



Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality Maria W. Stewart (1831)

Maria Stewart was a freeborn African American from New England. She became an educator and, briefly, a public lecturer, being one of the first women in the United States, of any race, to deliver speeches to audiences composed of both women and men. Stewart made her first foray into the public sphere in 1831, when she wrote the pamphlet excerpted below in the aftermath of a suppressed slave uprising that had taken place in Virginia. Stewart was living at the time in Boston, Massachusetts, where white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison published her pamphlet. The pamphlet is primarily an exhortation to other African Americans, urging them to improve themselves intellectually and morally and to eschew violence, but Stewart also delivers an apocalyptic warning to white Americans. When she wrote this pamphlet, Stewart was affiliated with a black Baptist church; she later became Episcopalian.

This is the land of freedom. The press is at liberty. Every man has a right to express his opinion. Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea. He hath crowned you with glory and honor, hath made you but a little lower than the angels; and, according to the Constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free and equal. Then why should one worm say to another, "Keep you down there, while I sit up yonder; for I am better than thou"? [...]

O ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O ye daughters of Africa! What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn? Where are our union and love? And where is our sympathy, that weeps at another's woe and hides the faults we see? And our daughters, where are they—blushing in innocence and virtue? And our sons, do they bid fair to become crowns of glory to our hoary heads? Where is the parent who is conscious of having faithfully discharged his duty and, at the last awful day of account, shall be able to say, "Here, Lord, is thy poor, unworthy servant and the children thou hast given me"? And where are the children that will arise and call them blessed? Alas! O God, forgive me if I speak amiss. The minds of our tender babes are tainted as soon as they are born; they go astray, as it were, from the womb. Where is the maiden who will blush at vulgarity? And where is the youth who has written upon his manly brow a thirst for knowledge, whose ambitious mind soars above trifles and longs for the time to come when he shall redress the wrongs of his father and plead the cause of his brethren? Did the daughters of our land possess a delicacy of manners, combined with gentleness and dignity; did their pure minds hold vice in abhorrence and contempt; did they frown when their ears were polluted with its vile accents—would not their influence become powerful? Would not our brethren fall in love with their virtues? Their souls would become fired with a holy zeal for freedom's cause. They would become ambitious to distinguish themselves; they would become proud to display their talents.

Able advocates would arise in our defense. Knowledge would begin to flow, and the chains of slavery and ignorance would melt like wax before the flames.

[...M]y heart's desire and prayer to God is that there might come a thorough reformation among us. Our minds have too long groveled in ignorance and sin. [...] I am of a strong opinion that the day on which we unite, heart and soul, and turn our attention to knowledge and improvement, that day the hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth against us will cease, and even those who now point at us with the finger of scorn will aid and befriend us. It is of no use for us to sit with our hands folded, hanging our heads like bulrushes, lamenting our wretched condition, but let us make a mighty effort and arise; and if no one will promote or respect us, let us promote and respect ourselves. [...] Shall it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, "They have no ambition, they have no force"? By no means. Let every female heart become united and let us raise a fund ourselves, and at the end of one year and a half, we might be able to lay the cornerstone for the building of a high school, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us; and God would raise us up and enough to aid us in our laudable designs. [...]

How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pot and kettles? [...] We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore, the world thinks we know nothing. And we have been possessed of by far too mean and cowardly a disposition, though I highly disapprove of an insolent or impertinent one. Do you ask the disposition I would have you possess? Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason that you cannot attain them. Weary them with your importunities. You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not. The Americans have practiced nothing but head-work these 200 years, and we have done their drudgery. And is it not high time for us to imitate their examples and practice head-work too, and keep what we have got and get what we can? We need never to think that anybody is going to feel interested for us if we do not feel interested for ourselves. [...]

* * *

Were every gentleman in America to realize, as one, that they had got to become bondmen, and their wives, their sons, and their daughters servants forever to Great Britain, like Belshazzar their joints would become loosened and tremblingly would smite one against another; their countenance would be filled with horror; every nerve and muscle would be forced into action; their souls would recoil at the very thought; their hearts would die within them, and death would be far more preferable. Then why have not Afric's sons a right to feel the same? Are not their wives, their sons, and their daughters as dear to them as those of the white man? Certainly God has not deprived them of the divine influences of his Holy Spirit, which is the greatest of all blessings, if they ask him. Then why should man any longer deprive his fellow man of equal rights and privileges?

O America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee. Thou art almost become drunken with the blood of her slain; thou hast enriched thyself through her toils and labors, and now thou refuseth to make even a small return. And thou hast caused the daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms

and fornications; but upon thee be their curse. O ye great and mighty men of America, ye rich and powerful ones, many of you will call for the rocks and mountains to fall upon you and to hide you from the wrath of the Lamb and from him that sitteth upon the throne, whilst many of the sable-skinned Africans you now despise will shine in the kingdom of heaven, as the stars, forever and ever.

Charity begins at home, and those that provide not for their own are worse than infidels. We know that you are raising contributions to aid the gallant Poles; we know that you have befriended Greece and Ireland, and you have rejoiced with France for her heroic deeds of valor. You have acknowledged all the nations of the earth, except Hayti; and you may publish, as far as the East is from the West, that you have two millions of negroes who aspire no higher than to bow at your feet and to court your smiles. You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God—for I am firmly persuaded that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless, and undaunted spirit of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt. We will not come out against you with swords and staves, as against a thief; but we will tell you that our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired. We will tell you that too much of your blood flows in our veins, and too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits. We will tell you that it is our gold that clothes you in fine linen and purple and causes you to fare sumptuously every day, and it is the blood of our fathers and the tears of our brethren that have enriched your soils. *And we claim our rights.* [...]

Then, my brethren, sheath your swords, and calm your angry passions. Stand still, and know that the Lord, he is God. Vengeance is his, and he will repay. It is a long lane that has no turn. America has risen to her meridian. When you begin to thrive, she will begin to fall. [...] Then fret not yourself because of evildoers. Fret not yourself because of the men who bring wicked devices to pass, for they shall be cut down as the grass and wither as the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Encourage the noble-hearted Garrison. Prove to the world that you are neither orangutans nor a species of mere animals, but that you possess the same powers of intellect as those of the proud-boasting American.

I am sensible, my brethren and friends, that many of you have been deprived of advantages, kept in utter ignorance, and that your minds are now darkened; and if any of you have attempted to aspire after high and noble enterprises, you have met with so much opposition that your souls have become discouraged. For this very cause, a few of us have ventured to expose our lives in your behalf, to plead your cause against the great; and it will be of no use, unless you feel for yourselves and your little ones and exhibit the spirits of men. Oh, then, turn your attention to knowledge and improvement, for knowledge is power; and God is able to fill you with wisdom and understanding and to dispel your fears. Arm yourselves with the weapons of prayer. Put your trust in the living God. Persevere strictly in the paths of virtue. Let nothing be lacking on your part; and in God's own time, and his time is certainly the best, he will surely deliver you with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm.

Source: *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart...* (Washington DC: [n.p.], 1879), 24-35, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000011406927>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Two emendations made based on a digital transcript of Stewart's pamphlet as reproduced in *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart...* (Boston: Published by Friends of Freedom and Virtue, 1835), 3-22. Digital transcript prepared by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 1997, https://s3.amazonaws.com/nypl-aaww/SCAAWW_book_33_Productions_of_Mrs_Maria_W_Stewart_presented_to_the_First_Africa_Baptist_Church_and_Society_of_the_City_of_Boston.pdf. The phrase *blushing in innocence and virtue* converted from an exclamation to a question. An instance of *his own cause* emended to *our cause*.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. The section break indicated here by centered asterisks corresponds to a section break marked in the source publication. Paragraph breaks adjusted to better match shifts in topic. Sentence breaks adjusted for readability (in one case, emending the source's treatment of a dependent clause as an independent one). A grammatical infelicity corrected (*those of the white man's* → *those of the white man*). Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions, except for the spelling of names, which replicates the source. A vocative *O* converted to exclamatory *oh*. Divine pronouns, inconsistently capitalized in the source publication, are consistently presented here in lowercase. The use of lowercase for *negroes* reproduces the usage of the source.

These edited excerpts from Stewart's pamphlet are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



© 2022 by John-Charles Duffy. Except as otherwise noted, this work is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

All rights are reserved for the flag-shaped “Empire and American Religion” logo; if you alter this work, you may not reproduce the logo. Use of the Creative Commons license icon is subject to the Creative Commons Trademark Policy.