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Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writing

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In an 1872 anti-suffrage essay for the *Overland Monthly* entitled “Woman Suffrage—Cui Bono?” (who benefits?), Mrs. Sarah Cooper, like other anti-suffrage writers of the period, contends that only women of the worst sort would deign to vote, making public elections inappropriate for true women: “Womanhood—cultured, sensitive, and refined—would instinctively shrink from encountering such an element in the body-politic; and thus the dissolute, the depraved, and the vicious, ‘embaloted’ and bold, would dominate the weak, the timid, and the vacillating, and thus occupy the field” (160).¹ The author implies that enfranchisement would inappropriately sexualize women, creating a promiscuous mingling of male and female bodies in the “body-politic.” Although Cooper believes that women of the “depraved” sort mostly come from the lower, immigrant classes, she claims to be even more concerned with “a lamentable increase of the Mrs. Potiphar-type of womanhood” that has women lobbying for the vote within the more “refined” classes (160).

Cooper’s allusion aligns women’s rights advocates with Potiphar’s wife, the biblical woman who failed to seduce Joseph, her hus-

band’s most trusted slave. Much as Cooper fears the electoral influence of lower-class immigrant women—warning that they will be no more patriotic than their male counterparts who “sell their votes to the highest bidder” and “vote early and often” (158, 162)—she focuses her attention on the “female-lobbyist”: a woman who, like Mrs. Potiphar, may appear cultured but is actually driven by impure sexual desires (160). Still, the author takes a sympathetic tone in regard to lower-class women, arguing that fallen women “starving for bread . . . can not resist the temptation to sin” (161). However, there are no excuses for the existence of the suffragist: “We have no just reason to suppose that Mrs. Potiphar was hungry for bread; carnal appetite held sway, and there are not a few, to-day, cursed with the same inherent tendency to ‘moral vertigo’” (161).

Cooper was far from alone in her fear that the right to vote would trigger the “carnal appetite” of women like Mrs. Potiphar and lead to the “moral vertigo” of America. As I contend in this essay, few realize how shrewdly anti-suffragists used the specter of female adultery to argue against what to them was a startling—and threatening—new form of female individualism. To many anti-suffragists, a woman who cast a ballot was not rising up to grasp democracy’s most essential right; she was abandoning her

natural role as the central pillar of domestic life. Her brash entrance into the public sphere could only undermine the nation's most important institution, the family, and open a Pandora's box of other, even more selfish desires.

Read more than a century later, this strain of anti-suffrage literature can seem alarmist and even comical; however, it was not so at the time. The anti-suffragists exploited serious anxieties concerning women's roles and the preservation of gender, race, and class hierarchies in an expanding nation. Through the rhetorical use of female adultery within the suffrage debate, conservative writers negatively associated woman's vote with some of the most controversial "foreign" movements of the period, including Fourierism, Socialism, and Free Love.

As I argue, reading anti-suffrage literature provides insight into the complexity of both the suffrage debate and current debates over women's rights. While the tendency today may be to assume that women in the past were simply for or against women's rights, the actual situation was much more complex, leading me to suggest that among the varying perspectives were three major camps of political thought in regard to woman's suffrage in the nineteenth century: Traditionalism, Domestic Feminism, and Public Feminism. In addition, while the suffrage debate is long over, many of the anti-suffrage rhetorical strategies live on. Similar arguments continue to be employed in the anti-feminism of today.

Anti-suffrage writers like Cooper represented the desire to enfranchise women as an expression of a selfish and adulterous individualism that would destroy America by undermining society's very foundation: the family.² As one essayist for the *Galaxy* wrote in 1870, "Now, if the wife votes, she must either vote with her husband or against him. In the former case, you are merely giving the man two votes; in the latter, you are making a grave addition to the already too numerous causes of dissension in families" ("The Woman Question" 842).

Thus, voting was seen by some opponents as an open invitation for wives to disobey their husbands and disrupt the patriarchal leadership of the family. British articles reprinted in the popular New York journal the *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science and Art* reinforced American anxieties regarding the effect of women's rights. In "Female Suffrage," reprinted in 1874, Professor Goldwin Smith claimed that women's suffrage "would declare the family not to be a political unit, and for the first time authorize a wife, and make it in certain cases her duty as a citizen, to act publicly in opposition to her husband" (171). The implication that a married woman's vote was akin to adultery, the ultimate act of wifely disobedience, made suffrage appear all the more abominable.

Women who advocated suffrage, therefore, had to be of the most degenerate sort. In "The Right Not to Vote. Second Paper," published in *Scribner's Monthly* in 1871, individualism and voting are associated explicitly with the promiscuity of married women. In this essay, the anonymous author equates enfranchisement with the disobedient usurpation of male authority, calling suffrage "a Second Temptation" of a new Eve and warning that enfranchisement will lead to a proliferation of bad wives and mothers:

[T]he profane and whiskey-drinking class of married women, who are numerous even in places not populous enough to support many of the abandoned sort, and who are very little better in manners, will bring into the primary meetings and the vicinage of the polls a reeking, sickening, and irrepressible filthiness, such as that of vilest male depravity cannot engender. (215)

Worse than even the worst men, sexually promiscuous wives will contaminate the political process and make a mockery of the "substantially procreative union" of marriage (209).

In 1891, a similar image of the wanton woman was reprinted in the *Eclectic*. In "The

Wild Women as Social Insurgents,” Mrs. E. Lynn Linton characterized the suffragist as a “Wild Woman”:

About the Wild Woman is always an unpleasant suggestion of the adventuress. Whatever their natural place and lineage they are the same family as those hotel heroines who forget to lock the chamber door—those confiding innocents of riper years, who contract imperfect marriages—those pretty country blossoms who begin life modestly and creditably, and go on to flaunting notoriety and disgrace. One feels that it is only the accident of birth which differences these from those, and determines a certain stability of class. (671)

As with the Mrs. Potiphars of Cooper’s warning, Linton’s Wild Women may appear high-class, but their sexual notoriety reveals an underlying baseness that separates them from virtuous women. Sexual and dangerous, the Wild Woman advocates anarchic female independence at the expense of sober patriarchal order:

Mistress of herself, the Wild Woman as a social insurgent preaches the “lesson of liberty” broadened into lawlessness and license. . . . Her ideal of life for herself is absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men. She repudiates the doctrine of individual conformity for the sake of the general good; holding the self-restraint involved as an act of slavishness of which no woman worth her salt would be guilty. (668)

The Wild Woman brazenly rejects domesticity in favor of a lawless and licentious individualism that threatens, presumably, both British and American society. In addition, Linton’s fear of a growing number of insurgent Wild Women speaks to specific American anxieties regarding the Wild West. At a time when the growing population was expanding into a lawless frontier, the specter of unrestrained womanhood running amuck on the range seemed a sure sign

of social collapse. In this context, Linton’s republished response to suffrage speaks to an even more widespread cultural desire to impose traditional order on a changing American landscape.

The resistance to woman’s suffrage was largely based on theories of the family and government established during the Revolution. In particular, John Locke’s construction of a family consisting of loyal dependents headed by a patriarch helped establish a model for republican Americans that in turn reinforced the developing nineteenth-century gender ideology of dual but complementary spheres.³ In early nineteenth-century America, the ideal wife and mother took on great significance as a vehicle for controlling the independent, potentially transgressive, impulses of individual men.⁴ As a result, the ideal woman served as a social check on the individual freedoms of men by teaching her sons to be patriotic citizens, redeeming the immorality of her husband and instilling domestic values in her daughters. The political primacy of the patriarchal family continued into the late nineteenth century, leading one commentator to write in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1890, “The truth is that the unit of society is not the individual, but the family” (Clark 311). Since the family was considered both the cornerstone of society and the natural domain of women, it made sense that women were ultimately responsible for maintaining the social structure.⁵

The adulteress, perhaps more than any other nineteenth-century figure of transgressive womanhood, symbolizes a nonprocreative sexual desire that is at odds with the nineteenth-century construction of woman as wife and mother; because she expresses this desire outside of her own marriage, she becomes doubly problematic to the dominant characterization of women as passionless subordinates.⁶ Since the wife’s role was primarily controlled by her husband, the adulteress’s transgression is a symbol of social destruction and anarchy that

must be restrained in order to keep the social order intact.⁷ Not only does the adulteress's sexual autonomy defy her vow to "love, honor and obey" her husband, but her sexual transgression raises concerns regarding the legitimacy of her offspring. By possibly producing bastards, the adulteress threatens to subvert patriarchal lineage and, in Lockean terms, the stability of society in nineteenth-century America. Even more alarming, however, is the adulteress's independent agency in her transgression. While Cooper and others may pity fallen women who naively succumb to seduction or desperately try to avoid poverty, the suffragist's transgression is typically characterized as a knowingly destructive adulterous act. Her singular defiance of her husband, her selfish sexual desires, and her independent disregard for the common good make the adulterous suffragist a symbol of wanton individualism.

For many conservative writers of the late nineteenth century, women's suffrage in particular was an outrageous threat to what they considered the tenuous stability of American democracy. Often referred to as a political "experiment," the young nation's continued success presumably relied on a constant vigilance over and containment of the individual rights it ostensibly promoted. One anonymous writer for the *Republic* in 1874 offered the sobering suggestion that "before we enfranchise eight millions of female voters" the public needed to recognize that

no other nation (except Switzerland) has succeeded in maintaining peaceful, progressive, republican self-government. In these circumstances, and with the world's history before them, some of the most scientific and impartial political publicists declare that government by universal ballot can only be a success under peculiarly favorable influences, while its general tendency leads to anarchy, violence, disintegration, and speedy national decay. ("Shall Women Be Charged" 39–40)

The author reiterates that to avoid the collapse of society the duties of women need to remain separate from the duties of men. While this balancing of social duty relied on a certain amount of self-sacrifice from both men and women, women especially had to forego their individual rights for the good of society, conforming to the domestic "duty" of selfless wifehood and motherhood. For many men and women of the period, domesticity was woman's necessary limitation, but it was also the source of her power.⁸

The suffrage debate was complicated by the ideology of woman's domestic power, creating what I see as three major camps of political thought in regard to the "Woman Question": Traditionalism, Domestic Feminism, and Public Feminism.⁹ Although each camp was trying to assert women's power, they had differing ideas about how that power should be defined in relation to a woman's domestic role. Rhetorically, they all defined themselves in contrast to one another—typically characterizing the other camps in unflattering terms. However, this rhetorical tactic was often more divisive than their overall goals might have warranted. Rather than think of these camps as mutually exclusive, it is more accurate to see them as overlapping. In other words, while their political views may seem clearly delineated in hindsight, in actual practice they were often blurred. Thus, issue by issue, a single woman could hold opinions from each of the camps simultaneously.

For the traditionalists, woman's place was strictly in the home, where she could exert a Christian influence on her husband and family without direct political activity. For them, the "cult of true womanhood," to borrow a phrase from Barbara Welter, did not appear to be an effort to strip white women of power so much as it was an argument to give them more power within their domestic domain.¹⁰ While generally anti-feminist, traditionalists could adopt what we would consider feminist positions, depending on the cause.

As the century progressed, woman's socially redemptive role in the family extended to include reform movements meant to purify the nation, allowing women a measure of public power based on their domestic qualifications.¹¹ The cult of true womanhood encouraged what Daniel Scott Smith has called a "domestic feminism" that began by emphasizing the necessity for woman's Christian influence on the family and expanded to include the purification of the social context in which the family dwelled (218).¹² While the influence of white middle-class women in the home and in the largely Protestant reform movements they championed was often lauded as socially beneficial, the domestic feminist's power was restricted by notions of Christian propriety and feminine selflessness. As Lora Romero suggests, "While such theories of female influence held that women ultimately controlled society, they also stressed that women exercised that power through indirect influence rather than direct force" (15). In effect, white middle-class women were offered social empowerment through a carefully constructed veil of domestic submission.¹³

While domestic feminists broadened woman's sphere of influence to include reform movements meant to improve the larger family of humankind, public feminists believed that women had the right to assert their individual agency as equals to men without the circumlocution demanded by the other two groups. Public feminists entered the public sphere and argued for the expansion of women's rights in the political (i.e., the public) arena.

While traditionalists and domestic feminists disagreed over the extent of woman's influence, they could at times adopt opinions that modern readers might strictly associate with public feminism. For example, the most notable traditional proponent of woman's sphere, Sarah Josepha Hale, was adamantly against women's suffrage as thrusting women into an improper sphere; however, she championed female textile strikers when they publicly protested their mistreatment

at the mills.¹⁴ Even for some of the most famous domestic feminists of the period—such as Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe—the idea of a woman encouraging social change through public lectures or marches was a degradation of her very nature.¹⁵ However wary of public involvement by women, domestic feminists were not necessarily opposed to women's suffrage. Although Catharine Beecher never supported enfranchisement, women like her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe believed that the polls, like the family, were in need of female moral influence. In "The Woman Question: Or, What Will You Do With Her?" (published in the December 1865 *Atlantic Monthly*), Stowe argued that the state was an extension of the family, insisting that the government "can no more afford to dispense with the vote of women in its affairs than a family" (674). Thus, domestic feminists like Stowe could support suffrage as long as conventional notions of propriety were maintained.¹⁶

Contrary to traditional and domestic feminist emphases on indirect female influence as a source of power for women, there were a number of highly visible public feminists demanding individual rights in all arenas of life. Whereas domestic feminists perpetuated Lockean traditions that emphasized the primacy of the patriarchal family, public feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sarah Grimké, and Susan B. Anthony expanded Locke's individualistic rhetoric to argue that women were entitled to "natural" rights equal to men. At the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, the "Declaration of Sentiments" boldly revised the Declaration of Independence, announcing, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men *and women* are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights . . ." (qtd. in Ruth 486; emphasis added). Male and female writers sympathetic to universal suffrage continued to argue throughout the century that voting was an inalienable, individual right long overdue to women.

Whereas anti-suffragists claimed that woman's "natural" rights excluded her from individual participation, pro-suffrage writers questioned why, "natural" or not, political rights should be denied to women. The female author of "Reasons Why Women Should Vote"—whose "masculine vigor of thought and statement" was praised by the editor of the *Nation*—wrote in 1867,

The question whether or not the right of suffrage is a natural right, which occupies so prominent a place in the recent discussions about female suffrage, seems to me, I confess, to have very little bearing on the subject. Unless those who maintain that the right of suffrage is not a natural right can deduce as a logical conclusion from their premises that the male sex alone have a natural right to acquire it, I do not see that any amount of definition of a natural right . . . is of the slightest practical importance in discussing the present question. It is just, it is expedient . . . that women should share with men a right which, whether natural or acquired, undoubtedly exists here; and here alone lies the gist of the question. (417)

A year later, another writer argued in the *Radical* that the exclusion of women from the political sphere was the result of unnatural social constructions that unjustly limit women's individual freedom:

We sin against individual freedom by putting purely personal tastes, proprieties and conventions into organic and arbitrary forms, into social, civil and political institutions. . . . Let her become what time, thought, and wise discussion, in a word, what the inevitable law of human development may make her, whether that be politician or parlor-tician, kitchen domestic or railroad engineer, weakling or woman. The all-vital thing is an open field and fair play. (Cronyn 387–88)

For the pro-suffrage camp, enfranchisement was the ultimate exercise of woman's individual rights.

As reasonable, and even enlightened, as these arguments supporting female individualism may appear to modern readers, resistance was remarkably pervasive in nineteenth-century America.¹⁷ In a culture with so much invested in the belief that woman's moral influence was its best safeguard against anarchy, public feminism's emphasis on individualism raised the fear that the well-ordered Christian family would be replaced by lawless infidels. The fear of individualism caused some writers in the late nineteenth century to make statements that today appear ridiculously un-democratic. In "The Right Not to Vote," one writer in 1871 argues that women should not vote because if they did, "absolute individualism and anarchy" would be the result (74). Twenty years later, American readers of the *Eclectic* may have noticed the same sentiments coming from England in "The Emancipation of Women." In this essay, Frederic Harrison mocks "[t]he prevalent sophistry [that] calls out for complete freedom to every individual, male or female" and then describes the chaos that would ensue if women were granted suffrage:

Therefore—it is argued—let every man, woman, and child live with whomsoever he or she like, wear breeches or petticoats as he or she prefer, put their vote in a ballot-box whenever they see one at hand, conduct divine service, treat the sick, plead causes, coin money, carry letters, drive cabs, and arrest the neighbors, as they like, and as long as they like, and so far as they can get others to consent. (756)

Satirically equating voting with, among other things, promiscuity, cross-dressing, and counterfeiting, Harrison recasts the family as a loose band of criminals ruled only by their fickle passions. Likewise, to many Americans, equitable individualism represented a frightening restructuring of society in which civilization itself could be destroyed.

If domestic feminism stemmed from Locke's seventeenth-century construction of elite male

individualism, public feminism found philosophical allies in the works of the British philosopher John Stuart Mill and the French social theorist Charles Fourier. Not only did both men have a similar conception of individualism that included women, but, to some extent, they lent respectability to the suffrage movement because they were eminent *male* thinkers of the period. Public feminists saw Mill as a kindred spirit. In "On Liberty" in 1859, Mill argues that "the modern spirit of liberty is the love of individual independence" free from the repressive influences of society (qtd. in Shain 192). Mill recognized that the conventional social order Locke supported was unfairly patriarchal, arguing in 1869 that the subjection of women in particular was like slavery in that it indicated social coercion, not consent.¹⁸ Still, however influential Mill was philosophically, his efforts to gain voting rights for British women seemed distant compared to the visible impact of Fourierism on American society.

Fourier's work, translated and disseminated largely by Albert Brisbane through Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* in the 1840s, inspired twenty-nine utopian "phalanxes" and "Associations" all over the mid-western territories and New England.¹⁹ These Fourieristic communal experiments, which included Brook Farm and Raritan Bay Union, attracted a great deal of public attention, yet all but disappeared by 1855.²⁰ As Carl J. Guarneri has shown, many prominent thinkers, such as Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, the Grimkés, and Stanton, visited phalanxes and honed their social theories partly in relation to Fourieristic socialism. Fourier himself believed that women deserved equitable political rights, and his statement that "the extension of the privileges of women is the general principle of all social progress" was repeated by many of his admirers in America (1:133).²¹

However, Fourierism had a mixed impact on the women's movement in America. While most American Fourierists, including Brisbane, attempted to ignore elements of Fourier's the-

ory that were particularly critical of marriage and gender norms, by the late 1840s his most radical ideas became known by the general public and created a mystique around both Fourierism and socialism that lasted long after the phalanxes ceased operating. Fourier believed that society should be reorganized according to the "law of passionate attraction." This "law" was based on the idea that if innate human passions were satisfied, social harmony would result. He argued that repression of the passions caused the disharmony and inequity of the present social structure. Although Fourier identified twelve basic passions, it was his discussion of sexual passion that was the most controversial. He imagined a "New Amorous World" where marriage was unnecessary and a range of promiscuous sexual activity was tolerated and even encouraged (qtd. in Guarneri 94). Because the passions of women in particular had been repressed by the present social structure, Fourier saw women as benefiting from his theory the most. Fourier believed that woman's conformity to a sexually passionless feminine ideal stifled her individual development. According to Fourier, the institution of marriage, the sexual double-standard, and the denial of woman's personal authority caused women to look for sexual and emotional fulfillment in unnatural outlets such as sentimental love and superficial entertainments. Allowing women to develop their potential as individuals, Fourier argued, would bring the natural balance between men and women into harmony.

In a country where national stability was often linked to the containment of female desire, Fourier's emphasis on the free expression of passion was truly scandalous. Because of the radical ideas concerning passion, marriage, and female gender roles associated with Fourier, Fourierist socialism provided fuel for the anti-suffrage argument that the vote would lead to female adultery. Despite the fact that most American Fourierists did not subscribe to Fourier's more radical ideas, his "foreign" critique of marriage

was considered by detractors to be the underlying “truth” behind both the socialist and the women’s movement.²² In an essay on “Woman’s Rights” for the *American Review* in 1848, the Reverend John W. Nevin argues that by looking closely at the detrimental effects of socialism on marriage, he is able “to expose in a direct way . . . the entire theory of what is sometimes styled the *emancipation of woman*, as held with various modifications, by our modern Fourierites and Socialists” (379). Nevin warns that, through enfranchisement, Fourierites and Socialists would “unsex” woman by tempting her to “forsake her own character and sphere” as defined by Christian marriage (380). In the 1840s, Fourierism and Socialism seemed synonymous to many Americans. In “Societary Theories,” also published in an issue of the *American Review* in 1848, J. A. McMaster wrote, “In this country Socialism has been presented to us chiefly under the name of Fourierism; and, indeed, both in France and here this may be considered the fairest and best representation of the Socialist theory” (632). As a foreign import, socialism represented an anti-American desire to thrust women out of the chaste domestic sphere and into a sexualized political sphere.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive to modern readers, I would suggest that the distrust Nevin and others felt in regard to socialism was heightened by their underlying fear of female individualism. Although socialism was often characterized as anti-individual during the Cold War of the last half of the twentieth century, socialist theory in the nineteenth century was not only perceived as trying to make women the individual equals of men but also was often ridiculed as trying to make women literally into men.²³ In this context, Nevin emphasizes that marriage is a subordination of the “individual natures” of a woman: “As the united person constituted by marriage is required to centre ultimately in man, it follows that the union calls for the largest measure of such free sacrifice on the side of woman” (378).

Socialism, therefore, is destructive of the very foundation of marriage because it argues that men and women remain individuals.

In his final statement, Nevin reverses the meaning of “emancipation” in order to make woman’s marital limits the true nature of her “independence”: “In its [socialism’s] pretended regard for the dignity and freedom of woman, it robs her of the entire glory of her sex, and takes away the last bulwark of her independence and strength” (381). In “Societary Theories,” McMaster explicitly conflates female independence with adulterous sexual passion. In his critique, he echoes the Fourieristic terminology of “passion”: “Socialism is never tired nor ashamed of crying out that it alone, it first, is going to *emancipate* woman, by making her independent of man; to emancipate her again, by giving her up to follow her passions” (641). According to McMaster, socialists are for “making a rule of adultery” (637). He goes on to describe adulterous socialism as spreading like a venereal disease, “infecting whole masses throughout every country where they are propagated with a spirit of revolution for the establishment of unbridled licentiousness” (645).

However, there were some Americans for whom the “unbridled licentiousness” of Fourierism seemed appealing. For members of the small reform movement called “Free Love,” Fourier offered a codified theory that reinforced their own agitation for individualistic and sexual self-expression.²⁴ Although Free Lovers differed in the scope and scandal of their platforms, they basically agreed with Fourier that divorce should be more easily attainable, sexual relations should be dictated by mutual attraction rather than by marriage, and that women deserved the right to vote. However, Free Lovers differed from the much more moderate American Fourierists in their adamant belief that social ills—such as gender inequities and domestic abuse—would be cured through the elimination of marriage. While highly visible because of public fascination with them, a

relatively small number of reformers actually espoused Free Love through their writings, lectures, and experimental communities such as Modern Times and Berlin Heights.²⁵ Nevertheless, the Free Love movement had a direct impact on the debate over the woman's vote in nineteenth-century America. While their notoriety surpassed their actual activities, the general perception of Free Lovers as wild and licentious persisted throughout the century, offering even more reasons for politically conservative writers to distrust the suffrage movement.

Free Love as a movement entered public consciousness in 1852 with the sensational publication of Marx Edgeworth Lazarus's *Love vs. Marriage* and the discussion it inspired over several months in the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Observer*. The central argument of Lazarus's book was that marriage should be abolished because it instituted what was, in effect, female slavery and prostitution. The debate began when Lazarus's book was negatively reviewed by Henry James, Sr., himself a Fourierist, in the *Tribune*. In the review, James agreed that women were at a legal disadvantage within the institution of marriage; however, James advocated liberalizing divorce laws, not abolishing marriage. Despite James's anti-Free Love position, the *Observer* published an attack on James claiming that he was really an advocate for Free Love. James published a reply in the *Tribune* and soon a three-way debate emerged. Horace Greeley, the *Tribune's* editor, made the conventional argument that marriage was an indissoluble institution. At the other extreme, Stephen Pearl Andrews, a member of the Free Love community Modern Times, defended Lazarus's view that marriage should be abolished. In his responses, Andrews made what would become a common Free Love argument: that marriage was in itself an adulterous act because it was an institution not based on mutual attraction or true love. As Andrews proclaimed, "I charge adultery upon nine-tenths of the married couples in this city, committed not

out of, but within, the limits of their marriage bonds" (qtd. in Spurlock 121).²⁶

Critics argued that Free Love itself was an open invitation to commit infidelity. In particular, critics warned that Free Love encouraged women to cheat on their husbands. In 1855, after the publication of *Mary Lyndon*, the autobiographical account of Mary Gove Nichols's failed first marriage and conversion to Free Love, a reviewer for the *New York Times* warned that the book was "a deliberate attempt to teach the art of adultery, and to justify that crime as the realization of a 'true life'" ("A Bad Book Gibbeted" 2). Mocking Nichols's claim that "marriage without love was adultery," the reviewer warns that the author is actually "sowing the seeds of infidelity in the minds of innocent readers" by "exhort[ing] all such women [who are unhappily married] to follow her example" (2).

In combination with its radical view of marriage and adultery, Free Love added Josiah Warren's doctrine of Individual Sovereignty. Warren, a former Owenite who had lived at New Harmony, had developed an economic system based on what he called the cost principle and the sovereignty of the individual. In his socialistic system, profit was not a motive; instead, prices for goods would reflect only the necessary costs of production and labor. Although Warren limited his reforms to economic practices, his rhetoric of individuality was quickly adopted by Free Lovers to justify the abolition of marriage. Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols, who joined Warren's experimental community Modern Times in 1853, argued that woman's individualism included sexual as well as economic autonomy. As Thomas Nichols wrote in 1853,

It is for her nature to decide both as to whom she will admit to her embraces, and when; and there is no despotism on earth like that which compels a woman to the embraces of a man she does not love; or to receive the embraces of a

man she does love when her nature does not require them. . . . If a woman has any right in the world, it is the right to herself. (*Esoteric Anthropology* 96)

The following year, the Nicholsons redefined Warren's sovereignty of the individual in Free Love terms: "The society we want, is men and women, living in freedom, sustaining themselves by their own industry, dealing with each other in equity, respecting each other's sovereignty, and governed by their attractions; no one presuming to interfere in the delicate, the private, and personal matters of the affections" (*Marriage* 300).

In a culture already suspicious that individualism could lead to social chaos, the Free Love emphasis on individualism appeared to be a harbinger of doom. As early as the debate of 1852, Greeley warned that "the Sovereignty of the Individual"—that is, the right of every one to do pretty nearly as he pleases" would ultimately be "destructive alike of social and personal well-being" (qtd. in Stoehr 102). In Greeley's commentary, social stability is linked to the "wise law" of indissoluble marriage. However, Free Lovers insisted that individual rights were necessary for social progress. As Andrews stated in one of his responses to Greeley, "This same principle of individual sovereignty, which to you seems destructive alike of social and personal well-being, is to me the profoundest and most valuable and most transcendently important principle of political and social order and individual well-being ever discovered or dreamed of" (qtd. in Stoehr 108).

Gradually the notoriety of the Free Lovers eclipsed that of Fourierism, and, in the public imagination of the mid- to late nineteenth century, Socialism and Free Love became synonymous for the adulterous individualism presumably behind women's suffrage. Anti-suffrage writers argued that the woman's vote was a socialistic Free Love tactic to get rid of Christian marriage. In an editorial for the September

8, 1855, *New York Times* entitled "The Free Love System: Origin, Progress and Position of the Anti-Marriage Movement," the author conflates socialism with adultery and argues that it is trying to replace marriage with Free Love:

The championship of Socialism, or of universal Libertinism and Adultery, which is but another name for the same thing—is carried forward under various disguises and by many different agencies;—but they all aim at the same thing,—the destruction of the Marriage Relation as it is created and recognized by Christianity and by law, and the substitution for it of a system which will permit every man and every woman to consult solely their own inclinations in the relations they shall form and maintain.

According to the editorial, Free Love is not merely an ephemeral curiosity but an organized movement that manifests itself most dangerously through the woman's rights movement. The author warns, "The *Woman's Rights* movement tends directly and rapidly in the same direction,—that extreme section of it, we mean, which claims to rest on the absolute and indefeasible right of woman to an equality in all respects with Man, and to a complete sovereignty over her own person and her conduct." For members of the "ultra school . . . who thus identify their cause entirely with that of the adherents of the Free Love School," marriage "offers a perpetual barrier to the progress of what are technically styled Woman's Rights."

After the Civil War, *Modern Times* and *Berlin Heights* drifted into respectability; however, the torch of Free Love radicalism was passed to one woman of enormous notoriety: Victoria Woodhull.²⁷ While Free Lovers had always believed that women deserved the right to vote just as much as they deserved the right to choose their sexual partners, it was Woodhull who brought the issue of Free Love to the forefront of the suffrage platform during her campaign for President of the United States in the

early 1870s. By the time Woodhull ran, suffrage was almost unconsciously connected to overt female sexuality in the public imagination. After Woodhull's campaign, the perception that woman's suffrage was connected to Free Love and socialist ideology was concretely personified by Woodhull herself.

Already a celebrity as the first woman to hold a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, a popular lecturer, and a successful spiritualist for the likes of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, Woodhull turned her attention to politics after meeting Stephen Pearl Andrews in 1869. Andrews's ideas on Free Love and Individual Sovereignty appealed to Woodhull and articulated principles she believed proved the necessity for women's rights. Soon, Andrews became Woodhull's occasional co-author as she moved from brokering to politics.²⁸ In the April 2, 1870, *New York Herald*, she declared her candidacy for President based on individualistic criteria reminiscent of Andrews's teaching:

While others of my sex devoted themselves to a crusade against the laws that shackle the women of the country, I asserted my individual independence. . . . I therefore claim the right to speak for the unenfranchised women of the country, and believing as I do that the prejudices which still exist in the popular mind against women in public life will soon disappear, I now announce myself as a candidate for the Presidency. (qtd. in Underhill 77-78)

In May 1870, she and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, began publishing *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* as an organ for the campaign. For a time, she seemed like a natural leader for the woman's suffrage movement. In December, she testified before Congress on the legality of enfranchisement, gaining the admiration of women's rights activists like Stanton.

However, as Woodhull became more outspoken in her support for Free Love and Communism, her supporters in the women's rights movement began to distance themselves from

her. She proclaimed to a New York audience of more than three thousand in November 1871, "Yes, I am a free lover. I have an inalienable, constitutional and natural right to love whom I may, to love as long or as short a period as I can; to change that love every day if I please, and with that right neither you nor any law you can frame have any right to interfere" ("And the Truth Shall Make You Free" 23). For Woodhull, herself a married woman, basically to admit to adulterous behavior was shocking. In addition, her political leanings were equally unconventional. Merely a month after her impressive speech to Congress, she published the first English translation in America of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. A few months later, in "A Speech on the Impending Revolution" in Boston, Woodhull stated, "Now, Christ was a Communist of the strictest sort and so am I, and of the most extreme kind" ("Freedom" 28).

Although Woodhull had seemed like the darling of the suffrage movement in 1870, the publicity of her radical views in 1871 made her a liability to the movement. Pro-suffrage articles pleaded with women to distance themselves from Woodhull and all Free-Love theories. For example, the author of "Woman Suffrage in England," published in the June 10, 1871, edition of *Every Saturday*, predicts that women will gain suffrage in England before America because suffrage here "has become associated in many minds with free love and free divorce and half a dozen other forms of freedom dangerous to social order and the general welfare" (530). The following week, the author of "The Voice of Apollo Hall" warns that the "repugnant" ideas expressed by Woodhull at a recent convention damage the women's suffrage movement and make it necessary for women to take a more moderate stance if they are ever to convince men to allow women to vote.²⁹ Woodhull became angry at the lack of support and lashed out in the well-known instance of pointing out the hypocrisy of a much-revered former ally: the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. According

to Woodhull, the married minister was actually a Free Lover because he had secretly been involved sexually with a married parishioner, Elizabeth Tilton. Although the scandal eventually resulted in a sensational trial between Elizabeth's husband, the noted lecturer and political writer Theodore Tilton, and the minister in 1875, Woodhull's political career was effectively ended in 1872.

After Woodhull's sensational bid for the presidency and the scandals that followed, the suffrage movement continued to be both implicitly and explicitly linked to Free Love principles. In an essay for the *Southern Magazine* titled "Women's Rights Women" in 1871, R. L. Dabney states with authority that "'Women's Rights' mean the abolition of all permanent marriage ties. . . . The only relation between the sexes which will remain will be a cohabitation continuing so long as the convenience or caprice of both parties may suggest; and this, with most, will amount to a vagrant concubinage" (331). As a result, Dabney warns that "a race of sons will be reared nearer to devils than to men. In the hands of such a bastard progeny, without discipline, without homes, without a God, the last remains of social order will speedily perish, and society will be overwhelmed by savage anarchy" (332). He states that "the theory of 'Woman's Rights' is sheer infidelity" (331). He goes on to confuse Stanton with Woodhull, arguing that Stanton "holds that woman's bondage is not truly dissolved until the marriage bond is annulled" (331). By this time, "women's rights women" like Stanton are simply conflated with Free Love principles.

In "The Woman Question" in 1873, Orestes Brownson more explicitly continues what was by then the conventional argument that suffrage is fundamentally a Free Love threat to marriage. The former Transcendentalist states, "The advocates of woman suffrage . . . are moved principally . . . by the desire to abolish Christian marriage and introduce in its place what is called FREE-LOVE. . . . It abolishes wife-

hood, and for the wife it substitutes the mistress, and makes the end of the relation . . . sensual pleasure" (518). In a similar essay for the *Republic* the following year, an anonymous author fears that the sort of women who will enter politics will be "women of the lawless stamp of Mrs. Woodhull and Miss Susan B. Anthony" ("Shall Women Be Charged" 44). Here, the author simply conflates female advocates of enfranchisement with "Mrs. Woodhull" and thereby implies that they are all sexually, adulterously licentious.

For anti-suffrage writers, the trope of female adultery offered both a monstrous vision of female individualism and a means of defining the "necessary" limits on American women's freedom. Typically, anti-suffrage writers advocated the dominant separate sphere ideology of the day. The suffrage movement provided a dangerous counter-example to what they considered the model of feminine behavior. While "female-lobbyists" were portrayed as rare exceptions to true womanhood, their potentially dangerous sexual power ironically necessitated the confinement of all women within the domestic sphere. Thus, the adulteress's transgressive nature problematized the rigid, quotidian definition of womanhood she was meant to enforce.

An analysis of the conservative discourse in which the figure of the adulteress appears leads to a more fully contextualized understanding of the women's rights debate. By looking at texts that seem relatively obscure to us today but were actually part of the mainstream culture, a more instructive portrait of the political debates of the nineteenth century is possible. Today, Mrs. Sarah Cooper's concern that enfranchisement would lead to "a lamentable increase of the Mrs. Potiphar-type of womanhood" appears to be a ridiculous overestimate of the effect of suffrage on women. However, as I have illustrated, the specter of widespread female adultery was considered a serious threat by anti-suffrage writers throughout the nineteenth century, allowing

them to disparage women's suffrage as a dangerous, sexualized outgrowth of political movements such as public feminism, Fourierism, socialism, and Free Love.

In the broader cultural context, the rhetorical use of female adultery within the debate over women's rights and roles provides further insight into the structural relationship between concepts of gender and social organization, offering a deeper understanding of how the construction of gender is intimately connected to relationships of power. A closer look at the rhetorical strategies of nineteenth-century anti-suffrage writers provides a rich historical backdrop for current debates over women's rights. For example, the claims that suffrage would over-sex women, dissolve the family, and make women into men are echoed in statements by conservatives such as Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell during the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁰ The linking of suffragists to largely unpopular liberal theories such as socialism and Free Love is a precursor of the dismissive labeling of feminism as "political correctness" in the 1990s. Analysis of the conservative rhetoric of the past can help us better understand the underlying prejudices and fears that continue to hamper the women's movement. Through careful and respectful study of anti-suffrage literature and writers, we can more fully understand the persuasiveness and power of today's contrary positions in order to find ways to work together for the improvement of life for all women.

NOTES

I would like to thank the Newberry Library in Chicago, where most of the nineteenth-century materials cited in this essay were available.

1. "Female Suffrage. A Letter to the Christian Women of America. Part 1," "The Right Not to Vote," and Bloodgood also argue that only the worst women would vote.

2. My analysis corresponds with the work of other

critics who find fears about the fragility of the union articulated through the representation of female disruptions or misbehaviors. See Samuels's "Infidelity and Contagion: The Rhetoric of Revolution," Kann (23–24), and Barnes.

3. Susan Moller Okin writes, "Behind the individualistic rhetoric, it is clear that the family, and not the adult human individual, is the basic political unit of liberal . . . philosophers" (282). See also Shain (97).

4. See Kann (24) and Chudacoff on the fear of bachelorhood.

5. See Romero and Kann.

6. Nonreproductive sexual desire in women was an increasingly apparent social reality in the nineteenth century. See Degler, D'Emilio and Freedman, and Freedman.

7. See Nicholson (119).

8. See Bisland (754).

9. See Black, chapters one and two, for an overview of the various ways "feminism" has been defined and categorized by American and Canadian scholars. I agree with her that scholars seeking to define nineteenth-century American feminism have often equated it too narrowly with the suffrage movement. She advocates for a broader understanding of what feminism was in the nineteenth century and proposes two categories: "social feminism" and "equity feminism." In creating her typology, Black wants to use categories that have clear theoretical continuity with twentieth-century feminism. Although the term "social feminism" may be confused with "socialism," Black argues for its use because it emphasizes women's "integration of the social and the political" as an extension of the domestic role into the public sphere (26). She uses the term "equity feminism" for women's activities that strive to extend the rights of men to women, basing it on Gelb and Palley. My terms can easily fall into Black's categories but are, I believe, more intuitive and useful as historical terms. I find the older "domestic feminism" term to be perfectly serviceable and more reflective of nineteenth-century language, and less likely to be confused with socialism. The term "equity feminism" seems an inadequate counterpart for two reasons. As a borrowed legal term, it implies that "equity feminists" were

engaged in legal battles. Also, as a contrasting term, it implies that “social feminists” were not for gender equity—an implication that unfairly limits our understanding of these women given the broad interests of their various reform movements. “Domestic feminism” and “public feminism” better reflect both the methodology and the common arguments of these two groups. By adding a third term, “traditionalism,” I try to avoid unfairly pigeonholing the most conservative women as simply anti-feminist.

10. Welter, Smith-Rosenberg, Cott, and Kelley have been especially helpful to my understanding of the construction of womanhood and the politics of domesticity in nineteenth-century America. See Armstrong on the construction of ideal womanhood in nineteenth-century England.

11. Kann explains, “Throughout the nineteenth century, women organized and operated social movements for religious revivalism, social purity, Sabbath schools, child welfare, charity and public education. They conducted protests against slavery, prostitution, gambling, and, most notably, male intemperance. Female reform was a continuous crusade to protect family virtue by redeeming corrupt male society” (261).

12. “Family Limitation, Sexual Control and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America,” the essay in which Smith coined the term “domestic feminism,” was originally published in *Feminist Studies* in 1973 and has been reprinted in at least two essay collections on women’s history: *Clio’s Consciousness Raised* and *History of Women in the United States*. Other historians have found Smith’s term to be a useful way to refer to the empowerment of women via movements that emphasized a broadening influence within the family. For example, see Kann (27) and Scharff. Black wonders why Smith’s term has not been more widely used and claims that it was dismissed by late twentieth-century feminists who narrowly focused on suffragists as precursors to their own beliefs. For example, see DuBois’s collection of essays.

13. See also studies of the ways in which sentimentalism, the rhetorical aesthetic most associated with the cult of true womanhood, was used as a strategy for social change. See Tompkins; Brown; *The*

Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America, edited by Samuels; and Barnes.

14. See Tonkovich and Okker.

15. See Boydson, Kelley, and Margolis; see Hedrick and Sklar for insight into the Beecher sisters’ lives and their evolving politics of domesticity.

16. See Boydson, Kelley, and Margolis on Stowe’s complex reaction to the question of women’s suffrage (260–62). See Scharff on the work of women who, in 1869, were instrumental in gaining suffrage in Wyoming, yet did so while maintaining “feminine” propriety.

17. Kann remarks, “It is not surprising that nineteenth-century feminists employed individualist language and values. . . . What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which American women ignored individualism and cooperated in the promotion of the Victorian cult of true womanhood” (27).

18. See Mill’s “The Subjection of Women.”

19. Between 1841 and 1869, Fourierist communities sprang up in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, and Texas.

20. Brook Farm began in 1841 and became Fourierist in 1844.

21. Stanton put the following epigraph on the title page of her memoir: “Social science affirms that woman’s place in society marks the level of civilization.”

22. See also Bercovitch on the fear of European socialism after 1848 (219–20).

23. See “Modern Mannish Maidens.”

24. Guarneri states, “Fourier bequeathed to free love the vocabulary of passion attraction, a reform network in which it could circulate, and leaders who had served apprenticeships as utopian publicists” (354). Many of the most outspoken Free Lovers—such as Mary Gove Nichols, Marx Edgeworth Lazarus, and Stephen Pearl Andrews—had connections to Fourierism and espoused theories that can be linked to Fourier’s more controversial writings. See Stoehr’s Introduction and Spurlock.

25. In the 1850s, two Free Love communities emerged. Modern Times, which was started by Josiah

Warren in 1852 on Long Island, became a Free Love community in 1853. In 1857, Francis Barry established a Free Love community in Berlin Heights near Cleveland. Stoehr argues that “[a]ll in all free love had perhaps thirty leaders active between the publication of Marx Edgeworth Lazarus’s *Love vs. Marriage* in 1852 and the breakup of the Oneida Community in 1879, the heyday of the movement” (6). He conjectures that while there were probably only a few hundred strict adherents to free love, the movement’s publications and ideas were widely known.

26. Thomas Nichols in 1853: “[A] true marriage may be what the laws call adultery, while the real adultery is an unloving marriage” (*Esoteric* 100).

27. See Gabriel, Goldsmith, and Underhill.

28. Andrews was Woodhull’s ghostwriter for a series on political theory originally published in the *Herald* in 1871 and then reprinted in a book (Underhill 83–84).

29. See also “Free-Love and Free-Divorce.”

30. See Schlafly’s *The Power of the Positive Woman* (1977) (reprinted as *The Power of the Christian Woman* in 1980) and Falwell’s *Listen America!* (1980). See also Schlafly’s *Feminist Fantasies* (2003), with a foreword by Ann Coulter.

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