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Francis Russo
University of Pennsylvania
Department of History

Dear Workshop Attendees,

Thank you in advance for reading the draft of this essay, which is a first foray into a potential avenue of research. As such, it omits reference to large literatures and makes no pretense a comprehensive survey of secondary material that would be required should it move forward. Many of the claims offered are intended as suggestive rather than conclusive. I look forward to your feedback and expertise, especially as it relates to the field of political theory.

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Francis Russo
University of Pennsylvania
Department of History

Rights vs. Duties: The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were born daughters of southern slaveholders and died radical feminists and abolitionists. During their public careers in the 1830s, they were intellectuals who styled prose commandingly. They were not the first to speak publicly against slavery, but they were the first to do so from a slaveholding family. They believed in the moral and political equality of men and women and the racial equality of blacks and whites. They were the first women to tour as agents of the American Anti-Slavery society and the first to speak before mixed audiences – and to defend their right as women to speak. Most importantly, they defended their *duty* to speak. In today’s age of human rights, historians have often overlooked the history of human duties. The Grimké sisters are undeniably part of this history – their public and private writings place duty at the center of their abolitionism and feminism – and offer a preliminary window into our understanding of that still unwritten history.

Duties and obligations as the corollary to rights – across moral, political, social fields – have received attention among historians only tangentially, unsystematically, and not in any equal measure to the concept of human rights, an overwhelming literature that has garnered ubiquitous academic as well as public attention. In 1995, Linda Kerber claimed we have “only rudimentary understanding” of the relationship between rights and obligations.¹ Following Kerber, Stephanie McCurry reminded us in 2000 that the issue of citizens’ obligation was still

¹ Kerber, Linda, Alice Kessler-Harris, & Kathryn Kish Sklar (eds.). *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* (UNC, 1995), 24.

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“underdeveloped” in American political history.² In a 2016 essay, Samuel Moyn commented that despite the flourishing field of human rights there was not a single book on the history of human duties.³ In 2019, a full account of human duties and obligations has yet to find its historian.⁴

The absence of historical scholarship on human duties is curious if one considers that at least as far into the nineteenth century, and certainly before the Age of Revolutions, duties were the requisite setting for rights claims and often the predominant framework for moral and political theories of human conduct, society, and government. Rights claims themselves in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were not primarily individualistic and tended to be corporate in focus, appealing to obligations and duties to social others.⁵ As Kerber, McCurry, and Moyn all point out, political history in general has followed a rather circumscribed conception of rights that tends to stress claims first and obligations second, if at all.⁶ It is also possible that today citizenship has lost its meaning as a fulfilment of duties and has instead been emphasized as a series of claims without reciprocal obligations. Scholars have had trouble seeing duties from within the normative “rights talk” of the twentieth and twenty-first century. How did duties fall out of the equation? Are duties fundamentally more resistant to explicit enumeration than are rights? At what register – intellectual, theoretical, practical, emotional – might duty figure into history and into political life? At moments where new groups are brought into the

² McCurry, Stephanie. "Citizens, Soldiers' Wives, and 'Hiley Hope Up' Slaves: The Problem of Political Obligation in the Civil War South" in *Gender and the Southern Body Politic* ed. Nancy Bercaw (2000), 96.

³ Samuel Moyn, “Rights vs Duties: Reclaiming Civic Balance,” *Boston Review* (2016).

⁴ Some political theorists have also pointed out the surprising lack of concern with theorizing duties in contemporary liberal thinking. See Joseph H. Carens, “Rights and Duties in Egalitarian Society,” *Political Theory* 14:1 (1986).

⁵ See “Introduction,” Barry Alan Shain and Rogers M. Smith in Barry Alan Shain, ed. *The Nature of Rights at the American Founding and Beyond* (University of Virginia Press, 2007).

⁶ New histories of liberalism have stressed its inherently communal aspects and concern with social obligation. See Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton, 2018). The question remains if Rosenblatt’s “lost” history of liberalism is simply the other dominant strand of early modern Atlantic political discourse – republicanism – that scholars have studied immensely.

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American political sphere as voters or as claimants of rights yet-to-be granted, is it even possible to chart a concurrent introspection about political duties?

The Grimké's are a place to start exploring the manifold ways in which the concept of duty became operable in history and what aspect of duty relevant for political life might be worth recovering for our own day. The Grimké's focus duties on the politics of gender, abolitionism, and religion in the antebellum U.S. and challenge two themes that have been central to recent historical writing on political obligation: that obligation is centrally a problem for states, and that duty is a constricting force which acts to blunt more than to promote emancipatory political activism. Many political historians and liberal theorists have been concerned with the notion of obligation in a negative sense: the obligation not to violate the law of states. Theorists ask what our obligation are such that we might obey or disobey the state.⁷ Historians have asked how states command allegiance to ensure citizens obey laws, pay taxes, serve on juries, and perform military service. Stephanie McCurry, as just one example, has argued that in the Civil War South, Confederate states relied on a gendered and racialized notion of political obligation that attempted to harness the loyalty of poor white men around the southern "Cause."⁸ Because they did not own slaves themselves, for McCurry, white men's "obligations" to the state could not be appealed to on the basis of a war for the protection of slavery alone. What all white men shared was their status as masters over property: land, households, women, and the enslaved. While not all white men owned plantations, all "owned" women, at the least, which provided a universal basis that sustained state demands of duty during wartime. Linda Kerber has argued that for

⁷ I make no pretenses to exhaust the literature on "political obligation." Some useful titles have been: T.H. Green, *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (1836-1882); Paul Harris, ed., *On Political Obligation* (Routledge, 1990); John Horton, *Political Obligation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Dudley Knowles, *Political Obligation: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2010); Shklar, *On Political Obligation* (Yale, 2019). See also Carens, "Rights and Duties in Egalitarian Society," (1986).

⁸ McCurry, "Citizens, Soldiers' Wives, and 'Hiley Hope Up' Slaves..."

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women in the early Republic obligations to husbands and households were understood to substitute for obligations to the state. Importantly, for Kerber obligations were constricting. Duties represented “the means by which the state can use its power to constrain the freedom of individual citizens” and to have obligations is “to be bound, to be constrained, to be under compulsion.” Kerber treats as obligations “only those duties that invite state punishment if they are not performed.”⁹ These scholars have made sophisticated dives into the history of political obligation and our understanding of the relationship between rights and duties has grown richer because of their efforts.

The Grimké sisters extend the story. They open space for considering *emancipatory* sides of duty that transcend a direct relationship to the state (but with obvious real political consequences), at least as understood by the Grimké sisters themselves. For them, the fulfilment of duty invited divine rewards, not state censure. They present a case in which “duty” figures centrally into a campaign where more rights are being demanded, and in fact insist that “right” is only the weaker flipside to “duty.” At the very least, the Grimké’s understanding and employment of duty complicates the story of rights claims as the central discourse of emancipatory movements. Despite continued characterizations among preeminent historians of the Grimkés – as well as the abolitionism and feminism of antebellum period – as movements for human “rights,” modern “rights talk” was not the language of the Grimkés.¹⁰ They did not set out to convince women and men that they had abstract rights to claim. They tried to convince women and men that they were citizens and moral beings that had duties to perform as members of an indissoluble social body and as duty-bound believers in a Christian God. They may have

⁹ See Linda Kerber, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship* (Hill and Wang, 1998), xxi.

¹⁰ See Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (Norton, 2019), 12; also Manish Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale, 2016), esp. 278-298.

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laid claim to the tradition of natural rights that had been proclaimed by men during the Revolution, but they were compelled to enter that “political” sphere because of a devoted sense of duty, from which all else followed.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were born in 1792 and 1805, into the Southern aristocracy of South Carolina and surrounded by slaves. As children both Sarah and Angelina developed an aversion to the cruelty of human bondage and an affection for one another. By the 1820s both sisters had moved to Philadelphia where they became Quakers and started to frequent abolitionist meetings. When Angelia wrote a private letter to William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, Garrison was impressed with its passion and rhetorical force and published it, launching the Grimkés into a public career in the abolitionist movement. As the first female agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the sisters traveled around the north on public speaking tours and wrote and published antislavery tracts that helped to galvanize the movement. Born in the slaveholding South, they cited their own biographies as a testament to the possibilities of moral transformation and issued their antislavery appeals directly to Northern and Southern men and women. Although their public careers faded, the sisters continued to work as teachers until their lives closed in the 1870s.¹¹

Duty for the Grimké sisters was at the center of their advocacy and an unconditional imperative. It bound all Christian Americans South *and* North. It left no space to abstain from the cause of abolition. As Judith Shklar pointed out, the abolitionist struggle in America presents a unique case in the history of obligation for denying “negative liberty,” or the freedom to be left

¹¹ For a general biographical overview of the Grimké sisters, see Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters From South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (Chapel Hill, 2004 [1967]).

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alone, unbothered by other people's interference.¹² As the Grimke sisters never tired in pointing out, a Gordian knot tied the entire country in sin over slavery. "Like the miasma of some pestilential pool," Angelina stated, slavery "spreads its desolating influence far beyond its own boundaries."¹³ The Grimkés labored to show that to be complicit in and tainted by slavery was unavoidable so long as one lived in the United States. Northern racists lent tacit support to slavery. Northern economic profit from commercial integration with the South supported slavery. The North allowed the capture of fugitive slaves that tainted "free" soil, allowed the sons of Southern slaveholders attend Northern universities and taint Northern education. There was no place to remove oneself from slavery, no ground to legitimately claim a negative liberty to abstain from the issue, the Grimkés believed. This was the base condition of complicity that cast all Americans in sin so long as slavery existed in the country. It followed only too naturally for the Grimkés that therefore all Americans were duty-bound to rectify slavery's all-pervasive sin. As Christians, the "right" to abstain from the debate over slavery on the grounds that one had no responsibility was morally empty for the Grimkés, since sin was pervasive and divine duties demanded its rectification. Slavery was not a state command to disobey under the right of conscientious objection. It was an all-pervasive moral evil that human beings were duty-bound to rectify. The Grimkés argued for entrance into the field of political action where together men and women could fulfill the duty demanded of them: a Christian commonwealth purified of slavery.

At the root of the Grimké's activism – and central to their understanding of duty – was radical equality. All moral beings had "essentially the same rights and the same duties," wrote

¹² Judith Shklar, *On Political Obligation* (Yale, 2019), 2. The classic formulation of "negative liberty" is from Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958).

¹³ Angelina Grimké, "An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States" (1837), in Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké, *On Slavery and Abolitionism: Essays and Letters* (Penguin, 2014), 186.

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Angelina, “whether they be male or female.”¹⁴ Moral equivalence between the sexes meant that rights should be universal and it meant too that duties were equally binding for women just as they were for men. Sarah considered it a case of pure logic: “whatever is morally right for a man to do, is morally right for a woman to do, it follows as a necessary corollary, that if it is the duty of man to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ, it is the duty also of woman.”¹⁵ Rights were granted for the reciprocal performance of duty; if there was no duty to perform, there would be no right to perform it. “So long as the divine commands [of duty] are binding upon her,” Angelina wrote of women, “so long must her rights continue.”¹⁶

Accepting the reciprocal relationship between rights and duties, the Grimké sisters understood that it was the duty side of the equation from which the duality derived its animating force. “We never mention women’s rights in our lectures,” wrote Angelina, “except so far as is necessary to urge them to meet their responsibilities. We speak of [women’s] responsibilities & leave them to infer their rights...”¹⁷ The Grimké sisters spoke of both rights and duties, but it was clear that duties were the central frame, the issue to contend with, the sacred burden to bear. On the one hand, duty staid their souls amid the trials of their calling. Angelina insisted on her “solemn calmness which is the result of conviction and duty.”¹⁸ Sarah echoed her in believing “there are solemn responsibilities resting upon us, and that in this day of light and knowledge, we cannot plead ignorance of duty.”¹⁹ Even when exposed to great suffering, Christian beings had no choice but to tread the path of duty. “I am not very comfortable in the performance of those duties to which I have called,” wrote Angelina privately. Yet both Grimké sisters acknowledged that the cause of

¹⁴ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States” (1837), Penguin, 191.

¹⁵ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes” (1837), Penguin, 98.

¹⁶ Angelina Grimké, “Letters to Catherine E. Beecher,” 28 August 1837, Penguin, 314.

¹⁷ “Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier,” 20 August 1837, in Larry Ceplair (ed.), *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835-1839* (Columbia, 1989), 285.

¹⁸ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” (1836), Penguin, 127.

¹⁹ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” October 1837, Penguin, 118.

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abolition would “inevitably expose us to great suffering” and “this will *not* excuse [us] or any one else for the neglect of *duty*.”²⁰ On the other hand, duty mattered because divine judgement rested on the fulfilment or neglect of duty. God did not grant rights for men and women to employ as they saw fit; rights opened up the conditions by which men and women performed duties and it was under the rubric of duty that one was divinely judged. In her 1836 “Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States,” Sarah reminded her southern readers that “commensurate with your power is your responsibility, and if you abuse, or neglect to use it aught, great will be your condemnation.”²¹

The Grimkés believed that duties, not rights, prompted action. A woman with rights could stay at home with them; a woman with duties was compelled to act in the world that desperately needed the laboring hands of duty-bound souls. “Our principles possess *a life and power which must prompt to action*,” the Grimkés believed, and that “it is our duty as Americans to cry aloud and spare not, to lift up our voices as a trumpet, and to show our people their transgressions... we are striving to rouse a slumbering nation to a sense of the retributions which must soon descend upon her guilty head.”²² The central problem for the Grimkés was that the country’s present state left duties unfulfilled, especially among women. “I am persuaded that woman is not filling the high and holy station which God allotted to her” Sarah worried publicly.²³ Yet the Grimkés and other abolitionist efforts seems to be rousing from slumber antislavery sentiments of duty. One follower was prompted to action and wrote to the Grimkés to tell them she was now convinced by their ideas that “I must be up and doing,” for “my tears,

²⁰ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Penguin, 152.

²¹ Sarah Grimké, “An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States,” (1836), Caplair, 110.

²² Angelina Grimké, “Letters to Catherine E. Beecher,” 17 June 1837, Penguin, 249.

²³ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” October 1837, Penguin, 98.

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unaided by effort, could never melt the chain of the slave.”²⁴ The Grimké believed abolitionists should first direct their actions in the North and the South would follow. Angelina compelled Northern listeners to “Go, and *when you* have performed *your* duties, then, aided by that correct public sentiment which you shall have created at the North – *then we will* do our duties at the South.”²⁵ In the end nothing, the Grimké insisted, “may drive us from the performance of our high and holy duties.”²⁶

Nothing included the law. “I say such wicked laws [that protect slavery] *ought to be no barrier* in the way of your duty, and I appeal the Bible to prove this position” wrote Angelina.²⁷ When slaves passed from father to son under the guise of inheritance law, the Grimké assailed those in “utter ignorance of duty” who did not perceived the “iniquity of that act by which we inherit PROPERTY IN MAN.” Rightful ownership was due to slaves themselves, a right which although legally sanctioned by the United States government, was vested in “the slave *himself* by the laws of God.”²⁸ Law was not only negligible when it troubled the dictates of higher duty, but was often the source of women’s oppression in the first place. Sarah wrote of civil laws that “there are few things which present greater obstacles to the improvement and elevation of woman to her appropriate sphere of usefulness and duty, than the laws which have been enacted to destroy her independence, and crush her individuality.”²⁹ Man-made laws fell easily before divine duty. The root cause of legal antagonism arose for the Grimké not only because laws restricted the natural rights of the enslaved or women, but because laws prevented the fulfilment of duty binding on all moral souls. With typical clarity Angelina insisted: “*We* say that all the

²⁴ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” 22 August 1837, Penguin, 58.

²⁵ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 233.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Penguin, 150.

²⁸ Sarah Grimké, “An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States” (1836), Caplair, 113.

²⁹ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” 6 September 1837, Penguin, 80.

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laws which sustain the system of slavery are unjust and oppressive -- contrary to the fundamental principles of morality, and, therefore, null and void.”³⁰

As the Grimké sisters sought to define their work as that of duty, their work compelled them out of what they understood to be the “domestic” and into the “political” sphere.³¹ While opponents confined women to “domestic duties” of husbands and households, the Grimké sisters assailed the idea that women’s duties were circumscribed to the domestic. Against the idea of “separate spheres” they insisted both men and women were equal moral beings before God and therefore bound by the exact same duties. “Intellect is not sexed,” wrote Sarah. She asserted that distinctions of duty were arbitrarily placed upon men and women:

The duties of men and the duties of women, the sphere of man and the sphere of woman, are mere arbitrary opinions, differing in different ages and countries, and dependent solely on the will and judgment of erring mortals... As moral and responsible beings, men and women have the same sphere of action, and the same duties devolve upon both.³²

The Grimké sisters urged women not to “shrink from duty in this exigency” in the “enjoyments of her own domestic circles” and tried to convince both women and men that women had full political duties to perform in service of the “thousands of her fellow creatures, who are the victims of intemperance and licentiousness.”³³ Musing over woman’s full potential, Sarah imagined her sisters “destined, if she fulfils her duty, to dwell with [God] through the endless ages of eternity ... I ardently long to behold her occupying that sphere in which I believe her

³⁰ Angelina Grimké, “Letters to Catherine E. Beecher,” 17 June 1837, Penguin, 246.

³¹ Scholarship on changing domestic ideals and growing “separate spheres” in the early Republic and antebellum eras is vast; for the briefest introduction, see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151–75; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977); Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” in *Journal of American History*, 75, no. 1 (June 1986), 9–39; Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³² Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” 25 August 1837, Penguin, 71.

³³ *Ibid.*

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Creator designed her to move.”³⁴ Separate spheres was an odious idea because it denied women rights, but even more so because it denied women the ability to perform duties.

If detractors insisted women did not belong in the “political” sphere, history testified against them. The Grimké happily summoned biblical and classical examples of political women from Ancient Roman to Joan of Arc to Lydia Darrah, a female spy during the American Revolution who successfully delivered to George Washington expedient wartime information. “Did she perform the duties of an American citizen?” Angelina quipped, “Or, was this act an impertinent intermeddling with the *political concerns* of her country, with which, as a *woman*, she had nothing to do?”³⁵ Angelina answered her own question. Bolstered by the example of political women from history, the Grimké happily admitted slavery was a political question, as well as a moral one, and in all cases women had a duty and right to engage that sphere. Women not only had the duty to be political but had the unique ability *as women* to better effectuate political acts. Because women could leverage moral gravity in ways men could not, “it will be a great thing,” Angelina lectured audiences, that the subject of slavery should “be introduced into your legislatures in any way, even by women, and they will be the most likely to introduce it there in the best possible manner, as a matter of morals and religion, not of expediency or politics.”³⁶ Again and again, the Grimké urged women that duty was no barrier to action and in fact the was animating impulse of action -- whether to petition the government or speak out against slavery.

For the Grimké the very logic of separate spheres was itself ludicrous because public sins bled into private life. To neglect this fact was to neglect the duty to remedy sin. Slavery

³⁴ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” September 1837, Penguin, 75.

³⁵ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 185.

³⁶ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Penguin, 160.

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“vaults over the barrier of Mason’s and Dixon’s line,” wrote Angelina, and exerted “a most deadly influence” across the entire country, not only over the terrain in which it actually existed as an institution. “Have northern women then, nothing to do with slavery, when its demoralizing influence is polluting their domestic circles and blasting the fair character of their sons and brothers?” she asked.³⁷ Fugitive slave laws allowed enslavers to commit evil on Northern ground. Censors gaged honest northerners from expressing “the sentiments of the Declaration of our Independence.” Northern fraternization with Southerners dug the grave of their virtue, and northern academic and theological institutions “opened to the sons of the planter,” endangered “the purity of the morals of our own sons.”³⁸ Slavery was a *national* sin. The whip, the Grimké’s reminded Northerners, “*is made by northern men.*”³⁹ A world where slavery’s evil permeated all boundaries, such boundaries were artificial. If sin could not be confined, neither could duty.

Despite the Grimké’s own clarity, there were plenty misconceptions of duty amongst the public they thought had to be overcome. Too many women, the Grimké’s believed, either lived in ignorance of their duties and rights, or hid behind the false idea that their obligations were solely to husbands and homes. To perform duties, one had to *comprehend* duties – not those to the domestic sphere but those to the entire world. “It is because we do not understand [them],” wrote Angelina, “that we now fall so far short in the discharge of our obligations.”⁴⁰ Sometimes the lack of understanding was the fault of oppressive men, and there was no shortage of iron-fisted husbands the Grimké’s could summon from history, abusers of the very creatures they purported to love. Sarah said that in keeping wives confined to the home, women’s “sense of morality has

³⁷ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 188.

³⁸ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 187.

³⁹ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 196.

⁴⁰ Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” 2 October 1837, Penguin, 112.

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been impaired by [men's] interpretation of our duties."⁴¹ And yet husbands were not the only ones in need of education. Women, too, with "shackled" minds accepted their husband's commands without consideration. Sarah wrote that

I know some women are very glad of so convenient a pretext to shield themselves from the performance of duty; but there are others, who, under a mistaken view of their obligations as wives, submit conscientiously to the species of oppression, and go mourning on their way, for want of that holy fortitude, which would enable them to fulfil their duties as moral and responsible beings, without reference to poor fallen man.⁴²

Sometimes discrepancies over duty led the Grimké sisters into conflict with other reformers. Precisely over the issues of separate spheres and obligations the Grimké sisters fell into a famous two-year pamphlet war in the mid 1830s with fellow women's rights advocate Catherine Beecher. Although Beecher opposed slavery, she was outraged by Angelina's *Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States* (1836) which not only attacked religious and legal defenses of slavery but also encouraged women to enter the political sphere to defeat it, most practically by petitioning the government. A year after it was published, Angelina commenced a speaking tour of the Northern states while Beecher penned a reply of her own: *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism with Reference to the Duty of American Females*. In the essay Beecher insisted that women should engage in politics by way of "influence" in the home – private persuasion of husbands and moral education of sons – out of public sight. Angelina replied in a series of letters, stressing her conviction that women should fulfil public, political duties. The Grimké-Beecher debate has been cast by historians as a debate between two competing visions of women's political roles in the 1830s, Beecher arguing for traditional domestic "influence" that harkened back to women as "republican mothers" and the Grimké sisters advancing "a kind of natural

⁴¹ Sarah Grimké, "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes," July 1837, Penguin, 41.

⁴² Sarah Grimké, "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes," September 1837, Penguin, 90.

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rights argument” to justify women’s direct action in political life.⁴³ The Grimkés did argue for women’s rights, but more importantly they argued for the right to labor in the full field of duties. Women’s duty was the central issue in the debate – Beecher limited that field to the home while the Grimkés believed the entire world beckoned for women to perform duties equal with men. The Grimkés in fact still celebrated women’s traditional domestic duties but argued that they were by no means the limits of womanly action.⁴⁴

To stress duties in political history by way of abolitionists like the Grimkés is not to diminish the power of rights. After all, at its most triumphant, was not modern democracy invented to replace traditional forms of oppressive obedience, real or perceived? How could obedience be an animating force for anything resembling “liberty”? The interest here is in the potentially overlooked cases where rights and duties were understood to be paired, duties emphasized, and people willing to act politically on that basis. For the Grimkés duty could further the cause of emancipation, yet duties in various contexts could have a dark side. Obligation does have an aristocratic ring. The capacities of duty to exclude on the basis of class, gender, and race and to perpetuate hierarchical forms of human relations are easily indexed throughout history. Discourses of duty figure prominently in the U.S. state’s relations to marginalized groups, especially in a nineteenth-century era of expansion and empire where a

⁴³ For a textbook treatment, see Mari Jo Buhle, Jane Gerhard, and Teresa Murphy, *Woman and the Making of America* (Pearson, 2009).

⁴⁴ Sarah wrote that women should be devoted to all the sacred duties of domestic life, but to also leave room for mental cultivation in service of the full range of divine duties equal with men. She wished that husbands would “forgo some of their accustomed indulgences” in the home, and “encourage their wives to devote some portion of their time to mental cultivation, even at the expense of having to dine sometimes on baked potatoes, or bread and butter.” Sarah Grimké, “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” 1837, Penguin, 63. In a recent publication, Helena Rosenblatt also makes the observation in the context of the French Revolution that few if any advocates of women’s rights challenged the idea that women had domestic duties, and that a greater degree of equality with men would allow for collaboration in carrying out “duties to humanity.” See Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, 85.

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political system premised on the continual entrance of new groups into a universal polity continuously imposed barriers on entry partly legitimized on entrant's failure to meet the "duties" of citizenship. Just like rights, the contours of obligation have been subject to power inequities in various historical contexts. Religious duty in the context of class formation could also manifest as intrusions of the righteous to fulfill duties that the objects of their reforms – the poor – would not recognize, especially when reform efforts of all kinds in the early nineteenth century would become tinged in bourgeois moralism. As Christine Stansell observed of 1830s New York, "Religious duty lay not just in responding to need – or vice – when it presented itself, but in actively ferreting out opportunities to minister to or struggle with the benighted souls hiding away in those dark urban places."⁴⁵

From a racial perspective, the Grimké sisters seemed to know they were treading dangerous ground. They urged that colored women also had duties to perform, though admitted they were duties "far more delicate and difficult."⁴⁶ The Grimkés wished to "tenderly solicit" the indulgence of their "sisters of color" to "bear with us a little in our folly," that is, in the racial prejudice of northern whites. Yet, they also felt confident enough to demand, even in the acknowledgement of the chance of severe personal suffering, that it was "*now the duty of the slaves of the South to rebuke their masters.*"⁴⁷ Distinctions and demands of duty were wrought with power asymmetries that posited potentially harmful rhetoric into the cause for abolition. Was it really the duty of slaves to rebel against their enslavers at the risk of their own lives? Harmful assumptions of individual responsibility could tinge discourses of duty.

⁴⁵ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (Illinois, 1987), 65.

⁴⁶ Angelina Grimké, "An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States," Penguin, 233.

⁴⁷ Angelina Grimké, "Letters to Cathrine Beecher," 17 August, 1837, Penguin, 280.

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A full accounting of the Grimké's use of rights and duties would have to summon historical literatures beyond those of rights and duties alone. Crucial to understanding the Grimké's is to attend to the history of religion and to the history of the self. Like early modern ideas of divine "calling," the Grimké sisters believed that God ordained the universe with meaning and assigned human beings the task of carrying out God's will within it.⁴⁸ The Grimké's also harken to ideas of a "pre-modern" self, one in which identity was primarily socially derived, not yet possessed of that autonomous interiority with which we consider constitutive of the modern self. It should be clear that the history of modern citizenship must contend with the history of the modern self. "How did rights," Joan Scott has asked, "come to be understood as something individuals possessed?" They may have done so when "the belief in the self-evidence of the human rights of autonomous individuals," Lynn Hunt suggests, "depended not only on alteration in the intellectual climate but also on subtle changes in the perception of bodies and selves."⁴⁹ As the example of the Grimké's attests, despite language of natural rights articulated in the American Revolution, people still drew upon and coexisted with notions of socially-turned and duty-bound understandings of self. A rights-claiming individual would be an element but certainly not the end of a full human being to the Grimké's. Rights only made sense in the context of duties to be performed.⁵⁰

Finally, the Grimké's understanding and employment of duty raises questions about state power and the chronology of state building in the United States. By the 1850s, many moral

⁴⁸ For an analysis of early modern Christian identity understood as "callings" to fulfil the duties of predetermined "offices," especially in political context, see Alexander Haskell, *For God, King, & People: Forging Commonwealth Bonds in Renaissance Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 2017).

⁴⁹ Joan W. Scott, "Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics," *Gender and the Politics of History*, revised edn., (New York, 1999), 217; Lynn Hunt, "The Paradoxical Origins of Human Rights," in Wasserstrom et al. (eds.), *Human Rights and Revolutions* 9-12.

⁵⁰ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, 1992), 11-12; for a suggestive general discussion of rights, duties, and selfhood, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (Yale, 2004).

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reform causes were moving out of the realm of moral suasion and into the realm of legislative initiative. Whether fighting for temperance or chastity or the end to slavery, reformers began to seek political solutions to problems that had been the target of their moral reform concerns during the 1830s and 1840s. The Grimké perhaps offer a window into political action at the state's periphery – petitioning, the boycott of slave-made products, sympathy with “oppressed colored sisters.” The Grimké believed that a “multitude of instances” would remedy the nation, not rights claimed from the state but duties performed in everyday life.⁵¹ The Grimké ask us to take seriously the suggestion of William Novak that analyses of American power should “emphasize the interpenetration of public and private spheres – the convergence of public and private authority” in everyday arrangements of power.⁵² The Grimké, though not directly engaged with the state, certainly understood themselves to be political actors, and may in fact have organized discourses that shaped the state when later abolitionists engaged it directly. Moreover, Drew Faust has shown the post-war phenomenon of “obligation” to the Civil War Dead as a key factor having increased the bureaucratic capacity of the state and the expanded understanding of what that state owed its own citizens.⁵³ Yet the framework of political duty has a much earlier origin, and its role in producing politics of state-building should be explored in the antebellum period. More than the Grimkes or abolitionists' own estimation or subjective experience, it is worthwhile to ask how duty as an operative concept at multiple registers of political life – from sentiment to law to formal theorization – helped to expand the U.S. state or laid the conceptual groundwork for such a process to occur.

⁵¹ Angelina Grimké, “An Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States,” Penguin, 232-233.

⁵² William J. Novak, “The Myth of the ‘Weak’ American State,” *The American Historical Review* 113: 3 (Jun., 2008), 770. The point can also be taken as more general one, that “politics” encompasses a broad range of activity, including activity traditionally viewed as “non-political.” As just one example as it regards women's political action, see Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (UPenn Press, 2007).

⁵³ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (2008), 217-237.

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This much is clear: the Grimke's efforts were waged by stressing the duty, not the rights, of political and moral citizens. The Grimkés were diviners of duty before they were claimers of rights. The extension of rights in American history is often taken as the understanding of state expansion, but it should also be understood how the concept of duty could also be used to legitimize political entrance into full civic life of the nation. The answers to the questions raised here are hardly obvious and touch on vast bodies of existing literature: intellectual and cultural histories of republicanism, citizenship, religion, "honor" culture, to name a few. But the ability to tackle them in the first place is only confused if we proceed with an unbalanced understanding of moral and political discourse over time. There is now a whole canon on the history of human rights since but as of yet there is not a single book on the history of duties. Clear precedents for theories of duty as well as duty as a historical phenomenon in many registers do exist, from the Grimkés to Giuseppe Mazzini to Mahatma Gandhi.⁵⁴ Such history is needed to correct a historiographical asymmetry, as well as to better understand what might be worth recovering in emancipatory and egalitarian notions of community, obligation, and duty in our own day.

⁵⁴ Giuseppe Mazzini, *The Duties of Man and Other Essays* (London, 1907); Ram Rattan, *Gandhi's Concept of Political Obligation* (1972).