From the Instructor

For a writer, an orator, or a critic, how important is credibility? This is the question that Sophie Spiers sought to answer in a series of essays she wrote for my WR 100 course, "Oratory in America." The essay included here, "Frederick Douglass: The [In]Credible Orator," which was selected by the editors of *WR* as the prize-winner for the best WR 100 essay for the 2011–2012 academic year, culminated her writing for the semester.

In order to make the kind of nuanced and sensitive arguments that are essential to credible claims, Sophie worked on a number of important rhetorical moves, including a judicious use of first person. Like many students, Sophie was unaccustomed to using first person in her academic writing. Over time, however, she discovered how the first person point of view contributed to her rhetorical arsenal. We can see in this essay, for example, how the use of first person allows her to assert her own voice and to make clear to readers important distinctions between her views and those of others.

The essay also demonstrates close reading of several texts, acknowledgement of and responses to alternative viewpoints, and concessions to legitimate objections to her claim. Throughout, the essay sustains a clear argument that compares the rhetoric of three significant nineteenth-century abolitionists, who also endorsed women's rights. As you can see, Sophie claims that the rhetoric of Frederick Douglass, far more successfully than that of William Lloyd Garrison or Sarah Grimké, manifests credibility because of his sensitivity to the dangers inherent in linking two independent and radical reforms.

I hope you enjoy reading this essay as much as I did. Sophie's hard work, her willingness to take intellectual risks, and her commitment to excellence allowed her to grow into an exceptional (and quite credible) writer. I am very happy to share this excellent essay with you.

— David Shawn

From the Writer

The final essay assignment in WR 100 allowed us a lot of freedom in choosing which rhetoric we wanted to discuss in our papers. The speakers I chose—Frederick Douglass, Sarah Grimké, and William Lloyd Garrison—were not only great writers and speakers, but also important vehicles of societal change. While their greatness certainly links them, I was initially unsure of how to further connect them in my paper. After considering my interest in the subject, I decided to focus on the specific tactics and devices these figures implemented—and the different ways in which they applied them—to promote positive change during the abolition and women's rights movements. Studying the rhetorical methods that promoted positive change in the past is important if we are to continue to better our society.

— Sophie Spiers

Sophie Spiers

Prize Essay Winner

Frederick Douglass, The (In)credible Orator

In every formative period in history, a few individuals' actions and words stand apart from the rest of society. Abraham Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address* exemplifies the near destruction of the Union; FDR's *Fireside Chats* are central to the Great Depression; and Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech is representative of the entire Civil Rights Movement. During the mid to late 1800s, when anti-slavery sentiments were at their peak, women also began to find their voices in the fight for the equality and liberty of all humans. The women's rights movement quickly gained momentum and, simultaneously, built an association with the abolition movement. While some abolitionists could not bring themselves to support women's quest for equality, others, such as Sarah Grimké, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass, became fervent advocates. In rising to represent the unification of abolition and women's rights, these figures made a prominent mark on history; no one can deny their genuine belief in and desire for equality and liberty, nor can we ignore the moral correctness of their aims. What I intend to examine and question, however, is the *credibility* they demonstrate in their rhetoric: do Grimké, Garrison, and Douglass present themselves as credible representatives of the union of abolition and women's rights? In other words, do all of these figures demonstrate an understanding of the fragile relationship between these two movements? In answering these questions, I not only intend to describe the fragility of this relationship, but also to emphasize that credibility is most apparent when one demonstrates sensitivity to the dangers inherent in such a fragile relationship. In my view, Douglass, in his implicit characterization of the opponent, his passionate yet conscious tone, and

his tactful mention of both women *and* slaves, demonstrates a clear understanding of the danger in associating women's rights and anti-slavery, and is therefore a more credible representative of these movements than Grimké or Garrison.

In today's society, women continue to gain prestige and power as doctors, lawyers, and executives. Such opportunity, unfortunately, was not available during Sarah Grimké's time. During the height of her career, Grimké's gender, as well as her outspoken approach to representing the woman movement, garnered a great deal of opposition. So much so that she not only "had trouble obtaining venues in which to speak," but was also "frequently heckled" (Reid and Klumpp 316). Animosity against Grimké's support for the abolition movement continued to build, as those opposed to abolition accused her of "seeking black husbands" (Reid and Klumpp 316). Grimké was not the only target of criticism and anger; the entire concept of uniting abolition and women's rights was largely met with hostility and disapproval.

Linking women and abolitionists created a delicate relationship between the two movements, so that remarks regarding one threatened to diminish the following of the other. According to critic Aileen Kraditor, the movements' orators "had to consider the expediency of any position they might adopt on women's rights in a period in which abolitionism was gaining many converts who would be repelled by . . . the equality of the sexes" (40). In her essay, Kraditor also emphasizes how "most advocates of the more popular reform endorsed the prevailing disapproval of the other" (40). So as not to deter support, it was imperative that advocates find balance between the two issues. In the specific case of the abolition and woman movements, employing rhetorical approaches to maintain this balance, in my view, equates to credibility. In his speeches Douglass employs several such rhetorical devices: he addresses and defines the opponent without attacking that opponent; he promotes his views while remaining conscious of his audience; and finally, he makes equal mention of both movements to clearly establish their relatedness. Douglass, more so than Grimké or Garrison, demonstrates an awareness of the necessity of balance, tailors his writing to fit this balance, and establishes credibility in his rhetoric.

At the heart of both the anti-slavery and the women's rights movements were anger, hostility, and an overwhelming desire to combat the opponent. To overcome these emotions, it was crucial for speakers to help their audience understand the opponent. Grimké and Garrison were vocal in identifying the white male as the villain, and in condemning his actions. To Grimké, man and his tyrannical nature, "adorned the creature whom God gave him as a companion, with baubles and gewgaws . . . and made her the instrument of his selfish gratification, a plaything to please his eye and amuse his hours of leisure" (321). She describes man's assertion over woman as a "war he has waged against her mind, her heart, and her soul," and even characterizes the very idea of female subservience as "monstrous" and "anti-Christian" (321). Grimké makes no concession in her description of man, in general, as an evil being. Equally outspoken and unapologetic in his description of the opponent is Garrison in his commentary on a debate over women's rights at the Boston Lyceum. In referring to men as "impounders of stray women," Garrison suggests a tendency for "tyrannical men" to treat women as less than human (99, 100). He echoes this sentiment when he declares men to be "the usurpers of mankind" (100). Garrison views men as both a threat to women and a source of destruction to mankind in general. Grimké and Garrison not only identify the opponent, but also manage to publically denounce him with their unforgiving, blunt, and pointed characterizations.

Contrary to Grimké and Garrison's critical, brazen rhetoric, Douglass employs implicit, rather than explicit, tactics in addressing the opposition. He does not declare man an "impounder" of women or a war-wager. In fact, Douglass does not specifically mention "man" at all. Instead, he makes general mention of his adversaries when he states, "many who have at last made the discovery that the negroes have some rights . . . have yet to be convinced that women are entitled to any" ("Editorial" 84). Using a similar tactic, he again refers to "a number of persons of this description," and continues to describe "the judgment of such persons" ("Editorial" 84–85). As a supporter of the same movements as Grimké and Garrison, we can assume Douglass shares with them a common opponent. Unlike his fellow reformers, however, Douglass' implicit, vague references to "such persons" do not come across as harsh; he may condemn the adversaries' views, but he refrains from insulting and personally attacking them. This restraint is

evidence of his unwillingness to jeopardize either women or slaves in their movements for equality, and helps to establish his credibility as an orator.

Characterization of the opponent is not the only area where Grimké and Garrison demonstrate passionate, emotionally charged rhetoric. The overall tones of both speakers also strike an unwaveringly intense chord. At the very outset of her "Response to the Pastoral Letter," Grimké exhibits a propensity toward dramatic rhetoric when she refers to the pastors as "[t]hose . . . who are now endeavoring to smother the irreplaceable desire for mental and spiritual freedom which glows in the breast of many, who hardly dare to speak their sentiments" (320). Grimké's statements increase in intensity as she continues to promote her position; she declares, "Alas! She has too well learned the lesson which MAN has labored to teach her. She has surrendered her dearest RIGHTS, and has been satisfied with the privileges which man has assumed to grant her" (321). Her use of capital letters and exclamatory punctuation smacks of a forceful, unrelenting tone.

Equally as bold, but arguably more insulting, is the nature of Garrison's writing. In reporting on the debate at the Boston Lyceum, Garrison calls the arguments proposed by those averse to women's rights "bad illustrations and worse witticisms" (99). He considers them "barbarous," and "not entitled to Christian consideration" (100). Garrison's blatant disagreement with the subjects of his critique is again underlined when he demands, "A most unmeaning flourish of words! Can any reason be given, why a man may not jointly rule in the same empire? Why he should not govern solely by love as well as woman?" (100). Given his position on women's rights, we could expect Garrison to demonstrate some favoritism toward the pro-women's side of the debate. In his commentary, however, Garrison's aggressive tone is more than a product of favoritism. His insulting, belligerent depiction of the other side's arguments is uncompromisingly partial, and shows no sensitivity to any views other than his own. While their passion is admirable, Grimké and Garrison's pieces are aggressive in tone, and appear intolerant of other points of view. Such intolerance could leave the audience feeling attacked during a time when reform success is largely dependent on audience support.

There are certain speeches in which Douglass' tone mirrors Grimké and Garrison's more vigorous styles. As an escaped slave and a fervent proponent of abolition, Douglass delivered many speeches urging the

immediate cessation of slavery. The most notorious examples are products of his passionate views and what one biographer describes as his "'rich voice, handsome physique and superb command of the English language'" (qtd. in Reid and Klumpp 338). In his oration entitled "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Douglass employs the emotional, powerful rhetoric that is characteristic of his speeches dealing *solely* with abolition. In addressing his audience, Douglass declares,

> This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. ("Fourth of July" 341)

In emphasizing the separation that exists between himself, as a slave, and his audience of white women, Douglass highlights his listeners' naïveté; he uses theatrical and pointed speech as a means of inducing guilt in his audience, and opening their eyes to the cruelty of slavery. Given Douglass' tendency toward this type of robust rhetoric, the balanced, restrained tone he implements in his *North Star* editorial on women's rights is of even greater note; Douglass recognizes that when dealing with slaves *and* women, his rhetoric must adapt to his audience.

Despite his ability to passionately emote in front of a crowd, Douglass was highly praised by critics for his even temper. According to Margaret Fuller, Douglass "seems very just and temperate. We feel that his view, even of those who have injured him most, may be relied upon. He knows how to allow for motives and influences" ("Narrative of Frederick Douglass" 356). Fuller's depiction of Douglass holds especially true for his editorial in the *North Star*, where instead of broad, emotional statements, he uses logical appeals to explain his views. While describing his belief in women's rights, he states,

> We are free to say that in respect to political rights, we hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for man. We go farther, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for woman. ("Editorial" 85)

While his proclamations could seem rather flat compared to Grimké's or Garrison's, Douglass manages to present the same arguments about equality in a way that limits insult and offense. His logic shines through again when he reasons,

> And if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the laws of the land. ("Editorial" 85)

Douglass' conclusion about the government's intended role is not only sensible, but also difficult to dispute; anyone who believes in the democratic principles upon which our nation is founded should have a difficult time denying rights of freedom and equality. Douglass pinpoints a loophole in his audience's reasoning, and responds to it with his clear rationale. Thus, he once again demonstrates a consciousness of his audience, which, as evidenced by their overtly emotional rhetoric, Grimké and Garrison do not.

It is not my intent to suggest that credible rhetoric leaves no room for emotional appeals. On the contrary, emotion is often a useful embellishment to rational arguments. My interpretation of credibility depends on the specific period when women's rights and abolition merged together. To some, this dependency could render my standards for credibility unduly narrow. In my view, there is no generic definition of credibility; what is "credible" in one situation could be different from what is "credible" under a completely different set of circumstances. In terms of slavery and women's rights, the delicacy of this reform period did not allow for bursts of passion, where there was the potential for hurt feelings and bitter reactions. Superfluous displays of emotion threatened the already unsteady union of the reforms. Thus, emotion was not the keystone of credible rhetoric during this time, but a deterrent to one's credibility. To be credible, the rhetoric of the time needed balance.

The final component to my definition of credible rhetoric involves clear, equal incorporation of the abolition and woman causes. When two monumental reforms join hands, one expects to see extensive overlap between the rhetoric of each. It seems only natural that abolitionists would mention women, and vice versa, in speeches and editorials. Furthermore, one would expect the mention to be made with great care, and with an

awareness of the possible implications of representing a neighboring movement. This is not the case in the pieces by Grimké and Garrison. Throughout her entire response to the Ministers of Massachusetts, Grimké mentions slavery once, and while she boldly asserts her belief in freedom and equality—both of which are at the core of abolition—she focuses almost exclusively on women. Her one mention of slavery comes when she says,

> I rejoice, because I am persuaded that the rights of woman, like the rights of slaves, need only be examined to be understood and asserted, even by some of those, who are now endeavoring to smother the irreplaceable desire for mental and spiritual freedom which glows in the breast of many, who hardly dare to speak their sentiments. (320)

Grimké's simple mention of "the rights of slaves" seems haphazard in its placement, and plays into the opposition's view that women's rights was an "'extraneous' issue," that was "tacked…onto the antislavery movement" (Kraditor 40). While the limited number of references to slavery is alarming, I take issue more with Grimké's disregard for the comments she makes *after* her reference to slaves' rights. Her discussion of "those, who are now endeavoring to smother the irreplaceable desire for mental and spiritual freedom," once again uses extreme rhetoric to create an unforgiving view of the opponent. By associating slavery with such bold remarks, Grimké risks misrepresenting her fellow movement. Garrison, while he extends his mention of slavery in his editorial, is also abrasive in his rhetoric. He describes the men's debate on women's rights by stating,

> It was like a meeting of slaveholders to discuss with all gravity the question, whether their slaves, if emancipated, would be in a better condition than if kept in bondage; and having muzzled their victims, so that their wishes could not be expressed or known, coming to the rational conclusion that to extend their "appropriate sphere" beyond the boundaries of a plantation, would be injurious to them and destructive to the welfare of society! (100)

Garrison provides his own interpretation of a "meeting of slaveholders," and summarizes what he considers the oppositions' conclusions regarding slavery. In doing so, he once again portrays the opponent as a tyrannical

force. Garrison's conclusions seem too bold for a public figure that desires to build support for both women and anti-slavery. His remarks could easily upset the slaveholders he describes, and in turn, could endanger the abolition movement. A level of carelessness in representing both movements is apparent in Grimké's and Garrison's rhetoric, and further discounts the credibility of their words.

Perhaps Douglass's most impressive display of balance is in his equal mention of abolition and women's rights. He manages to reference the two reforms, while emphasizing the core values and goals that unite them. Early in his editorial, Douglass acknowledges the delicate relationship between the movements when he explains,

> Eight years ago a number of persons…actually abandoned the anti-slavery cause, lest by giving their influence in that direction they might possibly be giving countenance to the dangerous heresy that woman, in respect to rights, stands on an equal footing with man. ("Editorial" 85)

Douglass immediately recognizes the growing uncertainty of some abolitionists surrounding the incorporation of the woman movement, and attempts to prevent further uncertainty when he discusses human duty and morality in promoting freedom and equality. Douglass proclaims, "Standing as we do upon the watch-tower of human freedom, we cannot be deterred from an expression of our approbation of any movement, however, humble, to improve and elevate the character of any members of the human family" ("Editorial" 85). In dedicating much of his rhetoric to promoting general principles, Douglass avoids favoritism of one movement over the other. His representation of the two movements as one united effort displays deference for each individual movement, and recognizes the fragility of the relationship between them. Neither Grimké nor Garrison proves able to achieve this balance, which is the final reason why their rhetoric lacks the credibility of Douglass's.

So often we equate fame and prestige with perfection. Those whose influence manages to stand the test of time, we consider flawless and above criticism. There is no denying the honor and respect with which today's society regards the abolition and woman movements. Without courageous, moral reformers such as Grimké, Garrison, and Douglass, our society may never have realized its egregious error in denying both slaves and women

the equality and liberty on which the United States is based. While I do not dispute the importance of these reformers, I cannot help but question how their rhetoric influenced the eventual outcomes of both movements: how did their messages, and the way in which they presented those messages, affect anti-slavery? Women's rights? Would the pace or the outcome of the reforms have been different had the rhetoric been less emotional? More balanced? While we may be incapable of answering these questions, any orator who wishes to effect lasting change must consider them. In leading major movements, speakers have an obligation to envision the possible outcomes and implications of their words. As voices of unification, Grimké, Garrison, and Douglass needed to speak for both women and slaves. Grimké and Garrison chose emotional, harsh, and imbalanced rhetoric to express their views. In contrast, Douglass approached his audience in a rational, clear, and balanced way. Douglass, therefore, established himself as a particularly worthy and credible orator.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. "Editorial from *The North Star*." *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*. Ed. Miriam Schneir. New York: Vintage, 1972. 83–85. Print.

---. "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" *American Rhetorical Discourse*. Ed. Ronald Reid and James Klumpp. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2005. 340–343. Print.

Fuller, Margaret. "On the Narrative of Frederick Douglass." *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. Ed. Lawrence Buell. New York: Modern Library, 2006. 354–356. Print.

Garrison, William Lloyd. "Rights of Woman." *William L. Garrison and the Fights Against Slavery: Selections from* <u>The Liberator</u>. Ed William E. Cain. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995. 97–101. Print

Grimké, Sarah. "Response to the Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts."*American Rhetorical Discourse*. Ed. Ronald Reid and James Klumpp. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2005. 317–320. Print.

Kraditor, Eileen. "The Woman Question." *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism–Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 1967. 39–77. Reprint. 1989.

Reid, Ronald E., and James F. Klumpp. Introduction to "Pastoral Letter and Response to the Pastoral Letter." *American Rhetorical Discourse*. Ed. Ronald Reid and James Klumpp. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2005. 315–317. Print.

---. Introduction to "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" *American Rhetorical Discourse*. Ed. Ronald Reid and James Klumpp. Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2005. 338–330. Print.

SOPHIE PEARL SPIERS, originally from Concord, Massachusetts, is a rising sophomore in BU's College of Arts and Sciences. She is double majoring in international relations and French. Sophie is honored to have been recognized by those involved in WR, and would like to thank her WR 100 professor, David Shawn, for his support in writing and revising this essay. This essay was written for David Shawn's course, WR 100: Oratory in America.