

Introduction to Lydia Maria Child's Letter to Harriet Jacobs

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On August 13, 1860, Lydia Maria Child wrote to ex-slave Harriet Jacobs in order to advise her on the writing of her autobiography. Child was a novelist, journalist, and abolitionist. Harriet Jacobs was an ex-slave and an abolitionist best known for her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, one year after the receipt of this letter from Child. Lydia Maria Child served as an editor to Jacobs; they met in person before the publication of the autobiography and remained in contact via letters throughout their lives (Teets-Parzynski). Child also acted as a trustworthy white woman that could authenticate Jacobs' story. This letter from Child to Jacobs in 1860 illustrates the nature of their relationship—casting Child as a dedicated abolitionist and somewhat controlling editor, perhaps changing too much of Jacobs' writing in order to support the anti-slavery cause.

Lydia Maria Child was born in 1802 in Medford, Massachusetts, the daughter of a baker with a very successful business. Child's education was comprised of dame school and local seminary. Upon the death of her mother, Child's father sent her to live in Maine territory with her sister, Mary Francis Preston. She lived with her sister for a period of six years, studying primarily at the local academy in preparation to become a teacher. Throughout her life, Child's brother, Convers, served as an intellectual tutor of sorts for his sister. He introduced her to the works of prominent authors such as Homer, Sir Walter Scot, and John Milton. In 1821, Child moved back to Massachusetts to live with her brother, then a minister in Watertown. While living with her brother, Child had the opportunity to meet intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Greenleaf Whittier. She also befriended Margaret Fuller, a contemporary who lived nearby in Cambridge. Child opened up a girls' school in the 1820s in Watertown which became very successful and popular (Teets-Parzynski).

While living in Watertown, she began her career as a novelist. *Hobomok, a Tale of Times*, was her first novel and was published in 1824. Some critics perceived the story as slightly scandalous, but on the whole, it seemed that her literary career was off to a successful start. Child authored *The Rebels; or, Boston before the Revolution*, and soon

after began publishing a bimonthly periodical targeted at children entitled *Juvenile Miscellany*. She published several other works in rapid succession, pausing only briefly to marry David Child in 1828. Arguably her most important writing, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, was published in 1833. The publication of her *Appeal* was incredibly controversial. Child's opinion was a radical one—she called for the immediate abolition of slavery without compensation to slave-owners, racial equality, and opposed the deportation of freed slaves and their colonization in Africa. Well-known abolitionists credited Child with having shaped their own views on slavery, including Charles Sumner, William Ellery Channing, and Wendell Phillips (Teets-Parzynski).

Unfortunately, Lydia Maria Child's obstinate support of abolition proved to be a cause of hardship. The general public in general was outraged at Child's bold expression of radical antislavery sentiments. Child lost not only many of her readers but also many of her friends upon its publication. Salerno uses the word "vilified" to describe the extent to which Child was rejected from society upon the publication of her *Appeal* (Salerno 46). Lydia Maria Child chose to accept the job of editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1841, the newspaper published by the New York branch of the American Anti-Slavery Society. However, Child had trouble reconciling her own personal beliefs with the American Anti-Slavery Society's belief that violence was a necessary element in the abolition of slavery, so she left her job as editor within two years. She declared that she was "forever alienated from the anti-slavery organization" and "retired from the anti-slavery cause altogether" (Salerno 122).

Instead, Child preferred milder means of stirring abolitionist sentiments. For example, she actively produced books to help mothers to educate their children in the ways of anti-slavery thinking (Salerno 41). In 1852, the Childs moved to Wayland, Massachusetts, where their home served as a refuge for runaway slaves. In 1861, Child edited Harriet Jacobs' novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* because she felt that it was crucial to the abolitionist cause. Ultimately, Lydia Maria Childs is remembered as a figure who worked for abolitionism, Indian rights, women's rights, religious toleration, and educational reform while staying true to her own convictions (Teets-Parzynski).

Conversely, the life of Harriet Jacobs remains ambiguous; because she was a slave, her birth date remains unknown, although historians estimate it to be between 1813 and 1817 (Yellin). She was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina. At the age of six, Harriet's mother died and she was taken in by her mistress, who taught Jacobs to spell, read, and write. A few years later, Harriet's mistress died and she was willed to a new master and mistress, where she faced constant sexual harassment. In an attempt to escape from the horrors of her situation and to control some aspect of her life, she initiated a sexual liaison with a young white man living nearby. They had two children together. When her master's sexual harassment coupled with his threats to make her children plantation slaves grew too much

for Jacobs to bear, she decided to run away. She hoped that her master would choose to sell her children instead and that their father would buy and free them. Ultimately, the children's father did buy them but denied them their freedom. For nearly seven years, Jacobs lived as a fugitive slave in the south, hiding in her freed grandmother's attic. In 1842, she was able to escape to Philadelphia, finally settling in Rochester, New York in 1849. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Jacobs' old mistress offered to buy her freedom; Jacobs refused, saying that she could not consider herself property and that paying for her freedom would take away the triumph of her escape. However, in 1853, her employer Cornelia Grinnell Willis purchased and freed both Jacobs and her children (Yellin).

After her experience with slavery, abolitionist Amy Post convinced Jacobs to write her autobiography in promotion of the abolitionist cause. Lydia Maria Child assisted by editing the manuscript and helping to secure financial backing from abolitionists in the Boston area. She published her novel, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in 1861 and received praise from critics nationwide. During the Civil War, Jacobs played an active role in helping abolitionists. She used her fame to raise money and supplies for the Union troops, published newspaper reports on the condition of refugees, and did relief work in Washington, D.C. She also worked to establish the Jacobs Free School in Virginia with the help of the New England Freedman's Aid Society. In 1869, Jacobs began to retreat from public life as her health was failing. She passed away in 1897, remembered as the author of what has been called "the most important antebellum autobiography written by an African-American woman" (Yellin). Her willingness to describe and discuss her sexual experiences in anti-slavery literature and her philanthropic activities as an advocate of social reform are indicative of the powerful effect Jacobs had as an educated ex-slave (Yellin).

The relationship between Child, Jacobs, and the publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is widely discussed by historians. In the early 1900s, critics dismissed *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a false autobiography written by Lydia Maria Child (Johnson 11). The autobiography regained popularity in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement and again in the 1970s during the Women's Movement; Jean Fagan Yellin strove to show that the narrative was an authentic historical document legitimately written by Harriet Jacobs. By 1981, historians began to accept the autobiography as historical fact rather than falsified fiction. The unwillingness of Americans to believe that Jacobs' narrative was truly written by an ex-slave and not by a white female abolitionist is indicative of the mistrust people felt towards freed slaves.

The editor's preface to the autobiography reveals a great deal about Child and Jacobs' relationship. Johnson argues that Child's preface serves a dual purpose. She says that not only was the preface necessary to "attest to the veracity of slave narratives, to 'endorse' the narrative in such a way as to make it more appealing," but that it was also necessary in

"preparing the audience for the...controversial and...shocking revelations that are to follow (Johnson 13). Traditionally, slave narratives were preceded by a text by a reliable white individual who would support the ex-slaves claims. Child filled that role and more in warning the reader of the "delicate subjects" that would follow in the narrative (Jacobs 7). The preface by Lydia Maria Child assures readers that her story has "veracity" that cannot be doubted and that Jacobs is a woman that "nature endowed...with quick perceptions" (8). She is trying to make the reader believe in Jacobs as a credible, honest narrator and as an intelligent former slave. Child also defends Jacobs' account in saying that it will "arouse conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery," revealing that she genuinely believed that the autobiography would have a major effect on the anti-slavery cause (8). Her autobiography is crucial to the abolitionist cause because it provides something unique that male slave narratives could not. Jacobs' "voice is raised against...sexual harassment," which would not be addressed in male-written slave narratives or by a freed slave less audacious than Jacobs (Johnson 35). Her perspective is also unique in that it provides insight as to the feelings of an "outraged mother" whose children are also trapped in the throes of slavery (39). However, for these very reasons, people were prone to doubt her autobiography, perceiving the events as too uncommon to be credible.

Surprisingly, we can see that the relationship between Child and Jacobs was, at times, somewhat strained. Foster reveals that "on more than one occasion, Jacobs had to confront her editor...in order to retain control over the form, the emphasis, and even the proofreading of her text," illustrating the frustration Jacobs must have felt when working with Child (Foster 106). In her eagerness to help the abolitionist cause, Child perhaps monitored the writing of Jacobs' autobiography too closely, limiting the voice of Jacobs in her own story.

The following letter from Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Jacobs describes the editing process and the reactions of Child to Jacobs' autobiography. Perhaps we can interpret the letter, in light of historical evidence, as slightly defensive on Child's part. She repeatedly affirms the excellent quality of Jacobs' writing and praises her to an excess. Then she proceeds to delicately, gently, almost defensively, state what changes she wishes to make and to assert what must be added to the manuscript. It is possible that this letter was written after a confrontation between Jacobs and Child; Child now writes to Jacobs as an editor doing her best to keep the author's voice intact.

Transcription of a letter from Lydia Maria Child to Harriet Jacobs Letter

Wayland, August 13th 1860

Dear Mrs. Jacobs,

I have been busy with your M.S. ever since I saw you; and have only done one third of it. I have very little occasion to alter the language, which is wonderfully good, for one whose opportunities for education have been so limited. The events are interesting, and well told; the remarks are also good, and to the purpose. But I am copying a great deal of it, for the purpose of transposing sentences and pages, so as to bring the story into continuous order, and the remarks into appropriate places. I think you will see that this renders the story much more clear and entertaining.

I should not take so much pains, if I did not consider the book unusually interesting, and likely to do much service to the Anti-Slavery cause. So you need not feel under great personal obligations. You know I would go through fire and water to help give a blow to Slavery. I suppose you will want to see the M.S. after I have exercised my bump of mental order upon it; and I will send it wherever you direct, a fortnight hence.

My object in writing at this time is to ask you to write what you can recollect of the outrages committed on the colored people, in Nat Turner's time. You say the reader would not believe what you saw "inflicted on men, women, and children, without the slightest ground of suspicion against them." What were those inflictions? Were any tortured to make them confess? and how? Where any killed? Please write down some of the most striking particulars, and let me have them to insert.

I think the last Chapter, about John Brown, had better be omitted. It does not naturally come into your story, and the M.S. is already too long. Nothing can be so appropriate to end with, as the death of your grand mother.

Mr. Child desires to be respectfully remembered to you.

Very cordially your friend,

L. Maria Child.

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