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Black Female Respectability and Abolitionism: Lucy Stanton at Oberlin College and Beyond¹

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Abstract: Abolitionist Lucy Stanton, the first female graduate of Oberlin College and the first black woman in the United States to finish four years of college, strongly believed in the power of moral reform. In her self-presentation, personal choices, and abolitionist rhetoric, Stanton embodied a politics of respectability. Using the works of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Erica L. Ball, I articulate my interpretation of the politics of respectability for middle-class free black women before the Civil War, with Stanton's life as a case study. I assert that Stanton primarily chose to embody ideals of respectability due to her belief in the transformative abolitionist power of living out her values. Rather than being a performance, Stanton's respectability was an intrinsic part of her identity.

Keywords: Oberlin College; Lucy Stanton; Lucy Stanton Day; William Howard Day; abolition in Ohio; politics of respectability; black female abolitionist

In the years leading up to the Civil War, many free black women living in the northern United States devoted themselves to the abolitionist cause, dedicating their lives to the struggle to end slavery. One of those women, Lucy Stanton, exemplified this passionate commitment in her writings, personal decisions, and abolitionist activism. Born the free daughter of abolitionists in October 1831, Stanton came of age in Cleveland, Ohio.² In 1850, at just eighteen years old, she became the first woman to graduate from Oberlin College.³ During her education and after finishing her studies, she devoted her life to abolition. Stanton strongly believed in the power of moral reform, and her most powerful actions for abolition were personal, revolving around the very way in which she lived. In her self-presentation, personal choices, and abolitionist rhetoric, Stanton embodied a politics of respectability.

The term 'politics of respectability' was created by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*.⁴ She claims that black Baptist women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that "respectable" behavior in public would inspire regard from white people, leading to the advancement of the African-American race.⁵ This politics of respectability reflected a deep conservatism that placed the blame for racism on individuals, demanding them to adhere to unreasonable standards.⁶ Years later, after Higginbotham's term and its usage had become familiar in academic discourse, Erica L. Ball proposed a new perspective on the politics of respectability in

¹ Many thanks to Professor Tamika Nunley, whose class about abolition inspired my research about Lucy Stanton. I couldn't be more grateful for her thoughtful comments throughout the writing process.

² Ellen N. Lawson, "Lucy Stanton: Life on the Cutting Edge," *Western Reserve Magazine*, January-February 1993, 9, Former Student Files, Box 921, Oberlin College Archives.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Ibid.

her 2012 book, *To Live an Anti-Slavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*.⁷ Ball's politics of respectability diverges significantly from the original use of the term by Higginbotham. She argues that, rather than being inauthentic efforts to influence white people politically, demonstrations of respectability were important personal projects to middle-class black individuals, who saw morally sound lives as crucial to their abolitionism.⁸ As I investigate the works of Higginbotham and Ball, I articulate my interpretation of the politics of respectability for middle-class free black women before the Civil War, using Stanton's life as a case study.

Though, as Higginbotham argues, Stanton presented herself as respectable to make herself heard by white abolitionists, I follow Ball in arguing that Stanton's politics of respectability had significance beyond the white gaze. I qualify that Higginbotham is correct that black women of Stanton's era did utilize respectability in order to be taken seriously by white individuals. The way in which Stanton lived, spoke, and taught others disproved pro-slavery arguments by demonstrating the humanity and intelligence of African Americans in the United States. However, I complicate Higginbotham's framework by asserting that Stanton primarily chose to embody ideals of respectability because of her strong belief in the transformative abolitionist power of living out her values. Stanton exemplified her moral reform ideology in her words, actions, and way of life because she felt that this was the best method through which to bring her abolitionist ideals to fruition. In line with Ball's view, I claim that, rather than being a performance, Stanton's respectability was an intrinsic part of her identity. Throughout her life, Stanton lived as a direct and empowered embodiment of black respectability.

Raised by abolitionists and possessing an activist spirit, Stanton was a determined student from an early age.⁹ She entered Oberlin College – then the Oberlin Collegiate Institute – in the mid-1840s.¹⁰ She was one of few black students at the integrated college, which was 97 percent white.¹¹ Stanton went on to become the first black woman in the United States to finish four years of college, graduating in 1850 with a “Ladies Degree,” which was not considered equivalent to a Bachelor's degree at the time.¹² While an Oberlin College student, she developed a commitment to moral reform that would serve her work in the abolitionist movement. As a young woman, Stanton began to create and live out her own politics of respectability, which would prove to be an essential part of her abolitionism for the rest of her life.

At Stanton's Oberlin College commencement in 1850, she delivered an address entitled “A Plea for the Oppressed” to great acclaim.¹³ Throughout the speech, Stanton communicated her belief in the abolitionist strategy of moral reform. She appealed to the moral sensibilities of her predominantly white audience to persuade them to become abolitionists. Due to Oberlin's political culture, many of those in attendance at commencement were activists for various causes. Thus, Stanton stated, “Reformers, ye who have labored long to convince man that happiness is found alone in doing good to

⁷ Erica Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Lawson, “Lucy Stanton: Life on the Cutting Edge,” 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 6, 1850, Lawson-Merrill Papers, Box 2, Oberlin College Archives.

others ... ye that advocate the great principles of Temperance, Peace, and Moral Reform ... will you not plead the cause of the Slave?"¹⁴ By calling attention to the moral causes non-abolitionist reformers had taken up, Stanton claimed that those individuals were acting hypocritically by ignoring the plight of slaves. She wanted them to understand that abolitionism deserved their activist passion. When she wrote about the hypocrisy of those reformers, Stanton was asserting, as Ball writes, that "[living a respectable life] required a willingness to embody one's total commitment to the freedom struggle at all times."¹⁵ As she used her speech to criticize non-abolitionist reformers for their failure to act, Stanton argued that being respectable and morally virtuous required a commitment to abolition – and that, therefore, refusing to engage with abolitionism meant that one was acting immorally.

In her speech, Stanton then linked her cause to the values of peace and benevolence, arguing that abolition was a logical next step for reformers involved in other movements. She further emphasized the hypocrisy of moral reform without abolitionism, continuing, "[Slavery] is intemperance; for there is an intoxication ... more fearful than the madness of the drunkard, which if let loose upon the moral universe would sweep away everything pure and holy, leaving but the wreck of man's nobler nature."¹⁶ Stanton cautioned her listeners against being reformers whose actions failed to match their values. By comparing slavery to drunkenness, she specifically criticized temperance activists who did not speak out against slavery. She implied that the fate of the world's depended on abolition, and placed slavery in opposition to the foundational reformist values of peace and temperance. Stanton made it evident that she believed abolition to be a moral battle. But while the speech's content exemplified her commitment to moral reform, it was Stanton's presentation and manner that affected her audience most profoundly.

Stanton's speech and delivery were well-received by her audience. *The Oberlin Evangelist* focused on her achievement in its coverage of the commencement proceedings, writing that Stanton's demeanor was much appreciated.¹⁷ While the newspaper lauded the address' content, it largely focused on her presentation, writing, "Her charming voice, modest demeanor, appropriate pronunciation, and graceful cadences riveted attention."¹⁸ This language described Stanton as worthy of admiration due to her manner. In line with Higginbotham's politics of respectability, it is clear that, had she not presented herself as respectful and educated, Stanton may not have gained her audience's attention.¹⁹ Her composure enabled the white audience to listen to her, as she fit their ideal of a dignified woman. She served as a stark contrast to prevailing stereotypes about black women at the time, which labeled them as

¹⁴ Lucy Stanton, "A Plea for the Oppressed," in *The Three Sarahs: Documents of Antebellum Black College Women*, ed. Ellen NickKenzie Lawson and Marlene D. Merrill (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 203.

¹⁵ Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 8.

¹⁶ Stanton, "A Plea for the Oppressed," 203.

¹⁷ *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 6, 1850.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, 15.

hypersexualized and unchaste “Jezebels” or subservient and devoted “Mammys.”²⁰ These damaging ideas contributed to “a brand of racism that rationalized the economic, social, and political subordination of African Americans.”²¹ As Stanton’s embodiment of a politics of respectability placed her in opposition to these stereotypes, she made a case for the elevation of African Americans as a racial group.

Stanton’s manner during her speech convinced many in her audience that black people possessed considerable intelligence. *The Oberlin Evangelist* wrote that, after her address, “A man rose in the congregation and said, ‘When the question came before the trustees, “Shall colored persons be admitted [to Oberlin]?” ... it was then predicted that this would ruin the institution. The piece to which you have just listened shall decide upon the credibility of the prophecy.’ Then only was there one general, swelling burst of applause.”²² Through the man’s comment and the ensuing audience reaction, Stanton’s demeanor and writing became evidence that black students were as well-mannered and intelligent as white students, and therefore should be welcomed at Oberlin. As the black women about whom Higginbotham writes believed, “Individual behavior ... determined the collective fate of African Americans. They perceived [public behavior] to wield the power either to refute or confirm stereotypical representations and discriminatory practices.”²³ Stanton’s platform gave her a great responsibility; since black women so rarely had the opportunity to deliver speeches, she was under pressure to perform well. Respectable behavior was required and necessary in disproving stereotypes.

Yet Stanton viewed this respectability first and foremost as an act of resistance against a system of beliefs that sought to dehumanize her. Ball argues, “Respectability is best understood as ... essential to ... [the emerging black middle class’s] determination to live and die in a way that was utterly antithetical to the life deemed appropriate for them by slavery’s supporters.”²⁴ Living with dignity and comporting herself in a proper manner was a crucial part of Stanton’s abolitionism and rebellion against stereotypes. The attention of a white audience was not the main impetus for her dignified self-presentation during her address; her respectability was more about personalizing her antislavery politics than satisfying the white gaze.²⁵ Respectable behavior did improve Stanton’s standing with sympathetic white reformers, as Higginbotham describes. But that was not the primary purpose of Stanton’s politics of respectability. As in Ball’s framework, she primarily chose to live in such a way as an act of resistance against those who supported slavery and sought to dehumanize black people. For her and many other black women of the period, embodying a politics of respectability was a personal project as much as a political strategy. As indicated by her emphasis on moral reform in “A Plea for the Oppressed,” Stanton deeply believed in the benefits of living in accordance with her values.

The black family as a unit and site of proper morals was especially important in narratives of respectability for free blacks. Black women were “required to battle a well-

²⁰ Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Oberlin Evangelist*, November 6, 1850.

²³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, 196.

²⁴ Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

developed array of stereotypes that compromised their standing,” which entailed sustaining a certain politics of respectability.²⁶ Marriage was one way to push back on the hypersexual “Jezebel” stereotype, as it refuted the idea that black women were sexually immoral and available. In 1852, Stanton married Day, a committed abolitionist.²⁷ Together, they modeled a successful black abolitionist family. They strove to live out their values by helping freedmen and publishing abolitionist texts. Ball writes, “The ideal black family served as the engine of the antislavery struggle, an essential part of the race’s ascendance from slavery to freedom.”²⁸ Since the family was viewed as the location in which one developed their morals and values, it became the foundation of a respectable antislavery lifestyle. Therefore, marriage was an important aspect of Stanton’s embodiment of a politics of respectability as a free black woman.

Even when her family was thrown into upheaval, Stanton continued to live an antislavery life. In 1856, she and her husband moved from Ohio to Canada.²⁹ At the King and Elgin settlements – black utopian communities in Buxton, Ontario – they taught and advocated for freedmen and fugitive slaves.³⁰ Then, in 1859, Day left for England to raise money for freedmen and never returned; he took property from his wife before abandoning her and their child.³¹ A major element in Stanton’s life – her family – was disrupted. Respectable black women were supposed to create “well-ordered, virtuous, and independent households” that were “the antithesis of slavery and thus a vehicle for engaging in the most personal of antislavery politics.”³² Part of living out a politics of respectability was holding oneself to a certain standard in private as well as in public. Thus, when Day asked Stanton for a divorce, she was hesitant to agree. She wrote in a letter explaining the situation, “He desires a divorce or rather desires me to obtain one – which I have not made up my mind to do.”³³ If Stanton had divorced her husband, she would no longer have conformed to the standards of respectability for a black abolitionist household. As Ball writes, “Middle-class ideals about gender, home, family, and domestic space [were linked] to the project of living an antislavery life.”³⁴ As a divorced woman, Stanton would have fallen outside of her own perception of respectability and therefore would have risked the loss of her success as a black female abolitionist.

Though Stanton chose not to divorce Day at the time of their separation, the public ceased to see her as a married woman. She was forced to determine a dignified way to succeed in her new life as a single mother. Like many others, who continued to “place every aspect of their lives in the service of the freedom struggle,” Stanton did not abandon her commitment to abolition when in dire straits.³⁵ She became a dressmaker,

²⁶ Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, 18.

²⁷ Lawson, “Lucy Stanton: Life on the Cutting Edge,” 11.

²⁸ Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 84.

²⁹ Lawson and Merrill, “Lucy Stanton: Pioneering College Graduate,” 197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

³¹ Lawson, “Lucy Stanton: Life on the Cutting Edge,” 12.

³² Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 106.

³³ Lucy Stanton, “Defense of Marital Status,” in *The Three Sarahs: Documents of Antebellum Black College Women*, ed. Ellen NickKenzie Lawson and Marlene D. Merrill (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 218.

³⁴ Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 84.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

writing proudly that “myself and my child are entirely dependent upon my exertions for support.”³⁶ She was no longer embodying a respectability based on the value of the nuclear black family, but she continued to live a respectable antislavery life. She found dignity in her tireless work to support her child independently and in her continued commitment to abolition. A politics of respectability continued to figure as a central personal project – as in Ball’s framework – in the antislavery life Stanton built for herself.

Day and Stanton divorced over a decade after their separation, in 1872.³⁷ Stanton went on to teach freedmen in the South during Reconstruction and re-married.³⁸ She died in February 1910 at the age of seventy-eight, having dedicated her life to abolition and the education of African Americans.³⁹ In her writings, her abolitionism, and her personal choices, she committed herself to abiding by her values. For Stanton, living an antislavery life meant embodying a politics of respectability. As Higginbotham argues, this allowed Stanton and other black women of her era to appear legitimate to white individuals. Respectability played an important role in convincing white Americans of the goals of the abolitionist movement, as it sought to demonstrate that black people were worthy of human rights by virtue of their manners. However, Stanton’s life demonstrates that this pursuit had great significance beyond its political efficacy. As Ball asserts, free black women of the period viewed respectability as a personal project that enabled them to embody their antislavery principles.⁴⁰ Living in accordance with their values empowered them to become “living, breathing refutations” of slavery as an institution.⁴¹ As she sought to help black people live free and fulfilling lives, Stanton created her own politics of respectability. She embodied her ideals, keeping her commitment to abolition at the very heart of her identity.

³⁶ Lucy Stanton, “Application to Teach the Freedmen,” in *The Three Sarahs: Documents of Antebellum Black College Women*, ed. Ellen NickKenzie Lawson and Marlene D. Merrill (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984), 216.

³⁷ Lawson, “Lucy Stanton: Life on the Cutting Edge,” 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Pioneer Race Leader Called to Her Reward,” no publication or date listed, Former Student Files, Box 921, Oberlin College Archives.

⁴⁰ Ball, *To Live an Antislavery Life: Personal Politics and the Antebellum Black Middle Class*, 132.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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