In the nineteenth century, men and women alike wrote copiously against slavery. These writings, in their efforts to convince the public of abolitionism, unintentionally display the distinct gender roles of the time. Most abolitionist writings had common themes, such as religion and morality, but writing by male and female abolitionists also differed in many key ways. These differences show that society expected women to be compassionate, nonassertive, and to fill a caregiving role and men to be protectors and advocators. However, one female abolitionist, Maria Weston Chapman, wrote that the “enthusiasm for the cause,” abolition, “overleaped…the graceful feebleness which the age cherished as an ornament in the female character.”¹ The same writings that portrayed women as passive and maternal also showed them becoming more active and breaking out of their traditional role.

American women in organized groups worked to affect social change in their communities as early as the seventeen-sixties. In a society where individual women had no power, working together often gave groups of women an opportunity at collective political influence. Early societies like the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (1797), the Boston Female Asylum (1800), and the Boston Children’s Friend Society (1833), aimed to care for people who were not being cared for by governmental organizations. According to Anne M. Boylan, a historian of the nineteenth century and women and gender, most of the women who participated in these societies had powerful connections. They worked discreetly, petitioning prominent individuals and focusing on personal contact with the people they were serving. In the eighteen-thirties, women began to become involved in the anti-slavery

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¹ Chapman, Maria Weston, *The Right and Wrong in Massachusetts*, Page 11
movement. Boylan states that this movement attracted a more diverse group of women and encouraged women to be more outspoken and public about their work. Instead of giving petitions to a single person, abolitionist women circulated petitions to as many people as possible. Through the movement, women became publicly active although society still expected them to stay at home and allow their husbands and fathers to do the political work.

Women’s traditional role manifested itself in the reoccurring theme of sympathy towards slaves in female abolitionist writing. Women often imagined themselves in the slaves’ place, saying “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.”

Abolitionist women often sympathized with slave women over the demanding, physical labor slave women had to perform. In the nineteenth century, white women were thought of as weak, frail, and “tender by nature.”

They had to be “helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches.” Slave women, on the other hand, often worked outdoors all day doing the same work as men. In one article written for abolitionist women, “A Negro Woman’s Appeal to her White Sisters,” the author writes that “In health and in sickness I daily must toil from sunrise to sunset to hoe the rough soil. My fevered head is aching and throbbing with pain, my fragile limbs torn, but I must not complain.”

Because women were thought to be compassionate by nature, this article aimed to enlist women in the abolitionist cause through feelings of pity towards and a desire to care for slave women.

“A Negro Women’s Appeal to her White Sisters,” also aimed to awaken female sympathies in another way. Besides manual labor, the article also focuses on how the author is separated from her children all day as she works. She talks about how her children’s faces are covered in tears that she “would soon kiss away, could I see my sweet infants the long sunny

3 Unknown, “A Negro Woman’s Appeal to her White Sisters”
4 Truth, Sojourner, “Ain’t I a Woman?”
5 “A Negro Woman’s Appeal to her White Sisters”
Slave mothers were also often separated from their children when their children were sold to different masters. Sojourner Truth said, “I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me!” Abolitionist women wrote about slave mothers being separated from their children repeatedly. To the women in the Ladies’ New York City Anti-Slavery Society, this issue was one of the most horrifying. In their first annual meeting, the ladies stated, “Who that has listened to the slave mother’s tale of woe, and heard her describe her anguish when her children were torn from her, would dare say that because those bitter tears poured down sable cheeks they came not from the deep fountain of a mother’s love?” These writings show that motherhood was a defining part of a woman’s life. Hearing about slave women whose motherhood had been taken away from them or who were not able to perform their maternal duties inspired extreme sympathy in abolitionist women.

With their primary role as mothers, women often referred to themselves as especially caring and tender in nature and especially sensitive to the suffering of slaves. In this way, abolitionist women further displayed their place in society as caregivers. In the opinion of Ladies’ New York City Anti-Slavery society, a desire to end slavery was innate to women. They wrote, “It is not to be supposed, that in the general awaking upon this subject, and especially in the disclosure of the heartrending details of slavery, there would be no response of woman’s heart, no kindling of her sympathy, or enlistment of energies in her appropriate sphere.” The emphasis on sympathy and care for slaves in female abolitionist writing demonstrates the societal expectation that women act maternally in all aspects of their lives.

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6 “A Negro Woman’s Appeal to her White Sisters”
7 Truth
8 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 8
9 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 4
Conversely, writing by abolitionist men calls on bravery to fight for the enforcement of their morals, depicting men as advocates and defenders. For example, outspoken and opinionated William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the Liberator, used verbs like “oppose,” “thwart,” “bust,” “rescue,” and “trample,” showing men’s active role in society. Garrison often returned to the theme of himself as a rescuer of the slaves and soldier for their freedom. In the first issue of the Liberator he wrote, “Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher… but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present.” By focusing on the bravery of a fight against slavery, Garrison confirms the male gender role of the time: the protector. Men were expected to act on their opinions and defend what they believed to be morally right. Fellow abolitionists largely respected Garrison for his outspokenness, including Maria Weston Chapman who wrote that Garrison had, “the best of all qualifications for his work, an entire devotedness to the principles of liberty.” Men and women alike praised outspokenness and dedication in men.

Although stark differences between male and female abolitionist writing exist, men and women still wrote about many of the same subjects, such as sexual exploitation. In her article, “Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric,” Carol Lasser, a history professor who has written a lot on women and gender in the nineteenth century, states that in abolitionist writings, men and women used the same tactic of describing the brutal sexual assault of slave women in order to turn readers against slavery. The examples she gives, though display differences in the way men and women wrote about this topic. For example, Lasser first quotes William Ellery Channing who wrote that “the scowling glances of a slave driver’s sensuality…destroyed the morals, the comfort, and the prosperity of slaves.”

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10 Garrison, William Lloyd, “The Liberator,” Volume 1 Number 1
11 Garrison
12 Chapman, Page 4
goes on to describe sexual assault as one of the most “odious and criminal attributes of American slaveholding,” and a “direful calamity.”

Where Channing and men like him focus mostly on putting a stop to the evil of the slave master, the women Lasser quotes tend to focus on sympathy for the victims, as they did in the cases of manual labor and motherhood. On this issue, the Ladies’ Anti-slavery Society from Canton, Ohio wrote that “As a mother,” the slave women’s “parental feelings were disregarded; as a wife, her affections were mocked;... as a daughter, her virtue was wantonly trampled upon.”

Although writing about the same topic, the difference of focus of men and women shows a continuation of traditional gender roles.

Another common theme in abolitionist writing, religion, often served to unite different groups of people, including men and women. When Maria Weston Chapman described the formation of the New England Society she said that, with religion as a common ground, people “came from every sect, and class, and party—of every age and sex and color... and to their astonishment found how much they possessed in common.”

The principles of certain forms of Christianity corresponded very well with abolitionist principles. Christian abolitionists believed that God created all people, so all people deserved freedom. They also believed that God had not given any person the right to own another person. The New England Society believed uniformly that “there is neither bond or free, male or female, foreigner or native; but all are one in Christ Jesus.”

The Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society echoed this opinion writing, “Hath not one God created us? Are we not children of one Father, who fashioneth our hearts alike?” In this instance, men and women agreed that their religion enforced the end of slavery.

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13 Lasser, Carol “Voyeuristic Abolitionism: Sex, Gender, and the Transformation of Antislavery Rhetoric,” Page 90
14 Lasser, Page 91
15 Chapman, Page 7
16 Chapman, Page 13
17 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 8
While men and women alike believed in the equalizing power of religion, their religious approaches still differed. The differences in the ways abolitionist men and women talk about religion continues to illustrate the traditional gender roles of the time. Women talked about religion as a way of further sympathizing with slaves, seeing their compassion as their gift from God. Men more often wrote about God as a source of strength and religion as giving them courage to fight for what they believed to be morally right. For example, the women in the Ladies’ New York City Anti-Slavery society state that God implanted a “holy impulse,” in their hearts, while William Lloyd Garrison thanks God for enabling him to “disregard the fear of man which bringeth a snare and to speak His truth in its simplicity and power.” Women believed that God made them caring, while men believed that God gave them courage.

In the same way they differed in talking about religion, men and women also differed in the way they discussed religious issues. Men and women alike believed that churches should not support slavery, but spoke about it very differently. Reverend J.T. Woodbury stated that he personally would “raise [his] voice against such hypocrisy as long as [he] lived.”, while the Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society stressed working together to forward petitions and pray to have their churches “purified from all participation in the sin of slavery.” Woodbury’s response emphasizes his personal bravery and dedication to the cause, while the ladies’ response emphasizes working communally as women did before the anti-slavery movement in charitable organizations like the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children.

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18 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 6
19 Garrison
20 Chapman, Page 18
21 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 10
Maria Weston Chapman used Christianity in another way as well, to empower women. She personified Christianity as a woman, attributing women with moral strength and bravery. Chapman stated that in every age, Christianity was “the antagonist of [the age’s] crying abomination.” Christianity, and by extension women, fought for morality in each issue they faced. Chapman described Christianity defeating intemperance, coming “like Liberty to inhabit the dwelling from which intemperance has been banished to make room for her beatific presence.” If Christianity, the woman, could overcome intemperance, women had the power to overcome slavery.

Through the anti-slavery movement, some women, such as Lucretia Mott and the Glimké sisters, became famous for their outspokenness and dedication. Overall, women involved in the anti-slavery movement had taken on more active roles than society expected of them. This created a conflict in the anti-slavery movement, about whether women should be allowed to participate or not. In many cases, men thought women were not capable of actually making a difference on issues of importance, such as slavery. Chapman states that some men in the New England Society believed women, “injured the cause” by “leaving [their] sphere.” They believed women prevented men, the people capable of affecting change, from doing everything they could. They believed that women made “the whole matter seem little, and below the attention of men.” Chapman also speaks about the New England Convention of 1838 in which men tried to stop women from voting in matters of the New England Anti-slavery Society. This enraged women and many men, including William Lloyd Garrison who stated that the men had “trampled on human rights, and the rights of membership in the persons of those women whom

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22 Chapman, Page 6  
23 Chapman, Page 6  
24 Chapman, Page 12  
25 Chapman, Page 12
they labored to exclude.” In 1840, during the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, the American Anti-Slavery Society split over the issue of women’s rights. Six American women attended the convention, but a group of men prevented them from participating. The men argued that if women participated, the women’s rights issue would become bound up with anti-slavery and not as much would be accomplished. Women eventually made their own anti-slavery groups, such as the Ladies’ New York City Anti-Slavery Society, but after 1840 men constrained the influence of women in the movement.

Against the wishes of many men, participation in the anti-slavery movement served to empower women and the women’s writings reflected this. They desired an active rather than a passive role in the issues they cared about, in this case the anti-slavery. Sojourner Truth stated that “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!” In other words, if women worked together, they could achieve equal rights for both women and African Americans. The annual report from the Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society supports Truth’s claim. In one year, the ladies were able to raise substantial amounts of money, distribute anti-slavery publications, and petition congress. Women began to see themselves as capable members of society. History professor Julie Roy Jeffrey argues in her book, The Silent Army of Abolitionism that women played a crucial role in the anti-slavery movement and that without women, change could not have been made. As a consequence of their involvement, women began to believe that the act of fighting against slavery no longer “interfered with the sacredness of the feminine character, but rather… proved its existence.” The compassion they were expected to possess began to require action. Lucretia Mott once stated, “I am no advocate

26 Chapman, Page 53
27 Truth
28 Ladies’ New York City Anti-slavery Society, Page 9
of passivity,”29 at the same time vowing to “oppose [slavery] with all the moral powers with which [she] was endowed.” The desire to affect change caused many women to leave their traditional role as passive caregiver and enter the role of political activist. The growing empowerment of women culminated in the Seneca Falls convention in New York in 1848. Women organized the convention and presented the “Declaration of Sentiments,” beginning the women’s rights movement.

Abolitionist writings by American men and women in the mid-nineteenth century indicate very distinct and traditional gender roles. Appeals to women’s maternal sympathies show that society expected women in this time period to be caregivers. On the other hand, male abolitionist writing, with focuses on bravery and individualism, show that society expected men to be protectors. While writings by women display their expected passive role, they also show a desire to break out and become advocates of abolition. Ironically, it is the women’s traditional compassionate trait that led them to speak out against slavery and eventually take on an active role in society. From the motivation abolition instilled in women, it is not surprising that the women’s rights movement shortly followed the anti-slavery movement.
