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Speech by Elizabeth Cady Stanton to the Reunion of the Pioneers and Friends of Woman's Progress

12 November 1895

Editorial note:

At the Metropolitan Opera House, on her eightieth birthday, Elizabeth Cady Stanton occupied center stage on a throne-like chair a little higher than the ones on either side for Susan B Anthony and Mary Dickinson. Around her were close friends, pioneers in professions and reforms, delegates from the constituent societies of the National Council of women, and family members. One reporter counted five Stanton children, two daughters-in-law, and a number of nieces and nephews. Children and grandchildren of old friends like Martha Wright, Lucretia Mott, and William Lloyd Garrison were in attendance. "The boxes," one member of the audience wrote to a friend, "were all taken by the different Women's Societies, whether Woman's rights or not & each club decorated their box with flowers, banners, flags & lights. Indeed it was a very fine sight." Musicians performed between speeches, and the evening concluded with stereopticon views projected onto the darkened stage, illustrating women's lives then and now across fifty years. "[F]or instance," wrote the member of the audience to her friend, "courting—a couple sitting together, the man holding the yarn while the young woman wound— Then was presented a boy & girl riding alongside each other on a bicycle!" Stanton's address fell in the middle of the lengthy program. She rose to accept the audience's salute and reassure the men in the audience, lest they think from all they heard "that the new woman is going to crowd them entirely off the planet. I want to assure you all that, as long as you have mothers, wives, and sweethearts, they will look out for your welfare." She also said, "[a]s I am not able to stand very long, nor to talk loud enough, I have invited Miss Helen Potter to read what I have to say to you." For many years Helen Potter had impersonated Stanton on lecture platforms across the country. (Elizabeth E. Pike to Caroline Putnam, 21 November 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington D.C.)

In thanking the friends present, and through the press the many clubs of women throughout the country who are celebrating my birthday to-night, and in response to the many letters and telegrams I have received from the Old World and the New, I would say to one and all that in demanding justice and equality for all women I have secured larger liberties for myself.¹

I am well aware that all these public demonstrations are not so much tributes to me as an individual as to the great idea I represent—the enfranchisement of women.

It is a long time, near half a century, since a few persons met in 1848, in a little Methodist church in Seneca Falls, to discuss the status of women under the laws of New York.

That was the first woman's rights convention ever held in the world, and here the first demand was made for woman suffrage.² A declaration was read and signed by most of those present, and a series of radical resolutions adopted. But the majority of women ridiculed the idea of political rights for themselves, the press caricatured the convention, the pulpit denounced it, and some who took part withdrew their names, and appeared no more on our platform. But above this wave of clamor³ that rolled from Maine to Louisiana, arose the clarion voice of Phillips; "This is the inauguration

of the most momentous reform yet launched upon the world, the first organized protest against the injustice that has brooded for ages over the character and destiny of one-half the human race."⁴

Within two years conventions were held in half a dozen different States, letters of sympathy came from women in this country, from Italy, France and Germany, all taking an active part in the revolutions of 1848. Just at that time, too, the earthquakes began in California, showing that old mother earth sympathized in the general upheaval, in the rebellion of her daughters against the creeds and codes and customs of effete civilizations. And the invisibles began at that time to knock and move tables, gradually awakening a deep interest in psychological manifestations.⁵ But I will not use any of my allotted time in dwelling on the past and noting the steps of progress, except to say that James Mott,⁶ a dignified Quaker, presided over the first convention, and his noble wife Lucretia, and her sister, Martha Wright, and Frederick Douglass were the leading speakers. Paulina Wright Davis called the first convention in old Massachusetts,⁷ and Lucy Stone kept the watch fires of liberty burning there until the day of her death.⁸ She was the first woman in the nation to protest against the marriage laws at the altar, and to manifest sufficient self respect to keep her own name, to represent her individual existence through life. Frances D. Gage responded to the call for Ohio, Mary F. Thomas for Indiana, Lucinda Stone⁹ for Michigan, Mary Grew for Pennsylvania, Elizabeth B. Chace¹⁰ for Rhode Island, Ernestine L. Rose, a beautiful Polish lady, and Antoinette Brown¹¹ made their appeals in most of the States and before several legislative assemblies. Matilda Joslyn Gage and Susan B. Anthony made their debut on our platform in 1852.¹² Later came Mary A. Livermore, Isabella Beecher Hooker and Julia Ward Howe, Rev. Phebe Hanaford,¹³ Rev. Olympia Brown and others, who all did good service. Those who follow will pay fitting tributes to all these noble women.¹⁴ I have just two thoughts I wish to emphasize.

1. Woman's sphere. That ground has been travelled over so often that there is not a single tree nor flower nor blade of grass to be found anywhere. Yet excursions of men are continually going to survey that old worn-out land. Ever since Eve left Paradise, the trend of thought has been in the direction of woman's sphere. Those who could write in prose or verse have written about it. Those who could orate have talked about it. Statesmen have declared its limits in laws and constitutions; bishops in Scriptures and sermons; editors in journals, and scientists in osseous formations, muscles, nerves, and the size and quality of the feminine brain. They have sung in chorus the same old song, and will continue, like Poe's raven to sing it "evermore," unless some one shall arise to solve this tangled problem.¹⁵ Fortunately, to remove this subject from human thought and give place to more profitable discussions, I arose on the 12th of November, in the year of our Lord 1815, and have spent a greater part of my life in elucidating this question. I propose now to give you the result of my explorations. Those who are capable of drawing logical conclusions from facts will leave this house to-night with their minds forever at rest as to the limits of woman's sphere. While

Franklin, Kane, Greeley and Peary¹⁶ have been sailing mid the Polar ices to find the North Pole, I have been travelling in the realm of the possibilities to find woman's sphere and the voting poll. Spyglass in hand, I have crossed the imaginary lines of diameter and circumference bounding its limits; I took reckonings at every degree of latitude and longitude; in the temperate, frigid and torrid, Arctic and Antarctic zones. In halting one day I found an old document, said to have been written at the dawn of creation, when the Gods were in consultation about the creation of man. They said:

Let us make man in our own image, male and female, and
give them dominion over the whole earth and every living
thing therein.¹⁷

They did so. Here we have the first title-deed to this green earth, given alike to man and woman, and the first hint of "God's intentions." Those who will make some logical concessions must admit that wherever woman has been and maintained a foothold, and whatever she has done and done well, it must have been the "Creator's intentions" that she should occupy that position and do that special work. Unless you admit this, you impeach the wisdom of the Creator and exalt the woman as able to set at defiance the laws of her being. While everything in the universe moves according to immutable law, the sun, the moon, the stars and every planet revolving in its own elliptic, the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, all in their appointed places, moving together in harmony, how can woman get out of her sphere? The moment you declare she is, you make her all-powerful, greater than her Maker. To do this she must defy the laws of attraction, cohesion and gravitation, the centripetal and centrifugal forces, the positive and negative electricity, to be scattered into space, herself, and be seen no more forever.

Instead of this fatal escapade, lo! she is here; tied to the planet just as man is, and compelled to follow in his footsteps. He is happy and contented, and always stays in his sphere, and nobody writes or talks about it. He has gone everywhere and done everything his genius made possible; diving to ocean depths, he gives us pictures of coral caves and the monsters of the sea; sailing with his balloon in the blue ether, he tells us of the wonders above the clouds. With his railroads he has linked together the Rocky and Alleghany mountains, the Atlantic and Pacific, and with his ocean cable he has anchored continents side by side and welded the nations of the earth in one. The seven wonders of the world are so many tributes to his genius; the magnificent cathedrals, the museums, the libraries, the art galleries—all proclaim his divine origin, his creative powers.

He has labored by turns in every department of science and industry, and has gathered knowledge and riches from every quarter of the globe. He has filled all stations, high and low, governed nations, led armies, and by his marvellous inventions has shifted the heavy burdens of labor from human shoulders to tireless machines.

Every day he has some new surprise in store for us, and new promises of the future, when we are to make the journey of life by electricity, when all our present modes of locomotion, even the bicycle, will be thrown into the shade. He will thus make life like a sweet dream, the realization of a fairy land.

Thus we see that women need no longer knit or weave, make butter or cheese. Cunning arms and fingers of steel now do it all. Women need no longer cook or wash or iron or bake or brew, for men do it all in restaurants, laundries, bakeries and breweries. Women need no longer sew, for with cunning machines men now make underclothes for women and children, and even the man-milliner bonnets and the tailor-made dresses are superior to what women themselves can produce. And man is not only making our earthly dwelling all that we could desire, but he is giving us new and delightful anticipations of the life to come. Learned revising committees have cast serious doubts on the Inferno and the Prince of Darkness. They have even, in the last version of the New Testament, eliminated the words "hell" and "everlasting punishment," a most praiseworthy concession to the emotional nature of women and children. They have even added some new touches of gladness and hospitality to our heavenly home. Instead of a frowning judge, driving three-fourths of the human race like goats into outer darkness and despair, we have pictures of a loving father who welcomes us to his presence; instead of a bigoted Peter at the gate questioning our entrance there, smiling angels open wide the portals, and all shades and colors of humanity walk in together—Jew and Gentile, bond and free, white and black, rich and poor, male and female, without regard to color, sex, or previous condition of servitude.¹⁸

This is the beautiful vision liberal Doctors of Divinity and Spiritualists give us of the future. Milton and Dante,¹⁹ they say, threw their doleful poems into the Jordan as they passed over; and Swedenborg,²⁰ on the shore, got out an expurgated edition of his melancholy prose writings. Now, I suppose, carping women all over the house are saying to their neighbors, "Where do we come in? If man is such a wonderful being, and fills all space, where is our sphere?" Why it is plain to every rational mind that if man is everywhere and women must of necessity remain on the planet, then their sphere is the same. They are and ever must be indissolubly bound together, as mother, father, husband, wife, brother, sister, in childhood, in marriage, in all life's struggles, ever sharing each other's joys and sorrows. With tears of affection and immortal wreaths they perform the last sad offices of love and friendship for each other, and in the bosom of mother earth, side by side, they rest at last together.

Yes, the spheres of man and woman are the same, with different duties according to the capacity of the individual. Woman, like all created things, lives, moves, and has her being obedient to law, exploring with man the mysteries of the universe and speculating on the glories of the hereafter. In the words of Tennyson²¹ they must be together

Everywhere,
Two heads in council, two beside the hearth,
Two in the tangled business of the world,
Two in the liberal offices of life,
Two plummeted dropped for one to sound the abyss
Of science and the secrets of the mind.

The question is no longer the sphere of a whole sex but of each individual. Women are now in the trades and professions, everywhere in the world of work. They have shown their capacity as students in the sciences, their skill as mariners before the mast, their courage as rescuers in lifeboats. They are close on the heels of man in the arts, sciences and literature; in their knowledge and understanding of the vital questions of the hour, and in the every day practical duties of life. Like man, woman's sphere is in the whole universe of matter and mind, to do whatever she can, and thus prove "the intentions of the Creator."

2. The other thought I would emphasize is the next step in progress we should take in our march to complete emancipation. We who have made our demands on the State have nearly finished this battle. The principle is practically conceded.

We now have full suffrage in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah;²² municipal suffrage in the great State of Kansas, and school suffrage in half the States of the Union. They have had municipal suffrage in Great Britain and her colonies for over twenty years, and some form of suffrage, on a property qualification, either in person or by proxy, in several European countries. Most of those who fought this battle have passed to another sphere of action, and our younger coadjutors will ere long, like Miriam of old, with timbrels and dances and songs of victory,²³ lead the hosts of women into the promised land of freedom. As learned bishops and editors of religious newspapers are warning us against further demands for new liberties, and clergymen are still preaching sermons on the "rib origin," and refuse to receive women as delegates to their synods, it is evident that our demands for equal recognition should now be made of the Church for the same rights we have asked of the State for the last fifty years, for the same rights, privileges and immunities that men enjoy. We must demand that the canon laws, the Mosaic code, the Scriptures, prayer books and liturgies be purged of all invidious distinctions of sex, of all false teaching as to woman's origin, character and destiny. To make her the author of sin, cursed in her maternity, subordinate in marriage, an afterthought in the creation, and all by the command of God, was so to overweight her in the scale of being that centuries of civilization have not as yet been able to lift the burden. Charles Kingsley said long ago, "This will never be a good world for women until the last remnant of the canon law is swept from the face of the earth,"²⁴ and Lord Brougham²⁵ echoed back the same sentiment as to the civil law for women. "It is," said he, "a disgrace to the Christianity and civilization of the nineteenth century." Here is the opinion of two distinguished men as to women's

degraded position under the canon and civil law in Church and State. Can it be that what such men see and denounce women themselves do not feel and repudiate?

3. We must demand an equal place in the offices of the Church, as pastors, elders, deacons; an equal voice in the creeds, discipline, and all business matters, in synods, conferences and general assemblies.

Women of wealth are all the time giving large sums of money to build and maintain churches; they fill the pews each returning Sunday; they swell the numbers of the devotees; they supply the enthusiasm for revival seasons, and worship the priesthood. They are ever loyal to the sons of Aaron, the house of Levi, the very powers that through the centuries have done more to block their way to freedom than all other influences put together. It is the perversion of the religious element in woman that has held her for ages the patient victim under the car of Juggernaut, on the funeral pyre, in iron shoes, in the Turkish harem, in the Catholic nunnery, and in the Protestant world beggars ever for fairs, donation parties, church decorations, embroideries of altar clothes, surplices and slippers. In return for this devotion they are entertained with sermons from the texts: "I suffer not a woman to speak in the churches"; "As Christ is the head of the Church, so is man the head of the woman."²⁶

4. Women must demand that all unworthy reflections on the dignity and sacred office of the mother of the race be expunged from religious literature, such as the allegory as to the creation of woman and St. Paul's assumption as to her social status. These ideas conflict with the Golden Rule and the fifth commandment: "Honor thy mother," and should no longer be rehearsed in the pulpit.²⁷ Such sentiments cannot inspire the rising generation with respect for their mothers.

5. We must demand that the pulpit be no longer desecrated by men who read passages of Scripture or preach from texts that teach subordination of one-half the human race to the other.

What sight could be more inexpressibly sad and comic than a young man fresh from Princeton, preaching his first sermon to a congregation of educated middle-aged women from the text: "Wives, obey your husbands"; "If you would know anything, ask your husbands at home."²⁸ In view of the character and higher education of the women of the present day, the time has fully come for the Church to take an advance step on this question. Jewish women should demand an expurgated edition of their liturgy. It must be very humiliating to them to have every man stand up in the Synagogue each returning Sabbath day, and say: "I thank thee, O Lord, that I was not born a woman."²⁹ Nothing that has ever emanated from the brain of man is too sacred to be revised and corrected. Our National Constitution has been amended fifteen times, our English system of jurisprudence has been essentially modified in the interest of women, to keep pace with advancing civilization. And now the time has come to amend and modify the canon laws, prayer books, liturgies and Bibles. Gladstone said the American Constitution, considering the circumstances under which

it was written, is the most wonderful document that ever emanated from the brain of man.³⁰ Yet from time to time, with the growth of the people, amendments were demanded. So with our statute laws. Why should we hold the Mosaic code and church decretals more sacred than the Saxon civil code and the legal opinions of Blackstone, Story and Kent?³¹ The trouble in both cases is that the laws and customs in Church and State alike are behind the public sentiment of our day and generation.

Woman's imperative duty at this hour is to demand a thorough revision of creeds and codes, Scriptures and constitutions. Petitions for a sixteenth amendment to the National Constitution for the enfranchisement of women have been annually presented to Congress for the last quarter of a century. Similar petitions for equal recognition in the Church should now every year press into the synods, conferences and general assemblies.

Twenty-five years ago a church in Illinois was rent in twain because some women persisted in praying in the weekly meetings. Ten years ago the Presbyterian General Assembly discussed this question for three days, and finally passed a resolution leaving the matter to the discretion of the pastor. Now women not only pray in church meetings, but on many public occasions, in missionary and charitable conventions. Fifteen years ago the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, by a large majority, voted down a resolution to ordain women as missionaries, and four years ago they voted down a resolution to ordain women as lay delegates; while thus far this autumn every State conference held has given a majority vote in favor of women as lay delegates. Last May (1895), the Episcopal Church of California passed a resolution that women might vote in vestry meetings, and also be eligible as church officers.³² When the Church obeys the command, "Honor thy mother," and the State heeds the declaration, "Equal rights to all"; when the two powers join hands to exalt the mother of the race, who has gone to the very gates of death to give every man life and immortality, then we shall see the dawn of a new day in woman's emancipation. When she awakes to the beauty of science, philosophy, true religion and pure government, then will the first note of harmony be touched; then will the great organ of humanity be played on all its keys, with every stop rightly adjusted, and with louder, loftier strains, the march of civilization will be immeasurably quickened.

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