University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

Spring 2010

Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull

Victoria C. Woodhall

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Woodhall, Victoria C., "Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull" (2010). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 23.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/23

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull

Buy the Book

LEGACIES OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

SERIES EDITORS
Sharon Harris, University of Connecticut
Cindy Weinstein, California Institute of
Technology

ADVISORY EDITOR
Karen Dandurand, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania

BOARD OF EDITORS
Martha Cutter, University of Connecticut Storrs
Frances Smith Foster, Emory University
Susan K. Harris, University of Kansas
Mary Kelley, University of Michigan
Venetria Patton, Purdue University
Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Amherst College
Elizabeth Young, Mount Holyoke College

Buy the Book

Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull

Suffrage, Free Love, and Eugenics

Victoria C. Woodhull
Edited and with an introduction by Cari M. Carpenter

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

Buy the Book

© 2010 by the Board of Regents of the University
of Nebraska. All rights reserved.
Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Woodhull, Victoria C. (Victoria Claflin), 1838–1927.
[Selections. 2010]
Selected writings of Victoria Woodhull: suffrage, free
love, and eugenics / Victoria C. Woodhull; edited and
with an introduction by Cari M. Carpenter.
p. cm. —(Legacies of nineteenth-century American
women writers)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8032-1647-1 (PBK. : ALK. PAPER)
1. Women's rights—United States—History—
19th century. 2. United States—Social condi-
tions—1865–1918. 3. Women—Suffrage—United
States. 4. Woodhull, Victoria C. (Victoria Claflin),
1838–1927. I. Carpenter, Cari M., 1973– II. Title.
HQ1236.5.U6W688 2010
305.420973—dc22
2009035829

Set in Arno Pro by Bob Reitz.
Designed by Mikah Tacha.

Buy the Book

Contents

vii | List of Illustrations
ix | Acknowledgments
x | Note on the Text
xi | Introduction

Chapter One
1 | The Woodhull Manifesto

Chapter Two
5 | Killing No Murder

Chapter Three
7 | A Page of American History: Constitution of the United States of the World

Chapter Four
21 | The Memorial of Victoria C. Woodhull

Chapter Five
23 | Constitutional Equality

Chapter Six
29 | The New Rebellion: The Great Secession Speech of Victoria C. Woodhull

Chapter Seven
37 | My Dear Mrs. Bladen

Chapter Eight
40 | Correspondence between the Victoria League and Victoria C. Woodhull: The First Candidate for the Next Presidency

Chapter Nine
50 | My Dear Mrs. Mott

Buy the Book

Chapter Ten
51 | "And the Truth Shall Make You Free": A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom

Chapter Eleven
66 | A Speech on the Impending Revolution

Chapter Twelve
78 | The Correspondence of the Equal Rights Party

Chapter Thirteen
90 | Speech of Victoria C. Woodhull

Chapter Fourteen
98 | The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case

Chapter Fifteen
125 | The Naked Truth; or, the Situation Reviewed!

Chapter Sixteen
147 | Dear Lucretia Mott

Chapter Seventeen
149 | Reformation or Revolution, Which? or, Behind the Political Scenes

Chapter Eighteen
166 | The Spirit World: A Highly Interesting Communication from Mrs. Victoria C. Woodhull

Chapter Ninteen
172 | The Elixir of Life; or, Why Do We Die? An Oration

Chapter Twenty
198 | The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery

Chapter Twenty-One
212 | Tried as by Fire; or, the True and the False, Socially

Chapter Twenty-Two
261 | The Garden of Eden; or, Paradise Lost and Found

Buy the Book

Chapter Twenty-Three
273 | Stirpiculture; or, the Scientific Propagation of the Human Race

Chapter Twenty-Four
284 | The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit

Chapter Twenty-Five
295 | I Am the Daughter of Time

Chapter Twenty-Six
299 | Woman Suffrage in the United States

305 | Notes
321 | Bibliography
325 | Index

Illustrations

xii | Victoria C. Woodhull
xxiii | Thomas Nast cartoon, "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!"

Buy the Book

Buy the Book

Acknowledgments

Just as women's suffrage was not won by any single individual, this project owes its completion to the efforts of many people. First and foremost, I credit Sharon Harris's enthusiasm for the book, and her long-standing commitment to recovering the work of nineteenth-century American women writers. My colleagues at West Virginia University have assisted me in countless ways; Jane Donovan, John Ernest, Michael Germana, Kirk Hazen, David Krech, Carolyn Nelson, and Alyssa Wright have been particularly generous with their time. A Senate Grant from the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University enabled me to do research at the Boston Public Library, Harvard University, and the New York Public Library, and a Riggle Fellowship afforded me a visit to the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Special Collections. A book subvention grant from West Virginia University fostered the completion of this project. And I thank Kristen A. Elias Rowley, Ladette Randolph, Ann Baker, Lona Dearmont, and the others at the University of Nebraska Press who have helped bring this book to its readers.

I have also been aided by colleagues from other institutions: a Dartmouth summer seminar in July 2007 was helpful early in the book's compilation, and Bruce Mills of Kalamazoo College offered his guidance along the way.

This collection would not have been possible without earlier, foundational scholarship: Madeleine B. Stern's reader, biographies by Mary Gabriel, Barbara Goldsmith, Lois Beachy Underhill, and new critical studies like *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution* by Amanda Frisken. The Woodhull Presidential Library, http://www.victoria-woodhull.com/library.htm, has been another useful resource. Finally, I thank my students, whose surprise in learning about Woodhull for the first time helped convince me of the importance of this project.

Buy the Book

Special acknowledgment is due to graduate students Molly Hatcher and Beth Staley, whose diligence and dedication to this project would make any nineteenth-century suffragist proud. I also thank undergraduate Brittney Warnick for her editorial assistance.

I extend my appreciation to all of those suffragists who endured countless insults and injury so that women could vote.

I thank my parents for their unvarying support of this and all my projects. And finally, Eric Bowen's patience and kindness sustains my every day.

Note on the Text

Texts not intended for publication, including private letters and miscellaneous notes in Victoria Woodhull's handwriting, are presented exactly as they appear in the original. These documents were found in various archives. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century style is thus retained.

Texts intended for publication, including Woodhull's speeches and newspaper items, raise a more complicated question of authorship and intention. Scholars agree that these materials were written and edited at least in part by Stephen Pearl Andrews and Colonel James Harvey Blood. A comparison between her handwritten documents and the published texts reveals that the latter are far more polished, a fact that may reflect their status as published works more than it clearly indicates authorship. It remains difficult and perhaps not altogether desirable to determine exactly who wrote what; like any politician, Woodhull borrowed from others' words in crafting her public image. Any speech that exists in multiple versions has been edited to reflect, as much as possible, Woodhull's intentions. See individual texts for specific sources.

The only silent emendations are the following: obvious printer errors have been corrected, and variable font sizes and styles have been standardized. Anachronistic spellings and punctuation are maintained unless they would create confusion for the reader. Notes are the editor's. Woodhull's original footnotes are retained. Ellipses are used to represent the editor's textual omissions.

Buy the Book

Introduction

To the extent that anyone's life reflects the time in which she lives, Victoria Claflin Woodhull embodied hers. Born shortly after Samuel Morse developed the electric telegraph in the United States, she died not long after promising five thousand dollars to the first person to fly across the Atlantic. Like the inventions her life witnessed, she crossed what others deemed uncrossable. First and foremost a performer, her most extravagant crossovers occurred on stage, as she delivered speeches perhaps even more shocking by today's standards: speeches that espoused free love, a more equal distribution of wealth, and women's legal rights. In Amanda Frisken's words, Victoria Woodhull was "one of the most powerful speakers of the time. Her contribution was to act out the period's most extreme positions on a public stage" (5).

This collection offers a glimpse into the life of this complicated figure, affording us a sense not only of Woodhull's circumstances and accomplishments but of how they inform late nineteenth-century suffragism, reproductive rights, sexual politics, and spiritualism. While scholars tend to divide her life into two distinct phases—her early, progressive commitment to free love and her later conservative eugenics—I hope to show that the two are more connected than previously imagined, and that they need to be refigured in order to understand both her and her context.

Woodhull tends to be a marginal figure in many accounts of nineteenth-century women's rights, in part because of the disdain most suffragists ultimately felt toward her. Reformers like Susan B. Anthony, after a brief fascination with Woodhull, came to view her radicalism as a threat to the movement. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's voluminous record of the women's movement only mentions Woodhull's memorial to Congress, and an early biography of Anthony ignores

Buy the Book

Victoria C. Woodhull. By permission of the Billy Rose Theater Division, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations. Photographer unknown.

Buy the Book

Woodhull altogether (Gabriel 169). Anthony's aversion to Woodhull was perhaps most obvious at the National Woman Suffrage Association convention of May 1872, when she turned off the stage lights to prevent Woodhull from addressing the audience.[1] Today, Woodhull's memory remains eclipsed by suffragists like Anthony, Stanton, and Sojourner Truth: with the exception of books like *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, she usually haunts the margins of "First Wave" histories. Martha M. Solomon largely dismisses *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, one of four suffragist newspapers of the 1870s, as a "racy, often even lurid, chronicle of gossip" (95). Moving Woodhull to the center of the late nineteenth-century United States opens up a series of questions: How would her inclusion change the landscape of American studies or women's studies? Is her relative invisibility due to the past (and even present) tendency to "write her out" of women's rights histories, or is there something about her that conflicts with our present-day narratives of early feminist movements? How might we understand her in terms of the racism and imperialism of the late nineteenth century? To give her the attention she deserves, that is, requires a critical eye toward her challenge of and complicity in the social inequalities of the time. She was, at once, more *and* less progressive than our historical memory has allowed.

NOTES ON A LIFE

At first glance, Woodhull seems to be a woman of great contradictions: she was the first to print Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* in the United States even as she and her sister, Tennessee (Tennie), using Cornelius Vanderbilt's money, were the first known female stockbrokers in New York City; she condemned masturbation at the same time that she called for what we would now deem sex education; she described herself as a spiritualist and once spoke of the limits of "a Church's creed" while infusing many of her speeches with biblical scripture.[2] It is our twenty-first century lens, however, that makes these seem like contradictions; many of her ostensibly paradoxical beliefs were consistent with those of the time. In blasting "solitary vice," for example, she borrowed from the nineteenth-century hygiene movement that

Buy the Book

deemed masturbation as dangerous in part because it wasted critical bodily resources. Consider *A Lecture to Young Men* (1837), a book by Sylvester Graham—a man now best known as the namesake of the graham cracker: "therefore that the emission of semen enfeebles the body more than the loss of twenty times the same quantity of blood,—more than violent cathartics and emetics:—and hence the frequent and excessive loss of it cannot fail to produce the most extreme debility, and disorder, and wretchedness, of both body and mind" (Graham 51–52). Woodhull's "The Elixir of Life" (1873) expresses a similar sentiment: "With this knowledge [of masturbation], added to the stifled but still growing passion, they decline into a morbid sexual condition which, running into years, carries them beyond the possibility of a return to natural and healthy action to maturity, utterly ruined, sexually and physically" (chap. 19, this vol.).

While Graham and Woodhull ultimately reached different conclusions, both were preoccupied by what they saw as improper sexuality. Marshalling various medical and religious literature, Woodhull, not unlike the hygienists, sketched a vision of sexual health that seems rather draconian today. It is not difficult to draw a connection between such writing and a later eugenic preoccupation with the "fit" and "unfit." Given these parameters on sexuality, "free love" becomes something else indeed.

Woodhull was, like anyone, a product of her surroundings, which in her case were those of a profound and transformative religious and spiritual revival. Victoria Claflin was born in Homer, Ohio, in 1838, a decade before the celebrated Seneca Falls Convention. It was a time when the Second Great Awakening held sway, dotting the landscape with revival tents and bringing people like Victoria's mother, Rose, to their feet—and knees. It was a time when people had a fine (or perhaps an obtuse) sense of spectacle: the Fox sisters, two young girls who claimed to hear the rappings of a murdered salesman in Hydesville, New York, were soon exhibited by P. T. Barnum. It was a time when people knew both too much and too little: in this case, the ghost claimed to be Charles B. Rosma, who had been killed and buried in the cellar. Indeed, a skeleton was found in the cellar wall in 1904, long before DNA tests could have confirmed the ghost's story.

Buy the Book

Victoria's father, Buck Claflin, always looking for a get-rich scheme, took advantage of the spiritualist rage and installed Victoria and her sister Tennie as mediums from a young age. Well versed as a charlatan, he led them on exhibits throughout the country. Their departures were sometimes determined by customer dissatisfaction; in the most damaging case, an Illinois cancer patient claimed in 1864 that Tennie had sold her an ineffective treatment. Tennie left the state immediately to evade authorities. For Victoria, it was a seamless slide at age fifteen from such schemes to a hasty marriage with Dr. Channing Woodhull, a Civil War veteran more devoted to drink than to his new wife. Victoria's son, Byron, was born at home in 1854 with the assistance of his intoxicated father. Victoria would always blame Byron's mental disability on the fact that he was conceived and delivered in a dysfunctional marriage. Later writings like "Stirpiculture" and "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit" argue that loveless matches result in "undesirable" offspring. Although such theories are repugnant today, in her time they offered women like Woodhull a compelling defense against unsatisfying marriages and restrictive gender roles. Her theory did not hold out with her daughter, Zula Maud, however, who was born under similar circumstances in 1861. Zula would become Victoria's most devoted companion.

It was Zula's birth, and Channing Woodhull's continuing intoxication, that convinced Victoria to secure a divorce. She met Colonel James Harvey Blood in St. Louis in 1864 when he consulted her as a spiritualist. They applied for a marriage license two years later in Ohio. In 1868 she reported being called to New York City by the spirit of the Greek orator Demosthenes. Woodhull thus became one of the millions who were drawn to a city by its promises of financial and political opportunities during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Along with Tennie, Woodhull opened a stockbroking office in New York in early 1870. It was a time of many firsts for the burgeoning city; work on the Brooklyn Bridge began that month. The sisters made much of their money through an alliance with tycoon Cornelius (Commodore) Vanderbilt, who at one point asked Tennie to marry him. She declined, apparently satisfied with their extramarital relationship. Victoria and Tennie credited their spiritualist powers for their ability

Buy the Book

to advise investors. They established their newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, with stockmarket funds. Despite its claim to be the "only Paper in the World conducted, absolutely, upon the Principles of a Free Press," it was forever linked both to their financial status and the sexualized image they acquired: men, who dominated the financial scene, could see these first lady stockbrokers in no other terms. As Amanda Frisken has shown, sporting newspapers contributed to their sexualization; *The Days' Doings*, for example, presented a suggestive image of the sisters surrounded by men (2–3). In another cartoon, Victoria and her sister Tennie, riding in a carriage on Wall Street, whip the submissive men who pull the carriage (4, 6).[3] This cartoon indicates the anxiety their public positions aroused as they crossed into a male stronghold. On February 6, 1870, the *New York Times* expressed skepticism about the brokers' future: "The place was thronged from early morning until late at night by a crowd of curiosity hunters, who gazed at the females and besieged them with questions. The older and more respectable dealers of the street remained at their offices, discussing the advent of the female financiers in the street, and there was a strong popular feeling against the persons. . . . A short, speedy winding up of the firm of WOODHULL, CLAFLIN & Co. is predicted" (8). The *New York Herald* was far more laudatory: "Their extraordinary coolness and self-possession, and evident knowledge of the difficult *rôle* they have undertaken, is far more remarkable than their personal beauty and graces of manner, and these are considerable. They are evidently women of remarkable coolness and tact, and are capable of extraordinary endurance" (quoted in *The Human Body* 296). Likewise, the *New York Courier* agreed that they were "perfectly capable of taking care of themselves" (quoted in *The Human Body* 297).

Despite these votes of confidence, the financial world Victoria and Tennie entered as the "First Lady Stockbrokers" in 1870 was a tumultuous one. On one hand, with growing opportunities in oil and steel investments, Gilded Age fortunes were made overnight; on the other, speculation and shifting government monetary policies rendered such fortunes ever fragile. The market was just recovering from Black Friday of 1869, when thousands lost money after President Ulysses S. Grant

Buy the Book

released gold into the market, thus lowering the value of gold held by private investors. The Woodhull sisters were initially able to survive market fluctuations because of their close relationship with Vanderbilt. By 1872, when that relationship came to an end following Victoria's criticism of him in speeches like "The Impending Revolution," they were more vulnerable. At that point, Victoria became dependent on income from her lectures. The newspaper and the brokerage fell into debt; *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* briefly ceased circulation in 1872, and when landlords refused to rent to her, Woodhull was forced to move from a regal home to her office. Her financial situation was further impeded by the size of her large and often unharmonious household: her parents, ex-husband, and various other relatives lived with her. In May 1871 her mother, notoriously mercurial, sued Colonel Blood for alienating her from Victoria's affections and threatening her with bodily harm. The very public case did not help Woodhull's reputation. The *New York Times* records Woodhull's financial decline: in 1871 she offered ten thousand dollars to the struggling women's rights movement (an amount she did not in fact deliver), while the *Times* of August 28, 1872, recorded her testimony that she did not even own "the clothes on her back" (2).

In 1871 the woman who would offer thousands to the women's suffrage movement became the first woman to speak before a U.S. congressional committee. Her memorial made an argument, known as the "new departure," that she had heard at the women's suffrage convention in 1869: the Constitution already grants women, as citizens, suffrage. Her goal was "to show that *to vote is not a privilege* conferred by a State upon its citizens, but a CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT of every citizen of the United States, of which they cannot be deprived" (*The Origin, Tendencies, and Principles of Government*, 37). She goes on to assert that "[t]he male citizen has no more right to deprive the female citizen of the free, public, political expression of opinion than the female citizen has to deprive the male citizen thereof." Woodhull argued that women have a race, and therefore are enfranchised thanks to the Fifteenth Amendment. The argument that women's suffrage is a constitutional right was made by suffragists with words and action as they attempted

Buy the Book

to vote on a number of occasions. The majority of the committee was not convinced by Woodhull's argument, however, responding that the question of suffrage should be left up to the states. Woodhull and other suffragists were heartened by the minority opinion, which was penned by Representatives William Loughridge and Benjamin Butler.

One of Woodhull's first public statements on suffrage appeared in the *New York Herald* of April 2, 1870. The *Herald*, a major publication of the nineteenth century, was an interesting choice; its publisher was James Gordon Bennett, who has been called the father of yellow journalism. As Erika Falk notes, the paper's extensive coverage of Woodhull can be explained in part by its focus on financial matters (103). As New York's first female stockbroker, Woodhull was of obvious interest to such a publication. She begins her editorial by asserting that her actions to date have earned her the right to speak on women's behalf, while others have merely given lip service to equality: "I boldly entered the arena of politics and business and exercised the rights I already possessed" ("The Woodhull Manifesto," chap. 1, this vol.). The first part of the piece is filled with active verbs: she "asserted," "worked," and "proved," and she ends with words popular among politicians: "courage, energy and strength." After establishing her right to speak, she turns to the frequent argument of white women that if blacks (black *men*, that is) have the vote, of course "woman" should. The immensely complicated status of sectionalism and Reconstruction is here reduced to a single sentence: "The simple issue whether woman should not have this complete political equality with the negro is the only one to be tried, and none more important is likely to arise before the Presidential election." In this statement "woman" is implicitly white and "negro" is implicitly male. The alignment of women with whites and "negros" with men is also evident in Woodhull's later speech "The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery": "Tell me that wives are not slaves! As well might you have done the same of the negroes, who, as the women do not, did not realize their condition!" (chap. 20, this vol.). Such comments emerged within the Reconstruction era when tensions between whites and African Americans, northerners and southerners, Democrats and Republicans festered. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868,

Buy the Book

assured citizenship for former slaves, reversing the earlier decision of *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, while the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 banned the prohibition of suffrage based on race, color, or previous servitude. The Enforcement Act of 1870 attempted to combat rising violence and discrimination against African Americans in the South. But by 1872, reconstruction efforts were waning; President Grant, who had begun to shy away from such policies, won another term. It was in this context that Woodhull argued that "women," who were implicitly white, should be able to vote. This argument was unsuccessful in securing a sixteenth amendment for women's suffrage; it was not until 1920 that they won the vote.

Woodhull's racism took a number of forms, from claims that black men did not deserve the right to vote before white women to more subtle associations with whiteness. One of her most egregious statements comes in "The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery": in response to the claim that free love would result in women's unrestrained passion, she asks, "Did you not say that all the women would immediately rush into the arms of every man they should meet, let it be in the street, in the car or wherever else; that even negroes would not escape the mad debauch of white women?" Woodhull employs miscegenation, a primary fear of the time, as evidence for her own racist argument, suggesting how preposterous it would be that white women would desire black men. Her famous speech "Tried as by Fire" includes a more subtle call for women to embrace "their white-robed purity" (chap. 21, this vol.). These were powerful words, given that "pure white women" were "one of the central fictions of the antebellum southern aristocracy" (Frisken 58). In turn, the popular press produced several images suggesting that Woodhull's ticket promoted a distasteful mingling of the races (Frisken 62–84). Again, we are faced with an apparent contradiction: Woodhull ran on the equal rights ticket even as she took advantage of her white privilege and depended on racist figures like George Francis Train, who offered her financial and emotional support during her battles with anti-obscenity crusader Anthony Comstock.[4]

The Equal Rights Party, whose main goal was to secure women's suffrage, was credited with a July 4th letter of nomination that Woodhull

Buy the Book

actually wrote. The letter and Woodhull's response appeared in the *Weekly* in June 1872. At the May 1872 meeting, the 668 delegates nominated abolitionist Frederick Douglass as her running mate. For reasons that remain unknown, he never responded.[5] As Frisken argues, the party's nomination of a white woman and an African American man in this period of extensive racial violence was, if nothing else, a symbolic testament to the equal rights it claimed to pursue. The fact that Woodhull could run on this ticket even when espousing such beliefs indicates the depth and complexity of the period's racism. Most sources indicate that Woodhull received some popular votes in the presidential election, but no electoral votes. She ran again, with much less fanfare, in the 1884 and 1892 races.

The height of Woodhull's speaking career was in the 1870s; according to Amanda Frisken, "By 1872, none of the suffrage lecturers could command an audience that compared to Woodhull's" (119).[6] Even when—or perhaps because—her reputation was tainted by scandal, she made successful lectures across the country. Spectators often commented on her appearance, noting her magnetism, beauty, and the single rose that she often wore at her neck. In 1872 audience member Austin Kent described her as "[a] woman, small in stature, of good countenance, and feminine in manner, [who] took the liberty to think freely, write her thought, and read it to six thousand people,—six thousand more returning to their homes—not finding standing room in the Hall" (1). Accounts of her nervousness in her first lectures are rendered with a note of approval, suggesting that she was viewed as feminine enough to avoid outright censure. At the same time, in keeping with a larger move among suffragists to challenge the restrictive women's fashions of the day, Woodhull often wore men's clothing. Descriptions of her physical appearance indicate that at least at the height of her popularity, she was able to walk a fine line between being adequately feminine and, in wearing masculine dress, avoiding a debilitating sexualization. As a reporter from the *New York World* noted, she combined "a singular masculine grasp with the most gentle and womanly attraction" (quoted in *The Human Body* 272). Frisken notes that Woodhull was especially gifted at winning over hostile audiences, a valuable talent as she continued

Buy the Book

to battle public opinion. She did so using a variety of tactics, appearing with a Bible to deliver "The Human Body the Temple of God" in the South; speaking directly to the mothers in the audience; and beginning lectures with a shaky voice (Frisken 137–41). Her rhetorical strategies, then, were as varied as the audiences she faced.

Key to Woodhull's prominence—and her fall from the good graces of many other suffrage leaders—was her fierce adherence to free love. As she said at a dramatic moment in "The Principles of Social Freedom," "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" (chap. 10, this vol.). Free lovers disagreed, however, on how "free" one should be; some varietists, to the displeasure of monogamists, argued for multiple lovers. Joanne E. Passet captures the term's ambiguity:

> Mainstream newspaper editors and clergy, free love's most vocal critics, called anyone who deviated from customary ideals of proper behavior a "free lover." Nineteenth-century sex radicals further confused matters because they could not agree on the term's application in daily life: for some it meant a lifelong and monogamous commitment to a member of the opposite sex, others envisioned it as serial monogamy, a few advocated chaste heterosexual relationships except when children were mutually desired, and a smaller number defined it as variety (multiple partners, simultaneously) in sexual relationships. Many who called themselves free lovers were married yet denounced marriage as an institution requiring women's subordination to men. Yet no matter what their practical interpretation of free love, they shared two core convictions: opposition the idea of coercion in sexual relationships and advocacy of a woman's right to determine the uses of her body. (2)

Indeed, Woodhull regarded sex within loveless marriages as coercive to women, and held that wives who remained in such relationships simply for the sake of convention were more "impure" than prostitutes. In turn, as Tennie argued in the *Weekly* on September 23, 1871, abortion

Buy the Book

indicated that conception occurred not in love but in the shackles of institutionalized marriage: "Abortion is only a symptom of a more deep-seated disorder of the social state. It cannot be put down by law. Normally the mother of ten children is as healthy, and may be as youthful and beautiful, as a healthy maiden. Child-bearing is not a disease, but a beautiful office of nature. But to our faded-out, sickly, exhausted type of women, it is a fearful ordeal. Nearly every child born is an unwelcome guest. Abortion is the choice of evils for such women" (9).

For reformers like Tennie Claflin and Victoria Woodhull, abortion was one inevitable result of a society in which children were conceived in loveless unions without proper support. Thus abortion itself was not the primary crime, but the social system that made it necessary.

In contrast to opponents who equated "free love" with promiscuity, some who adopted the label urged abstinence. Woodhull made a number of attempts in her speeches to distinguish "free love" from "free lust," at times preferring the more neutral term "social freedom." Such attempts were not always successful. Thomas Nast's infamous cartoon in *Harper's Weekly* sports the caption "Get thee behind me, (Mrs.) Satan!" and features a sinister Woodhull with batlike wings clutching a sign that reads "Be Saved By Free Love." Behind her a sickly woman is bent over with the weight of two infants and a whiskey-guzzling man. Nast emphasizes Woodhull's full lips and eyebrows, characteristics that seem both sensual and dangerous. Inserting the title "Mrs." here, the artists reminds readers that Woodhull's sex is of vital importance; this is not just Satan, but his wife. So the very "free love" that Woodhull espoused, with its critique of institutional marriage, is erased in this title: she is effectively married off, stripped of her name in the usual patriarchal tradition.

An understanding of Woodhull's conception of free love requires a consideration of Stephen Pearl Andrews (1812–1886), her most important mentor besides James Blood. Through lectures and writing, Andrews helped popularize Josiah Warren's notion of "Individual Sovereignty," the belief that each person was the only authority on his or her true sexual relations. Warren and Andrews had created the social experiment Modern Times at Long Island in 1851. Andrews wrote and distributed

Buy the Book

Thomas Nast, "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" *Harper's Weekly*, February 17, 1872. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Buy the Book

the 1853 pamphlet *Love, Marriage, and Divorce,* an argument for social freedom. He was an eccentric man with a long list of preoccupations: he developed a system of phonographic recording, learned thirty languages (even developing one of his own), and in 1843 proposed an unsuccessful plan to end slavery by having English abolitionists purchase and then free Texan slaves. One of his most famous inventions was "The Pantarchy," a somewhat mystical free-love organization. *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* was, at least initially, its organ (Stern 109). In Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's words, it was his "odd combination of anarchic liberalism and economic radicalism" that most influenced Woodhull (349). Andrews's fingerprint is visible on Woodhull's involvement in labor rights and antimonopoly work. Both were members of Section 12 of the International Workingmen's Association, a socialist organization founded in 1864 and relocated to New York City in 1872. The *Weekly* ran regular updates on the association during this time, and its prospectus declares its commitment to a new land, economic, and industrial system "in which each individual will remain possessed of all his or her productions." Victoria and Tennie received much press attention for their participation in a parade in December of 1871 on behalf of Louis-Nathaniel Rossel and other leaders who had been executed after the failure of the Paris Commune, a short-lived socialist rule of Paris. Woodhull also held an honorary post in the American Labor Reform League. Her interest in labor issues is evident in "A Page of American History: Constitution of the United States of the World" (1870), a revision of the U.S. Constitution that gives Congress the power of the "abolition of Pauperism and Beggary" and calls for a system in which "the producer is entitled to the total proceeds of labor, which shall prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of non-producers" (chap. 3, this vol.). Woodhull's views on labor were shaped not only by Andrews but by political economists like Henry George, who argued that poverty resulted from the concentration of large amounts of land and natural resources in the hands of monopolies. Woodhull's commitment to free love and women's suffrage conflicted with the larger communist platform, however, and in 1872 her chapter was expelled from the International Workingmen's Association.

Buy the Book

Woodhull's vision of free love drew in part from the tenets of the Oneida Community, which she once described as "the best order of society now on the earth" ("Tried as by Fire," chap. 21, this vol.). Founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848, the community held that its highest purpose was the worship of God, and that "worship," in what today seems like a generous definition of the term, included polygamous sexual relations. Indeed, within his borders, monogamy was not allowed; in its place was "complex marriage," promiscuous sexual relationships. Young men had sex with postmenopausal women in order to learn the withdrawal method that was required of all men (unless they were given permission to reproduce). Jealousy among spouses was strongly discouraged. In keeping with a communist ethos, children were raised not by their parents—indeed, parental ownership of any kind was frowned upon—but by the community at large. If women could tolerate the lack of privacy and the autocratic rule of the commune, they enjoyed a freedom from the kinds of control that existed in the larger society: they could determine when, and even if, they wanted children; they were not limited to particular kinds of labor; and they escaped the patriarchal control of a husband (although this control was handed over, in many cases, to Noyes himself). When we try to fit Oneida into contemporary models of sexuality we are inevitably stymied: its progressive spirit was stunted by Noyes's rigid control, and the proto-eugenist selection of "desirable" partnerships is likely to make anyone uncomfortable.

The structure of the Oneida Community, for better or worse, had a conclusive answer to one of the central questions posed to free lovers: what is the fate of the children of open relationships? In works like "The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery" (chap. 20, this vol.), Woodhull envisions a somewhat similar arrangement, but knowing that the Oneida arrangement was at once too local and too sweeping for the masses, she struggled to find a suitable answer. Stephen Pearl Andrews's letter in the *Weekly* of August 26, 1871, takes up this issue: "The third and last grand objection to Amorous Liberty relates to the maintenance and culture of Children. This objection assumes that the isolated family offers the only mode of properly caring for offspring. The family, as

Buy the Book

now constituted, is, in fact, a very hot-bed of selfishness, which, while it provides for one's own children badly enough, permits the children of others, equally good, to starve at one's door, with the comfortable assurance that the responsibility belongs with somebody else. A grand social revolution is soon to occur" (11). The nursery imagined here is "scientifically organized and adapted to the new social state" (11). This nursery would thus be a cradle, so to speak, of the communist civilization Andrews envisioned.

One of the speeches included in this volume is Woodhull's most famous articulation of free love. According to Frisken, "A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom" (chap. 10), first delivered in 1871, is "probably the most frank defense of social freedom before a public audience in American history" (37). When Woodhull gave "Social Freedom" (also called "The True and the False") to a St. Paul audience in 1874, a reporter declared that she spoke with "considerable fierceness, and with a degree of elocution that indicates no small amount of study and labor. As a speaker she irresistibly attracts attention, both on account of the matter and the manner, and one listens continually, wondering what will come next" (quoted in Frisken 124). Others echoed this sense of her "electrifying" words (quoted in Frisken 124). Such reviews indicate that the success of Woodhull's message was due in no small part to her masterful delivery, with her speeches amounting to a kind of seduction: as one noted, "her face and form present a spectacle of bewildering loveliness such as Praxiteles might worship" (quoted in *The Human Body* 272). Given Woodhull's starring role in discussions of sex and marriage in the late nineteenth century, it is little wonder that she took center stage in one of the biggest scandals of the time, the Beecher-Tilton trial. In September 1872, after hearing rumors of the affair of fabulously popular minister Henry Ward Beecher and his parishioner Elizabeth Tilton, Woodhull detailed their infidelity in her address at the meeting of the American Association of Spiritualists. On November 2 she published it in her newly resuscitated newspaper. Woodhull was driven to expose Beecher not only because of her commitment to free love but a balder need for money. Throughout the controversy and later trial, she maintained that Beecher's crime was

Buy the Book

not his adultery but his failure to acknowledge it publicly. He was, in other words, practicing free love in private while publicly denouncing its followers. The newspaper was an immediate bestseller; copies went for as much as forty dollars each. As Horowitz details, public response to Woodhull was mixed: some defended her while others believed she had crossed the line into indecency. Woodhull's involvement in the scandal was complicated by her personal and professional relationship with Tilton, her biographer and possible lover.[7] Tilton and Beecher never fully reconciled; Beecher's trial in 1875 ended in a hung jury.

The Beecher-Tilton scandal coincided with both Woodhull's presidential ambitions and her battle with the reformer Andrew Comstock. Comstock was appalled by the "foul stories and criminal deeds" that he saw as a direct threat to innocence (*Traps for the Young* 8). Yet as historians have shown, Comstock's crusade was not as easy as one might expect. In an urban setting like New York City, prostitution was big business; at one point, there were 621 brothels (Gabriel 33). As early as the 1830s, periodicals ostensibly protesting vice delighted in publishing titillating details of prostitution and engaged, on occasion, in blackmail. According to Horowitz, opposition to "vice" was less organized at this time than it would be in later decades. Even when anti-obscenity organizations became more prevalent later in the century, Comstock was subject to judicial decisions like that of Samuel Blatchford, who ruled in 1873 that Comstock's law did not apply to newspapers. Such moments allowed Woodhull and her associates the delicious treat of lampooning him, as with their editorial "Poor Comstock." Consider Woodhull's depiction of the infamous figure in the *Weekly* on March 8, 1873: "Now, we commiserate what we know must be the feelings of so sensitive of a soul as this one is, and we hope the Christian ministry will instantly call a series of prayer meetings, lest under the extreme affliction he may fall from grace. . . . Poor Comstock! We trust your Christian hope and faith will prove sufficient in this your hour of trial, and that Christ, upon whom you so confidently lean for support, may not even now think you a heavy load to carry" (10).

On November 2, 1872, Woodhull, Tennie, and Colonel Blood were arrested on obscenity charges for the Beecher-Tilton article and sent

Buy the Book

to the Ludlow Street Jail, where they would spend Election Day. They were bailed out only to be arrested again soon after on charges of libeling Luther Challis, a man they had accused of seducing two young women. The sisters were acquitted of libel in 1874. Despite Comstock's efforts, the obscenity charges were dismissed in the summer of 1873 when the judge ruled that the 1872 law did not apply to newspapers. A more stringent law, including a special agent position that Comstock would occupy, was signed by President Grant on March 3, 1873. Molly McGarry notes that although it passed without much public notice, it "would police sexuality and govern traffic in sexual literature and information for nearly a century afterward" (9). In another momentary victory, upon hearing in January 1873 of Comstock's plans to arrest her once again, Woodhull disguised herself in order to speak at the Cooper Institute. In an editorial in the *Weekly* on February 8, 1873, she boasts of her success:

> It would be impossible for me to secrete myself in the building and to appear upon the rostrum at the proper time. Therefore I resolved to assume a disguise. Some willing friends assisted, and I soon presented the appearance of an old and decrepit Quaker lady. In this costume I confidently entered the hall, passing a half-dozen or more United States marshals, who stood guarding the entrances and warning the people that there was to be no lecture there that night—so certain they were of arresting me. But I passed them all safely, one of them even essaying to assist me on through the crowd. (9)

Her effect was momentous; as one observer wrote, "[T]here, with an energy and excitement never to be forgotten, [she] threw off her disguise, pushed her fingers through her disheveled hair with tremulous rapidity, and stood before her audience as Mrs. V. C. Woodhull" (quoted in Frisken 106). She would not, it seems, be easily silenced. The agents waited until the conclusion of the speech to make the arrest.

Woodhull's life was shaped not only by free love ideology and the anti-obscenity movement, but by spiritualism. Spiritualism and sexuality, McGarry has argued, were intimately related. According to McGarry, claims to materialization—the embodiment of spirits—who could

Buy the Book

pass over literary and abstract boundaries of space and morality, even kissing séance participants, related to the fears that the postal service could transmit vice from public to private space, urban setting to the home. Spiritualism, with its own crossings, threatened to unsettle rigid conventions, just as the "obscene" mailing could corrupt the innocent. Famous for her own crossings of public and private space, Woodhull provoked similar awe and unease. At the same time, Woodhull's spiritualism was occasionally used to defend her morality:

> In this Lecture, Mrs. Woodhull used no language touching "social freedom" which had not been often used by the best minds, in relation to mental and religious freedom,—yet a host of human hornets were ready to sting her. It was not strange, and was no "disgrace" that many Spiritualists should demur to her positions, and closely, if kindly criticize them. Some Spiritualists are and have been life-long conservatives. But how could any *Spiritualist* condemn free thought and free speech, no matter where they may have led an honest soul! At this we have a right to marvel. (Kent 1)

American spiritualism found its origins in the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and the French socialist Charles Fourier. Swedenborgism enjoyed tremendous popularity in the United States beginning in the 1840s. It differed markedly from traditional Christian beliefs, endorsing "spiritual affinities" that might occur outside traditional marriage. Fourier's commitment to women's rights and cooperative living communities had obvious appeal to people like Noyes. Despite spiritualist departures from Christian tradition, the two beliefs often coexisted. Spiritualism became all the more popular during and after the Civil War, when a nation of mourners sought connection to the dead.

The connection between spiritualists, abolitionists, and advocates of women's rights was an intricate one: William Lloyd Garrison and the Grimké sisters, for example, were early adherents. As Ann Braude writes, "Not all feminists were Spiritualists, but all Spiritualists advocated women's rights" (3). In the first decades of the movement, a time when women speakers were still quite rare, spiritualism offered them a public position as mediums. Braude notes that mediums were most

Buy the Book

often women and girls because the position of medium was thought to require the passivity associated with females. In this capacity women thus enjoyed an authority they had not previously known. Indeed, the African American author-turned-spiritualist Harriet Wilson was able to support herself in Boston in the 1860s as "the colored medium."[8] In the spiritualist tradition, Woodhull performs passivity as a means of asserting her voice: "Do not, however, receive this as coming from me; but accept it as coming from the wisest and best of ascended Spirits—those whom you have learned to honor and love for the good done while on the earthly plane" ("The Elixir of Life," chap. 19, this vol.). Woodhull continued to refer to the spirits as inspiration on stage even in the 1870s, when women speakers were more common: in an 1873 letter to the *Pittsburgh Leader*, she wrote, "I should feel that all the blessings that make life worth having would be lost to me, were I now commanded to testify of my life, to attempt to arrogate to myself, what has been done through me by spirits."[9]

The development of spiritualism was often likened to the telegraph, which was seen as a metaphorical tie to God: a kind of spiritualist strand of pearls linking the individual and the divine. Noted authors from Margaret Fuller to James Fenimore Cooper subscribed to spiritualist tenets. With its emphasis on the individual connection to the divine and its commitment to reform, spiritualism differed markedly from Calvinism. As evident in Woodhull's mother's frequent "trances," it overlapped well with the fervency of the Second Great Awakening. For many Americans a direct connection to God was more important than precise adherence to the tenets of any one faith. In the words of historian Nathan O. Hatch, "[W]hether they came to fix their identity as Methodist or Baptist, Universalist or Disciple, Mormon or Millerite, [religious leaders] all shared a passion for expansion, a hostility to orthodox belief and style, a zeal for religious reconstruction, and a systematic plan to labor on behalf of that ideal" (56). Thus Woodhull came of age in a time when people were relatively receptive to multiple expressions of faith.

The fact that Victoria Woodhull was elected president of the American Association of Spiritualists in 1871 suggests her prominence in the

Buy the Book

field; however, Braude notes that many spiritualists felt alienated by Woodhull's view of marriage as legalized prostitution. Braude describes Woodhull as an opportunist who rose rather rapidly in the ranks of the spiritualist society as the movement was beginning to wane; mediums, once considered respectable channels to deceased loved ones, were increasingly dismissed as charlatans. Woodhull herself critiqued the "barefaced frauds" in a letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Leader* in 1873. It was at this point that Christian Scientists, who denounced mediums, were able to gain the esteem that spiritualists had once enjoyed. Notwithstanding her rich history of spiritualism in the United States, Braude's rather swift dismissal of Woodhull as an opportunist fails to account for Woodhull's success on stage, even as spiritualism was generally declining. The collection in the present book, by including Woodhull's speeches, aims to account for that influence.

Braude offers a useful distinction between feminist abolitionists and feminist spiritualists, the latter of whom tended to view anarchy favorably and were less likely to prioritize the end of slavery. Braude notes that some seemed preoccupied with arguing that (white) women were slaves, and in doing so neglected the position of African American men and women. She locates both Woodhull and Andrews in the latter category. Even feminist abolitionists, however, held problematic positions on slavery and race; as Karen Sánchez-Eppler has shown, in identifying with slaves on the basis of oppression through difference, white women were "inextricably bound to a process of absorption not unlike the one that they expose" (31). In other words, the particularities of black women's experiences were erased as white women abolitionists ended up reproducing, or at least appropriating, the oppressive relationships of slavery. And while one might think that Woodhull's free love, with her vow to "love whomever I choose whenever I choose," would challenge laws and mores against miscegenation, she demonstrated racist beliefs not unlike that of many white women of the time.

Although they might at first seem at odds, an important connection exists between Woodhull's attachment to free love and her eventual adoption of "sexual science." Motherhood is the crucial link between the two. Braude notes that spiritualists like Alice Stockham espoused

Buy the Book

sex education as part of the voluntary motherhood (contraceptive) movement (127). Woodhull was no doubt influenced by such reformers in her call for frank discussions of sexuality. In the maternalism of sexual science, Woodhull found a solution to the children of free love: "Nor should one-half of all the children born continue to die before reaching the age of five years, sacrificed, as they now are, to the inexcusable ignorance of mothers—murdered, it ought rather to be said, by the popular barbarity which condones ignorance of sexual matters" ("Tried as by Fire," chap. 21, this vol.). Unsatisfying marriages made for "unfit" offspring; thus, it was for the good of the children that more egalitarian relationships were pursued. In a time when anti-obscenity efforts became more prevalent and anarchists were increasingly feared, Woodhull found in motherhood an effective defense of her ideals.[10]

In a post-Holocaust world it is difficult to untangle eugenics from its most horrific twentieth-century products, yet to properly understand Woodhull's relationship to the emerging movement we must attempt to do so. Because *On the Origin of Species* was published in the midst of the Civil War, Darwinism was initially ignored by most Americans. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, however, it gained what Richard Hofstadter calls "an unusually quick and sympathetic reception" (4). Evolutionary theory complemented certain beliefs of the time, forming what he refers to as "conservatism almost without religion" (7). Of course, religious figures were not completely disconnected from the movement; some voiced their disapproval while others, like Henry Ward Beecher, were vocal adherents to both Darwin and Spencer: "Beecher publicly acknowledged Spencer as his intellectual foster father" (Hofstadter 30). For his part, Lyman Abbott challenged conventional constructions of original sin, seeing it as a (natural) "lapse into animality" (Hofstadter 29). Figures like Beecher and Abbott enabled Woodhull to see evolution not in conflict with religion but as its partner.

Woodhull's attachment to eugenics grew stronger once she moved to Great Britain, the birthplace of the ideology. Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin and the inventor of eugenics, propagated his ideas through a number of books: *Hereditary Genius* (1869), *Inquiries into Human*

Buy the Book

Faculty (1883), and *Natural Inheritance* (1889). The Oneida Community, under Noyes's stewardship, was already practicing stirpiculture when Galton's first book appeared; Noyes viewed it as further legitimation of the practice. It was Noyes, in fact, who coined the term "stirpiculture." Not surprisingly, Noyes's criteria for the "most fit" most often included himself; he fathered a number of Oneida children. Hofstadter notes that eugenicists subscribed to a belief in the "fit," who were usually of the upper classes, and the "unfit," those of a lower socioeconomic status. Eugenicists "were also in large part responsible for the emphasis upon preserving the 'racial stock' as a means of national salvation—an emphasis so congenial to militant nationalists like Theodore Roosevelt" (Hofstadter 163–64). Woodhull's calls for institutional eugenics reflect the larger social shift from laissez-faire Darwinism to an active state role and illustrate some of the race and class distinctions that Hofstadter notes.

It was at one of her eugenics speeches in London that Woodhull met the wealthy businessman John Martin. (Citing adultery, an ironic and likely arbitrary charge, she had divorced Blood in 1876).[11] Her courtship with Martin was hampered by her scandalous record, and it was only after she publicly denounced free love that they married in 1883. Their correspondence indicates a deep and anguished love as Martin was frequently absent from home, conducting the business of a late–nineteenth century British millionaire. His letters are written on a host of hotel and office stationery, from the British Association for the Advancement of Science to Overbury Court, Tewkesbury. He frequently begs Victoria either to stay home or meet him. In an odd mix of loving desperation and passive aggression, he writes, "Dearest little wife, If you knew how much I think of you all day, you would not let anything be done that ~~would~~ will make me unhappy when I am at my work, & have to think that you are left alone. So pray believe that I am only thinking of your happiness, & do not do anything to mar it."[12] The fact that he changes the subjunctive "would" to "will" makes his message more emphatic, transforming the letter from a request to a command. Martin emerges in these letters as an overprotective, anxious husband; as he says, "I don't like your going [illegible] by yourself, I

Buy the Book

don't see what you have to say to him." In another letter, he urges her to join him and demands to know where she has disappeared: "I asked every hour yesterday for your promised telegram, but none came, & I could not write for want of your address. At last I was obliged to telegraph to Clarke (!!!) to know what has become of you. . . . I hope that you will telegraph . . . me early this morning: don't leave me uncertain where you are." Yet her responses seem equally anguished about their separation; as she writes in one letter, "I only heard yesterday morning that you were ill—it has broken my heart to think of you so far off and suffering and I cannot go to you[.] Oh my husband *I* am so weary of life since you left I have not been well a day and I have aged so. You would not care to see *me*." Common to these letters is her sense that the entire world, including his family, is against her and that only he can protect her. In this sense, her letters correspond to the common theme of victimhood that appears in much of her later writing, as she reflected on her waning public career. "I know your family do not *love* me—and I do not trust them[;] they did not care for us when we were well. How is it possible that they should *now*." Shortly before Martin's premature death of pneumonia in 1897, she wrote him, "[I]n this world of treachery and hollowness there is still one who cares if I am suffering or in despair." Her late writings portray a woman who saw herself as a tragic, misunderstood victim of the public's whims. One who had always tried to negotiate her public image, she spent many of her last years rewriting her past, disowning many of her writings, lambasting people like Blood and Andrews, and even attempting to change her name to "Woodhall." Such efforts muddle her biographical record and leave a trace of uncertainty, making the title of one of her late essays "The Unsolved Riddle," an apt description of her life itself.

Victoria Woodhull-Martin would survive her husband by thirty years, dying in England on June 9, 1927. A document she wrote in 1918 offers us a window into her late psyche: "They have struck me down with the deepest insult they could find Entering my private home with all the brutality of Ignorant Insolence having the seal of goverment in thier hands I had to submit alas it broke me down dazed and Horified."[13] A will dated June 24, 1920, indicates her concern over her

Buy the Book

daughter's fate: "I hope that *none* of what the *world calls family* will in any way make [Zula] any trouble or annoyance."[14] Despite this private despair, she posed the face of a confident, fantastically wealthy matriarch: she hosted the Ladies' Automobile Club and the Women's Aerial League of Great Britain. Clippings included in her collection at the Boston Public Library suggest she remained interested in women's rights and labor issues: one is entitled "Control of US Wealth; 41 Per. in the Hands of Women," another is "Wealth Concentrated in the Hands of the Few," and a story from the *Charlotte News* of November 26, 1928, is entitled "The Rich and the Poor."[15] As a testament to her mother's influence, Zula Maud left her fortune to a eugenics society with which Margaret Sanger was also affiliated. This gesture ensured that the complicated relationship between eugenics and the women's movement would continue.

VICTORIA WOODHULL'S WORKS

The bridge between Woodhull's free love ideology and her commitment to "sexual science" and eugenics is most evident in speeches like "The Elixir of Life" (chap. 19, this vol.), which she gave to the American Association of Spiritualists in 1873. At first glance, the speech seems consistent with many feminist beliefs today: Woodhull defines free love in contrast to the "brutal lust" to which married women are regularly subjected by their husbands, women's stifled sexual desire, and the hypocrisy of men who preach of purity and yet pursue extramarital affairs. Woodhull declares, "Is it not foolish then—aye, is it not more than this, is it not criminal, longer to attempt to place limits upon this heaven ordained passion?" In her endorsement of consensual sexual relations based on love, even and especially outside the "despotism" of marriage, she raises astonishingly modern questions about whether sexuality might exist outside patriarchal oppression.

Yet embedded within "The Elixir of Life" is an artful rhetoric that depends on a more conservative moral/immoral binary. As she states, "I indeed thank heaven for giving me the moral strength to utter the plain, unvarnished truth." In describing this as a "heaven-ordained passion," Woodhull imbues it with a sense of Christian morality, implicitly

Buy the Book

challenging those who called her ideas obscene. She also uses shame, which inevitably invokes authority: "Are we indeed so impure that to us all sexual things are impure?" This rhetorical question works on two levels, suggesting people are ashamed only if they have reason to be. She indicates that it is her duty to reveal the truth, so that the crime becomes not telling, but refusing to do so. As she says, "Standing, however, as I do, somewhat representative of the immense issue of sexual freedom that is now agitating the public mind, I have a duty to fulfill, to which I should be recreant did I withhold a single sentence that I propose to utter." This statement recalls the reference to patriotic duty in the Declaration of Independence as well as in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments. Woodhull thus reverses the binary in which she is "Mrs. Satan" and associates herself with truth, health, "white[ness] and pur[ity]," "perfected unity," happiness and humanity, freedom, "heaven-ordained passion," and God. On the other side is "falsity," "sickly sentimentalism," disease, slavery, and immodesty. She gets braver as she goes along, at one point describing a mirror held up to the audience to show its imperfections: "You are afraid that I may hold up a glass in which you will see your secret deformities; and you scarcely dare to look upon them." The literary trope of the looking glass also appeared in a contemporary conduct manual that discouraged women's anger. *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book* (1856) warns that an angry woman who makes "herself a frightful spectacle, by turning white with rage, rolling up her eyes, drawing in her lips, gritting her teeth, clenching her hands, and stamping her feet, depend on it, she is not of a nervous, but of a furious temperament. A looking-glass held before her, to let her see what a shocking object she has made herself, would, we think, have an excellent effect. We have seen but few females in this revolting state, and only three of them were ladies—but we have heard of many" (209-10). In Woodhull's speech, she has the authority to hold the mirror and show others' "deformities": a word consistent with proto-eugenic discourse of the time.

In such speeches, Woodhull calls for an honest discussion of sexuality, what she calls sexual science. She authorizes her voice not only by aligning herself with morality and motherhood but by directing

Buy the Book

herself to women, whom she knew risked their reputations to attend her lectures. In the piece "To Women Who Have an Interest in Humanity, Present and Future," published in the *Weekly* on October 31, 1874, she notes, "But women are so frightened at the idea of hearing these matters talked about before the men who have demoralized them so badly, and I have had to guard my speech so carefully, lest those who had the courage to come out to hear me should be scared away, that I have finally concluded to give way to these considerations and include in my lectures one address to women alone in each place I may visit" (9). Such tactics worked, at least for a time; while her presence remained controversial, she enjoyed tremendous popularity and fierce defenders.

Woodhull's preoccupation with maternalism was accompanied by an increasing use of Christianity. "The Garden of Eden" (1876) is a symbolic tour de force that figures the human body as Eden. In this sense, the body becomes a place of purity, of "the highest and divinest functions" (chap. 22, this vol.). Each body part and function corresponds to a divine geography: "How is the body watered and fed? Is it not by a stream which is the extension of the mouth, and that changes constantly as it encircles the system? Does not the support of the body enter it by the mouth, and by the river which is the extension of the mouth, run to the stomach?" She notes that as the River Pison branches, so does the body branch into the heart and lungs. "A river, to water the land of pleasure and delight, enters by the mouth, and extending by the way of the stomach, intestines, heart, lungs, arteries and veins, waters the whole land that suffers pain and brings forth." The process of excretion becomes "a process of grace . . . of natural and involuntary purification." Thus one of the most "vulgar" aspects of the human body, and one that at the time was of great concern to urban dwellers, is sanctified. She does not shirk from explicit images, remarking that the description of the "swift current" of the river Hiddekel is the precise sound of urination. The second-to-last paragraph is crowded with exclamation marks that give the piece a sense of the religious exultation appropriate to Woodhull's mother's experience with revivals during the Great Awakening: "Welcome! Thrice welcome!!

Buy the Book

Thou messenger of God!" Biblical scripture becomes a compelling way for Woodhull, increasingly dependent on public approval, to discuss sexuality. As Altina Waller has argued in her analysis of Elizabeth Tilton, Beecher's "Gospel of Love" held that women were of a "higher sensitive nature," which made them closer to God and at the same time more vulnerable to victimization (147). In these terms, religious affect is akin to—and perhaps a safer vehicle for—sexual passion. As Joann Passet notes, Woodhull began to infuse her speeches with biblical scripture in 1874, using her Bible and her daughter, who often read a religious piece, as props (103). This Christian ethos was adopted even before this, however; an article from the *Detroit Union* of 1873 notes her regret that her words "might be construed into a lack of veneration for Christ. She was a religious woman, and revered Him and His doctrines" (quoted in *The Human Body* 388). And as Mary Gabriel notes, beginning in 1875 the *Weekly* ran stories endorsing Catholicism, a trend that irked some spiritualists (236). In some sense, however, the Christian thread had been there all along: "But while her critics condemned her decision to embrace Christianity as hollow and opportunistic, it was not, in fact, a radical departure for her. Much of the theory of social freedom she had previously preached was founded in the Paulist socialism of the 1850s" (Gabriel 240).[16] Woodhull mined Christian rhetoric throughout her life, whether speaking of sexual science, eugenics, or free love.

Even Woodhull's early writing on suffrage contains occasional, if veiled, references to a kind of eugenics mentality. In "Qualification for the Franchise," published in the *Washington Chronicle* in 1894, she notes that a man who has reached age twenty-one is allowed to vote "though he may have no capacity to judge who should be put into office."[17] As she asks, "What liberty have we in the majority vote of the uneducated, the unfit or defective individuals?" She then makes an odd antipopulist turn in arguing that laws should be made by "scientific authorities" or "experts" who are more qualified—more, in the parlance of the time, "fit." We need those "who will free us from pernicious habits and depraved appetites."

A tension emerges between her concept of individual freedom and

Buy the Book

moral codes that is symptomatic of a larger strain between the influences of Andrews, the anti-obscenity movement, and eugenics. Woodhull's essay "Marriage and Maternity," which was published in the *Weekly Times and Echo* on June 3, 1893, features a dialogue between a man who has proposed marriage and the woman whose affection he seeks. At one point the female speaker claims, "Instinct can tell us whether we are attracted to, or repulsed from one another; but it can't reason for us, it can't draw conclusions concerning the consequences of this or that act. Education ought to do this. But, instead, love between a man and a woman is treated as if it were something to be ashamed of, to be kept out of sight, degrading when it ought to be the incentive to moral and physical perfection" (4). Woodhull goes on to say that open communication between partners about what she calls "hereditary characteristics" like intemperance would enable them to acknowledge their duties owed "to the future members of society" (4). For Woodhull, "right marriage" is the "first step towards the improvement of the race" (4). Here is a striking conflation between a call for free choice in sexuality and the coerciveness of eugenics, in which individuals are obligated to sacrifice individual needs to the "greater good," which is of course a racialized, gendered, and nationalist entity.

The front cover of Woodhull's *Humanitarian*, "A Monthly Magazine of Sociology," indicates its interest in eugenics: "The children of to-day are the citizens of to-morrow, and their value will depend on their inherited qualities no less than on their education and environment." Not surprisingly, her most explicit references to eugenics are in the essays "Stirpiculture" and "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit" (chaps. 23 and 24, this vol.). The former essay marvels that while progress has been made in livestock and agriculture, such human "improvement" is considered vulgar: "We build institutions in order to incarcerate the insane, the idiots, the epileptics, the drunkards, the criminals, &c. If the lower organism of animals were subject to such infirmities and propensities, we should exterminate them; and yet we have not thought it needful to take measures to eradicate them from the highest organism, man." Again, Woodhull uses the powerful imagery of maternal love and influence to advance her argument, noting that

Buy the Book

in the future people will marvel at the mothers who "looked on" as their own or other children were incarcerated for inevitable, hereditary criminal behavior. Stirpiculture thus becomes a means of "protection," of "progress," of "education." The focus has shifted from woman as free lover to mother, a focus that requires explicitly moral terms. "The truth should be brought home to every woman, and she should be made to feel that she is criminally responsible for all the misery from which the human race is suffering through her ignorance of the vital subject of proper generation." And yet at the same time, she suggests that not to follow stirpiculture is to degrade and oppress women, who alone have "the power to regenerate humanity." She employs sentimentality, describing the "unsympathetic, pitiless world" in which women are left "to weep tears of blood over the dying embers of a misspent life!" The essay demonstrates, then, her efforts to meld women's rights with eugenics.

Woodhull's late writings reflect the period's attitudes about race, including classification efforts, Anglo fears of immigration, and imperialism. Curiously, Woodhull includes what is today recognized as key evidence for the social construction of race: "There are often greater differences between individuals of the same race than between individuals of different races" ("The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," chap. 24, this vol.). While this statement is for modern scholars a means of chipping away at biological notions of hard-wired, genetic races, Woodhull follows this with a physiologically based discussion of individual "inferiority." Here she draws from Michael Foster's *Text Book on Physiology*, which would become a classic in the subject. She combines a Marxist critique of working conditions with the hygiene movement's concern with activities that "sap" individuals' energy. For many devotees of the hygiene movement, it was masturbation or other "impure" activities that drained one's bodily fluids and energy; here it is also the "crowded enclosed workrooms [that] supplant work in the open air. . . . [T]he energy of the workers is gradually sapped by artificial life in cities, and they become the progenitors of a class physically enfeebled, spiritless, incapable of sustained effort" ("The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit," chap. 24, this vol.). In one sense, her view

Buy the Book

is more progressive than those theories that located individuals in rigid, biologically based categories; presumably, it is an argument for improved working conditions. But a more rigid classification system also emerges in her account of the "unfit hordes" from China in "The Rapid Multiplication of the Unfit" (1891). Reflecting the nativism that would only grow with the increase in immigration in the late nineteenth century, the essay sounds eerily similar to twenty-first-century rhetoric about the dangers of Latino immigration: "We have an example of this in the rapid multiplication of the negroes in America, who at some not far distant day will outnumber and outrun the whites if the rapid increase be not checked" (chap. 24, this vol.).

Such nativism coexisted with the imperialism of the late nineteenth century, which also appears in Woodhull's work. "Constitution of the United States of the World" imagines an ostensibly benevolent imperializing nation, as evident in the title itself. "We, the people," as the first paragraph contends, "to erect a government which shall be the center around which the nations may aggregate, until ours shall become a Universal Republic, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of the World; which shall be the Supreme Law wherever it shall have, or acquire, jurisdiction" (chap. 3, this vol.). Although Madeleine Stern reads this document as a precursor to the interdependence ethos of the League of Nations, it also demonstrates the fine line between a benevolent interdependence and a more insidious imperialism that entities like the United Nations still struggle with today. Although imperialism was certainly not a new development at the time, Woodhull seems to anticipate the United States' involvement in places like the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Article X imagines an internal and external movement, promising that "[t]he Congress shall grant to any adult citizen of the United States, applying for the same, any desired and unoccupied part of the public land, excepting mineral, coal, oil and salt lands, not to exceed one hundred and sixty acres, so long as such citizens shall pay regularly to the Government the yearly tax required, and to be ascertained by law for such occupancy" (17). This language is strikingly similar to that of the Dawes Act of 1887, which initiated the allotment of Native American lands;

Buy the Book

it conveniently depends on a racialist concept of an "empty" land that would have disastrous consequences for its indigenous inhabitants. Although Woodhull does not specify white landowners, her failure to account for the racial particularities of the time renders the owner white by default. Borrowing from both the Declaration and the Constitution, and adding land grants and other imperialist impulses, Woodhull's document is a telling commentary on her time.

Despite the richness of Woodhull's commentary, no comparable collection of her writing remains in print; Madeleine B. Stern's reader, published in 1974, is the most recent. Scholars' reticence to publish such a collection may be due in part to the historic amnesia surrounding her as well as a lingering question about the extent of her authorship; some have claimed that Stephen Pearl Andrews wrote all of her speeches. I am most satisfied with Frisken's explanation:

> Her own personal papers are fragmentary and heavily edited. We will never know for certain who really wrote the lectures, speeches, letters, and articles attributed to her. They were almost never written in her own hand, and she later repudiated many, saying they had been written without her knowledge or consent. Some contemporary observers said that Woodhull could barely write, and that she did not have the education, breadth of knowledge, or grasp of the language necessary to produce the writings that appeared over her name. On the other hand, many others credited her with a powerful gift for extemporaneous speech on a wide variety of subjects. Whether these conflicting assertions are accurate or an indication of contemporary prejudice remains unknowable and, perhaps, unimportant. (10)

We can conclude that Andrews and Blood contributed to her famous lectures and editorials. But the reality of politics is that such speeches were, and remain, commonly produced in collaboration. We must be cognizant of the tendency, even of Woodhull herself, to deny her authorship, and we should question any individualistic, stable construct of "the author." Further, we must not neglect the fact that Woodhull

Buy the Book

was the public voice of these controversial ideas and that she rose and fell by these, her words.

Woodhull's impassioned defense of her unorthodox lifestyle helps us understand that the early women's movement was marked by particular tensions, even between its two most famous leaders, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. While Anthony ultimately sought to distance herself from Woodhull's "dangerous" views, Stanton's support indicates her flexibility. A letter from Stanton to Woodhull in 1901, in which Stanton asks Woodhull to consider two of her essays for publication in the *Humanitarian*, demonstrates her enduring interest in collaborating with Woodhull.[18] In neglecting Victoria Woodhull, we create a simpler—and more limited—view of the nineteenth-century women's rights movement: one that does not include "The Manifesto," Wall Street, or free love. Nearly a century after her death, Woodhull calls attention to our assumptions about what feminism—and America itself—is and might be.

Buy the Book