

A Marriage of Recluses: Wendell and Ann Greene Phillips and the Joint Politics of Isolation and Reform

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In his 1884 obituary of American abolitionist Wendell Phillips, published in *The Nation*, Wendell Phillips Garrison, the son of William Lloyd Garrison, speaks of Phillips's "extreme seclusion," which he claims contributed to Phillips's growing irrelevance in the American political landscape.

It was Wendell Phillips's marriage to abolitionist Ann Terry Greene in October 1836 which explains in part his participation in the anti-slavery movement. Very quickly, Phillips became one of the leaders of the movement. His wife, however, was an invalid most of her life, a situation they both had to reconcile with their intense activism against slavery and, eventually, in favor of women's rights. The Phillipses were also wealthy people, who funded abolitionist activities and gave money to people in need rather generously.

Despite their intense engagement with the world, Wendell and Ann Greene Phillips also led a secluded and private life apart from the world they were so keen on changing, a situation which, as Wendell Phillips Garrison suggests, was a constant in their lives. Garrison argues that his namesake's "isolation" was the result of his abolitionist activism, which put him on the margins of the privileged world he was born in.

What are we then to make of the paradox of isolation and reform visible in Wendell and Ann Greene Phillips's marriage? How are we to reconcile their reclusiveness and seemingly boundless generosity? I will argue that the Phillipses's isolation provided the very basis for their activism, which was centered on the notions of "disinterestedness" and "selflessness," valued by Phillips above anything else. Distance and isolation from the world on the one hand, and activism on the other hand were in fact two sides of the same coin.