“What Shall be Done with Her?”

Frances Fuller Victor Analyzes “The Woman Question” in Oregon

ON DECEMBER 5, 1873, Far West author Frances Fuller Victor launched her serialized novella “Judith Miles; or, What Shall be Done with Her?” in The New Northwest, an equal-rights newspaper. The story features an extremely beautiful sixteen-year-old protagonist, Judith, the daughter of an irascible, poor cattle rancher who is fighting for his land against powerful San Joaquin Valley farmers. Faced with multiplying financial misfortunes, Jack Miles decides to take his family back to ranchland in Texas, where they once lived. As they drive their rickety, overloaded wagon through the Arizona desert, Apache Indians brutally attack the band of travelers, leaving Judith as the sole survivor.

Before the story reaches this climax, Victor illustrates the tragic reality of women’s dependence on and subjugation to men in the late-nineteenth-century West through descriptions of the fictional family’s life and impoverished circumstances. Jack Miles, a man “deaf to argument and persuasion alike,” mercilessly drives his family on the exhausting trek from Texas to California, resulting in his wife’s death during childbirth. Judith then assumes her mother’s role, raising her precocious little sister in a cheerless household. Judith yearns for education, but her father’s insular worldview provokes rage against “book larnin’” and modernity. To Jack, his daughter’s rudimentary ability to read is enough for a gal. Judith therefore hides a precious cache of poetry and literature and fantasizes about the world beyond their ranch. At the time of her father’s death in the Arizona desert, she is utterly dependent, with no skills or resources. Her tangled emotions and material circumstances no doubt contribute to the “brain fever” she suffers on the
traumatic loss of her family after the Apache assault.1

Found lying in the Arizona desert several days later, Judith is taken to Fort Kellogg, where her vulnerability is a source of fascination to the officers’ wives, but it also leaves Judith susceptible to exploitation. Once she recovers from illness, the fort’s drunken, lecherous colonel preys on her fragile emotional state and naiveté, sexually harassing her. Rather than coming to her defense, the colonel’s wife blames Judith for her husband’s unwanted advances. Judith’s position as an unattached woman becomes untenable. Within days she is told to leave, cast from the protection of the fort. Put on a stagecoach for San Francisco, an apprehensive but hopeful Judith looks forward to making her own way in the world as an independent woman, determined to rise above the barriers of class and sex oppression that threaten to overwhelm her.2

Judith’s plight is expressed in Victor’s subtitle, “What shall be done with her?” Victor cleverly uses the question throughout the narrative to explore the complexities of nineteenth-century gender and class relations. Never directed toward Judith but instead asked of others, the query reiterates the vulnerabilities of a young woman without family or resources. In a conversation before Judith boards the stagecoach to San Francisco, for example, an agitated military officer asks the doctor’s wife: “What is to be done with her at the end of this journey? Do not I know that a young girl cannot be left to herself in a strange city? Has she money? Has she friends?” Exasperated with the barrage of questions, the woman retorts: “What shall be done with her?”3 She suggests providing Judith with letters of introduction to wealthy women in San Francisco. What Judith wishes to do with herself is a question never posed. Thus, each time a character in the novella wonders what to do with “poor” Judith, Victor’s women readers can see a mirror of their own dependency and vulnerability and ask: “What shall we do with ourselves?”

Seeking answers to that question, Victor, born in 1826, joined the first American revolutionaries who called for women’s equal rights, adding her voice to a generational and ideological cohort of social–justice advocates that was national as well as regional. Typically white, native born, middle class, and drawn to progressive Protestantism, these women and men shared a commitment to antebellum reform causes such as abolition, temperance, and the improvement of women’s health. The elder foremothers of this group had been born in the 1790s and included such national figures as Quaker teacher Lucretia Mott and writer Sarah Grimké, while the younger activists, generally born between 1815 and 1825, included writer Elizabeth Cady Stanton, orator-organizer Susan B. Anthony, abolitionist Lucy Stone, and Congregational-turned-Unitarian minister Antoinette Brown Blackwell.4

In 1869, after two decades of concerted effort to achieve abolition, women’s property rights, and woman suffrage, the national equal rights movement split into two wings. Leaders had been unable to reach consensus over future tactics and strategy when congressional Republicans disappointing defined citizens as male in the Fourteenth Amendment and then enfranchised only black men in the Fifteenth Amendment. Stone Photographed in 1870, at age fifty, Susan B. Anthony traveled throughout the Pacific Northwest in autumn 1871 with Abigail Scott Duniway as tour manager. Leaving Washington to return to Portland in November, Anthony mentioned the grueling schedule: “I have traveled 1,800 miles in fifty-six days, spoken forty-two nights and many days, and I am tired, tired” (Ida Husted Harper, The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill, 1899), 400).
and former abolitionist Henry Blackwell organized the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and pledged to continue working for gender and racial justice. Stanton and Anthony formed the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA), which was committed to the primacy of woman suffrage and advocated for a sixteenth amendment, intending to enfranchise all women. Thus, the early 1870s, when Victor completed “Judith Miles,” was a period of redefinition and reinvigoration for both national suffrage organizations.

As leaders from the AWSA and NWSA sought to awaken, educate, and evangelize new members, they increasingly depended on radical women at the local and state levels whose persuasive writing and energetic oratory could reach an untapped audience of both the eager and the indifferent. In Oregon, this first generation of female equal-rights supporters included, among others, Abigail Scott Duniway, editor and author Abigail Scott Duniway, health reform advocate and physician Mary Thompson, and Frances Fuller Victor. As “organic intellectuals,” women who “used their personal experiences to analyze and to articulate feminist issues,” they raised their voices in concert with women in the national movement, implored their constituents to investigate the roots of women’s sexual and economic degradation and promote efficacious remedies to male dominance.

The decade of the 1870s, ripe with both possibility and conflict in the national suffrage movement, also marked a turning point in Victor’s career and personal history. Separated from her profligate husband and entirely self-supporting, she utilized her own literary aspirations, thwarted ambitions, and financial degradation to sharpen and deepen her analysis of women’s subjugation. Victor’s “Judith Miles,” for example, not only represented a literary accomplishment but also drew from her personal experiences to explore the meanings of individuality and womanhood in the nineteenth century. The result was “a penetrating critique of gender relations in western society.”

Victor followed “Judith Miles” with a series of ruthlessly insightful prose essays in The New Northwest that attacked the perceived logic of what she called “the social system” — white male socioeconomic, legal, political, and religious dominance — and probed in exhaustive detail its catastrophic effects on women’s humanity. Her intellectual contribution to the regional and national equal-rights movement, beginning in the 1870s, was to awaken women and men to the reality and brutality of patriarchy in order to promote social change. She accomplished this consciousness-raising by utilizing an ironic, witty, and caustic voice, developed over twenty years in her fiction, to write feminist prose lectures and essays. In those texts, Victor seized on three interconnected arguments that she used to develop women’s self-awareness and strengthen their commitment to equality: women’s dependency on men for socioeconomic stability and status infantilized women and perpetuated male political domination; competition for men within a patriarchal system destroyed women’s interrelationships; and women’s self-education was the key to avoiding victimization and increasing politicization. To provoke and motivate women to think critically about the ramifications of their marginal status and power, Victor persistently beseeched them to “investigate for themselves” the reasons for their subjugation. Only with knowledge, she asserted, could women fight successfully for the ballot and crusade for citizenship.

**When Victor Took Up** her pen to craft Judith’s story, she already had developed a deep personal interest in women’s status. She had moved to Portland in December 1864, having spent the previous eighteen months in San Francisco as a columnist for The Golden Era, the city’s premier literary newspaper. As the provocative, witty, and fictional social critic “Florence Fane,” Victor had criticized the consequences for women of San Francisco’s complex Civil War-era economy. On October 25, 1865, for example, Florence Fane abruptly declared that on several occasions she had “wished to be a man.” With tongue in cheek, she claimed that she was “not an advocate of women’s rights,” then elaborately catalogued women’s “disadvantages” in wage inequities, their constantly having to “endure” the company of...
children, and their complete dependence on men. This and Fane's similar, often humorous efforts to highlight San Francisco's economic and social stratification demonstrate Victor's awareness of women's lower status and lack of power.9

"Florence Fane in San Francisco" was immensely popular in The Golden Era, running weekly for fifteen months under a prominent masthead. But Victor's writing for the newspaper ended when her second husband, Henry Victor, decided that on his retirement from the Navy they would move north to Portland. From her first sighting of the Oregon coast while aboard the Brother Jonathan, Victor was fascinated with the state's landscapes, people, and history. She soon met Gov. Addison Gibbs, who encouraged Victor to write about her new home. To launch the enterprise, as both a chronicler of the pioneers and booster of the Pacific Northwest, she became an intrepid traveler, covering hundreds of miles by stagecoach, steamboat, and on foot — usually alone — from which she gleaned material to craft The River of the West (1870) and All Over Oregon and Washington (1872). In addition, many of her travel essays and short stories found a place in the Overland Monthly, the San Francisco Daily Bulletin, and the Oregonian.10

Victor's personal life in Oregon did not fare as well as her professional career. She separated from Henry in 1868, after he squandered their few resources on bad investments in real estate and coal mining. He subsequently died in a shipwreck in 1875; what remained of their meager estate was soon tangled in legal limbo and ultimately lost in 1885. That collision of Victor's challenging personal circumstances with her literary aspirations converged in her portrayal of "Judith Miles" and analysis of "the woman question" in The New Northwest. As scholar Jean Matthews has noted, it was "these two strands — women's wrongs and women's rights, the discourse of complaint and the discourse of aspiration — [that] remained interwoven throughout the history of the women's movement."11

On February 13, 1874, as readers of "Judith Miles" learned of Judith's fate in the Arizona desert, Victor left her home to attend the second annual Oregon State Woman Suffrage Association (OSWSA) conference at Portland's Masonic Hall. She had prepared a lecture for the evening session that focused on women's dependent status within "the social system" and the ramifications of their inequality. Her address, "Some Thoughts about Ourselves," particularly demanded that married middle-class women reflect on the privileges and limitations of their dependent status. Because she never felt comfortable speaking before a crowd, Victor asked Duniway to read the lecture to the gathering of sixty women and men who had pledged "to combine our mutual interests for the promotion of equal political rights for women who are taxed without representation and governed without consent."12 Duniway then reprinted Victor's lecture in The New Northwest, the newspaper for the nascent Oregon suffrage movement. With nearly 1,000 paid subscribers and many more who acquired the newspaper as it passed through the hands of friends and relatives, The New Northwest extended the reach of Victor's ideas well beyond the lecture hall. Just as she was hoping to accomplish through her fiction, Victor intended with her forthright prose to awaken women and men to the need for equal rights. When Victor's lecture was published in The New Northwest, it was printed next to chapter twelve of "Judith Miles."13

Victor's lengthy address opened with an "anonymous" quotation that struck an unusually conservative chord in the midst of an equal-rights meeting:

Women, trained for so many centuries to entire dependence, are not good at a long, steady defiance to association and habit. That they are capable of it, the world knows; but if it is forced on them, the sustained effort which it costs them, makes them coarse, fierce, and unwomanly. This continued effort at defiance will soon make, from habit, a woman's voice hoarse and manlike.

Noting solemnly, "there is a great deal of bitter truth" in the author's statement, Duniway, as reader of the speech, might have glanced up to see heads in the audience bobbing assent. Victor's text, however, had not yet indicated what was "bitter" or "truthful" about a quotation that was packed with significance regarding nineteenth-century white women's prescribed roles.14

What exactly did it mean to defy "association and habit"? How could defiance to those habits or norms be "forced" on women? Did an audience consisting of western suffragists truly believe that "defiance to association and habit" made women "coarse, fierce, and unwomanly"? In the analytical onslaught that followed, Victor invited her listeners to consider how "womanhood" was constructed and deeply rooted in history, culture, and class. To illustrate her multilayered ideas, Victor picked up the fictional threads from "Judith Miles," presenting the single woman's struggle for independence and dignity and asking the audience to consider how "the social system" degraded those who violated its tenets. She thereby illuminated the "bitter truth" that women's status within a patriarchal system was fragile and uncertain.

The concept that women had been "trained for so many centuries to entire dependence" sheds light on the intellectual framework for Victor's ideas, highlighting what she believed were complex interconnections between gender-role expectations and women's subjugation. The quotation that opened her speech is from Henry Kingsley's novel Hetty (1869), a detail missing from her lecture. In Hetty, the young protagonist, Rebecca, is motherless and ignored by her autocratic, unfeeling father; she detests
the stifling, stagnant household in which she is confined. There is a striking similarity between Rebecca and Victor’s character Judith. Both girls’ mothers die through actions set in motion by their domineering husbands. Rebecca and Judith long for education and more freedom not only to explore the world around them but also to become useful citizens; yet they have been taught to submit to unreasonable authority that seems baffling and illogical. The character George Turner in Hetty rules his female subjects (Rebecca, her timid sister, and intimidated servants) with severity and Calvinist rigidity, conspiring with the “unctuous” Reverend Hgbut to compel Rebecca’s engagement to him. Feeling the need to act in defiance of her father’s wishes, she surreptitiously plans a brief escape. A three-day journey of self-discovery achieves two goals: she becomes more determined not to lead a soul-killing, useless life, and her disappearance ends the engagement. On her return, Rebecca tells her furious father: “It was you who drove me to this course,” and she refuses to yield to him. The “coarse, fierce, and unwomanly” quote in Victor’s lecture comes from this part of the novella, and it is helpful to ask what impression the story and those lines might have made on her. First, powerful men and their sycophants conspire against powerless women; second, Rebecca’s subjugation and degradation was total: intellectual, economic, social, and religious; and, most important, Rebecca’s “insurrection” against her father’s dominance was successful. 

As Victor’s lecture unfolds, it becomes clear that Kingsley’s quotation succinctly explains her understanding of women’s lower status and power in nineteenth-century America. The idea that women had been “trained” to dependency bolstered her belief that women’s subjugation to men was not innate but culturally constructed. One of the most influential ideologies of the nineteenth century was the “cult of true womanhood,” which encouraged individuals to view women as dependents best suited for the private sphere. With its cardinal tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity, “true womanhood” upheld conservative reverence for obedience, deference, and religiosity. Yet women also seized the moral high ground that the ideology implied, exploiting it to expand their civic reach in society. Scholar Peggy Pascoe, for example, has noted that middle-class women in the Far West utilized their supposed moral purity to found “home mission” associations to “rescue” women from male sexual excess. Thus, some women called into service female moral authority against the cultural and religious customs of Mormons who practiced polygamy, as well as Catholics, Chinese immigrants, and Native Americans. Portland’s Anti-Saloon League also put women’s piety and female purity at the forefront of its activities. Just a few months after Victor’s lecture appeared in The New Northwest, women of the city’s League rose up against the liquor traffic, which Victor recorded in The Women’s War with Whisky or Crusading in Portland (1874). As one defendant defiantly stated at her sentencing for disturbing the peace outside a saloon: “We have not power to amend the law; but since the day when women were first at the sepulchre, [sic] it has been her conceded right to pray, and we claim this right as inalienably ours.” Evidently, women enthusiastically used their perceived piety and purity to advocate for themselves and their families in the public sphere, confirming both the strength and flexibility of true womanhood’s tenets.

In addition to their pious reform roles, many women at midcentury looked to writers such as Victor whose lives and work demonstrated an intellectually active yet still “womanly” standard. A published poet at age fifteen, Frances and her sister Metta wrote western regional verse as well as romantic love poems focused on female friendship. In 1848, the pair journeyed from Ohio to New York City, eagerly anticipating their literary futures. The unexpected death of their father pulled them back to their mother and sisters in the Midwest; however, both women continued to write, compelled by creative passion and financial necessity. After securing employment in Michigan as an assistant editor for The Monthly Hesperian, and Odd fellows’ Literary Magazine, Frances delved into western-themed travel and prose essays that regional newspapers enthusiastically published.

Other women heeded the advice of domestic icons Catharine Beecher and Godey’s Lady’s Book “editress” Sarah Josepha Hale. They saw in women’s moral purity, femininity, and efficiency an antidote to the acquisitiveness and
and without political citizenship in American society.

continued to be obedient and ultimately submissive to male authority — moral, religious, educational, or political. "So long as women am prepared to deny that women have a governing influence of any kind men and politics in society. Without the right to vote, Victor asserted, "I

their domestic, pious, and pure femininity as powerful forces to transform the era in which she was writing, this articulation of the interplay between men dominance over women and therefore license to humiliate them. For struggling against patriarchy could yield important rewards, as it did for Kingsley’s protagonist, Hetty. Victor emphasized that the villain of the story is the "social system" that granted men dominance over women and therefore license to humiliate them. For the era in which she was writing, this articulation of the interplay between subjugation and resistance is profound.

Although defiance did not transform a woman into a “manlike” creature, a woman’s quest for intellectual and economic independence did set her apart from her less radical peers. The isolation women might face was one of the “bitter truths” of defying patriarchy. From the examples she gives, Victor appears to allude to her own yearning for intellectual recognition and for the economic rewards that come with achievement. Tucked into her

lecture is the Enlightenment suffragist axiom: “Mind is the same, whether it resides in a man’s form, or a woman’s. All the laws of the mind, the sense, the affections, are the same in men as in women, so far as observation or science can determine. What affects the one, affects the other, and in exactly the same way.” But the fact of women’s intellectual equality had not yet been proven to most men and women of the nineteenth century. Victor found it disturbing that when women “aspire to an honorable or lucrative position,” men and women call them “unwomanly.” More troubling was that “a woman of brains” merited no respect, from either gender. Even among women she was “a crow to be pecked at.” Victor’s vivid language suggests her intellectual and literary gifts often had not been appreciated or rewarded.

For a woman who had achieved so much in her literary career, Victor seemed insecure about both her reputation as a writer and with her financial situation in the early 1870s. She had separated from her husband in 1868, and writing for pay became her only means of support. From the moment she arrived in Oregon, she began work on a book that was partly an immigrant’s guide to the region and mostly a historical description of the Pacific Northwest’s economic and cultural development. Gibbs introduced her to Judge Matthew Deady and Washington historian and lawyer Elwood Evans. She also soon met the noted eccentric pioneer Jesse Applegate, who recounted his family’s overland trek to Oregon in 1843. Countless others opened their homes, libraries, and reminiscences to her. The book that grew out of her travels and interviews, All Over Oregon and Washington, was “filled with all sorts of information concerning the State and adjacent territories, especially of the agricultural portions of Oregon, quite in detail, with a good map.”

Hoping an eastern publisher would issue the book, she asked her friend Albert D. Richardson of the New York Tribune to investigate the possibility of its publication with Harper’s. They were interested, but Richardson told her that the Oregon legislature would need to match Harper’s funding with an outright purchase of 2,000 copies. That request and a similar appeal to Oregon’s Chamber of Commerce failed. With Victor’s first book, The River of the West, already selling by subscription, the lack of interest in funding All Over Oregon and Washington was a serious financial blow.

Victor’s drive to publish her work, her boundless creative energy, and pressing financial needs meant that her writing never ceased. Those factors intertwined importantly for Victor with the blossoming Oregon suffrage movement. As she wrapped up the writing of her book manuscript and sought a publisher, Victor also was sending selections from her book to the Oregonian for publication and writing stories at a prodigious rate, making 1871 and 1872 two of her most productive years. This background helps explain why Victor seems to have been nowhere in sight when famed suf-
Portland, Oregon, Dec. 22, 1875.

Dear Sir,

The Fourth Annual Meeting of the Oregon State Woman Suffrage Association will be held in the city of Salem, beginning on Tuesday the 8th day of February, A. D. 1876, to continue three or more days.

You are respectfully and urgently requested to be present and address the Association, and co-operate in its work and aims.

The Corresponding Secretary will be glad to receive a favorable response from you, indicating the subject of your address or essay.

Very Respectfully,

F. F. VICTOR,
Cor. Sec'y O. S. W. S. Aus.

By order of the Ex. Com.

As her writing schedule permitted, Victor was an active participant in both the Oregon State Woman [Equal] Suffrage Association and the Multnomah County Woman Suffrage Association. In the former organization, she served as corresponding secretary for the annual meeting in February 1876.

21. She hoped to convince the Overland Monthly’s publisher John Carmany to print and bind 1,500 copies of the book at her expense. She would then sell them by subscription, absorbing all the financial risk. Ultimately successful in her negotiations with Carmany, Victor remained in the Bay Area until April, when her “little hand-book of Oregon” was printed.22 During those two years, Victor published eleven stories and one poem for the Overland Monthly, averaging thirty-three dollars per story.23

Although writing deadlines and financial pressures always impinged on Victor’s attendance at suffrage meetings and limited her political activism, her need to support herself and the isolation she experienced as a woman writer provided the basis for her equal-rights commitment. Thus, it seemed especially revealing when she wearily told her audience at the 1874 OSWSA Conference:

What wonder that when a woman is placed, either by choice of duty or by circumstances, between the upper and nether millstones of this false social system, her voice becomes hoarse, her disposition fierce and unwomanly. The habit of repressing tears, and forcing back sobs is not mellowing to the voice. The constant endurance of cruel injustice, not from men only, but from sister women, is not sweetening to the disposition. The face that is never smiled on, soon forgets to smile.

Her own consciousness-raising had been both painful and enlightening; it shaped her identity as a woman and informed her critical perspective on patriarchy. Victor’s personal understanding of how subordination within a patriarchal culture shaped women’s identity was therefore a central focus of her reading and writing.

The lead characters of both Hetty and “Judith Miles” struggle against domineering, controlling men to define their own personalities and sense of self. Similarly, Victor’s lecture “Some Thoughts about Ourselves” focused on the concept that through men, especially husbands, women obtained their identity, social position, and financial security. “Why, a woman must marry, albeit she has to wait to be asked. Not to marry, is to be held in contempt. She takes her rank from her husband. Of herself she is nothing.” Consequently, a woman’s social and economic status depended entirely on the man with whom she was connected.

Victor was certainly not the first feminist thinker to link women’s dependency on men with their lower status in society. Most national suffragists already had considered women’s inequality within marriage. The 1854 Albany National Convention, for example, was devoted entirely to the question of married women’s legal status, with Elizabeth Cady Stanton angrily summarizing the issue: “She can own nothing, sell nothing. She has no right even to the wages she earns; her person, her time, her services are the property of her husband, of whom she is connected. A woman’s social and economic status depended entirely on the man with whom she was connected.

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A man marries or not, as pleases him. If his wife dies, or is in any way separated from him, his life, in all appearances, goes on quite the same. If he is rich, he remains rich. If he is popular or famous, he remains popular or famous. The woman with whom he was once connected was only an incident of his free, untrammeled life.
Women, in other words, were trapped by their dependency and social custom, enveloped in relationships that prevented individual growth and maturation.

If those who heard or read “Some Thoughts about Ourselves” were not shocked already that Victor called a woman an “incident” or a “nothing” in her mate’s life, then they might have found it even more jarring when she demanded that women speculate about their fate without a patriarch: absent a father or husband, women had no independent socioeconomic standing. To explain this, she turned to the dissolution of marriage through death, a topic that most wives probably did not want to contemplate. If a woman’s husband possessed a “fortune or title” then she could continue to live off his prestige and wealth. If a deceased husband’s estate was inadequate or non-existent, the wife would be cast before the public gaze, an embarrassment and a burden. In either case, a husband’s class position positively or negatively impacted a woman’s experience of dependency. Ruthlessly, Victor concluded: “She has hardly any excuse for continuing to cumber the earth, since the entity from which she derived all that she was, and all that she had been permitted to enjoy, has become a nonentity, and she has become that disreputable thing, a ‘lone woman’ — a ‘relict.’”

As Victor’s example of the widow illustrated, women’s general lower status included a class component. Minus a wealthy patriarch’s title and the surety of his income, “the lone woman” faced an uncertain future with few options and grim outcomes. There were only two reasons, Victor claimed, that women sought employment: “solely for the sake of truth” or due to “unmerciful disaster.” She did not define these concepts, but “unmerciful disaster” appropriately characterizes the unexpected task of self-support that a widow or an unmarried woman faced. Her character Judith Miles learns painfully that one of the few occupations open to a “respectable” woman is teaching, employment that is only possible with an education. Otherwise, her options are limited to dress- and bonnet-making, or running a sewing machine. A poor rancher’s daughter, Judith never learned those skills. Mrs. Brazee, a wealthy, self-interested socialite and Judith’s temporary guardian, seemed alternately fascinated and horrified by her young charge: “I mean how deplorably and hopelessly ignorant. . . . It is a great pity, is it not, that a girl should grow up without any useful knowledge?”

Victor did not merely point out that women were passively held in “low estimation” by society — an assessment that downplayed patriarchy’s effect on the everyday experience of women; she also argued that men actively sought the power they held within the social system. Summarizing her analysis of the “lone woman,” Victor offered a damning statement on her status: “But why enumerate the disabilities of the ‘lone woman’? Whatever she might have been with liberty to use her natural, God-given abilities, she is nothing now. And why? Primarily, because men claim for themselves all the privileges of life” [emphasis mine]. Cataloguing her complaints against men in the workplace, Victor pointedly described women’s victimization and men’s dominance. If women wanted “to find something congenial or profitable to do,” men with their “selfishness and arrogance” would place “unnecessary burdens” on women. Any workplace became a battleground because men “sneered at” and “ridiculed” women. And men did not merely make public spaces uncomfortable for women, they also vigorously controlled the public sphere itself: “No sort of personal
freedom is allowed to her; all public places are forbidden to be entered alone.” With these examples, Victor described her understanding of patriarchy’s dynamic, continuous effect on women. Not only was patriarchy obscure and insidious, it also was active and continuous, and could be seen in numerous daily interactions between men and women.

Although Victor found men’s domineering behavior reprehensible, she found women’s actions toward each other even more so. One of the themes of her lecture was how “the social system,” particularly male dominance within a capitalist economy, warped women’s interrelationships. Women’s low status and inferiority, she pointed out to her audience, resulted in painful consequences for sisterhood. She firmly believed that as long as women competed with each other for male status, wealth, and power within the social system, they destroyed their solidarity with one another. Insightfully comprehending how class allegiance trumped gender solidarity in women’s and men’s relationships, Victor chastised “more fortunate women” for “sustaining men” in their “assumption” that they were entitled to wealth and power. “By a singular and most illogical mode of reasoning, a woman is womanly in proportion as she forsakes all allegiance to her own sex, and devotes herself to the other.” Women’s inability to sustain themselves financially meant they continually sought male attention, competing with other women for the status that men conferred.

Competition for men’s status also meant that women would ignore or abandon each other. In “Judith Miles,” the protagonist learns she cannot count on a supportive sisterhood when she is sexually harassed. Victimized by Colonel Kellogg, Judith is shocked when his wife blames her for the abuse. Viewing Judith’s youth and beauty as a threat to her social status, Mrs. Kellogg attacks her as “an artful, low-bred creature.” The “social system” required that male economic and social dominance outweigh the relationships women maintained with each other. Rather than viewing women as secure in one another’s friendships from within the private sphere, Victor found women’s interrelationships fraught with tension.

Women have no coherency about them. Each one is for herself, in some man — uncharitable, unappreciative, merciless — notwithstanding she knows that by a turn of Fortune’s wheel she may herself be brought to occupy the same lonely, aimless and joyless condition for which she has such a contempt in others.

All women, therefore, were utterly dependent on a patriarchal system that continually undermined their support for one another. Grimké also had concluded that women’s confinement within the private sphere negatively impacted their personal development and relationships. She signed the first of her now-famous letters “thine for the oppressed in the bonds of womanhood” and the remainder of them closed with “thine in the bonds of womanhood.” As scholar Elizabeth Ann Bartlett notes, Grimké did not use the singular, which might have referred to the bond of friendship, but rather the plural “bonds” as “an expression of their common bondage.”

Acknowledging the emotional damage that women’s disunity perpetuated, Victor recognized that it further reinforced male dominance: “What most strengthens men’s hands against women, is their treachery towards, or their indifference to each other.” Women’s betrayal of each other thus further undermined their efforts to become independent.

VICTOR’S DIM VIEW of gender relations provided her with the motivation to uplift and enlighten her sisters in the struggle for equal rights. But raising the consciousness of women also required that they educate themselves regarding the historical roots of their oppression. If they understood the origins of their dependency, she believed, they could imagine and achieve a future of equal citizenship in the nation. Those origins reached back into the past, Victor argued, demonstrating that women’s subjugation was historically and culturally rooted in ancient civilizations (“the State”) and in the church. “Women should study history,” she said, “and learn whence comes their enslavement.” In a brief historical analysis of secular society during the Roman Empire, Victor provided both a gender and class analysis of male domination. Women’s subjugation to men “began in barbarism, when rude physical struggle governed. Being first enslaved by brute force,” she wrote, “the subsequent elevation of the ruling class only widened and deepened the valley of humiliation” between elite white men and women. Once privileged men assumed a dominant role, she asserted, they “indulged” their consorts “in just that amount of knowledge” and “corrupted” them with “just that degree of vice, which made them agreeable to their masters.” Enjoying men’s flattery and craving their more-powerful status, women sought male attention instead of self-actualization, highlighting women’s culpability in their own oppression. “Proper pride, self-esteem, honor and loyalty, are qualities belonging to the highest culture, and we do not look for them among serfs,” Victor noted acerbically.

When “Some Thoughts about Ourselves” turned to analyze the role of the church in women’s oppression, Victor muted her radical voice, not finding fault with Christian principles but instead focusing on traditional customs and biblical interpretation. Women’s subservience “did not come from the hand of God,” she wrote. “He made all things free.” She also argued that “in the early days of the Church in Europe,” many women fled “to the seclusion of conventual life to escape the brutality of their male relatives” who “were masters of their persons and fortunes.” She then quickly re-engaged
the social-systems critique that wove throughout her lecture, arguing that men’s interpretation of scripture and male dominance within the church subjugated women. The Christian marriage ritual, for example, which Victor believed generally raised women’s status and lessened male brutality, unfortunately also codified women’s submission to their husbands. “Obedience,” she emphatically stated, “has continued to be imposed upon them by that same Church ritual, ever since.”

Victor was one of many early suffragists who struggled with women’s subordination within a scriptural context. Throughout the nineteenth century, some activists concluded that cultural norms, biblical interpretations, and centuries of male dominance within the church created women’s subjugation, not Christianity itself. In order to move the conversation forward, the Rev. Antoinette Brown offered the following resolution at the Syracuse national suffrage convention in 1852: “That the Bible recognizes the rights, duties, and privileges of woman as a public teacher, as every way equal with those of man; that it enjoins upon her no subjection that is not enjoined upon him; and that it truly and practically recognizes neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.” Her resolution and subsequent arguments set off a firestorm of disapproval from conservative male ministers and those opposed to linking long-held religious practices and doctrine to political change. A lively letter sent from Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not calm the flames. In part, the letter stated: “Woman in her present ignorance is made to rest in the most distorted views of God and the Bible and the laws of her being; and like the poor slave ‘Uncle Tom,’ her religion, instead of making her noble and free...has made her bondage but more certain and lasting, her degradation more helpless and complete.” After two days of fierce debate, the convention tabled Brown’s resolution.8 Stanton’s rhetoric hinted at her later articulation of the irreconcilable differences between Christianity and women’s equality. In 1895, she completed The Woman’s Bible, which presented “women’s commentaries on women’s position in the Old and New Testaments.” In her introduction, Stanton argued that the Bible was the root of all laws and customs pertaining to women; its tenets created and sustained women’s inferiority. “The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced,” she emphatically stated. For most suffragists, however, Stanton’s views were heretical. A majority of the women and men attending the national suffrage convention in 1896 passed a resolution condemning Stanton’s religious radicalism and renouncing any connection to her magnum opus.9

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s controversial Woman’s Bible sparked a contentious meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1896. Many long-time allies, such as Anna Howard Shaw and Carrie Chapman Catt, broke with Stanton and renounced any association with the text. Prominent southern suffragist Laura Clay claimed “[The Woman's Bible] belittled the grandeur of the Scriptures and jarred painfully upon the feelings of all devout Christians” (Kathi Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 182–83). For Victor, as with most liberal suffragists, it was the social system and not Christianity itself that had subjugated women, as she discussed in “Suffrage and Religion.” Published in The New Northwest on August 28, 1874, Victor’s essay began and ended in similar style to “Some Thoughts about Ourselves,” with conservative, reassuring statements that belied her progressive views. Hoping to bring awareness of women’s subjugation to a wide audience, she worked to not offend her religiously oriented constituency. Victor’s sharp wit was still readily apparent, however, when she claimed that what society needed was “the beginning of a religious movement in favor of suffrage for women. It has been unfortunate for the cause all along that so many people have treated it as if it were a thing that could not be prayed for, but should, on the contrary, be prayed against.” At the end of her essay, she told suffrage supporters that the ballot would be theirs if they would simply “pray for political and moral freedom”—most certainly written tongue-in-cheek. Unlike radical suffragists Stanton and Ernestine Rose, who wished to divorce the suffrage movement from all things religious, Victor claimed that the foundational principles of both the church and American government assured women’s equality; thus, she argued for suffrage because it was a Christian and just principle. Utilizing this logic, she wanted women to challenge their second-class status: “It is eighteen hundred years since Christ
taught freedom and equality in all spiritual matters; and one hundred years since the American Government was founded on the rights of conscience.” Describing women’s existence as “parasitic,” Victor informed her readers that “being theoretically free because men were free was a very different thing [than women] being free because they were unfettered.” Emphasizing the democratic and Christian principles of freedom and dignity, Victor reassured women that equality was a matter of Christ-like social justice and not antithetical to their religious beliefs.

In order to illustrate that equality and Christianity were inseparable, Victor presented a clever exchange between “man” and “God,” using the Ten Commandments as her model. It humorously illustrated the difference between men’s interpretation of scripture and her belief in a just and inclusive deity:

God says: Thou shalt have no other Gods but me.

Men, by their injunctions of duty to themselves, say practically: “Worship me as lover, husband, minister, or what not — never mind about God.”

God says: The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord; in it thou shalt not do any work: thou nor thy son nor thy daughter, thy man-servant nor thy maid-servant.

Men say: “We want extra good dinners on the Sabbath day; and while I repose myself from the labors of the week, let the woman attend to the gratification of my stomach: she and her man-servant and maid-servant, and let company be asked to dinner.”

God says: Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

Men say: “You owe no duties to father or mother after you become a wife, and especially are mothers-in-law odious.”

Victor’s rewriting of the Ten Commandments accomplished several goals. It ingeniously mocked patriarchal interpretations of Christian scripture while upholding Christian principles of justice, fairness, and equity. It was also a statement on moral and spiritual accountability: “We have a right to hold men accountable to us, as we have ever been held accountable to them,” she enjoined her readers. Highlighting once again the dangers of absolute dependency on others, Victor asked women a pointed question about their salvation and the consequences of following male-defined rules: “If it is true that each soul stands or falls for itself, are not women accumulating a terrible burden through their complicity in sins not originating in themselves, but at the same time not resisted as sinful both in themselves and others?” Finally, her disposition was a reminder that, for her generation, the Enlightenment’s promise of intellectual and spiritual equality had not yet been fulfilled. “God created us equal; — he created us free agents,” Grimké had concluded thirty-six years before, “and to him alone is woman bound to be in subjection.”

As humorous as Victor’s revised Ten Commandments may seem today, they were intended to stir deep soul-searching among Victor’s readers. Her somber insistence that “each soul stands or falls for itself” prefigured Stanton’s later claim for the “individuality of each human soul.” Nearly twenty years after Victor wrote “Suffrage and Religion,” Stanton issued perhaps her most famous statement on women’s “self sovereignty.” Her 1892 speech “The Solitude of Self” eloquently argued that each person must ultimately be accountable for herself.

VICTOR’S GOAL IN WRITING “Judith Miles” and her suffrage essays was to expose the deleterious effects of “the social system” on women and men. She believed, furthermore, that social and political change rested on women’s self sovereignty and self worth, which could only be nurtured through awareness and information. As a cosmopolitan writer-intellectual, it is not surprising that Victor urged women to seek knowledge — from history, literature, politics, and theology — of the origins of their subjugation. Women had been kept in “chains” through their own ignorance, she argued, and the only way to burst those bonds was to “let women investigate for themselves the means by which men, in Church and State, have for ages hindered their advancement in mental and moral culture.”

Victor’s investigation of patriarchy, however, did not simply conclude that women were victims of a system gone awry. Instead, she saw women as active participants in their own degradation. With irony, wit, and exhaustive detail, she boldly attacked long-accepted views regarding the importance of women’s separate sphere and the efficacy of domestically determined, paternalist politics. Victor abrasively argued that middle- and upper-class women degraded each other in their quest for men’s attention and status, too frequently ignored gender solidarity, and propped up the status quo. Although she was respected among her peers for the rigor of her arguments and depth of her insights, her persistent attack on “true womanhood” may have confounded sister suffragists and alienated potential converts to the cause. Yet it was her iconoclasm, her fearless style and provocative substance, that makes her intellectual contributions resonant and enduring.

Victor clearly linked women’s capacity for knowledge and moral development with their fundamental humanity and individuality. As such, she saw the achievement of the right to vote as a vital step forward in human progress, but accomplishing that goal would require argumentation, persuasion, and greater knowledge. In “Suffrage and Religion” she wrote: “The woman movement, like the temperance movement, began by lectures upon its merits as a matter of social and political economy and by attempts at...
legislation.” Nevertheless, “you cannot legislate convictions into anybody’s head or heart.” For that reason, it seemed, she often mentioned the ballot secondarily or sometimes not at all, preferring to engage women in lengthy discourses on the roots of their unequal social and economic status. Thus — she told readers again in “Woman’s Influence over Society,” — “instead of arguing about their right to the ballot,” they should “study up these social questions.” Once they had examined history and society thoroughly, she wrote, “the ballot would come into their hands so easily and naturally, that they will wonder that they had not always had it.”

Victor’s emphasis on study and self awareness should not be stressed at the expense of her advocacy for and participation in political organizing. Careful investigation of patriarchy, she thought, was the foundation for political activism, not an end in itself. In a letter to Oregon suffrage supporters before a special session of the OSWSA, Victor typically urged women “to enter upon a regular series of political meetings when the science of government, the political history of the country, the local laws, and all kindred topics should be studied and commented upon.” She then continued with a remarkably radical statement regarding the reason for these political lessons: “that we should eventually organize into a party, nominate our candidates, hold elections, and in every way carry on the political work of a party, or a separate government.” Once educated and organized, “the other political parties would find a use for us, and be as desirous of our suffrages as we are of theirs.”

In promoting her vision of a separate political party or even a new government, Victor championed the possibilities she saw in an “intelligent, independent womanhood.” Those who were knowledgeable and committed to the cause of equal rights would not hesitate to seize the reins of citizenship.

Victor’s belief in the transformative power of an “intelligent, independent womanhood” is expressed most poignantly in “Judith Miles.” Judith unexpectedly inherits her father’s land, freeing her from future economic bondage to a husband. Her suitor, Major Floyd, had viewed Judith’s pecuniary helplessness as one of her more attractive features. Now that she was no longer at his mercy, Judith could continue her coveted education and explore the possibility of becoming an artist. “Go away from me; let me be,” she orders. “Come back if you choose, sometime in the future and observe my progress. I shall at least understand myself better than I do now.” For Victor, as with numerous others who fought for women’s rights in the nineteenth century, it was women’s awareness of themselves as equal to men that ultimately would transform American society. Thus, she concluded for all women as she ended Judith’s story: “There was no longer any question as to what should be done with her.”

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Semi-Centennial Western History Association Conference in Oakland, California, October 2011. I would like to thank Karen Blair, Eliza Canty-Jones, Kimberly Jensen, and Jean M. Ward for their enthusiastic and thought-provoking comments on this and earlier drafts. Anonymous reviewers for the OHQ read this manuscript in its various renditions and helped enormously in my thinking and writing about Victor’s place in suffrage history. Gratitude goes to OHQ Rose Tucker Fellow Heather Petricelli for her meticulous fact-checking and her assistance in finding photographs. Dear friend and colleague Michael T. Bertrand deserves special mention for his unflagging enthusiasm, insightful perspectives, and constant support of my research and writing. And finally, for Jean M. Ward, mentor, devoted friend, and sister in the struggle for equal rights, this essay is dedicated to you.

1. Mrs. F.F. Victor, “Judith Miles; Or, What Shall Be Done with Her?” was serialized weekly in The New Northwest from December 5, 1873, through May 8, 1874; the quotations are from December 5 and December 12, 1873.


3. Victor, “Judith Miles.” These events are described in the first fourteen chapters, serialized through March 6, 1874.


regarding their degradation and to motivate social change.
9. Victor wrote a subsequent column devoted solely to women’s issues in the San Francisco Daily Morning Call during 1875. As “Dorothy D,” she humorously and insightfully analyzed divorce, dress reform, women’s poverty, and women’s and men’s social relations.
11. For Victor’s legal affairs, see Martin, A Bit of Blue, 276–79; and Matthews, Women’s Struggle for Equality, 93.
12. For the description of the conference, see The New Northwest, February 13 and 20, 1874; for the contents of the OSWSA Constitution, see the conference proceedings, February 20, 1874.
13. George P. Rowell estimated The New Northwest’s subscribers at 984 (as of the date of his publication, 1876); see his American Newspaper Directory (New York: George P. Rowell, 1876), 189. For more information on subscribers over time as well as an analysis of the impact and reach of The New Northwest, see Jean M. Ward and Elaine A. Maveety, eds., “Victor’s Milieu: Selections from Abigail Scott Duniway’s Suffrage Newspaper” (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000), Introduction, and 1496–1502.
17. For Victor’s early life, see Browne, “A Lovely but Unpredictable River,” 12–26; and Martin, A Bit of Blue, 1–9.
20. These and subsequent Victor quotations are from “Some Thoughts about Ourselves,” unless otherwise noted.
22. Ibid., August 19, 1872.
23. Ibid., March 12, 1866.
30. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Woman’s Bible (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 7, 9; for analysis of suffragists’ reaction to Stanton’s work, see the Foreword by Maureen Fritz, xxvi.
33. Victor, “Some Thoughts about Ourselves.”
34. Regarding early radicalism and unconventional thinking in the movement, Aileen Kraditor states: “Without a detailed investigation of public reaction to early suffragist propaganda...it is manifestly impossible to state authoritatively the degree to which early suffragist radicalism paved the way for later suffrage victories. Pending such an analysis, however, it may be legitimate to postulate that changes in women’s economic and social activities laid the foundations for changes in ideological attitudes toward women and that the early unconventional suffragists gradually accustomed the public to ideas which were still ahead of their time, but which circumstance began to render realistic. The victory of suffrage might have come much later than it did if the Stantonians had not spread their extremely advanced doctrines in the face of public opposition.” The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1830–1920 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 849–24.
36. As her writing schedule permitted, Victor was an active participant in the Multnomah County Woman Suffrage Association, as well as the OSWSA. In the former organization, for example, she served as its vice president and on the by-laws committee in 1874. See “Multnomah County Woman Suffrage Association,” Morning Oregonian, February 26, 1874; and “Woman Suffrage Meeting,” Morning Oregonian, March 11, 1874.