household duties,” and ends by warning that the wife who neglects “her happiest sphere...pays the penalty which has been affixed to idleness since the foundation of the world, and either wilts away from ennui, or is driven into all sorts of fashionable follies to find employment for the mind.”⁷ The author here suggests that a woman who meddles in the sphere outside of the domestic often falls victim to the vanity of fashion. Such was the political atmosphere in the decade surrounding the publication of Channing’s letters, the contents of which would address both the sphere of women and the ills of this so-called “world of fashion.” His rendering of the problems facing women of the era would remain relevant for decades, and demonstrate an attempt to reconcile the changing sphere of women with the goals and ideals of the Unitarian theology.

The first letter, dated April 23, 1827, opens by discussing the recently announced marriage of Mary L. Pickard, an apparent mutual friend of Channing and his addressee, to Henry Ware, Jr., a minister at the Unitarian Second Church in Boston. After praising at length the “character” of both parties of the engagement, the letter verges into a discussion of a recent work of British fiction, Marianne Hudson’s *Almack’s*, a novel portraying the social happenings in London’s popular club, the Almack’s Assembly Rooms. Without assigning a gender to the follies of the mode, Channing writes that he found the “world of fashion as wearisome in the book as...in real life, and left the tale half told.”⁸ Channing explains that republican virtue is necessarily unimpressed by the aristocratic consideration of fashion: “To you who have been brought up under an aristocracy, it may not be easy to conceive how superi-

menantly ridiculous the artificial intercourse, the pretensions, the exclusiveness and childish jealousies and competitions of the ‘great and fashionable,’ seem to us plain republicans, who have not associated an idea of dignity with a king or noble.” This biting critique of the ‘world of fashion’ would certainly have been of interest to the editors of the CI who, despite liberal tendencies, published countless articles of the same tone and topic addressed specifically to women. For example, an article entitled “Woman” was published in November of 1852, consisting of a few dozen lines of poetry by James W. Ward. The couplets, bearing scornful tones and such titles as “The Dismal Woman,” “The Tattling Woman,” and “The Strong-Minded Woman,” are introduced in this aside by the editors of the CI: “[The poet] enters upon some of the mooted questions of the day, women’s rights and woman’s sphere; casting his ballot, evidently, on the conservative side.”⁹ Included among the couplets is “The Votary of Fashion”: “Giddy and fickle, common sense she quits, / And to be governed by the mode submits.” Criticism of woman’s susceptibility to the frilly affair of “European style” was common in the CI, and therefore merited public responses from the likes of abolitionist and novelist Lydia Maria Child who, in a column entitled “Life in New York” (1855), defended women against this charge. She opens by juxtaposing the “lavishness” of fashionable and wealthy Americans with the “shivering little urchins [who] pay a cent apiece for the privilege of keeping out of watchmen’s hands, by sleeping on boards ranged in tiers.”¹⁰ She here casts a reproachful eye on the wealthier class, characterizing the upper crop of society with “sallow complexions, feeble steps, and crooked spines.” She also claims that their “spiritual bloom and elasticity are...injured by modes of life untrue to nature.” From these sad “effects of a luxurious and artificial life,”

the characters of women suffer more than those of men, because their resources are fewer. Very many things are considered unfeminine to be done, and of those duties which are feminine by universal consent, few are deemed genteel by the upper classes. It is not genteel for mothers to wash and dress their own children, or make their clothing, or teach them, or romp with them in the open air.

From this description of the fashionable class’ exacting treatment of the woman’s role, Child goes on to contend that “Some human souls, finding themselves fenced within such narrow limits by false relations, seek fashionable distinction, or the excitement of gossip, flirtation, and perpetual change, because they can find no other unforbidden outlets for the irrepressible activity of the mind and heart.” Child’s argument is the inverse of the norm, suggesting that women are the

⁷“Despising Household Duties,” *Christian Inquirer* (Sept. 23 1854), p. 4, col. 3.

⁸“Unpublished Letters of Dr. Channing,” *Christian Inquirer* (Aug. 11, 1849), p. 4, col. 1-2.

⁹“Editorial Correspondence: Woman,” *Christian Inquirer* (Nov. 27, 1852), p. 2, col. 3.

¹⁰Lydia Maria Child, “Life in New York,” *Christian Inquirer* (July 14 1844), p. 1, col. 1-3.

victims, rather than perpetrators, of the upper-class American world of fashion. The author had more to say, however, about this systematic narrowing of woman's sphere:

It is one of the saddest sights to see a young girl born of wealthy and worldly parents...[H]er kindly impulses continually checked by etiquette, her noble energies repressed by genteel limitations. She must not presume to love anybody until her father and mother find a suitable match; she must not laugh loud, because it is vulgar; she must not walk fast, because it is ungentle...she must not study, because gentlemen do not admire literary ladies. Thus left without ennobling objects of interest the feelings and energies are usually concentrated on frivolous and unsatisfactory pursuits, and woman becomes a by-word and a jest, for her giddy vanity, her love of dress and beaux.

Here Child takes issue with the paradoxical way in which society limits a woman's appropriate sphere to the vain and superficial, and then chides her for it as though she had a choice in the matter. It is this type of suspect thought that characterized orthodox resistance to progress during the fight for Women's Rights, to the point of blaming women for the American obsession with European fashion. As for Channing, while he did not seek to cast blame on either gender for the follies of fashion, his letter nonetheless details his disgust with the phenomenon, demonstrating, at the least, a nuanced and egalitarian approach to the issue.

Channing's second CI letter is dated April 29, 1828, from Boston. After a short paragraph introducing and recommending to his addressee a certain "Mrs. N-" (and after once again mentioning the worthy Mary Ware), the author ventures upon the subject of education. Channing was a known champion of educational reform, but here his inquiry takes a more personal tone:

I should like much to get your ideas, and your mother's, on the proper training of your own sex. I have one daughter, very lovely, at least in her parents' eyes, and of sufficient capacity, about ten years old. I have done less than my own mind approves, from not knowing what well to do. I mean, that I have not interfered with the common methods of our city, though the results satisfy me that something better can be done.¹¹

Channing raises a question that would later be disputed heavily in the pages of the CI. Around the time of the publication of Channing's letters, articles appeared in the CI placing blame on women and society alike for the state of female education. One article, signed "Knickerbocker," places at least partial blame on the ubiquitous "world of fashion" and the young American woman's vulnerability to its temptation:

The world is drained to furnish her wardrobe. No Cleopatra dissolves her pearls more recklessly; no more luxurious creature treads the earth than she. But does she think much? We are far from condemning luxuries and amusements...but it sometimes seems to us that they divert the mind from its true ends and aims. Our young ladies are hurried on by that vast organization called society, and never have time to stop and think, making the sphere in which our young ladies...move a narrow one.¹²

Though some authors laid blame with the silly, fashionable follies of society and its influence over young women, others viewed the education problem as more institutional. For example, an article titled "The Una" declares that though the author holds "pretty old-fashioned opinions on the subject [of Women's Rights]," he is "glad of every movement that tends to break the current of feminine frailty."¹³ The column argues that "the worst thing in American society is the studied indifference of female education to everything truly useful and exalting." From this discussion of the subject within the CI, it seems that genteel New England society at large has been blamed for education's superficial nature. Channing would later identify a more specific reason for this failure of society.

Channing's second letter continues to probe his addressee for her opinions on the subject of women's education. From his focus on his daughter's education, Channing turns to the subject at large:

Have you ever thought how far female education should differ from that of our sex? How far would woman be benefitted by being subjected to severer studies? It has been taught, you know, that you [women] are distinguished by quickness and delicacy, rather than by profoundness of thought; that you reach truth by a kind of intuition rather than reasoning; that human nature and life are a woman's most appropriate studies and experience, and society her best schools, and that she is to do good chiefly by the culture of the affections and the taste, by spreading love, order, refinement, etc. Are these heresies which the stronger party are passing off as orthodoxy; or are they true, and ought they to influence education? (emphasis added)¹⁴

Channing, known reformer and challenger of orthodoxy, seems to seek confirmation of his dissatisfaction with the state of women's education. He would, in fact, find echoes of his sentiment for decades to come, initially from his correspondent, and then from the pages of the CI. In June of 1850, less

¹¹"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 1.

¹²Knickerbocker, "Young Ladies of New England and New York," *Christian Inquirer* (July 28, 1855), p. 4, col. 1-2.

¹³"The Una," *Christian Inquirer* (April 30, 1853), p.2, col 4.

¹⁴"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 1.

than a year following publication of Channing's letters in the CI, an article by noted writer, lecturer, and activist Elizabeth Oakes Smith, "The Women of the May Flower," appeared in the "Miscellany" section of the CI, demonstrating compatibility with the ideas conveyed in Dr. Channing's second letter.¹⁵ The article uses artful metaphor to praise the strength of the female Pilgrims as "their stern husbands and fathers laid the cornerstone of empire." The author casts a critical eye on these patriarchal Puritan men: "They were men of a great age, men habituated to daring and subtle thought, who had learned to grasp what they believed to be truth, even with the desperation of those who clung to the horns of the altar...They were Cromwell-men, Milton-men, full of the arrogance of manly prerogative." These men had "engrafted the unyieldingness of the stoic upon the sublime charities of Jesus"; and "however arbitrary, cruel, and unjust became their civil and ecclesiastical decisions, they were able to make them square with the principles of their association, and the great object of the colony." Of these men, Smith writes, "Alas! truth is always progressive, always moving in a path forever brightening to her followers; but prejudice and error seize upon him who dares to stop in her pathway, as did the men of those days." After shaming these inhibitors of truth and progress, the author describes

three remarkable types of womanhood recorded as episodes in our colonial history; for historians rarely, in recounting events in which women are concerned, give a straightforward, manful detail, but content themselves with an "aside", as it were; and this is to be understood as a proper tribute to the modesty of the sex, which is to shrink from justice even, if it involve publicity.

Following what might be a jab at the CI for withholding Channing's letters until after the death of Mary L. Ware, the author here enters upon the subject of female defenders of truth, one of whom is "Anne Hutchinson, a woman altogether so remarkable, as to throw the whole colony into a ferment by the vigor of her understanding," the woman that "occasioned the meeting of the first synod in America, who came together expressly to examine and condemn what were called her heresies." The article lauds Hutchinson for her courage: "It was equal to those of the other sex with whom she had to compete, and far above that of the women of the day, who, till she began to question the doctrines of the leaders, and to look at their dogmas with her acuteness of perception, and wondrous grasp of reason, had tamely echoed their thoughts, and submitted to their exactions." Here the author has rendered Anne Hutchinson a feminist crusader for the female cause, whose "affluence of thought" and "clear, vigorous understanding...stands out as the type of intellectual woman." Demonstrating analogous thoughts to those espoused in Channing's letters, with respect to heresy and orthodoxy, the author suggests that woman must

¹⁵Elizabeth Oakes Smith, "The Women of the Mayflower," *Christian Inquirer* (June 8, 1850), p. 4, col. 1-3.

not "be blamed for her pertinacious questionings, since doctrine, in every possible shape, is thrust in her way, and the evils of heresy so often forced upon her thoughts, that she naturally begins to inquire wherein it consists." She ends by asking that "God grant, that the restless power of thought, so characteristic of a new England woman, may keep even pace with the developed harmonies of what is truly womanly, and that the religion which has so much to do with the head, may never retire from the citadel of the heart." This emphasis on female intelligence and reasoning is equally consistent with Channing's message in his letters, and may be read as an argument for the reexamination of the pervasive idea that women were meant to occupy a separate and unequal sphere. Where Channing's second letter identifies the heresy of placing "profoundness of thought" and "reasoning" outside of the sphere of women, the author of "Women of the May Flower" calls for women to see Anne Hutchinson as a champion of the thinking female, and to identify this heresy of thought that is, as Channing puts it, "passed off for orthodoxy." This short second letter in the exchange must have received a stirring reply, for his third letter touches on the heart of the matter at hand.

Dated 1829, Channing's third letter was hand-delivered to its addressee by none other than Mary L. Ware, whose death would occasion the publication of this same letter twenty years later. After a paragraph again congratulating Mary and Henry Ware, Jr., on a happy new marriage and lauding the characters of each, Channing returns to education. His correspondent has written that "female education is superficial among [the British]," a claim finding corroboration in the pages of the CI.¹⁶ For example, the Miscellany section reprinted a short column from the *North British Review* in March of 1857, titled "Female Education," which observed that "Instead of educating every girl as though she were born to be an independent, self-supporting member of society, we educate her to become a mere dependent, a hanger-on, or, as the law delicately phrases it, a chattel."¹⁷ The author remarks that this analogy is not totally correct; in fact, while chattel are at least fed and sheltered, "[the British] treat women as cattle, without providing for them as cattle...We bring up our women to be dependent, and then leave them without any one to depend on." Here the author intends to make clear the ways that women of the age were given insufficient education and then sent into the workforce to either marry into security, or to earn the pittance of a seamstress and the scorn of society. These terms would sound familiar to Channing, whose third letter describes a similar want of education:

I am afraid there will be no change until our ideas of education are enlarged. A young woman is pronounced educated, the work is supposed to be done, just when a young man is beginning the most important part of his intellectual discipline.

¹⁶"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 2.

¹⁷"Female Education," *Christian Inquirer* (Mar. 28 1857), p. 4, col. 2.

You [women] run the race of knowledge with a rapidity which we must despair of rivaling. At the time when your faculties are prepared for close and efficient attention, and for acquiring comprehensive views of subjects, they are released from their task.¹⁸

Although it would not come until later, this opinion would find a foothold in the Unitarian conscience. In 1856 the CI reprinted an article titled "Early Womanhood" from the *Quarterly Journal of American Unitarian Association* that finds itself in perfect alignment with Channing's earlier critique of the female educational system. It narrates as an American girl finishes school and "begins her new life" as a wife and mother.¹⁹ After five years spent removed from the influence of her teachers, the author asks:

What steps has she taken in real improvement...? As soon as the first glow of enthusiasm had subsided, it was very hard to find two hours every day for study, so many were the calls upon her time...She quiets her conscience by the assurance that it is only selfishness which prompts her to separate herself from her family for any length of time merely for her own improvement[.] Many mothers encourage this. If their daughters have been placed a certain number of years at a good school, their education is completed. A certain quantity of "learning" is to be forced into them, like sawdust into a doll; it needs no more while the body holds together; outward improvement is all the addition which can be made, and nothing is spared that this may not be wanting. All for what end?...All this system of labor and care, that the girl may make what is called a good match.

As Channing would have understood, this frank and critical column represents the coming self-awareness of the Unitarian sect with regard to women's rights and education during the mid-19th century. As Knickerbocker earlier described, women were hurried along by society and rushed through a diluted education without time to think or choose a future beyond the domestic, one of two causes pointed out in Channing's letters for the pitiful state of female education.

Aside from the brevity of female education, Channing identifies a second issue that touches on the larger social ill at play, lending itself to reiteration in the pages of the CI. After closing his statements on the first issue, he identifies "Another [problem]...the want of definite views of what a woman should be, the want of a sufficiently precise end."²⁰ Here, Channing strikes the core of the argument, foreshadowing the first few lines of the coming decades-long dialogue, the effects of which spanned generations. With no public purpose,

no goals to meet, female education had no real objective besides the creation of dutiful housewives who could sew and cook. In a letter to the editors of the CI published in March of 1852, Sarah M. Grimke iterates this point well: "As a body, women have not had the means of being highly developed intellectually as men. They have not been accustomed to take enlarged and comprehensive views, to think for themselves, to reason out a point and form their own conclusions."²¹ When they are afforded an education, "they drag out an existence even more miserable...because they have no object in life, no end to accomplish, no duties to fulfill." This critical view of women's positions in society places blame beyond mere faulty education, which the author, like Channing, views as the symptom of a much larger issue. An author identified as J. E. L. contributes an October 1851 article to the CI titled "Woman's Rights," expanding this argument with respect to a woman's intellect:

What shall then the woman of genius do; what can she do, and be woman still? She finds herself in possession of riches for which she never sighed or prayed, the very uncoveted gift of God, (for so I recognize genius,)...and what shall she do with it? Was it given to her to be a curse, to settle on her soul, as the mildew and the blight of Egypt, to separate her from her kind merely to unsex her, with all her woman's inspirations and sensibilities ten thousand times refined by it?²²

Using religious language familiar to her Unitarian audience, the author here renders tangible the true heresy of rejecting a woman's intellectual abilities on the grounds that they are unwomanly. She goes on to say that man is "awed" by the "woman of genius" but does not accept her, "for she is unsexed, and no longer woman," thereby indicating that genius has heretofore been a trait utterly unassociated with the proper, ideal, Christian woman. The column argues that woman "wants recognition as woman, as truest woman...in all that constitutes her inner nature as woman. This, in the deepest sense...man denies her." In other words, that society considers genius and education completely outside the sphere of women denies a God-given gift, meanwhile punishing its receiver, resulting in the very types of behavior that so many articles in the CI criticized: "In short, the more genius she possesses, the more masculine she is deemed, until, for lack of what her soul in a far greater degree covets, she goes out recklessly into all the absurdities and extravagances and even crimes, that have in ages past disgraced her annals." As Channing argues, the ambiguous and restricting societal standards for women left them without a place in society or a goal to work toward, denying their agency as human beings and limiting them to a superficial existence. As women began to push

¹⁸"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 2.

¹⁹"Early Womanhood," *Christian Inquirer* (Aug. 30, 1856), p.1, col. 2-3.

²⁰"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 2.

²¹Sarah M. Grimke, "To the Editors of the Christian Inquirer," *Christian Inquirer* (Mar. 13, 1852), col. 6-7.

²²J. E. L., "Woman's Rights," *Christian Inquirer* (Oct. 25, 1851), p. 2, col. 1-2.

the boundaries of their long-inhabited sphere, liberal theology was forced to check itself against old dogma and instead begin to construct the mental framework necessary to support women's new position.

Channing begins constructing this new framework in his third letter, with a humanistic approach that aligns women and men as equals with regard to intellectual refinement: "What we all want, I think, is, the growth of our faculties through the whole life, by continued vigorous exertion of them...Let [woman] do that which will give her a consciousness of her powers, and will unfold them."²³ He here intimates that women, like men, seek to enlarge their viewpoints and educate themselves, and to have equal resources to do so. To that end, "Let it be one of her aims to invigorate the intellect through her whole life by exertion, and to give greater harmony and vitality to thought. Let her intellectual nature, as well as her moral, be felt to be of infinite value." Channing here demonstrates that a woman's intellect is of equal value to that of man, and ought to be trained and cultivated with as much "exertion" as she is capable, refuting the notion of the strictly defined dogmatic sphere. A true Unitarian, Channing here demonstrates that an enlarged sphere for women does not threaten the Christian ideal, but is instead wholly consistent with Unitarian emphasis on human dignity across gender. The editors of the CI would soon follow in Channing's footsteps, slowly amending their views on Women's Rights and remaining true to their name by choosing to inquire further into the subject and give it the respect it demanded.

In late October of 1851 the CI reported the proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention at Worcester, and confessed themselves "much surprised at the prevailing of good sense, propriety, and moral elevation" of the gathering, noting that it may have been "the most important meeting since that held in the cabin of the Mayflower."²⁴ Although the editors admit that their staff is "among those who have regarded this movement with decided distrust and distaste," the authors recall "the scorn with which the annual procession of the first Abolitionists was greeted in Boston" and suggests that "The Woman's Rights Convention is, in like manner, a thing for honest scorn to point its finger at; but a few years' time may prove that we pointed the finger, not at an illuminated balloon, but at the rising sun." This comparison of Women's Rights to Abolition suggests that the editors have accepted that the movement may, in fact, represent moral progress. In defense of the current and conservative system, the editors point out that "Mankind have hitherto found the natural functions of the two sexes marking out different spheres for them." The CI nonetheless insists that "the political disenfranchisement of women, and their seclusion from publicity, have grown out of sincere convictions that their nature and happiness demanded from man an exemption from the cares and a protection from the perils of the out-of-door world." Thus, while defending

the status quo, the CI's willingness to admit women's political powerlessness and exclusion from the public world indicates a slowly waning resistance to the growing list of ills perpetuated by women's current narrow role. The author vows to "endeavor henceforth to keep [their] masculine mind—full, doubtless, of conventional prejudices—open to the light which is shed upon the theme." The column ends in a manner with which Channing would agree—by reconciling woman's new sphere with the Christian theology: "Woman's part has been the part which her actual state made necessary. If another and a better future is opening, let us see it and rejoice in it as a new gift from Providence." Though it may not have arrived directly from Channing's influence, the CI's shift in perspective is consistent with the ideas espoused in his letters, and suggests that Women's Rights was bound to be seen by discerning Unitarians as consistent with the liberal Christian theology.

2. Conclusion

Channing's stance on Woman's Rights may have influenced his nephew, Reverend William H. Channing, whose sermon "On the Position and Prospects of Woman" was summarized in the CI in April of 1853. The article describes the sermon as being characterized by the "conviction that Woman is debarred from avenues of employment to which she should be admitted, and that she is cramped and crowded down into a state of dependency."²⁵ The younger Channing, like his namesake, "regarded the movement on behalf of Woman's Rights as the outgrowth and development of the highest Christian civilization" and argued convincingly that "if Woman's nature was made by God, and not by man...then it could not and would not be lowered or rendered less pure and refined if she were admitted to the bar, the forum, or the legislative hall." This argument employs his namesake's framework of reconciliation to suggest that Woman's Rights was not opposed to the Christian ideal. Rather, gender equality seeks to strengthen the Republic.

As the analogues between Christian respect for human dignity and the Woman's Rights Movement became more apparent, Unitarians would soon latch on to the movement and deem it the new beacon of progress. Evolving quickly from their earlier defense of the old school, by December of 1856, when the Woman's Convention occurred in New York, the CI was lauding the movement as "one of the significant hands pointing toward the future."²⁶ Reconciling Woman's new sphere with both Christianity and Republicanism, the author describes the movement as "the attempt of woman in America to adjust herself to the new relations of Republican society." Stated otherwise, "Reverence for the soul, as the child of God, and heir to an eternal discipline of love, is the idea which, translated from the Golden Rule into the Declaration of Independence, is the load star of our Republican

²³"Unpublished Letters," p. 4, col. 2.

²⁴"The Women's Rights Convention at Worcester," *Christian Inquirer* (Oct. 25, 1851).

²⁵"Woman's Rights," *Christian Inquirer* (Apr. 16, 1853), p. 3, col. 2-3.

²⁶"The Woman's Movement," *Christian Inquirer* (Dec. 13, 1856), p. 2, col. 1-2.

life.” The author here utilizes Channing’s mental framework to demonstrate the consistency of women’s rights with Unitarianism’s belief in the dignity of the individual human soul. Indeed, “Every soul has a right to the development of its own faculties; few of us get that right now; but Republicanism responding to Christianity, announces that right as inalienable, and the object of all social arrangements.” Echoing precisely Channing’s claim that what “we all want” is “the growth of our faculties though the whole life,” the author emphasizes the inconsistency of the conservative mode of thought, arguing that a true Christian republic must necessarily respect all of its citizens equally as children of God. Consistent with Channing’s letters, the column expresses optimism at seeing American women “released from the bondage of pecuniary dependence and ignorance” by the educational reform taking place in schools, granting women equal rights to college education. On this subject, the author declares that “the time is approaching when no man who desires the respect of society will deny equal privileges and culture to her who is to mould the generations of freemen.” Indeed, the Unitarians quickly followed Channing’s example, incorporating his framework to bridge the gap between tradition and progress. The column not only demands for women “every American opportunity which she in her wisdom desires for the furnishing to her work of constructing a Christian society,” but attempts to persuade “the men of America to vote woman’s right to the ballot.” Though this would not be granted for another 60 years, Channing’s early stance on Women’s Rights and the Unitarian community’s willingness to challenge orthodoxy seems to have helped pave the way for the eventual triumph of Women’s Rights.

Author Biography

Molly Riddell, Honors College alumna, majored in Spanish and English, with a focus on Creative Writing. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature. She has published three creative works in the *North Texas Review*, and, in 2014, served as Assistant Editor in Chief of that journal. Molly published an essay on Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in *Social Circumstance and Aesthetic Achievement: Contextual Studies in Richard Wright’s Native Son*, ed. James Duban (Denton: U. of North Texas Libraries, 2016) and previewed that study at American Studies Association of Texas 59th Annual Conference (2015). To help fund her education, she worked on campus as a tutor in the UNT Writing Lab from 2013 to 2015. Molly also committed time to the Peer Academic Leadership program at the UNT Learning Center.