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Reason as a Gift from God: Radical Unitarians, Feminism and Mary Leman Grimstone

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Abstract Starting with a description of British Unitarianism, the present paper sheds light on how a particular expression of Christianity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England influenced the development of early feminist ideas. Unitarians, followers of a Christian denomination that rejects the doctrine of Trinity, believed that reason was a gift from God. They also upheld that both men and women were entitled to use their reason to interpret the Scriptures and arrive at rational conclusions. This article shows how those tenets were instrumental for writer Mary Leman Grimstone and her advocacy in favour of women's rights. Grimstone, as part of Radical Unitarian circles, used literature to denounce the oppression of women, vindicate their right to proper education, and demand changes to the institution of marriage.

Keywords Early feminism; Radical Unitarians; Nineteenth-century England; Mary Leman Grimstone; Christianity.

In this essay I propose to analyse how Unitarians positively impacted campaigns in favour of the emancipation of women in early nineteenth-century England. To do so, I have focused my research on the works of an important member of Radical Unitarian circles: the writer Mary Leman Grimstone (1796-1869). Nowadays, Grimstone and her writings are scarcely known. However, several historians agree on the fact that her advocacy for women's rights was fundamental to the actions Radical Unitarians undertook to improve conditions for women (Gleadle 1995; Rogers 1999; 2000).

Firstly, I will briefly explain Unitarianism as a form of dissenting Christianity, and its influence on the formation of early feminist ideas in England. I will centre my attention on a particular group within Unitarianism, the Radical Unitarians, and on their role in defining a feminist agenda between

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the 1830s and the 1850s. Secondly, I will analyse some of Grimstone's writings, focusing on how she used religious arguments to rebut the scriptural inferiority of women, defend their right to a proper education and criticise the institution of marriage.

1. British Unitarianism

Unitarianism is a denomination within Christianity. According to Francis E. Mineka, it is possible to trace Unitarian ideas back to Poland and Hungary during the sixteenth century, and it seems that the term Unitarian was first coined in Hungary (Mineka 1944: 6-7). However, the present paper focuses solely on British Unitarianism as it developed from the eighteenth century onwards.

British Unitarianism developed from eighteenth-century Rational Dissent (Gleadle 1995: 9-11; Watts 1998: 3). Unitarians, as their name indicates, do not believe in the doctrine of Trinity: they do not believe in Christ as the incarnation or son of God, but rather as a human particularly inspired by God, or as a prophet. They were never a unified denomination, rather different people, groups and collectives that shared the idea of God as one entity and the belief in reason as a gift from God.

Unitarians are considered part of the liberal family of churches. They reject several doctrines of Western Christianity like original sin, atonement, and predestination. They regard the Bible as a source of religious authority, but they do not uphold the idea of biblical infallibility. Like all other dissenters, Unitarians were subject to the Test Acts until 1828. Also, because they denied Christ divinity, they were legally subject to criminal prosecution for blasphemy up until 1813 (Mineka 1944; Gleadle 1995).

As subjects to the Test Acts, Unitarians created their own academies where, as Ruth Watts has pointed out, they combined the study of philosophy, religion, and science as a way of understanding God and God's creation, as well as fostering the growth of knowledge and open, free enquiry. They were never large in numbers, but because of the importance they gave to education and their sense of social responsibility, Unitarians became involved in different liberal and progressive causes, evolving into a powerful and influential pressure group. Although they did not necessarily have a unified doctrinal system, all Unitarians shared a common faith in people's ability to develop their God-given reason through education. This approach led them towards the path of science and experimentation to explain the world (Gleadle 1995; Watts 1998; 2011).

Unitarians' faith in reason and their support of everyone's ability to arrive at rational conclusions were also open to women. For Unitarians, no-one should or could be assumed to have an inferior mental capacity. For this reason, Kathryn Gleadle affirms that "Unitarian women were born into a denomination which encouraged a considerable amount of respect for their intellects and judgements" (1995: 21).

The idea of reason as God's gift was not exclusive to, nor did it originate from, Rational Dissenters. During the seventeenth century Cambridge Platonists had developed their idea of *Recta Ratio*, which postulated that reason was a God-given attribute (Apetrei 2010). This idea, which in its time had already inspired proto-feminists like Mary Astell, survived through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries partially thanks to the Dissenting academies and their studies of the Cambridge Platonists' work (Taylor 2003: 110). According to Barbara Taylor, the idea of reason as a gift from God has a strong presence in the works of Unitarians such as Richard Price, David Hartley, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld (Taylor 2003: 110).

1.1 The influence of rational dissent in the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft

Through the influence of the Rational Dissenters and Unitarians, these ideas are also present in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. According to Barbara Taylor, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* "contains at least fifty discussions of religious themes, ranging from brief statements on one or other doctrinal point to extended analyses of women's place within a divinely-ordered moral universe" (Taylor 2002: 99). One such argument is that reason is "an emanation of divinity" and therefore must be the same in men and women,

> The nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity, the tie that connects the creature with the Creator; for, can that soul be stamped with the heavenly image, that is not perfected by the exercise of its own reason? Yet outwardly ornamented with elaborate care, and so adorned to delight man, "that with honour he may love," the soul of woman is not allowed to have this distinction, and man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust (Wollstonecraft 1988 [1792]: 53)

Ruth Watts, in her analysis of the relation between Unitarian philosophy and female education, formulated that the basic premise of Wollstonecraft's work

"was that God had created all human beings as rational creatures who therefore had a basic right, irrespective of sex, to develop that rationality through a liberal education" (Watts 1989: 38).

Patricia Howell Michaelson has also traced Wollstonecraft's arguments to the "standard tenets of Rational Dissent", particularly to the teaching of Richard Price. She claimed that Wollstonecraft's originality lay not in the idea of reason as a gift from God, but in extending this idea to women as part of the human family. Michaelson went as far as affirming that "the core of the *Vindication* […] is a religious argument" (Michaelson 1993: 288) (italics original to the text).

Kim Jacobs-Beck has studied the influence that Richard Price, a Rational Dissenting minister, had on Wollstonecraft's work, finding a neat alignment between Wollstonecraft's arguments and Price's sermons. For her, "Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments were deeply grounded in a nonsectarian form of Christianity which she adapted from the Reverend Dr. Richard Price" (Jacobs-Beck 2012: 62).

Reading Wollstonecraft's most relevant work in this light, I posit that the central argument of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that women are first and foremost rational creatures and that reason, as a God-given attribute, should be developed by the same means and to the same ends in men and women alike.

After her death, Wollstonecraft's works and ideas were read and discussed privately among nineteenth-century Radical Unitarians and were highly influential on their arguments in favour of women's education (Gleadle 1995). However, due to "Wollstonecraft's reputation as a sexual radical and political revolutionary, they did not acknowledge her influence in public" (Rogers 2000: 129).

1.2 Radical Unitarians and their influence in the development of early feminist ideas in England

Gleadle differentiates between mainstream Unitarians and Radical Unitarians. For her, although all Unitarians had more progressive attitudes towards women than the general population, mainstream Unitarians still accepted traditional customs and morals about the appropriate roles and behaviours women were to have and exhibit. Thus, "while encouraging a progression in social perspectives on women, nevertheless cocooned them within conventional expectations of their characters and roles" (Gleadle 1995: 26).

Contrastingly, Radical Unitarians, identified by both Gleadle (1995) and Helen Rogers (2000) as those who orbited around South Place Chapel and its minister, William Johnson Fox, advocated vehemently and comprehensively for women's rights. Their advocacy included an attack on the customs and morals that supported the oppression of women (Gleadle 1995: 34). Radical Unitarians had a broad agenda of social change, and feminism was part of that agenda. According to Gleadle, Unitarians were "staunch defenders of the power of the environment in forming character" and, based on this idea,

> constructed a feminist vision in which female emancipation was part of a wider process than purely that of gender, whereby society might be ruled by reason and not by force; and true to their Christian ideals, whereby people were united by their common concern for one another. Within this context they campaigned not only for female liberation, but also for universal suffrage, national education, and new modes of social organisation (Gleadle 1995: 48-49).

One of the instruments they used in their quest for social reform was literature, in which *The Monthly Repository* played a fundamental role. *The Monthly Repository* was a journal founded in 1806 and, according to Rogers, "tended to be theologically and politically progressive" from the beginning (2000:127). In 1828 William Fox became editor, before buying it in 1831, starting a new series with which the journal "became an important organ of the radical party" (Mineka 1944: 168). According to Ann Robson, between 1806 and 1826 under 5% of the contributors to the journal were women, and "among them were Harriet Martineau, Emily Taylor and Mrs. Barbauld" (Robson 1987: 104). Under Fox's editorship that percentage came up to 14%, and included not only Martineau and Taylor, but also Eliza Flower and Mary Leman Grimstone (Robson 1987: 104).

Radical Unitarians believed in literature as an instrument for social and political change, which explains "their attempts to use it as a tool for achieving female emancipation" (Gleadle 1995: 55). Within this frame of mind, *The Monthly Repository* became a platform for the vindication of women's rights and the denunciation of their oppressed condition. According to Rogers, "under Fox's editorship, some contributors became much more outspoken in their support for women's rights and critically examined the relationship between the sexes, marriage and divorce reform, female education and the 'domestic slavery of women'" (Rogers 2000: 127).

Fox edited *The Monthly Repository* from 1831 to June 1836. This period corresponds with Grimstone's most fruitful contributions to the journal. Grimstone wrote for *The Monthly Repository* from 1833 to 1837, and her articles were "at the forefront" of Radical Unitarian endeavours to create a literature of their own that would help in the campaign for women's rights (Gleadle 1995: 57). According to Gleadle, "Grimstone's most significant contribution to feminist literature" was her series of short stories titled "Sketches of Domestic Life". In these stories she used "literature as a means of drawing the relationship between women's negative character-traits and the cultural conditioning which had produced them" (Gleadle 1995: 57-58).

Grimstone also included debates on women's rights and their emancipation in her many essays and novels. In the next section I will analyse three sets of arguments present in her work that had Unitarian Christian principles at their core, such as the right to use one's reason to interpret the Bible, and everyone's right to develop their God-given reason.

3. Mary Leman Grimstone's contributions to early feminist debate in England

Mary Leman Grimstone[1] was a fundamental part of the feminist movement which developed in England during the first half of the nineteenth century within Radical Unitarian circles. Gleadle, who has done extensive research on Radical Unitarianism and its influence on the development of early feminist ideas in England, describes Grimstone in the following terms,

> For many early feminists, she was *the* great figure in the movement. First coming to prominence with her feminist articles […] Grimstone went on to become a leading proponent of contemporary feminism, in her many periodical contributions and in her novels. Contemporary radicals refer to her work again and again, and her work had an immense influence upon them. (Gleadle 1995: 37) (italics original to the text).

[1] Grimstone wrote under several names: Mary Leman Rede, Mary Leman Grimstone and Mary Leman Gillies, as well as using only her initials, M.L.R. or M.L.G. She also used a pseudonym, Oscar, and sometimes she even published works anonymously. To avoid confusion, throughout the present paper I will refer to her as Mary Leman Grimstone. However, in the references and the bibliography, her works are referred to with the signature they were published under.

Helen Rogers concurs with Gleadle's assertions about Grimstone, affirming that "she was the most extensively published and probably the most influential advocate of the rights of women among the radical-unitarian circles based around William Fox's ministry" (Rogers 2000: 125).

Grimstone wrote extensively and in a great variety of genres: poetry, novels, short stories, serialised stories, and critical and polemic essays. In all of them, she explored the degraded condition of women and championed the cause of women's rights. In the postscript to her third novel *Woman's Love. A novel* (1832), she defended her interest in changing the social and cultural conditions of women by stating,

> I feel the present to be a period pregnant with important changes. A liberal spirit is abroad that seems disposed to recognize the interests of humanity upon a broader principle than heretofore. In the midst of this I glow with zeal for the cause of my own sex: this preference may be pardoned, since I am not insensible to the beautiful principle that embraces universal interests; but it is natural that, with such little ability as I can bring, I should take the side most in need of supporters (Grimstone 1832: 357-58)

For Grimstone, literature served to reform and advance society. For this reason, the adequate education of women and the reformation of the institution of marriage, as well as the abolition of other laws that kept women in an oppressed and subordinate state, were omnipresent elements in her writings. The characters and plots of her work deal with contemporary stereotypes of men and women not only as individuals but primarily as members of complex domestic and social networks.

Apart from writing for *The Monthly Repository*, during the 1830s Grimstone also contributed to journals like *The Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* and *The New Moral World*. From 1834 onwards her contributions to these journals, and particularly to *The Monthly Repository*, became regular and were primarily in prose. In 1846, after a hiatus between 1837 and 1845, under the name Mary Leman Gillies, Grimstone started once again to write for periodical publications, contributing to journals of popular progress, particularly *The People's Journal*.

Grimstone's contributions to the periodical publications of her time, both during the 1830s and the 1840s, were primarily of two kinds: social essays where she condemned women's position in society as eternal dependants, and short stories like her series "Sketches of Domestic Life", which marked the height of her collaboration with the radical journals.

Using some of her novels and articles, I will exemplify Grimstone's arguments in favour of the emancipation of women. In the next sub-sections, I will focus my attention on those arguments closely related to Grimstone's particular understanding of Christianity, which allowed her to call for a new and better interpretation of the Scriptures, founded in her belief in reason as a gift from God to humanity.

3.1 Grimstone's answer to the arguments about the scriptural bases of women's inferiority

Grimstone's fourth novel *Character; or, Jew and Gentile* was published in 1833 and marked the start of her close collaboration with *The Monthly Repository*. The journal's review of the novel praised Grimstone as a writer and her way of dealing with various argument within the story,

> Mrs. Grimstone excels very much, both in the delineation and the development of character. She preserves its metaphysical truth. Her mind has a distinct conception of the individual nature of each actor in the history […]. The dialogues, which frequently occur, especially in the first volume before the bustle of the story begins, deserve great praise. They are characteristic, well-timed, interesting, and instructive. The first links of long, useful, and often novel trains of thought are put into our hands, and only the most inert will let them slip without tracing them further. Mrs. Trevor, a frank, independent, and speculative woman, who, we presume, speaks the opinions of the author, talks thus […]. (Fox 1833: 546, 549)

One such dialogue is the discussion between Agnes, who would later become Mrs. Trevor, and Mr. Coverley about the condition of women. As the above review claims, Agnes seems to embody Grimstone's ideas about the condition of women and their right to equal treatment. For his part, Mr. Coverley represents the traditional and patriarchal positions of Grimstone's time.

Throughout the first part of the novel Mr. Coverley maintains that women are inferior to men. In one of his discussions about his (misguided) position with Agnes, he puts forward scriptural arguments to support his reasoning. When Agnes argues in favour of equality between men and women, Mr. Coverley cries out, asking: "Do you mean to contravene St. Paul, and deny the Scriptures?" (Grimstone 1833: 77). Agnes answers him with her own interpretation of the story of original sin, pointing to the fact that while Eve had to be tempted by a superior being that not even God could control (that is,

Satan), Adam was tempted by an inferior power to that of God or Satan, another human being,

> […] are you really going to march out Adam, and the Apostles, with King Ahasuerus at their head, against me? As to the first witness, let me examine his character before I admit his evidence. He, when he erred, yielded to an inferior power; for it was the spirit that even God could not conquer that tempted Eve, while only a mere mortal solicited Adam (Grimstone 1833: 77-78)

Implicit in Agnes' argument is Adam's weaker character, in comparison to that of Eve. While Eve had to be tempted by a higher being, Lucifer, who was a fallen angel, for Adam to sin it only took the prodding of an equal: his human wife. Grimstone, through Agnes' discourse, also condemns Adam for his willingness to put all the blame on Eve, when he had been more than willing to eat the apple,

> […] when he [Adam] was questioned as to his disobedience, how readily he cried out— 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' As he greedily partook the fruit he might have generously shared the fault; how like dutiful sons you have followed the example of your father ever since. From the co-partnership of error and folly you never shrink; but as for the penalty, you leave to woman the full benefit of that. No, no; as to your great prototype, Adam, I'll none of him (Grimstone 1833: 78)

Grimstone, through Agnes' voice, is thus presenting a new interpretation of a foundational story of Christianity. Traditionally, this story has been used to justify humanity's condemnation, i.e., original sin and the fall of man, as well as women's submission to men as ordained by God. Instead, Grimstone's new reading not only overturns the idea of women's weaker nature, but it also highlights men's willingness and capacity to skew their responsibilities and blame all wrongdoing, even on their part, on women.

The discussion between the characters continues and Mr. Coverley once again calls upon the teaching of the apostles to support his argument in favour of the natural inferiority of women. Agnes answers him by highlighting the fact that the apostles, even if inspired by a higher Being, were nevertheless men and, as imperfect creations, they were thus capable of tainting the original message according to their earthly experiences: "'They were,' said Agnes, 'men, and though filled with the divine doctrine of their great Master, they could not

transmit it without giving it a tinge from the earthy vessel through which it passed […]'" (Grimstone 1833: 78).

Agnes also recalls that the Scriptures had never been translated by a woman: "The world may yet see a translation of the Scriptures by a woman, who may detect more mistranslations than even Mr. Bellamy. It will be interesting, if not instructive, to collate the old and new translation" (Grimstone 1833: 79).

These two arguments are perfectly aligned with the Unitarian tenets of using one's reason to understand God and God's message, taking the Bible as a source of authority but not considering it infallible. As Mineka (1944) explains, Unitarians were encouraged not only to read the Bible, but also to arrive at their own conclusions. This is precisely what Grimstone did. She took the Scriptures and interpreted them in a different light, one that supported women's equality. In this case, the arguments made by Grimstone show that women's inferiority and oppression are not necessarily supported by God's message but, rather, it is the worldly, human interpretation of that message which can be patriarchal, sexist and against women.

It would take more than half a century for a group of women to attempt what Grimstone proposed in her novel: a new translation and interpretation of the Bible from a feminine and feminist perspective. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, one of the most prominent figures of the first women's movement in the United States, together with twenty-six women, edited *The Woman's Bible* which was published in two volumes in 1896 and 1898.

There is no evidence that Stanton knew Grimstone or her work. However, Stanton was close to both Quaker and Unitarian circles in the United States and England. In 1840, Stanton participated in the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London. There she met Lucretia Mott, a prominent woman within the Quaker community and anti-slavery movement in the United States, who would go on to become a Quaker minister. According to Gleadle, during their time in England Mott and other American anti-slavery activists encountered several Unitarians, striking chords with "the particular radical intelligentsia […] with whom they formed strong and lasting bonds" (Gleadle 1995: 3).

In 1848, Stanton and Mott, together with three other Quaker women, decided to hold the first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, the result of which was the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (Wellman 2004; McMillen 2008; Reid 2012). The *Declaration* affirmed that men and women had been created as equals by God, and, as such, had been invested with the same capabilities and responsibilities. It also asserted that men had assumed for

themselves the right to determine a woman's place, when in reality this could only be established by God and women's conscience,

> The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. […]
> He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and her God. […]
> Resolved, that woman is man's equal—was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such. […]
> Resolved, therefore, that, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause, by every righteous means (The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments as cited by McMillen 2008: 238-241).

According to both Sally McMillen and Judith Wellman, American Unitarians were among the first to support the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* and what it demanded (Wellman 2004: 151; McMillen 2008: 95). With this as her background, it is no surprise that Stanton took it upon herself to edit and publish a female version of the Bible: *The Woman's Bible*, in which American, British and European women participated. In the introduction to the first volume, Stanton affirms,

> The Bible cannot be accepted or rejected as a whole, its teachings are varied and its lessons differ widely from each other. In criticising the peccadilloes of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, we would not shadow the virtues of Deborah, Huldah and Vashti […]. The canon law, the Scriptures, the creeds and codes and church discipline of the leading religions bear the impress of fallible man, and not of our ideal first cause, "the Spirit of all Good," that set the universe of matter and mind in motion (Stanton et al. 1974 [1896-1898]: 13)

Whether Stanton was aware of Grimstone's ideas or not, it is however possible to affirm that her efforts to translate and interpret the Bible from a woman's perspective aligns itself with the critiques contained in *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*. Both Grimstone's arguments– voiced by her character Agnes– and the reasons behind Stanton's project share the same train of thought: the Bible is

fallible because it was written and has been interpreted and translated by men, who, by definition, are imperfect. As such, the Bible cannot be taken at face value. Instead, it can and should be interpreted in a way that supports and guarantees women's equal standing as God's creatures. This interpretation aims to show that the oppression of women is not based on God's commandments, but rather on how men had read and applied God's teachings.

Unfortunately, *The Woman's Bible* was met with great criticism. According to Lisa S. Strange,

> The *Woman's Bible* again made Stanton the object of criticism and scorn, not only among religious leaders and social conservatives, but even among her colleagues in the suffrage movement. Even the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) rejected the *Woman's Bible* by passing an official censure resolution at their annual convention in January 1896. (Strange 1999: 16)

Although, as Kathi L. Kern recognizes, "when the feminist spirituality movement of the 1970s rekindled the attack on patriarchal Christian texts, *The Woman's Bible* was resurrected, reprinted and re-read" (Kern 1991: 372), the truth is that *The Woman's Bible* has remained a little-known text, particularly outside Anglo-American academia.

However, the message behind Grimstone's arguments against using the Scriptures to justify women's inferiority, as expressed in her novel *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*, and Stanton's position when editing *The Woman's Bible*, represent an important contribution to feminist theology. They both call upon women's authority to read and interpret the Bible as rational beings created by God, endowed with reason in the same way and measure as men. They both attempted to reinterpret the Scriptures in order to find religious arguments in favour of the emancipation of women.

3.2 Arguments in favour of women's education

Grimstone also presented arguments in favour of women's education. The main idea she defended was that of the need for proper education for women. Grimstone upheld the idea that character was formed by the conjunction of the different experiences and sensations a person received in their life, giving particular importance to those received in early childhood. For her, character could only be determined, or, as she liked to present it, moulded, by education.

Consequently, the so-called "inherently distinctive differences existing between men and women", were actually few and "neither mental nor moral ones" (M. L. G. 1834: 101). Instead, Grimstone argued that the alleged distinctions between men and women, which assign reason to the former and feelings to the latter, were to be ascribed to customs and social prejudices, not to any divine design. In her article "Men and Women", published by *The New Moral World* in 1834, Grimstone argued,

> […] it is the craft of blind guides, not the creative hand of a benign deity, that has made these distinctions. Fortunately for man, the female mind, like his own, is capable of the highest elevation; fortunately for woman, the heart of man, like her own, is susceptible of the tenderest feelings […] I disclaim for my sex the presumed superiority of the heart, as I deny the imputed inferiority of the head (M. L. G. 1834: 102)

She also believed that every human being had the instinct to aspire to perfectibility, a principle that was present in everyone and could be developed in all through education. In her article "Self-Dependence", published by *The Monthly Repository* in 1835, Grimstone declared,

> Among the principles of creation I perceive that the thing originated is not perfect, but instinct with the principle of perfectibility. This principle, decidedly perceptible in the human being, is latent in all, and through human agency developed in all (M. L. G. 1835b: 597)

This argument is a development of the idea of reason as a gift from God to all human creation. Based on this idea, she also defended every person's right to seek and acquire knowledge for themselves, and especially women's right to do so. In her article "Female Education", published in 1835 by *The Monthly Repository*, Grimstone called for women's right to access knowledge for and by themselves: "[…] let her not cling from a principle of mercenary dependence […] let her look to nothing but God and herself" (M. L. G. 1835a: 110).

Her appeal was aimed particularly at those who claimed that women were not capable of rational thinking and that every notion, including the love of God, had to pass through a male medium before getting into women's weaker mind. Grimstone revisited this argument in her series of short stories "Sketches of Domestic Life", in particular in the story "The Coquette". In it, Mr. Hervey and Mrs. Walton, who Grimstone described as "a high-minded woman", discuss the oppressed condition women found themselves in. During their

respectful exchange, Mr. Hervey cites the verse "He for God only, she for God in Him" from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to which Mrs. Walton answers as follows,

> Let every being go for himself, or herself, as much as possible to the fountain-head of knowledge—seek, and accept no mediums, if they can help it; the further from the fount the less likely is the stream to be pure […] I assure you, whatever you and Milton may think and say, I do not deem you the most transparent and speckless medium through which we may look 'through nature up to nature's God' (M. L. G. 1835d: 561)

With this confutation, Grimstone was asserting women's intrinsic equality with men and their right to knowledge and education. If, as Unitarians preached, open knowledge and free inquiry were the true way to God, then everyone, including women, had to be given the right education and instruction to allow them to arrive at rational conclusions.

For Grimstone the differences between men and women, as well as women's alleged vices, were to be ascribed to the kind of education that each received. In "Self-Dependence", she declared that the differences between men and women as opposite categories were artificial,

> That striking differences have existed, and do exist, between the sexes, I admit; that they are natural or necessary, I deny. Variety is one of the beautiful laws of nature; by that law each being differs from all other beings —man from man as widely, in a thousand points of power and character, as woman from man, or man from woman. These are natural differences. The general differences which attach to sex *en masse* are artificial differences (M. L. G. 1835b: 601) (italics original to the text).

Grimstone had already presented this argument in her novels. In the Postscript to *Woman's Love* she had affirmed, "The disproportion of cultivation, encouragement, and that aliment of intellectual energy–freedom, is perhaps fully sufficient to account for the *ostensible* disproportion of mind in the sexes" (Grimstone 1832: 359) (italics original to the text).

Hence, for women to achieve equal standing with men in society, it was necessary for them to access and acquire the right kind of education, which would also allow them to understand God's message and God's creation.

3.3 Critique of the contemporary institution of marriage and rejection of the legal fiction of coverture

For Mary Leman Grimstone, the matters of education and marriage were intimately related. As her argument went, for a relationship to work the parties involved needed to agree on certain common principles, values, and interests. However, that commonality could not exist between men and women because the education given to the latter differed, abysmally, from that afforded to the former.

For Grimstone, marriage should not be an economic or political arrangement, but a union of love between partners that consider each other as equals in dealing with the business of life,

> The sympathy of appreciation is surely essential to a union of affection or friendship; but how is this, still less the sympathy of affinity, to exist between beings so oppositely educated as men and women? Were they never destined to meet —were they never called on to co-operate in the business of life—some excuse for such a system might be framed; but when they are called to form the most intimate union, to co-operate in the most important duties, it is impossible not to brand the system with the name of insanity […] (M. L. G. 1835b: 601).

The fact that marriage was supposed to be a union of equals explains Grimstone's objections and arguments against the legal fiction of coverture. Under common law, both in England and its colonies, marriage and married women's legal status were governed by the institution of coverture and the legal fiction of the *femme covert*. According to this legal doctrine, once married the legal personality of a woman was subsumed in that of her husband, becoming one subject under the law. As Zaher states,

> Under coverture, a wife simply had no legal existence […] Any income from property she brought into the marriage was controlled by her husband, and if she earned wages outside the home, those wages belonged to him. If he contracted debts, her property went to cover his expenses […] upon marriage the husband and wife became one—him. (Zaher 2002: 460-61)

Coverture's origins can be traced to medieval English law. As Charles J. Reid explains, is it possible to find vestiges of this legal fiction in several thirteenth-century treaties, and by "the fourteenth century, the English common lawyers

began to speak of a married woman as *feme covert* –this term meaning the absorption of the wife's legal personality into that of her husband's" (Reid 2012: 1128) (italics original to the text).

The justification for coverture, which was as much legal as it was ideological, changed over the centuries, "with a wife variously understood to be the dependent subordinate of her husband or, indeed, to have become 'one flesh' with him or one person at law" (Stretton & Kesselring 2013: 4). However, the effects remained the same: married women lost all rights to their property and were considered under the cover of their husbands, which ideologically justified their treatment as subservient and inferior.

One of the arguments that justified coverture was the biblical verse in the Book of Genesis that states: "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). This justified the principle of unity, according to which the term "one flesh" was to be interpreted as the legal personality of the husband. Most scholars concur in the idea that it was William Blackstone's work, published in 1760, which "served to enshrine the principle of 'unity of person' as being at the core of coverture" (Stretton & Kesselring 2013: 7).

Grimstone rejected the legal fiction of coverture, both in its material and ideological effects. In *Character; or, Jew and Gentile*, Grimstone uses a conversation between Mrs. Melburn and Agnes to highlight the injustices of the institution of marriage, directly referencing Blackstone. When Mrs. Melburn confesses to Agnes that she had authored many works but had had to conceal them in anonymity to keep her earnings, Agnes asks her why she conformed to these injustices. Mrs. Melburn answers that if there were any laws that attempted, in any way, to correct the social wrongs of marriage, she would have appealed to them, but alas, there were none. Agnes passionately agrees with her friend, claiming that laws cannot help them, but that the day will come when men realise that the laws that govern marriage are as evil and ignorant as sorcery,

> […] law only adds insult to injury—mortification to misfortune […]. No, no, keep to the ambuscade of deception, rather than the array of legal justice […] the day will be when men will look back upon it as they do now on sorcery and witchcraft, in spite of all that its apologists, with Blackstone at the head of them, can say in its defence (Grimstone 1833: 95).

Throughout *Character; or, Jew and Gentile* Grimstone continually criticises the marriage laws of her time, using Agnes as her voice. In a discussion between Agnes and Mr. Coverley, Agnes ascribes to habit and custom the indifference with which the institution of marriage is seen, "what but habit could make us regard with indifference anything so tyrannical in structure as the laws of marriage? Woman is a sacrifice to society, and to victimize her is made legal, and is, therefore, safe". When Mr. Coverley tries to rebuke her assertion by citing English law, she reminds him that "laws […] are everywhere made for the strong against the weak" (Grimstone 1833: 146-47).

She also used her articles to deny the principle of unity, which annulled women and made then utterly dependent on their husbands. In "Self-Dependence" Grimstone declared, "I utterly deny the so much talked-of notion of merging self in another or others" (M. L. G. 1835b: 596). She used her series "Sketches of Domestic Life" to redouble her argument. In the short story "The Notable", Grimstone argued,

> the animating principle which has awakened the spirit of the working man, must be brought to bear upon the women of all classes […] in like manner must women find and prove that they were not created to feel and think at secondhand, and hardly that; that the tie which unites them to men does not merge them in their husbands, but that it is for women, as equally essential and indispensable co-agents in the work of human progression, to originate high thoughts and- views, to advance useful and independent objects, and that the feelings of wife, mother, daughter, and sister, may co-exist with those of the philosopher, philanthropist, and patriot (M. L. G. 1835c: 229)

This last quote shows how Grimstone's stern critique of the institution of marriage and the principle of unity is connected to her idea of reason as a gift from God. If women have been created as individuals and rational beings, then the merging of their legal personality to that of their husbands was a contradiction of their nature. To accept women as fully human meant, then, the necessary rejection of the legal fiction of *femme covert*. Only in this manner could women truly develop their God-given reason, which, according to the tenets of Radical Unitarianism, was the only way to understand God's original design.

These three examples show how Grimstone integrated social, religious and cultural arguments to defend women's rights and advocate for their emancipation. They also demonstrate how religious arguments, based on a

particular understanding of Christianity, played an important and instrumental role in the defence of women's rights and the vindication of their full humanity.

Grimstone would not have been able to formulate her arguments in favour of women's rights without basing them on the fundamental idea that reason was a gift from God, and that, as such, both men and women had the right to develop it to understand God's message. To do so, women needed to be considered equal to men, had to have access to the same kind of education, and could not be absorbed by their husbands' legal personality upon marriage. Thus, this study proves that the relation between advocating for women's rights and practicing a particular religion is not necessarily a contradictory one. Instead, it shows that the relationship between feminism and religion has been, and still is, far more nuanced and complex that what our modern societies are willing to accept.

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