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Susan Zaeske

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# “THE SOUTH AROSE AS ONE MAN”: GENDER AND SECTIONALISM IN ANTISLAVERY PETITION DEBATES, 1835–1845

SUSAN ZAESKE

*Debates over female antislavery petitions provoked the first sustained discussion of women's political rights in the history of the U.S. Congress. Analysis of discourse produced on multiple sides of the debate reveals that as interlocutors questioned the womanhood and manhood of their opponents, the debates exceeded issues of constitutionality, escalating to what were perceived as attacks on the very way members and their constituents lived their lives. In the end, House debates over women's antislavery petitions from 1835 to 1845 were waged through a rhetoric of gender and amounted to a battle about who could be considered a citizen of the United States.*

In February 1835, a correspondent for the *New York Commercial Advertiser* reported that presentation of petitions for the abolition of slavery in the House of Representatives “struck the sensitive nerve which pervades and vibrates through the entire south.” The reporter described this “sensitive nerve” as “the absorbing, controlling and vital principle which animates the whole south—electrifies the south—unites the south—in their morals, habits, feelings, religion, politics—nullification—PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES.” As the petitions, many of them sent by women, poked the Southern nerve, “it thrilled and twinged, like the agonies of a decayed tooth.” According to the reporter, Northern representatives looked surprised and alarmed as “the south arose as one man.”<sup>1</sup>

Among the spokesmen for slaveholders was Representative James W. Bouldin of Virginia, who complained that Northerners “took a swaggering stand over the South, and proposed a kind of guardianship over [our] morals.”<sup>2</sup> Bouldin expressed the pervasive sentiment that the petitions had provoked more than a

*Susan Zaeske is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Research and writing of this paper was made possible by a Hamel Family Research Fellowship. The author wishes to thank Mary Louise Roberts, Bonnie J. Dow, and Stephen Kantrowitz for generously sharing their ideas and encouragement.*

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challenge between Northern petitioners and slaveholders or between their representatives in Congress. And he perceived the attack as animated by more than words—Northerners, he said, had taken “a swaggering,” in-your-face, physical stance over the South. Thus, this debate surpassed disagreement over interpretations of the First Amendment right of petition. For Bouldin and the majority of his slaveholding colleagues in the House of Representatives, the antislavery petitions inflamed the jealous pride of Southern members and entangled them in debates over slavery.

This was no small feat. During the first 50 years of the young republic, American statesmen of all sorts had studiously avoided public dispute over the issue of slavery. Indeed, antislavery petitions drew Southerners into what would be ranked among the most important debates in the history of the Congress and the nation. William Lee Miller, for instance, has deemed the congressional battle over the right to petition against slavery “the first explicit and extended struggle between American slavery and what would be called, in a later century, the American Creed.” It was, wrote Miller, “the articulate beginning of a national fork-in-the-road choice between inherited despotism and developing democracy. Or between tragic evil and human ideals.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the congressional debates over reception of antislavery petitions were monumental in another respect that has gone largely unremarked. Contention over the reception of female antislavery petitions, this essay will demonstrate, provoked the first sustained discussion of women’s political rights and their status as citizens in the history of the United States Congress.<sup>4</sup> Although on its surface the historic debate over slavery and the political rights of women was waged over questions about the First Amendment right of petition, this essay argues that examining the discourse at a deeper level reveals that the intense disputation was fired in no small part by competing notions of gender. As antislavery petitions sent by women and the speeches by Congressmen from both sections of the country questioned the womanhood and manhood of their political opponents, the debates overflowed the argumentative category of constitutionality and escalated in ferocity as rhetors perceived their very way of life under attack. Ultimately, this article concludes, House debate over women’s antislavery petitions from 1835 to 1845, waged as it was through a rhetoric of gender, amounted to a battle about the very question of who rightfully could be considered a citizen of the United States.

With its attention to the function of gender, this study provides a fresh reading of the congressional debates over slavery with the goal of making several contributions to historical and rhetorical scholarship. Existing studies of the debates focus primarily on arguments advanced by various constituencies. They categorize the major issues of the multifaceted debate, employ Toulmin’s method of diagramming arguments, and analyze First Amendment positions

developed by each side.<sup>5</sup> These studies accomplish the important work of categorizing arguments and interlocutors. But with the exception of an essay on the related topic of congressional reaction to the mail crisis of 1835, all focus on propositional argument and fall short of fully accounting for the ferocity of this debate.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, we are left to wonder, why did the introduction of antislavery petitions reportedly make the "sensitive nerve" of the South "throb like a decaying tooth"?

Why did the debates over the constitutional questions of slavery and the right of petition so often stray into character assaults? And why did the South, according to at least one key observer, "arise as one man" brandishing a palpably violent rhetoric? Answers to these questions can be found by moving beyond cataloging arguments to interrogating their construction within particular cultural contexts. To do so, I begin by illuminating how, throughout the debates, Southerners and Northerners disagreed not only about slavery, but also what it meant to be a man and a woman, whether white or black, rich, middling, or poor. For elite Southerners, I will explain, beliefs about gender were linked to their code of honor that settled disputes through highly formalized rituals, not the least of which was the duel. Second, I analyze how gender was constructed in female antislavery petitions to reveal clashing notions of manhood as well as womanhood that insulted Southern representatives and raised the stakes of the debate. Understanding that the petitions imputed elite Southern manhood and womanhood, I then read slaveholding members' response as following the cultural ritual of a duel with its peculiar requirements and forms. Last, I turn to Representative John Quincy Adams's reply, which employed a strategy of ironic performance to ridicule Southern masculinity and reassert the superiority of a particular set of Northern gender norms. By attending to how women petitioners and congressmen from either North or South performed gendered rituals in their discourse, in the end we can unravel the conflation of gender norms and political rights to comprehend more fully the ferocity and stakes of this debate.<sup>7</sup>

### **MASCULINITIES, FEMININITIES, AND ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN POLITICS**

In 1837, when former president John Quincy Adams, a member of the House, visited the eminent Boston theologian Dr. William Ellery Channing, he described the uneasiness that hung over the daily interaction of Northern and Southern congressmen in the halls and chambers of the nation's capitol. "There was," said Adams, "so marked a difference between the manners of the South and of the North that their members could never be very intimate personally together." Given Adams's experience in the presidential race a decade earlier, it is hardly surprising that he came to such a conclusion. The bitter

1828 presidential battle between Adams of Massachusetts and Andrew Jackson of Tennessee enacted the deep conflict among gender norms that pervaded American culture and society at a time of acute change fueled by immigration and industrialization as well as the emergence of the middle class.<sup>8</sup> This election, Norma Basch has demonstrated, centered on “an intense and gendered political controversy” strikingly evident in the discourse produced by both campaigns. The contest pitted against one another on the national political stage not only two men, but two conflicting norms of gender and sexual conduct during the late 1820s. And although displayed by the election, these competing sets of gender norms were by no means the only constellations of gender ideals operating at this time of “profound political and moral tensions.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Adams and Jackson represented two important types of manliness prominent at the time in American culture, especially among national leaders. Thus, a glance at the cultural dynamics of that campaign lends understanding to the gendered tensions pervading the House debates over women’s antislavery petitions.

The ethos Jackson cultivated throughout the 1828 campaign epitomized the Southern ethic of honor and appealed to large aggregations of the male populace in the South and the North who seized upon what Amy S. Greenberg has called “martial manhood.” Men who embraced this sort of masculinity, whether they resided in the South or the North, valued practices of dominance even when the economy was moving toward expertise. This brand of masculinity associated strength, aggression, and even violence with true manhood. Advocates of martial manhood generally disregarded notions of female moral superiority and the values of domesticity; nor did they tend to belong to political parties that encouraged female political participation.<sup>10</sup> With a reputation as a fierce Indian fighter and the “Hero of New Orleans,” Jackson had achieved unquestionable valor, a character trait essential to martial manhood and to any man of honor. Jackson, moreover, was viewed as possessing a ferocious will that rendered him ready to defend his family and community against assault. Indeed, Jackson was perceived as just as willing to fight on the battlefield as on the ultimate field of honor—the dueling ground. Jackson had actually fought numerous duels in his lifetime and had, on one occasion, killed a man. In fact, Jackson was the only elected president to have fought duels.<sup>11</sup>

The character that Adams cultivated during the 1828 campaign could hardly have been more different. Jackson, the rugged frontiersman and soldier, was known as “Old Hickory”; Adams, the urbane statesman and aristocrat, was hailed as the “Sage of Quincy.” Eschewing the code of honor cherished by elite Southerners, Adams embraced the humane sensibilities shared by the emerging middle class of industrializing New England. In sharp contrast to Jackson, Adams exerted his energies not on the battlefield, but in fields of knowledge such as constitutional law, rhetoric, philosophy, and history. Indeed, like

fellow proponents of "restrained manhood," who could be found in the North and the South and tended to belong to reform parties such as the Whigs and Republicans, Adams renounced violence in all its forms, privileging restraint in its place. A fervent opponent of dueling, Adams dismissed the custom as a barbarous appendage of slavery and its code of honor. Sharing Adams's disdain for violence, his 1828 campaign supporters circulated a pamphlet that accused Jackson of having on 14 occasions "killed, slashed, and clawed various American citizens." For Adams and restrained men like him, manhood was not predicated on willingness to face an opponent in a duel to establish "honor," but rather on one's ability to achieve "respectability." A man could attain respectability by demonstrating restraint, reliability, and a commitment to domestic and civic virtue. These traits could be displayed by temperate behavior rather than indulgence in alcohol and tobacco, acts martial men associated with masculinity.<sup>12</sup> Adams was a man so restrained in his emotions that even his youngest son, Charles, called his poker-faced father "Iron Mask." Adams neither drank nor smoked and was an early riser who, into his seventh decade of life, enjoyed a bracing skinny dip in the Potomac on warm Washington mornings.<sup>13</sup>

Norms of masculinity prescribed not only proper behavior for men, but also for women. When Jackson killed a man in cold blood during a duel, for example, he did so because the man had dared question the sexual purity of his wife Rachel. In the South, the only proper response for a man of honor to preserve the reputation of his wife was to fight a duel. This remained the case well into mid-century, though dueling had almost completely disappeared in the North at the beginning of the century.<sup>14</sup> So important was a lady's reputed purity in the culture of honor that after Rachel discovered literature from the 1828 presidential campaign that accused her of adultery and bigamy, it is said that she became hysterical, suffered a severe heart attack, and died.<sup>15</sup> In addition to sexual honor, another virtue required of the Southern woman was to be politically aware but never "to mingle in discussion."<sup>16</sup> The well-known author of proslavery treatises T. R. Dew of the College of William and Mary, for example, instructed that a lady ought never to "give utterance to her passions like man," but to display a "contentment and ease which may impose upon an inquisitive and scrutinizing world." Alabama planter Bolling Hall tutored his daughter on the ideal demeanor of a lady, advising, "If you learn to restrain every thought, action and word by virtue and religion, you will become an ornament."<sup>17</sup>

With the principles of restrained manhood differing so strikingly from those of the sort of martial manhood embraced by the Southern planter class, it is not surprising that notions of womanhood also differed significantly. Adams, who ironically was married to a Southern-born woman, witnessed first-hand clashes between differing notions of ideal female conduct. His wife Louisa had been raised in Europe by an English mother and a father from Maryland who

deeply distrusted Yankees. In her memoirs Louisa stated that, having been raised in luxury, she never “dreamt of anything beyond the hour.” Such short-sightedness did little to ingratiate Louisa with her in-laws, especially the venerable New England–bred former first lady, Abigail Adams. They viewed her as weak and flighty and had little tolerance for her moods and fainting fits. Louisa disagreed vehemently with the Adams family over philosophies of childrearing, she espousing a policy of indulgence and they one of sternness. The conflict was aptly characterized by a John Quincy Adams biographer who wrote: “Sickly and delicate, [Louisa] lacked the mental toughness, the resourcefulness, the strict standards of thrift, and the zest for life that made her mother-in-law, Abigail Adams, the measure of womanly excellence in New England.”<sup>18</sup> Although the difference in character between the Adams women is but an individual case, competing female gender norms permeated popular literature. Starting in the mid-1820s and continuing through the 1830s, Northern female novelists such as Catharine Sedgwick, Sarah Hale, and Eliza Follen published highly successful novels that portrayed Southern women as luxury-loving, self-absorbed, and lazy. The characters of Northern women, by contrast, were hard-working, efficient, and concerned with the world around them.<sup>19</sup>

Yet these two depictions of ideal womanhood were by no means the only ones in circulation throughout the United States or even the North. Indeed, these notions of womanhood along with the sort of manliness embodied by John Quincy Adams represented the gender ideals emerging among the middle class, especially in the North. Some number of Southerners (though probably not elected congressmen) adopted these sensibilities, but for the most part they developed in the North because, while the South remained moored in an agrarian economy and fairly rigid class structure, the market revolution convulsed Northern culture during the 1820s and 1830s and necessitated the formation of a new type of manhood to “explain these entrepreneurial strivings.” As the middle class emerged in the North, its members developed gender norms that aided in distinguishing its members from not only the poorer classes, but also from what they believed to be the “contemptible” upper class. A key component in this type of Northern middle-class identity was benevolent activism. According to this set of gender norms, ideal men and women conducted the work of benevolence and reform by belonging to associations with other members of this class, thereby establishing their respect and usefulness in society by ministering to the evils of industrialization.<sup>20</sup>

When in the 1828 presidential race Jackson won both the popular and electoral vote, his victory demonstrated not only the appeal of his character, but also the strength of the South. Predictably, Jackson lost in Adams’s home territory of New England, but the war hero won half the popular vote in the North as a whole. Jackson was propelled into office by his immense popularity in the

slave states where he won almost 73 percent of the vote and dominated in the Deep South with over 80 percent of the vote in Alabama and Mississippi and almost 100 percent in Georgia. Incensed, Adams blamed his loss on the power of slavery and considered Jackson's election a danger to democracy and a victory for the South. Consequently, the former president allowed his constituents to elect him to the House of Representatives in 1830.<sup>21</sup> In the House, Adams would not encounter Jackson in the flesh; rather, he confronted those of a similar mien. Like Jackson, most representatives from the South adhered to the code of honor, and a handful of members were celebrities in dueling circles.<sup>22</sup> Thus, despite the various forms of masculinity and femininity at play in American culture, because Southern congressmen emanated almost entirely from the plantation class, which depended on a culture of honor to maintain slavery, they almost without exception considered themselves gentlemen of honor.

One of the most vocal opponents of the petitions, James Henry Hammond of South Carolina, understood honor to be "that principle of nature which teaches us to respect ourselves, in order that we may gain the respect of others."<sup>23</sup> The Southern code of honor directed gentlemen to demonstrate valor and to exact revenge against familial and community enemies, a requirement that could be fulfilled by dueling. In February 1838, for example, Representative Henry Wise, a major participant in the petition debate, acted as a second in a duel fought with rifles over remarks made in the House by the Maine Democrat Jonathan Cilley. Cilley was killed by William Graves, a first-term Whig from Kentucky, when after surviving the initial exchange of shots, Wise urged the two to fire again. Outrage over the Graves-Cilley affair was directed not so much at the principals as at the seconds, namely Wise, who was held responsible for failing to stop the needless violence. Adams responded by sponsoring a bill, the Prentice-Adams Act, that outlawed dueling in the District of Columbia.<sup>24</sup>

### **"GIVING THE LIE": WOMEN'S PETITIONS INSULT SOUTHERN HONOR**

Into an arena populated by gentlemen of honor tumbled antislavery petitions, many of which had been written, circulated, signed, and sent by (mostly white) women. Taken as a whole, antislavery petitions sent to Congress by women from 1835 to 1845 condemned slaveholders as unchristian, lascivious, cruel, and uncaring. Asserting that it was their moral duty to end slavery, female petitioners directly condemned slavery and slaveholders as sinful. "As Christians," stated the women of Washington County, Vermont, "we mourn the toleration of this system, and deprecate the continuance of such flagrant violations of the pure and benignant precepts of our Holy Lawgiver, whose divine injunction is, 'Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'"<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Ladies of Dousa, New Hampshire, and those



of Massachusetts claimed that they “consider[ed] the toleration of slavery in the District of Columbia as a direct violation of the precepts of the Gospel, and shamefully inconsistent with the principles promulgated in the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to decrying the sinfulness of slavery, women’s petitions warned that slavery corroded the moral health of the republic, which would eventually provoke God to punish the nation. The female inhabitants of South Reading, Massachusetts, warned that for the United States Congress, “the Representatives of a free, republican and Christian people,” to declare “their consent to and approval of the extension of the evils of slavery in our land would be a blot on our national character that could never be effaced, and which would invoke the judgments of Heaven.”<sup>27</sup> Expressions of concern for the health of the country implied that women’s interest in preserving the national character extended beyond raising children to be good citizens to monitoring the morality of federal policy. Elevating the female petitioners to the position of concerned republican citizens, these statements indirectly though unquestionably rebuked slaveholding members for harming the reputation of the nation and invoking divine wrath upon it. In that way, the petitions implied that female signers were better citizens than slaveholding Southern representatives.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas indictments of slaveholders as sinful and harmful to the republic undoubtedly insulted Southern members, far more inflammatory were petitioners’ accusations of miscegenation. Female antislavery petitions dwelled on the suffering of the female slave and repeatedly condemned slaveholders for their brutal, lascivious behavior toward bondswomen. The Fathers and Rulers petition, for instance, explained, “We should be less than women, if the nameless and unnumbered wrongs of which the slaves of our sex are made the defenceless victims, did not fill us with horror and constrain us, in earnestness and agony of spirit to pray for their deliverance.”<sup>29</sup> Descriptions of the horrors of slavery in women’s petitions stressed the particular afflictions suffered by female slaves. Time and again they represented the slave woman as sexually and spiritually vulnerable, “degraded,” “brutified,” “the victims of insatiable avarice,” “wronged,” and “denied of male relatives to offer them protection.” Slavery denied “the weak and innocent” legal protection and “sundered all the sacred ties of domestic life . . . for the gratification of avarice,” complained an 1835 petition sent by women of New York State.<sup>30</sup> Another petition decried how, under slavery, “the soul formed for companionship with angels, is despoiled and brutified, and consigned to ignorance, pollution, and ruin.”<sup>31</sup> Allusions to “the gratification of avarice” appeared in many of the petitions sent by women and were thinly veiled accusations that slaveholders were sexually exploiting women who possessed no means to defend themselves. These charges were explosive because slave owners commonly raped and otherwise engaged in sexual activity with slaves. Yet within the culture of honor, as long as

they discreetly observed the social rules, no retribution would follow. Foremost among these rules was the understanding that all parties must maintain silence in public about such liaisons.<sup>32</sup> The women's petitions broke the silence. They exposed the asymmetrical treatment of elite white women and slave women by Southern patriarchs and as such amounted to protofeminist social critique. By bringing to light this grand hypocrisy, the petitions not only shamed Southern gentlemen as individuals but also shook the very foundation of the culture of honor.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to criticizing slaveholders for proudly claiming to protect womanhood while they treated black women brutally, the petitions went even further with their indictment of Southern gentlemen's identities as protectors, charging them with failing to safeguard white women. A petition attached to an appeal published by the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society said, "Yes, although we are *women*, we are still citizens, and it is to *us*, that the captive wives and mothers, sisters and daughters of the South have a peculiar right to look for help in this day of approaching emancipation."<sup>34</sup> This ambiguously worded petition could be read at least two ways, both of which undermined Southern patriarchs. On the one hand, "the captive wives and mothers, sisters and daughters of the South" could have referred to black women and their female relatives. On the other, "the captive wives . . . of the South" could have referred to the wives of planters, who, the petitions implied, were unable to escape the moral depravity of the culture of slavery. Read either as placing slave women or wives of slaveholders in the subject position of the victim of the peculiar institution, the petition supplants Southern gentlemen as protector, replacing them with Northern white women petitioners. Because they performed the role of protector, the petitioners argued, they could rightfully lay claim to the prize of citizenship.

Taken as a whole, the petitions articulated a particular middle-class white female morality by contrasting the uncaring behavior of slaveholding men, especially their unchecked sexual aggression toward black women, with the ideals of restrained manhood. Characteristic of abolitionist discourse, as Bruce Dorsey has observed, these petitions depicted slaveholders as so "bereft of human feelings and compassion" and epitomizing "self-interested, aggressive masculinity" that they devolved "beyond respectable manliness into a condition of inhumanity that made them no longer men."<sup>35</sup> Holding slave-owning members against the standard of respectable masculinity, women petitioners found them deeply flawed. For their lack of sympathy toward other human beings, as well as their want of self-control, Southern representatives fell short of the definition of manhood espoused by women antislavery petitioners and other reformers of the emerging Northern middle class. Men of this sort endangered not only slave women, the petitions implied, but white women and

the republic itself. The antislavery petitions submitted by women concluded that given their devotion to the moral health of the republic, they and men of their class possessed a truer claim to citizenship than slaveholding members of Congress.

**“CASTING DOWN THE GAUNTLET”: SOUTHERN HOTSPURS  
DEMAND SATISFACTION**

“Just the most exciting incident that occurs in the Houses of Congress is the presentation of petitions for the abolition of Slavery in this District,” reported a capitol observer during the first days of 1837. It was during this, the second session of the Twenty-Fourth Congress, that abolitionists loaded the desks of their representatives with memorials signed by thousands of constituents. The effect was “electrical” when time after time a few members to whom the memorials had been entrusted rose to state the content of the petitions. Already at the last session of Congress the growing number of antislavery petitions had thrown the House of Representatives into such commotion that Southern members proposed and Northern members acquiesced to the passage of a rule that immediately tabled the bothersome papers. But no gag rule had been instituted at this new session, and the antislavery petitions burst upon the floor. “If a nest of rattlesnakes were suddenly let loose among them, the members could manifest but little more ‘agitation’—except perhaps, that they retain their seats a *little* better,” the observer wrote. “The Southern hotspurs are almost ready to dance with rage at the attack, as they called it, upon their peculiar domestic institutions.”<sup>36</sup>

The female antislavery petitions struck Southern gentlemen with insults to their honor and to the honor of the South. Particularly offensive to Southern honor were petitions that accused gentlemen of sexual indiscretions with slaves, not because these accusations were untrue (they were not), but because they publicly exposed sexual misconduct with slaves. In the system of meaning sustained by the Southern culture of honor, the petitioners had violated standards of proper conduct by confronting gentleman about their sexual behavior. This accusation disgraced not only the man, but also his wife and children.<sup>37</sup> Because the petitions unmasked the public appearance of slaveholders as differing from their true nature—that is, because the petitions “gave the lie” to slaveholders—they fell into the category of insult that demanded a duel.<sup>38</sup>

Although an actual duel was impossible, there did exist a similar form of social drama through which Southerners could reassert their honor. That form was oratory, for the duel and the oration shared profound similarities in purpose, form, and style. In Southern political culture, oratory, like dueling, was viewed as an opportunity for a “public display” of character; thus eloquence

was considered a core value in the politics of honor.<sup>39</sup> Both the duel and oration were employed by elite Southern men for the purpose of responding to insult and avoiding shame to themselves, their family, and the South. Both Southern oratory and the *code duello* involved a peculiar language and rhetorical forms. Speech associated with affairs of honor was "a vitally important language for most white men in the states that ultimately joined the Confederacy," Kenneth S. Greenberg explains, though dueling and other statements of honor had disappeared from the North at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He stresses that many Northern men would never fully understand the Southern world of the duel, which placed a high value on appearance "as asserted and projected through the words of an honorable gentleman."<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the oratory of the Southern planter class possessed a language and associated system of meanings in many ways distinct from that of the elite classes of the North. "Easy reference to Homer, Plato, Horace, and Livy assured Southern gentlemen of one another's trustworthiness," explains Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "but only so long as the quotations and allusions were familiar." These and other catchwords and maxims, he elaborates, "were simply part of everyday parlance" or "ritual words" that reassured listeners that the past was yet alive and that nothing much needed to change. Likewise, the frequent use of hyperbole in elite Southern oratory belonged to this ritual speech that invoked ancient culture to conserve the present.<sup>41</sup>

Speeches delivered by Southern representatives were peppered with the language of dueling and often paralleled the progression through a ritualized form of escalating confrontation that properly led to a duel. In an affair of honor, whether it might lead to a duel or an oratorical encounter, the ritual was set in motion when a conflict was sparked through the utterance of insulting words or an action that caused affront. Affairs of honor proceeded with a carefully worded exchange of letters in which each party attempted to describe how he had been injured—how he had not been treated with the kind of courtesy due to him as a social equal. Likewise, in congressional debate, before launching into attacks on abolitionists and Northern members, Southern representatives enumerated the wrongs done to their section and themselves. Yet they decidedly did not address petitioners or abolitionists when setting forth grievances justifying their cultural right (not their constitutional right, but rather their "rightness" according to the code of honor governing Southern gentlemen) to take the next step of extracting honor through an aggressive oration. Such a speech would be aimed at Northern members of Congress rather than abolitionists and petitioners, whom Southern representatives regarded as social inferiors and beneath contempt. They were unworthy of rhetorical engagement in the same way that an elite gentleman would not condescend to duel with a slave or a poor white man.<sup>42</sup>

The ultimate phase of the affair of honor and rhetorical confrontation in elite Southern culture share many similarities. A duel was “a theatrical display for public consumption,”<sup>43</sup> and participants expected reports of the event to be widely disseminated. The same was true of a debate in Congress, especially during this golden age of American oratory. Congressmen delivered full-throated defenses of the South tailored for newspaper readers at home and fellow planters in the chamber rather than fellow representatives in the House who hailed from Northern states. Because abolitionists and Northern representatives existed outside the culture of honor, they were not part of the rhetorical audience. Southern members performed oratorical feats for one another and readers back home above all else to restore the reputation and status of their community as well as to reaffirm their masculinity and honor. At the same time, their rhetoric aimed to silence and punish adversaries. Building on Jennifer Rose Mercieca’s observations about the rhetoric of honor, we can understand their speeches as epideictic rather than deliberative for they ritualistically reconfirmed values shared by the planter class. By seeking to control insiders and punish outsiders, the rhetoric of honor employed by opponents of the petitions can also be understood as epideictic violence. At their core, then, both the duel and the rhetoric of Southern congressmen in response to antislavery petitions can be seen as forms of violence designed to preserve the culture and honor of the elite South.<sup>44</sup>

No nose was pulled, no gauntlet thrown down, and no pistol drawn, yet the prolonged exchange in the House between sponsors of antislavery petitions and Southern firebrands was, for slaveholding members, unquestionably a contest of honor. The petitions exposed their sexual misconduct and called their manhood into question. Slaveholding members had been shamed on the floor of the House. Though oratorical, their responses displayed the emotions, stakes, and forms of a duel. Slaveholding members bristled with insult, demanded satisfaction, and rose to defend the South. They asserted their masculinity, the quiet benevolence of their ladies, and the virtues of the South, while casting aspersions on the character of antislavery petitioners, Northern representatives, and the Northern people themselves. Even in the words of Southern members who refused to join in the frenzied attack on Northern petition presenters, especially Adams, we can discern the performance of honor and elite Southern masculinity. Representative Stanly of North Carolina, for example, vowed, “When a gentleman threw down a gauntlet to him, in defense of Southern rights he would go as far as he who went farthest.” But, Stanly explained, he would not in the interest of the South abandon the right of petition, he would not give his support to “miserable, jaundiced resolutions [to suppress abolition petitions], concocted in a caucus.”<sup>45</sup> Throwing down the gauntlet, of course, is the ritual act that initiates a duel.

In the oratorical duel sparked by presentation of women's antislavery petitions, Southern representatives questioned the honor of Northern women, and by implication Northern men, to undermine the credibility of their accusers. The majority of Southern responses attacked female signers as lacking the attributes of a proper lady. Northern women were characterized as flying wildly out of control and failing to recognize their place in society. Though he claimed to pay "cordial homage to the fair sex," Virginia's Henry Wise stated that he believed woman's sphere of action was drawn clearly and that she should not move beyond it: "Woman in the parlor, woman in her proper sphere, is the ornament and comfort of man; but out of the parlor, out of her sphere, if there is a devil on earth, when she is a devil, woman is a devil incarnate!"<sup>46</sup> Another Virginian professed that "there is no man on this floor who has a higher admiration of the female character than I." Yet he was forced to confess that he did not like to see women "madly shooting out of their proper sphere, and undertaking to control national politics."<sup>47</sup> Likewise, North Carolina's Jesse Bynum preached, "It is not in the field, nor is it in the cabinet, where the counsel of lovely woman has been found most potent; to adorn her sex, she is destined for a different sphere."<sup>48</sup>

Another salvo fired against Northerners was aimed at the physical appearance and sexuality of the women petitioners. Drawing from a poem, Bynum held that women who abandon their proper sphere inevitably lose their femininity: "women become most mannish grown" when they "assume the part that men should act alone."<sup>49</sup> He implied that the female signers were unappealing to men by dismissing them as "old grannies and a parcel of boarding-school misses."<sup>50</sup> Representative William Cost Johnson of Maryland implied that female petitioners were exhibiting inappropriate sexual behavior. He bid Northern representatives to instruct their women petitioners "to attend to knitting their own hose and darning their stockings, rather than come [here] and unsex themselves, be laid on the table, and sent to committee to be reported on."<sup>51</sup> With these words Johnson not only accused Northern women of excessive public displays that invited sexual response, but also implied that Northern men were unable to control their women.

Garland depicted women who sent antislavery petitions to Congress as available for sexual conquest. In one instance, he responded to the comment of a Northern congressman that female petitioners, who had been called murderers by some representatives, were "like those of Macbeth—they only 'murder sleep.'" It seemed from this remark, said Garland, that "one of the peculiar virtues of these females is, to disturb his slumbers." Certain that the petitioners were "old maids," Garland suggested that the Northern representative "take one of these interesting, charming ladies for his wife." Such a pairing, he chuckled, "would lessen the ranks of the abolitionists [by] one" and would prevent

Granger "further disturbance of his midnight slumbers." Garland ended by calling this solution "a powerful soporific, and a very pleasant one into the bargain."<sup>52</sup> In the course of his joke, Garland both impugned the Northern representative's manhood by suggesting that he lacked sexual experience and implied that the women petitioners were not properly domesticated, thus suggesting that they be reassigned from the position of public activist to that of outlet for male sexual desire.

Seeking to restore their honor through discursive performances of protection, other speakers jealously defended the virtues of Southern women, whom they perceived to have been dishonored by the petitioners. Representative John Patton of Virginia compared what he interpreted as the hostile actions of Northern women to the restrained behavior of Southern ladies, stating that "they must be very different from any of their sex of any class that I have been acquainted with, if they would persevere in any course that went to hazard every thing dear to their sex." He warned that if the women petitioners were to continue along their present course, "they would hazard the life and safety of the dear and tender offspring clinging to the bosoms of their own sisterhood." Patton professed to be certain that if Northern women were informed as to the effect they were producing "upon the helpless, defenceless objects of their blind charity, they, being Christians, (as all women are, or should be,) would leave the thing to God."<sup>53</sup> Bouldin proclaimed that it was unnecessary for Northern women to petition Congress "to preserve the ladies of the South from corruption." He promised to draw no comparisons between ladies from different sections, but he beseeched female petitioners "to give themselves no further trouble about the ladies of the South." There was no danger, he said, that slavery had or would corrupt Southern women, who did not "suffer by comparison with the fair in any part of the world, in any quality that could adorn or ornament the sex, or render it lovely."<sup>54</sup> Bouldin later refuted more bluntly claims that slavery tainted Southern women: "Who, for pure, feminine modesty, and unsuspected chastity, as well as every other quality that can recommend her to the love and admiration of stranger or acquaintance, stands better in the eyes of the world than the southern female? Is it supposed that she will suffer by comparison with females in any non-slaveholding State?"<sup>55</sup>

In the very act of defending the honor of their women and attacking the enemies of the South, slaveholding members demonstrated that despite the condemnations in the petitions, they were men of honor. Southern representatives repeatedly pledged to defend the South and with this discursive action demonstrated their valor and their character as men of honor. Garland, for one, assumed the role of the noble protector of helpless women and children in the face of the alleged imminent danger posed by abolitionist petitions. He

vowed that were the abolitionists to incite a slave rebellion resulting in "blood reeking from the bosoms of our wives and children," Southern husbands and fathers would "revenge to the utmost their blood upon the heads of those who shed it."<sup>56</sup>

As Southern representatives attempted to reassert their honor and manhood, they also sought to denigrate that of Northerners. Indeed, Southern firebrands accused Northern representatives who took no action to contain antislavery petitions as less than honorable and less than manly. Bynum, for example, urged members from New England—and especially Adams—to spurn the petitions of "old maids, grannies, and children." The reason was clear: the petitions were not manly and neither was any member who presented them. Bynum proclaimed, "There is not an idea connected with any part of the subject that deserves the name of manliness." He singled out the people of Massachusetts for rebuke and, in a thinly veiled reference to the aging Adams, shamed them for allowing women to become political agents who were "urging their imbecile, timid men to action." Bynum predicted that when agitation over slavery resulted in civil war, female abolitionists and their allies would flee the scene: "Where, then, will be found their women and children, who crowd this House with silly petitions? Where their priests? In the tented field? No, sir, but skulking, shivering, shrinking from danger and responsibility, and even then denying the part that they had once taken in getting up this tragic drama. Will their women then be seen in the field, amid the clangor of arms and the shouts of victory, or heard in the cabinet with the cries of their children around them?" Bynum demanded "the hardy sons of New England" to answer these questions.<sup>57</sup>

Adding to accusations that male abolitionists were dishonorable because they threatened the Union and caused innocents to suffer, Southerners attacked abolitionists as unmanly. Garland of Virginia singled out the British abolitionist George Thompson, who had been "lecturing and propagating his incendiarism" in the North, as lacking masculinity. According to Garland, when an anti-abolitionist mob rushed Thompson during a visit to Boston, the Englishman could not defend himself and hid behind women. When indignant citizens who wanted to suppress Thompson's lectures surrounded him breathing threats down his neck, reported Garland, he was saved by his "charming female followers." These "blessed, pious old maids," Garland narrated, carried Thompson away unseen—"in the midst of a cloud"—and he escaped untouched "entirely through female intervention."<sup>58</sup> So it was, implied Garland, that proper gender roles were reversed—the cowardly, feminized male abolitionist was rescued from the hostile mob by his masculine female followers. Women protecting men, Garland reasoned, was unnatural and therefore perverse.



George Thompson was only one example marshaled by Southern members to illustrate the lack of manhood among abolitionists. Garland “gave the lie” to abolitionists. He unmasked them and held them up to shame and ridicule by claiming that in general the abolitionists were “midnight murderers,” not “open and manly murderers.” They were cowards, not men, he explained, because they dared not show their faces in the South to propagate their schemes directly. Instead, Garland accused, they lacked the manly courage to take responsibility for their actions, and they stood at a distance, “safely moored behind the laws and institutions of independent States,” artfully to excite slaves to the work of destruction.<sup>59</sup> Garland’s attack on the abolitionists not only employed the “giving the lie” element of the *code duello*, but also reflected the fact that for many slaveowners, “the lie was at the heart of their problems with slave labor.” Explains Greenberg, “Instead of the open confrontation expected of men of honor, slaves seemed to resist their masters by stealth and deceit.” Due to their supposed inclination for sneaky treachery, slaves were considered unmanly and so, too, Garland alleged, were abolitionists as they were friends of the slave. Ironically, some thirty years later, the manliness of elite Southern men was questioned by Northerners through attacks on their collective gender norms after Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, was captured by Union troops while attempting to escape disguised in women’s clothes.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, Southern opponents of female antislavery petitions spurned the memorials’ conservative characterizations of women’s prayers on behalf of the slave as extensions of Christian duty, interpreting them instead as radical attempts to justify women’s incursion into the exclusively male realm of congressional debate. Southern representatives, moreover, considered the accusations voiced in the petitions to be assaults on the honor of the South and its people. Deeply offended, Southern representatives demanded satisfaction and exacted revenge oratorically by eviscerating the character of Northern women petitioners and their supposed male protectors. In the course of doing so, the Southern representatives conflated normative gender behavior with constitutional rights. Adversaries of the women petitioners argued that because it was improper for women to petition Congress, they had no right to petition Congress. They maintained, moreover, that women could not reason logically nor act independently—basic qualifications for republican citizenship—and therefore their petitions should not be seriously considered. Opponents denied that petitioning against slavery was an extension of female moral duty, instead labeling it as a clearly political action related to a clearly political subject. By bursting into congressional debate over the political issue of slavery, detractors maintained, Northern females acted in such an unbecoming, unwomanly manner that their reputation, if not their sanity, was

doubtful, and the House had no obligation to hear the requests of such deluded individuals. This objection amounted to denying women the right of petition because exercising that right fell outside norms of respectable womanly behavior. Slaveholders also developed a second level of arguments to build a republican rationale for denying women the right of petition, and, more generally, claims to citizenship. Women, they maintained, lacked the requisite virtues of republican citizenship: they could not deliberate rationally, act independently, nor fulfill a citizen's obligation to serve in the military. Certain members went so far as to suggest that women possessed no claims whatsoever to citizenship: "Have women, too, the right of petition?" Wise inquired. He continued, mixing the form of a question with an exclamation, at least to the ears of the congressional reporter, saying at one point in the debate, "Are they citizens!"<sup>61</sup>

### **DISHONORING HIS OPPONENTS: ADAMS RIDICULES SOUTHERN MASCULINITY**

Few Northern representatives were willing to defend the antislavery petitioners and even to respond to generalized attacks on the North. Yet one Yankee was unmoved by Southern threats and insisted that the abolition petitions be heard in the House. He repeatedly defended the character of petitioners, male and female, and threw the character of slaveholders into question. This man was, of course, John Quincy Adams, who by this stage in his long political career had earned the appellation "Old Man Eloquent." During the course of the nine-year debate over the presentation of antislavery petitions, Adams delivered hundreds of speeches defending the right of petition on various grounds, citing especially the First Amendment.

Yet, Adams recognized that the debate was animated by more than constitutional issues and propositional arguments. Despising dueling and the bravado of Southern men of honor, the cantankerous Adams repeatedly employed Southern oratorical forms to expose Southern firebrands as ridiculous. A major weapon in Adams's rhetorical arsenal was the accusation of hypocrisy against members who fancied themselves gentlemen of honor, but who turned a blind eye to ungentlemanly behavior. This position, of course, echoed arguments in women's antislavery petitions that charged slaveholders with asymmetrical treatment of women by race, namely, the idealization of white women and brutalization of black women. When Adams presented a petition from "nine ladies" of Fredericksburg, Virginia, Representative Patton, who had lived in that city, assailed him for bringing before the House a petition from "mulatto" women of "infamous character." Adams responded by asking who it was that had made them infamous? Then he threw the House into an

uproar with his answer: it was most likely white men who had made these women "infamous." In support of this claim, Adams noted that "there existed great resemblances in the South between the progeny of the colored people and the white men who claimed the possession of them." Southern members erupted with anger, for Adams had stabbed brutally at the heart of Southern honor.<sup>62</sup> Not only had he defended the morality of "mulatto women," who were despised by Patton and Southern elites in general, but he had accused Southern men of sexual misconduct with black women—a charge often made in abolitionist petitions, particularly those from women, but heretofore veiled in silence on the floor of Congress. Adams's accusation also upset Southern members because it was true.

Another rhetorical strategy employed by Adams was to adopt the touchy, easily provoked demeanor of Southern members to justify taking more of the House's time to discuss the abolition petitions. On June 14, 1838, Representative Benjamin Howard of Maryland presented the report of a committee appointed to study the expediency of granting the request of some 15,000 petitions regarding the annexation of Texas. Annoyed by the preponderance of petitions from females, Howard expressed his "regret" that so many of the memorials were signed by women, who, he claimed, were afforded ample opportunity for the exercise of their influence by discharging their duties to their fathers, husbands, and children in the domestic circle and by "shedding over it the mild radiance of the social virtues, instead of rushing into the fierce struggles of political life." By leaving their proper sphere, Howard charged, women were "discreditable, not only to their own particular section of the country, but also to the national character."<sup>63</sup>

Exploiting Southern members' penchant for acting as the protector, Adams responded to Howard by mimicking gentlemen's habit of jealously defending their women against the slightest insult: "Sir, was it from a son—was it from a father—was it from a husband, that I heard these words? Does the gentleman consider that women, by petitioning this House in favor of suffering and of distress, perform an office 'discreditable' to themselves, to the section of country where they reside, and to this nation?" Before discharging his rhetorical firepower, Adams offered Howard a chance to retract his assertion: "I have a right to make this call upon him. It is to the wives and to the daughters of my constituents that he applies this language." Like a valorous Southern gentleman protecting his home and hearth, Adams seized upon Howard's remarks as an insult to his women and to his section. Following the requisite form of language exchanged in an affair of honor—which, of course, often resulted in a duel—Adams confronted Howard with a description of how his honor had been injured and how he had not been treated with due courtesy.<sup>64</sup> Adams insisted that if Howard refused to retract the insulting comments, he would be

required to respond forcefully. And he did so not with a barrage of bullets, but with a fusillade of words. In fact, by insisting that he must defend the honor of Northern women, Adams justified holding forth on the floor of Congress for more than four days, during which time he defended the character of Northern female petitioners.<sup>65</sup>

Adams proceeded to demonstrate that Howard's principle that women should have nothing to do with political affairs possessed no biblical grounding. He cited the case of Deborah, a judge and prophetess during the infancy of the Jewish nation, of Jael, who slew the enemy of her nation, and of Esther, who saved the Jews by petitioning. Turning to secular history, Adams challenged Howard to "find there that it is 'discreditable' for women to take any interest or any part in political affairs." Adams bid opponents of female petitioners to examine the character of Aspasia, an Athenian woman whom Socrates praised as "an excellent mistress of the art of rhetoric." Knowing that in the culture of honor any encomium to Southern womanhood required mention of Sparta's brave mothers, Adams asked whether they had "forgotten that Spartan mother, who said to her son when going out to battle, 'My son, come back to me *with* thy shield, or *upon* thy shield?'"<sup>66</sup> In this way, Adams once again performed forms of elite Southern oratory deeply imbedded in the culture of honor to create a sense of irony that exposed the hypocrisy of Southern members and made fun of their very way of being in the world.<sup>67</sup>

To stir patriotic sentiments, Adams also discussed heroines of the American Revolution. After recalling the work of the "ladies of Philadelphia," who outfitted Washington's troops when they were destitute of clothes, he quoted from another history of the Revolution, which said that "the LADIES of South Carolina conducted themselves with more than Spartan magnanimity." Adams had special praise for the women of Charleston, who petitioned for the release of Colonel Hayne. In the midst of adducing this example, Adams shouted, "Where is the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations?" But Howard was not in the House chamber. Adams railed, "I want him to discuss this point. Here were women who entered deeply into concerns relating to their country, and felt that they had other duties to perform, besides those to the domestic comforts of their husbands, brothers, and sons. They petitioned! I want him to listen to their petition, all glorious to their memories as it is!" He then proceeded to read the rather lengthy petition.<sup>68</sup> But Adams did not stop there. He called up the example of Deborah Gannett, who had adorned herself in men's clothes, joined the patriot army, and fought for three years until she was wounded. Members of the House were aware of Gannett's feats because within recent memory they had voted to give her husband a military pension based on the services of his wife and had praised her on the grounds that she had "fought and bled for human liberty." After commending Gannett's actions,

which involved rushing physically into “the vortex of politics,” Adams asked how Howard could conceivably think it wrong for women to petition on a matter of politics.<sup>69</sup>

Adams aimed his last example from the Revolution directly at Howard, who had returned to the chamber. He recounted that the ladies of Baltimore won praise from all over the country by making summer clothing for the army of Lafayette. “Sir,” said Adams, “was it from the lips of a son of one of the most distinguished of those ladies of Baltimore—was it from the lips of a descendant of one of the most illustrious officers in that war that we now hear the annunciation that the political and public services of women are to be treated with contempt? Sir, I do hope that that honorable gentleman, when he shall reply to this part of my argument, will modify his opinions upon this point.”<sup>70</sup>

Howard was not about to wait for a chance to reply. He rose and begged permission to speak. Adams yielded the floor. Howard argued that he saw “not the slightest resemblance” between the conduct of the ladies of Baltimore during the Revolution and that of the women who were petitioning Congress against the admission of Texas: “When the relatives and friends of women are in the field, struggling amidst perils and sufferings for the independence of the country, undergoing all sorts of hardships and privations, without sufficient food or raiment, nothing could be more becoming to the female character than that, by the exercise of their needle, or influence, or industry, they should try to alleviate the toils of their gallant defenders.” Howard protested vociferously against classifying the generous and patriotic ladies of the Revolution with the female petitioners who publicly opposed the annexation of Texas. He also upbraided Adams for likening the petitioners to *Aspasia*, who was “notorious for the profligacy of her life,” and *Gannett*, who had “usurped the habiliments” of her sex and put on men’s clothes to associate with men. Surely, said Howard, the representative from Massachusetts could find more appropriate models for the “modest and virtuous girls of New England.” With this argument, Howard questioned the very foundation of Adams’s morals by implying that he possessed skewed perceptions about gender. Howard was saying, in so many words, “It figures that a Yankee would view a prostitute and a masculine woman as ideal.” In his rejoinder, Adams employed Orientalist rhetoric common to the era to accuse Howard of harboring an opinion about women much like that entertained by the Turks: women have no souls. This opinion, said Adams, was not shared by the nation generally, and it reflected cruelly on the conduct and character of the women of the Republic.<sup>71</sup>

In the course of defending the character of petitioning women, Adams articulated a philosophy of the political rights of women that differed significantly from that enacted by Southern representatives. Conflating notions of

female duty and morality with political rights, Southern members argued that antislavery petitions from women should be dismissed because female signers, having transgressed beyond their proper duties, were no longer respectable women. The House, they maintained, was under no obligation to accept petitions from people, especially women, of questionable character. Adams, by contrast, remained steadfast in his conviction that women possessed a natural right of petition and even a natural right to suffrage. Nonetheless, he linked the exercise of women's political rights to their duties as women. Adams recommended a three-pronged test by which one could determine whether women were acting properly when they voiced their opinion about controversial issues. Under such circumstances, professed Adams, one must inquire "into the motive which actuated them, the means they employ, and the end they have in view."

Adams then applied this test to the case at hand, the petitions against annexation of Texas. As for the motive, he said, it was of the "highest order" of purity: "They petitioned under a conviction that the consequence of the annexation would be the advancement of that which is sin in the sight of God, viz: slavery." The means were appropriate, Adams said, because it was Congress who must decide the question, and it was Congress to whom the women must petition. Echoing a justification offered by the female petitioners themselves, he said, "It is a petition—it is a prayer—a supplication—that which you address to the Almighty Being above you. And what can be more appropriate to their sex?" As for the end sought by female petitioners, it too was virtuous, pure, and of the most exalted character: "to prevent the perpetuation and spread of slavery through America."<sup>72</sup> In contrast to Howard's condemnation, Adams said, "the correct principle is, that women are not only justified, but exhibit the most exalted virtue when they do depart from the domestic circle, and enter on the concerns of their country, of humanity, and of their God." Adams concluded his argument by exalting the benevolence of Northern women by stating that the female petitioners, in discharging their duty to God, have "manifested a virtue which is even above the virtues of mankind, and approaches to a superior nature."<sup>73</sup>

But Adams did not stop with defending the character of female petitioners and the propriety of their actions in relation to their duty as women. He went one step further to expose Howard's attacks on the character of female petitioners as having the ultimate goal and effect of denying women the right of petition. Adams admitted that Howard had not directly contested the right of women to petition. "But he had," said Adams, "represented the exercise of it as disgraceful to those women who petitioned, and as discreditable to their own section of the Union, and to the nation at large. Now to say, respecting women, that any action of theirs was disgraceful, was more than merely contesting their

legal right so to act: it was contesting the right of the mind, of the soul, and the conscience." This was no "light question," insisted Adams; no mere quarrel over the honor of a few women. Instead it concerned "the very utmost depths of the Constitution of the country" and affected "the political rights of one half of the People of the nation."<sup>74</sup>

In a few short breaths Adams exposed the conflation of character and rights that had served since the writing of the Constitution to limit women's citizenship by depicting them as unfit to belong to the polis. And Adams pushed even further. He interpreted Howard as denying women the right of petition because they had no right to vote, and then demanded: "Is it so clear that they have no such right as this last? And if not, who shall say that this argument of the gentleman's is not adding one injustice to another?"<sup>75</sup> On the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1838, then, Adams questioned the very assumption that the Constitution denied women the right to vote. He suggested that the reason women did not vote was custom rather than lack of a right to the franchise. And he implied that outright denial of women's right to vote was an "injustice," as was the denial of their right of petition.

Adams's defense of women's right to petition was both radical and, yet, not entirely new. On the one hand, Adams's assertion that women possessed the right to vote was made a full eight years before the women of New York petitioned their state legislature for the suffrage and a decade before the women's rights convention in Seneca Falls issued its Declaration of Sentiments. Still, Adams's speech replicated a pattern of argument that appeared in debates over women's rights in American periodical literature from 1792 to 1825, in which interlocutors employed separate philosophies to delineate the rights of men and women. Men's rights were grounded in Lockean philosophy, which in American practice reified political liberty. Women's rights, by contrast, were grounded in Scottish Enlightenment philosophies, which made rights interchangeable with duties. Even as Adams clung to the defense of women's rights on the basis of their duties, he pushed the logic of Scottish natural rights philosophy in a direction that enhanced women's social and political equality. Unready to claim rights for women by applying Lockean notions of universal rights, Adams construed women's concerns and duties as reaching beyond the household and into what many considered the male realm. This was a significant advance, for as Rosemarie Zagarri has observed, the acknowledgment that women did possess natural rights, even though exercise of those rights was circumscribed by gendered notions of duty, amounted to a "discursive key that unlocked the possibility of women's social and political equality."<sup>76</sup> A decade before the organized women's rights movement began to employ rights discourse to claim universal rights for women, Adams moved in that direction with his defense of women's antislavery petitioning.

## CONCLUSION

Delving into the gender contexts of Southern and Northern representatives who participated in the debate, this study illuminates otherwise ignored dynamics of the debate over antislavery petitions. It reveals that the petitions and discourse that responded to them involved much more than arguments about slavery in the U.S. Constitution and First Amendment rights. Rather, we have seen that the petitions shot at the heart of Southern manhood, questioning the honesty of Southern gentlemen, accusing them of sexual relations with slaves, and denying their ability to protect their womenfolk. The petitions articulated notions of masculinity and femininity that implied standards of judgment by which slaveholders could be found immoral, unmanly, and undeserving of the rights of citizenship. Southern gentlemen felt as if they as individuals and the South as a whole were under political and moral assault. The assault was bodily, for the petitions threatened their very sense of how to live and breathe. And "the South arose as one man."

To reassert the honor, manhood, and values of the South, its spokesmen in the House unleashed a firestorm upon the character of women petitioners and their defenders. Southern representatives fell back upon the language and forms of the *code duello*, a means of ritualized violence through which Southern gentlemen were accustomed to avenging their honor. While using oratory to reassert their honor by acting as manly protectors of family and home, Southern firebrands attempted to masculinize women petitioners while emasculating male abolitionists and Northern representatives.

Fully comprehending but thoroughly despising the rhetorical behavior prescribed by the Southern code of honor, Representative John Quincy Adams chose to perform slaveholders' bristly, melodramatic style of oratory, parodying elite Southern cultural forms of oratory to fuel the flames of their anger. Using a rhetorical strategy of ironic performance,<sup>77</sup> Adams demonstrated the superiority of his brand of masculinity to expose the emptiness of Southern platitudes about protecting women. He then modulated back to a nonironic stance to demonstrate his "true" appreciation of the moral virtues of woman and her potential for positive political activism. Embodying norms of restrained manhood, Adams articulated a view of (white) women as moral beings who possessed a mind, soul, and conscience. In other words, he recognized women as rights-bearing individuals.

This understanding of white womanhood, which differed significantly from that espoused by elite Southern gentlemen in Congress, ultimately led Adams to the stunning assertion that women had been denied the right to vote by custom and that this denial was a profound injustice. Yet just as slaveholding members sought to reassert their honor by seeking reaffirmation from members of



their community through a rhetoric of epideictic violence, so too did Adams eschew deliberation in favor of ridiculing Southern gentlemen and advancing principles grounded in sensibilities of the emerging Northern middle class. Congressional debates over women's antislavery petitions, in sum, were waged in no small part over competing notions of masculinity and femininity to assert who deserved to be counted as an American citizen.

## NOTES

1. New York Commercial Advertiser, "Slavery," *Liberator* 5, no. 10 (1835): 1.
2. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 21, 1835), 2002–4, quote on 2003.
3. William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 24.
4. To be sure, during the Revolutionary period the rights of women had been deliberated in private correspondence and, during the post-Revolutionary period, in ladies' magazines. But as Rosemarie Zagarri has observed, these discussions "did not occur within official political institutions." And although the Supreme Court considered women's citizenship rights in *Martin v. Massachusetts* (1805), and state constitutional conventions contemplated extending the franchise to women, no sustained consideration of women's political rights took place in Congress until the debate over female antislavery petitions. Rosemarie Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 55, no. 2 (1998): 203; Linda K. Kerber, "The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of *Martin vs. Massachusetts*, 1805" *American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (1992): 349–78.
5. John W. Burgess, *The Middle Period, 1817–1858* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897); Robert P. Ludlum, "The Antislavery 'Gag Rule': History and Argument," *Journal of Negro History* 26 (April 1941): 202–43; Russel B. Nye, *Fettered Freedom: Civil Liberties and the Slavery Controversy, 1830–1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1949); George C. Rable, "Slavery, Politics, and the South: The Gag Rule as a Case Study," *Capitol Studies* 3 (Fall 1975): 69–87; Robert G. Smith, "The Arguments Over Abolition Petitions in the House of Representatives in December, 1835: A Toulmin Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1962); David C. Frederick, "John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Disappearance of the Right of Petition," *Law and History Review* 9 (Spring 1991): 113–55; Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*; Lyon Rathbun, "The Debate over Annexing Texas and the Emergence of Manifest Destiny," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2001): 459–93.
6. Jennifer Rose Mercieca, "The Culture of Honor: How Slaveholders Responded to the Abolitionist Mail Crisis of 1835," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2007): 51–76.
7. The form of gender analysis I embrace and employ here was put forth initially by Joan W. Scott in her landmark essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75. An accessible articulation of this approach, especially with relevance to nineteenth-century America, can be found in the prologue and first chapter of Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Throughout this article I draw upon the gender criticism of Norma Basch, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Amy S. Greenberg, and Norma Silber. My method of analysis is also informed by Stephen Kantrowitz, "Fighting Like Men: Civil War Dilemmas

- of Abolitionist Manhood," in *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the U.S. Civil War*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 19–40. Using a gendered approach, writes Stephanie McCurry, "draws our attention to what we acknowledge in our own political system but usually deny in historical analysis. It is that values expressed in the public sphere reflect complex and deep-seated beliefs about a whole range of relationships and issues, many of which are considered private: marriage, sexuality, parental authority, motherhood, manhood, and the very concept of privacy." McCurry, "The Two Faces of Republicanism: Gender and Proslavery Politics in Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1264.
8. "Dramatic changes in American society, economy, and culture reconfigured the meanings of both manhood and womanhood in the 1830s and 1840s," explains Amy S. Greenberg. "Antebellum Americans lived through an astonishing array of changes, including mass immigration from Europe; the emergence of evangelical Christianity in the Second Great Awakening; the end of bound labor in the North; the beginnings of a 'market revolution,' including specialization in agriculture and dependency on wider markets in even rural areas; class stratification; and universal white manhood suffrage. All of these transformations shaped the ideology and practices of womanhood and manhood, and the meaning of Manifest Destiny, as well." Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.
  9. Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828," *Journal of American History* 80 (1993): 890–918.
  10. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 12.
  11. As a major general in the Tennessee militia, Jackson had defeated the Creeks at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814 and a year later led U.S. Army troops in a successful defence of New Orleans. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Andrew Jackson's Honor," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (1997): 17–18, 3, 8.
  12. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19.
  13. Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4.
  14. Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 58.
  15. Wyatt-Brown, "Andrew Jackson's Honor," 10, 33.
  16. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 50.
  17. Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence*, 227.
  18. Richards, *Congressman John Quincy Adams*, 16–17.
  19. Anne Lewis Osler, "That Damned Mob: Northern and Southern Women Writers and the Coming of the American Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1995).
  20. Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women*, 105, 107.
  21. Richards, *Congressman John Quincy Adams*, 15. For discussion of the prolonged discord between Adams and Jackson, see Lynn Hudson Parsons, "In Which the Political Becomes the Personal, and Vice Versa: The Last Ten Years of John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23 (2003): 421–43.
  22. Richards, *Congressman John Quincy Adams*, 132.
  23. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 103.

24. Marjorie G. Fribourg, *The U.S. Congress: Men Who Steered Its Course, 1787–1867* (Philadelphia: MacRae Smith, 1972), 214; Miller, *Arguing About Slavery*, 282–83.
25. “Petition of the Females of Washington County, Vermont, for the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia and Various States,” 1836, HR24-G22.4, Library of Congress Box 75, National Archives Box 14, Washington, DC.
26. “Petition of the Ladies of Dousa, New Hampshire for Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” 1836, HR 24-G22.4, Library of Congress Box 75, National Archives Box 14, Washington, DC; “Petition of the Ladies of Massachusetts for Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” December 18, 1835 to June 6, 1836, HR24A-H1.3, Record Group 223, National Archives, Washington, DC.
27. “Petition of the Female Inhabitants of South Reading, Massachusetts, Against the Admission of the Territory of Arkansas to the Union as a Slaveholding State,” June 6, 1836, HR24A-H1.4, Library of Congress Box 46, National Archives Box 3, Washington, DC.
28. For an extended rhetorical analysis of how women’s antislavery petitions constructed for women an identity of citizenship, see Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women’s Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Susan Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women’s Antislavery Petitions,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 8 (2002): 147–68.
29. “Fathers and Rulers of Our Country Petition Form,” November 1834, in *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822–1844*, 2 vols., ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (New York, 1934), I:175–76. For further discussion of how women’s antislavery petitions stressed the suffering of the female slave, see Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, especially 62–66; and Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship.”
30. “Petition of the Ladies of Marshfield for Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” December 18, 1835 to June 6, 1836, HR24A-H1.3, Record Group 233, National Archives, Washington, DC; “Petition of the Ladies of Glastenbury for Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia,” 1836, HR24A-H1.3, Library of Congress Box 47, National Archives Box 3, Washington, DC.
31. “The Fathers and Rulers of Our Country Petition Form”; “Petition of 600 Ladies of Utica, Oneida County, New York, for abolition of slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia,” March 21, 1836, Library of Congress Box 47, National Archives Box 3, Washington, DC.
32. Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence*, 105.
33. In its focus on the exposure of asymmetry in feminist social critique (namely that of the petitions), my analysis draws upon Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
34. Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, *An Address of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia to the Women of Pennsylvania with the Form of a Petition to the Congress of the U. States* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1836); emphasis in original.
35. Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women*, 190, 189.
36. *Emancipator*, January 19, 1837; emphasis in original.
37. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 308.
38. Greenberg, “Nose, Lie, and Duel,” 62–63.
39. Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 38–41, 12–15.
40. Greenberg, “Nose, Lie, and Duel,” 58, 63–64.

41. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 93.
42. The next step in a duel was an intervention by another party whose job it was to bring about a reconciliation. I found no evidence of a similar step in congressional debate in my reading of the congressional record, but of course, it is unlikely that such conversation would be recorded in that source.
43. Greenberg, "Nose, Lie, and Duel," 62.
44. Mercieca, "Culture of Honor," 71. The connections among politics, oratory, and dueling are also explored by Joanne B. Freeman in "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 53 (1996): 289–318; and by James M. Farrell in "The Union and Deliberative Conduct: Dueling and Prudence in 'Webster's Reply to Hayne,'" paper presented at the 1997 convention of the National Communication Association, Chicago.
45. *Congressional Globe*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 31, 1839), 94.
46. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 22, 1835), 2032.
47. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2064.
48. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., (January 9, 1837), 1337.
49. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., (January 9, 1837), 1337.
50. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2064.
51. *Congressional Globe*, 26th Cong., 1st Sess., (January 28, 1840), 450.
52. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2064.
53. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (January 12, 1836), 2170–71.
54. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 21, 1835), 2002–4.
55. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (January 19, 1836), 2234.
56. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2066–69.
57. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., (January 9, 1837), 1329, 1337.
58. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2067.
59. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 23, 1835), 2068.
60. Greenberg, "Nose, Lie, and Duel," 65. For an excellent gender analysis that demonstrates how, during the years immediately after the Civil War, Northerners expressed their anger toward the South by condemning the aristocratic gender codes as corrupt, see Nina Silber, "Intemperate Men, Spiteful Women, and Jefferson Davis: Northern Views of the Defeated South," *American Quarterly* 41 (1989): 614–35.
61. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 1st Sess., (December 22, 1835), 2032–33. Although posed as a question, in the *Register of Debates* this sentence is punctuated by an exclamation point.
62. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess., (February 9, 1837), 1675–76.
63. John Quincy Adams, *Speech on the Right of the People, Men and Women, to Petition; on the Freedom of Speech and Debate in the House of Representatives of the United States; on the Resolutions of Seven State Legislatures and the Petitions of More than One Hundred Thousand Petitioners, Relating to the Annexation of Texas to this Union. Delivered in the House of Representatives of the United States, in fragments in the morning our, from the 16th of June to the 7th of July, 1838, inclusive* (Washington: Printed by Gales and Seaton, 1838), 65.
64. Greenberg, "Nose, Lie, and Duel," 65.
65. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 76–77.
66. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 80.

67. The frequency and function of classical allusions in Southern oratory are discussed by Wyatt-Brown in *Honor and Violence*, 45; emphasis in original.
68. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 70–72.
69. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 72–73.
70. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 75.
71. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 75–76. On the Orientalist reading of Adams's statement, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); and especially Margaret M. R. Kellow, "The Oriental Imaginary: Constructions of Female Bondage in Women's Antislavery Discourse," in *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Race, and the Ambiguities of American Reform*, ed. Steven Mintz and John Stauffer (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).
72. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 81, 68.
73. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 68.
74. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 77–78, 74.
75. Adams, *Speech on the Right of Petition*, 77.
76. Zaggarri, "Rights of Man and Woman," 203–30.
77. By using the term "ironic performance," I am drawing on the excellent work of Robert Terrill. Both Douglass and Adams employed rhetorical forms that were consonant with the audience expectations, yet their messages defied the political position of their listeners while advancing their own ends. See Robert E. Terrill, "Irony, Silence, and Time: Frederick Douglass on the Fifth of July," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 216–34.