Ernestine L. Rose: Freethinking Rebel

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The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

The editor of a small Maine newspaper wrote "It would be shameful to listen to this woman, a thousand times below a prostitute." A minister in Charleston, South Carolina, forbade his congregation to heed "this female devil." The object of this scorn was Ernestine L. Rose, one of the major intellectual forces behind then women's rights movement in nineteenth-century America.

Rose spent more than four decades arguing for women's rights and against legal and social restrictions on women. Born in Poland in 1810 of Jewish parents, Rose chafed at her father's religion at an early age. Leaving home at seventeen, she first traveled to Berlin, where she is reputed to have invented a chemical paper to perfume apartments ("Cologne waters"), then sailed to England. In England Rose quickly became enamored with the ideas of socialist Robert Owen. At an Owenite meeting she met her future husband, William Rose, and together they came to the New World in May of 1836 as reformers.

Within months, Ernestine Rose had begun speaking to groups of New Yorkers about "Mr. Owen's system," while her husband opened a jewelry repair shop to help support her speaking efforts. Rose's first cause during her first winter in New York City was the Married Woman's Property Act—she gathered signatures to pass legislation that would allow married women to retain their property after marriage. At a time when almost no woman spoke in public, Rose spent her first decade in the United States writing and lecturing throughout the country on traditional Owenite concerns: the evil of private property and organized religion and the importance of education, freethought, and women's rights. Her first and most important early platform was close to home—the annual New York City Thomas Paine birthday celebration. There, amidst her freethinking friends, Rose joined the men every January 29, making toasts and giving speeches on the "superstition" inherent in Christianity. In 1853, she was selected president of the New York Paine Society, a first-ever accomplishment for a woman in any Paine group.

By the early 1850s, Rose was increasingly dedicated to the intertwined issues of women's rights and freethought. She believed, as Robert Owen had before her—until he converted to Christian mysticism in his old age—that the development of organized religion and the capitalist economic system were the major causes of women's inferior status. But Rose, unlike Owen, understood from the context of her life how a simple change of economic systems would not alone liberate women. Women needed, she believed, to work together in concerted and unified action. They needed a gathering much like the Paine celebrations, a unifying space, as it were, that would provide them with the moral equivalent of evangelical rivals. Isolated women could come together for conversion and reinforcement, uplifted by the energy and excitement of shared belief.

Beginning in 1850, Rose helped organize the national women's rights conventions that were held yearly after the 1848 Seneca Falls meeting. As the women's rights movement grew, in part because of the great success of her speeches at the yearly conventions, Rose became one of the most important speakers in the movement and the one the newspapers labeled as "the most eloquent."

Despite her importance, Rose is perhaps the most forgotten of the women's

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Ernestine L. Rose
1810–1892

Background
Born Ernestine Potowski, daughter of an Orthodox rabbi in the ghetto of Piotrkow, Poland. Rebellious since age five, she rejected Judaism, left home, traveled, and, in England, became an advocate of Robert Owen's socialism. Emigrating to the United States in 1836 with her husband, jeweler William Rose, she quickly emerged as a fiery freethought, women's rights, and abolition lecturer.

Achievement
Rose was one of the earliest women to give public lectures in the United States, following Frances (Fanny) Wright (1795–1852). Despite her Polish accent and relentless manner, Rose became a marquee speaker who helped draw thousands to women's rights, antislavery, and freethought events. Throughout her public life she espoused a consistent platform of atheism, freedom of thought, equal rights for women, and the abolition of slavery.

Notable Work
Rose is known to history primarily as a speaker on the women's suffrage and antislavery movements. One of her freethought speeches, "A Defense of Atheism," was preserved in pamphlet form by Boston freethought publisher J.P. Mendum.

Accolades
Returning to England in 1869, Rose was befriended by leading British freethinkers. Atheist Charles Bradlaugh and freethinking cleric Moncure Conway spoke at her husband's funeral in 1882. She became close to Bradlaugh's daughter and biographer, Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner. Freethought firebrand George Jacob Holyoake spoke at Rose's graveside ten years later.

Fitting Epitaph
"But for the fact that such genuine reformers are never suitably appreciated in their days and generation, she would now be the most popular, as she has long been the best, female lecturer in the United States." *—Rabbi Jonas Bondi, May 1869*

Note
Annie Laurie Gaylor, ed. *Women Without Superstition* (Madison, Wis.: FFRF Inc., 1997), pp. 63–72.

rights activists; today virtually no one knows her name. She is, to use Virginia Woolf's words, "a stranded ghost." Her disappearance from history is telling: not only was she scorned by newspaper editors and Southern ministers, but she also was isolated from and sometimes ignored by the very women and men with whom she shared reform platforms. Rose was an "other" in a movement of others—an outsider in a group of women who banded together against oppression. She looked and sounded different from the other women: she spoke with a foreign accent; she was outspoken; she was ironic.

Even more significant, Rose was a professed freethinker. In a movement that drew much of its moral and intellectual energy from appeals to Christian piety, the combination of Rose's atheism, her Jewish and Polish background, her foreign accent, and her outspoken ways made her an obvious target for antagonistic newspaper editors and ministers who wanted to prove how radical and wrongheaded the women's rights movement was. But the blunt daughter of Eastern European culture also caused discomfort and unease for those within the movement. Rose acted as a kind of barometer for the reformers; she registered their anti-Semitism, their anti-immigrationist sentiment, and their unconscious racism. Rose's story is thus a story outside the standard narrative of the struggle for women's rights.

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Let me give you just one small example of Rose's activities and words. In early April 1854, Ernestine Rose and her friend and colleague Susan B. Anthony traveled to Baltimore where Rose began a series of four lectures. In their first few days in Baltimore, Anthony engaged the lecture halls where Rose would speak and put notices in the Baltimore newspapers.

Rose spoke to somewhat limited crowds while Anthony fussed over the number of tickets that they had sold—only fifty-four on April 4—while giving away some sixty free tickets. In her first two speeches, Rose talked specifically on women's rights: the first was a familiar speech for Rose, on women's lack of education, and the second outlined women's lack of legal and political rights. Rose's third speech was on "the root of evil": men's greed to acquire that allowed them to enslave others, to keep others from having a "self." Rose criticized professional men who were out for individual gain to the detriment of societal benefit. The only professional Rose did not lambaste was the schoolmaster, a figure that typically was the subject of ridicule.

The morning before Rose's final talk, the two women attended the Baltimore Universalist Church to hear a sermon on "Woman's Sphere," where they heard that women should have rights but should not have equal rights with men. The morning sermon influenced Rose's evening talk in the Committee Room of the Maryland Institute, where she spoke of "Charity," or rather the lack of it as expressed in sectarianism and in the "monstrous cruelties" perpetrated by dogmatic clergymen. Rose ended her speech by reviewing the morning's sermon and then imploring her listeners to ensure that there could never be a time again when "priestly bloodhounds" would have permission to "hunt down and mercilessly butcher those who may simply differ from them in opinion." Anthony called her speech a "glorious" one and was immensely pleased that, even though the hall seated about five hundred people, hundreds were unable to get in because all the seats were sold.

Local papers noted Rose's powerful oratorical style. The *Baltimore Republican and Argus* praised "Mrs. Rose's Lecture" as "forcible, nay truly eloquent," though they did not necessarily agree with everything she said. "We had," they wrote, "what we do not hesitate to speak of as the highest gratification, in listening to the lecture delivered at the Temple last evening, by Mrs. Ernestine L. Rose, of New York on the 'Education and Social Position of Woman,' as we are sure the audience generally must have had. Not that they, any more than we, necessarily, coincided fully with the lady in all her positions, but because of her forcible, nay, truly eloquent style of oratory."

The nine days that Rose and Anthony spent in Baltimore allowed them time to talk as well. Anthony's detailed diary reports a number of intense discussions that reveal a great deal about Ernestine Rose's idealism and her inability to compromise or to excuse friends' and colleagues' flaws. On April 9, Anthony recorded that she and "Mrs. Rose" were talking about the "Know-Nothings"—the conservative group that promoted Bibles in all classrooms and limitations on immigrants' rights—when Rose suddenly told Anthony that she had heard her friend, women's rights activist Lucy Stone, express prejudice against granting to foreigners the rights of citizenship. It was a subject that Rose, who was not yet a citizen, felt strongly about.

Anthony, unable to believe anything bad about Lucy Stone,[1] expressed disbelief that she would say such a thing. Rose countered by saying that Anthony was blinded by "that clique of Abolitionists." Anthony felt compelled to defend Stone, asking Rose "Is there not *one* in the Reform ranks, whom you think true, not one but whom panders to the popular feeling?"

Rose answered that she could not help it: "I take them by the words of their own mouths. I trust all until their own words or acts declare them false to truth and right." Yet, such forthright words caused anguish for Rose. She tried to explain her misery to Anthony: "No one can tell the hours of anguish I have suffered, as one after another I have seen those whom I had trusted, betray falsity of motive as I have been compelled to place one after another on the list of panderers to public favor."

Ten years younger and far less cynical, Anthony responded: "Do you know Mrs. Rose, that I can but feel that you place *me* too on that list." Rose hesitated, implying that Anthony was correct. Their talk ended with Rose acknowledging that she was often in despair over friends and colleagues whom she perceived as changing, chameleonlike, before her eyes.

Anthony's response reflected both her conciliatory nature and also her distance from Rose: "It filled my soul with anguish to see one so noble, so true, even though I felt I could not comprehend her, so bowed down, so overcome with deep swelling emotions." Anthony explains with great insight: "Mrs. Rose is not appreciated, nor cannot be by this age—she is too much in advance of the extreme ultraists even, to be understood by them."

Anthony's perceptions reveal both Rose's greatest virtue and greatest flaw: her inability to compromise. As an outsider, Rose registered the bigotry that infused even the women's rights movement. When she heard what she perceived as prejudice, she spoke out; she did not suffer fools, even if they were friends, gladly. Her differences in language (accent) and her appearance

(her long, unbobbed, curly hair) were obvious, but less obvious was Rose's overwhelming need to change the world in the public sphere even if it meant ignoring the "bonds of friendship" that sustained so many women.

Perhaps Rose's relationship with her husband, William, her constant source of emotional and financial support, left her less in need of female friendship and more able to focus on speaking than the husbandless Anthony and the badly married Lucy Stone. Or, perhaps, she rightly registered and refused to excuse intolerance (anti-immigrationism, anti-Semitism) that others, who perceived their biases as "natural," were unable to record.

Whatever her motives, Rose was clearly a woman with no mind to compromise, no manner of conciliation. It is not surprising, then, that her reception in both her time and in our own has been so negative: nothing is more fearsome than a sarcastic, idealistic woman who talks straight and appears to need no one.

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After the Baltimore lectures were over, Rose and Anthony continued on to Philadelphia, to the home of women's rights activist Lucretia Mott. While in Philadelphia, the two women spent the evening observing Rose's friend Charlotte Crowell be hypnotized by a spiritualist.

Spiritualism, the quasi-religious experience where participants spoke to the dead, was greatly in fashion in the spring of 1854. Many other popular figures involved in reform movements—William Lloyd Garrison, the Grimké sisters, Sojourner Truth, and even *Tribune* Editor Horace Greeley—had become converts to Spiritualism in the early 1850s, in the wake of the famous 1848 "Hydesville rappings." There, two pre-adolescent girls claimed they heard sounds made by a spirit called "Splitfoot." Brought to New York City, they gave public exhibitions where they said they communicated with the dead.

Anthony's account of Rose's response to this fashionable parlor-Spiritualism is amusing and telling. Anthony relates that, after Charlotte Crowell was put to sleep, "Mrs. Rose took her by the hands and said 'Charlotte! Look at me!' very sternly—Mrs. C seemed not to be able to open her eyes or control her [movements] but Mrs. Rose will have it that she practiced deception."

Even within her circle, Rose was almost alone in her opinions about spiritual matters. Concluding their Philadelphia visit, Rose and Anthony dined again at the Motts, where the table conversation turned once again to Spiritualism. On the "unbelieving side" were Ernestine Rose and only one other, who assumed "the spirit inseparable from the body." On the other side were the rest of the party—the Motts, Sarah Grimké, and Anthony herself, who reasoned that "If it is be true that we die like the flower, leaving behind only the fragrance . . . what a delusion has the race ever been in—what a dream is the life of man."

As is evident from Rose's reaction to the séance, there was not one spiritual bone in her body. She was a complete materialist. Given that she was living in a world where the rationalism of a Tom Paine was growing increasingly out of style, it is little wonder that even among her friends, Rose was always and forever "too much in advance."

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Ernestine Rose continued working for basic rights for all human beings for sixty years. As her death approached, she was so determined not to forsake her beliefs and to prevent any recantations of her life's work should an illness make her mind feeble, that she wrote into her will that her executors "shall not permit my body to be taken into any chapel or church" after death. She also arranged for a friend to be with her during her final illness lest she be "invaded by religious persons" who might make her unsay the convictions of her whole life when her brain was weakened.

Ernestine Rose did not recant. At Brighton for the fresh air and sea, Rose suffered a stroke on August 1, 1892, dying three days later. An attendant and doctor looking over her made sure her wishes were carried out; she was in her death, they assured us, "untroubled by any thoughts of religion."

Surely Susan B. Anthony was, indeed, correct: Rose could not be appreciated in her own time. I would argue that we need to become reacquainted with her sharp tongue, her ready wit, and her passion to the cause of justice. We might even be ready to appreciate her.

Note

1. See Lois Porter, "Lucy Stone: Woman of Firsts," *FI*, Winter 1996/97, pp. 41–44.

Comments at the Women's Rights Convention

At the Seventh National Women's Rights Convention, held in New York in November, 1865, Ernestine Rose used these words to respond to a male heckler that equality of the sexes was contrary to Scripture.—Eds.

Do you tell me that the Bible is against our rights? Then I say that our claims do not rest upon a book written no one knows when, or by whom. Do you tell me what Paul or Peter says on the subject? Then again I reply that our claims do not rest on the opinions of any one, not even on those of Paul and Peter, for they are older than they. Books and opinions, no matter from whom they came, if they are in opposition to human rights, are nothing but dead letters. . . .

". . . Sisters, . . . I entreat you, if you have an hour to spare, a dollar to give, or a word to utter—spare it, give it, and utter it, for the elevation of woman! And when your minister asks you for money for missionary purposes, tell him there are higher, and holier, and nobler missionary purposes to be performed at home. When he asks for colleges to educate ministers, tell him you must educate woman, that she may do away with the necessity of ministers, so that they may be able to go to some useful employment. If he asks you to give to churches (which means to himself) then ask him what he has done for the salvation of woman. When he speaks to you of leading a virtuous life, ask him whether he understands the causes that have prevented so many of your sisters from being virtuous, and have driven them to degradation, sin, and wretchedness. When he speaks to you of a hereafter, tell him to help educate woman, to enable her to live a life of intelligence, independence, virtue, and happiness here, as the best preparatory step for any other life. And if he has not told you from the pulpit of all these things; if he does not know them: it is high time you inform him, and teach him his duty here in this life."

—*Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, Eds.;* The History of Woman Suffrage *(Susan B. Anthony, publisher, 1881) Vol. 1, pp. 661-663.*