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Jean-Louis Marin-Lamellet

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Gender and imagined purity of at the turn of the 20th century: the example of B.O. Flower, reformer

Marin-Lamellet Jean-Louis

Université Lyon 2

[Jean-Louis.Marin-Lamellet@univ-lyon2.fr](mailto:Jean-Louis.Marin-Lamellet@univ-lyon2.fr)

## Abstract

Gender and imagined purity of at the turn of the 20th century: the example of B.O. Flower, reformer

Boston progressive editor Benjamin O. Flower (1858-1918) pushed for a wide range of women-friendly reforms and publicized many turn-of-the-century feminists. He saw “female purity” as the engine of progress - the moral purification women inspired was the backbone of a radical regeneration of the country that would lead to individual, social, economic, political and family transformations. This article purposes to explore this social imagination of purity, its scope and its evolution. It examines Flower’s role in the “Purity Movement,” a crusade that aimed at putting an end to prostitution – within and without marriage - and to low age of consent laws. For Flower, male immorality, urban poverty, and ignorance about sex accounted for women’s degradation. Realistic literature and journalistic exposures were therefore the necessary tools to regenerate society. This article also analyzes the ambiguous trajectory of Flower’s vision of “female purity.” He saw in Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, the embodiment and the logical outcome of his feminist struggles. However, this new movement only led to social apathy. His exhortations were also predicated upon essentialization (men as beasts or pure intellect and reforming energy, women as victims or as models of moral idealism) and the traditional postulates of Victorian culture (the centrality of home). Finally, in his last years, Flower embarked on a crusade against the “menace” Catholicism posed to women. This episode reveals the nativist potential of imagined purity as Flower tolerated nothing short of an ethereal “feminine” idealism.

## Résumé

Ambiguïtés de l’imaginaire de la pureté au tournant du XXème siècle: l’exemple d’un réformateur, B.O. Flower

Au tournant du XXe siècle, Benjamin O. Flower (1858-1918), journaliste progressiste de Boston, se vantait de diriger la revue la plus ouverte aux luttes féministes et aux réformatrices de son époque. Il considérait la « pureté féminine » comme le moteur du progrès : la purification morale inspirée par les femmes, clé de voûte de la régénération du pays, conduirait à des transformations individuelles, sociales, économiques, politiques et familiales. Cet article se propose d’explorer cet imaginaire social de la pureté, son champ d’application et son évolution. Il étudie le rôle de Flower dans la « croisade pour la pureté » qui cherchait à mettre un terme à la prostitution, dans la rue ou au sein du mariage, et à relever l’âge de la majorité sexuelle. Pour Flower, la dégradation des femmes s’expliquait par l’immoralité masculine, la misère urbaine et la méconnaissance des questions sexuelles ; il voyait dans le réalisme en littérature et le journalisme d’investigation les outils indispensables pour régénérer la société. La trajectoire de sa vision de la « pureté féminine » permet également d’en analyser les ambiguïtés. Flower voyait dans Mary Baker Eddy, la fondatrice de la Science Chrétienne, l’incarnation et l’aboutissement de ses combats féministes. Cependant, ce nouveau mouvement ne mena qu’à l’apathie sociale. En outre, ses exhortations se fondaient sur l’essentialisation des hommes (bestialité incarnée ou pur intellect et puissance réformatrice) et des femmes (victimes ou modèles d’idéalisme moral), ainsi que sur les prémisses traditionnelles de la culture victorienne, notamment la centralité du foyer. Enfin, les dernières années de Flower, parti en croisade contre la « menace » que le catholicisme posait aux femmes, révèlent les potentialités nativistes de cet imaginaire de la pureté ne tolérant rien en-deçà d’un idéalisme « féminin » éthéré.

Keywords: Benjamin O. Flower, feminism, purity crusade, spirituality, anti-Catholicism

Mots clés: Benjamin O. Flower, féminisme, croisade pour la pureté, spiritualité, anticatholicisme

## Outline

### The “era of woman”

“The constantly broadening sphere of woman’s influence”

Flower’s “threefold crusade”

Purity and “evolutionary republicanism”

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Discourses on purity: science and radical traditions

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Purity, the free discussion of sex and spirituality

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Purity and Christian Science

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## Conclusion

Boston reformist editor B.O. Flower (1858-1918) promoted his magazine, *The Arena*, as “more hospitable to women than any other a great review published in the civilized world” (cf. figures 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Dozens of feminists contributed to this monthly – Elizabeth Cady Stanton; WCTU president Frances Willard; novelist and woman suffrage champion Helen Gardener; home economics advocate and urban poverty specialist Helen Campbell to name but a few examples.<sup>2</sup> In the 1890s, female reformers wrote one-fourth of all articles in the magazine.<sup>3</sup> Women were central to reform efforts as they were both the victims of social ills and the agents of regeneration. Flower and the feminists he publicized shared the Victorian belief in inherent female purity: women were “pure as the glistening snow-clad peaks in the midst of the moral degradation which taints manhood.” They saw “female purity” as a moral standard and the engine of political action and social progress. They embodied an “urban-moral control impulse” that would tame the industrial city.<sup>4</sup> This article purposes to explore this social imagination of purity, its scope and its evolution.

THE NATIONAL PURITY CONGRESS.



B. O. FLOWER.

Figure 1. Benjamin Flower at the Purity Congress in Baltimore in 1895

<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from an advertisement for *The Arena* on the back end-paper of *Fashion's Slaves*, a pamphlet that reproduced Flower's series of articles on dress reform. Flower, Benjamin Orange, *Fashion's Slaves*, Boston, The Arena Publishing Company, 1892, unnumbered page.

<sup>2</sup> Gardener also co-edited *The Arena* for a few months

<sup>3</sup> Payne, Alma J, “Woman militant in *The Arena* of Benjamin Orange Flower,” in *Popular literature in America; a symposium in honor of Lyon N. Richardson*, ed. James C. Austin et Donald A. Koch, Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> Flower, “The Era of Woman,” *The Arena*, vol. 4, August 1891, p. 382 (unless otherwise stated, magazine articles referenced in this paper are all extracted from *The Arena*). Boyer, Paul, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 153, 162.

# THE ARENA.

The ARENA, since its inception, has been more hospitable to women than any other great review published in the civilized world. It has also ever been the champion of all means and measures looking toward the emancipation of woman. As an illustration of these important points we call attention to the ARENA for August, 1892, which contains papers by

Mary A. Livermore, Mrs. B. F. Underwood,  
Frances E. Willard, Mrs. Frances E. Russell,  
Helen H. Gardener, Louise Chandler Moulton,  
Mrs. Gen. Lew Wallace,

and a symposium on Women's Clubs, to which the following ladies contribute:—

May Wright Sewall, Ellen M. Mitchell,  
Mary E. Mumford, Mary A. Livermore,  
Mary E. Boyce, Kate Gannett Wells,  
Louise Chandler Moulton, Katharine Nobles,  
Hester M. Poole, Dr. Julia Holmes Smith,  
Annah Robinson Watson,

The September ARENA for 1892 contains a symposium on Woman's Dress, to which such well-known writers as the following will contribute:

Octavia W. Bates, Grace Greenwood,  
Frances E. Russell, May Wright Sewall,  
Mrs. E. M. King, Elizabeth Smith Miller,  
Frances M. Steele,

This will be the most important symposium on Woman's Dress that has ever appeared in a leading magazine.

It is the determination of the management to make the ARENA indispensable to all thoughtful, wide-awake women.

### The Opinion of the Highest Literary Authority of Boston.

They hold that this magazine has taken upon the public is due wholly and solely to its intrinsic merits, and not to any elaborate or shrewd methods of advertising. It has won its own way, and in a straightforward and legitimate manner. No magazine in the country has taken higher ground in the treatment of questions dealing with social and political reform. Its contributors include some of the best known men of the day in the walks of science, theology, and general literature, and there is no topic of public interest but readers may look to see broadly, thoroughly, and impartially treated.—*Evening Transcript*, Boston, Mass.

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, \$5.00, SINGLE COPIES, 50 cts.

A sample copy of the ARENA will be forwarded, postpaid, for 20 cents, to any person wishing to examine the same with a view to subscribing.

ARENA PUBLISHING CO., COPLEY SQ., BOSTON, MASS.

Figure 2. Advertisement for symposia on “Women’s Clubs” and “Woman’s Dress” in *The Arena*

## The “era of woman”

“The constantly broadening sphere of woman’s influence”

The US, for Flower, was entering “the era of woman”: the “constantly broadening sphere of woman’s influence” showed that society was outgrowing “barbarous conception[s], born of a cowardly and brutal childhood age,” namely the Edenic legend of female inferiority and Saint Paul’s “theory of woman’s sphere.”<sup>5</sup> Flower for instance praised Mrs. French-Sheldon who, like the famous Henry Stanley, explored Africa, climbed the Kilimanjaro and lived alone with natives<sup>6</sup> (cf. figure 3). He took pains to put men and women on an equal footing – elevating civilization depended on “arousing earnest men and women to action” and on “ennobling manhood and womanhood.”<sup>7</sup> Even though Flower did not relegate women to the private sphere, he did not completely challenge the separate spheres theory, as he held that women would carry over the domestic virtue of purity into society at large. He underlined that empowering

<sup>5</sup> Flower, “The Era of Woman,” p. 382-383; “The Next step Forward for Women; Or, Thoughts on the Movement for Rational Dress,” vol. 6, October 1892, p. 641.

<sup>6</sup> Flower, “The Next Step Forward for Women,” p. 640-64; M. French-Sheldon, “The First Circumnavigation of Lake Chala,” vol. 6, July 1892, p. 133-147.

<sup>7</sup> Flower, “Fronting the Future,” vol. 3, December 1890, p. 125; *Civilization’s Inferno, or, Studies in the Social Cellar*, Boston, The Arena Publishing Company, 1893, p. 3, 149. Flower devoted a whole chapter to “woman and the larger life” in his memoirs: Flower, *Progressive Men, Women, and Movements of the Past Twenty-five Years*, Boston, The New Arena, 1914, p. 143-150.

women would not “unsex” them— reformers like Willard or Campbell were examples of “noble, fine, true womanhood.”<sup>8</sup> Men and women were inherently different but complementary - each would, in their own way, lead the country on the path of progress. Like some turn-of-the century reformers who believed segregation could be progressive, Flower and many feminists he promoted thought men and women could be “separate but equal.” Moral uplift implied the enlistment of both male and female activists in order to elevate the country as a whole.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3. Mrs. French-Sheldon, the “intrepid woman” who explored East Africa

### Flower’s “threefold crusade”

Flower publicized the urgent need to embark on “a threefold crusade” for moral reform. First, reformers ought to push for “a childhood resulted from an awakened conscience, the fruit of intelligence and love” – in other words for a protective, caring and nurturing home, which implied marriages of love, the necessary condition for proper child-rearing. Then, he pressed for “absolute justice for woman,” focusing on women’s right to vote, to own independent property and to control their bodies, notably through dress reform. Finally, regeneration meant fighting “for a purer, simpler, and less sensuous and extravagant life, with a determined warfare on those things which stimulate passion and lower the moral ideal, chief

<sup>8</sup> Flower, “Notes and Announcements,” vol. 7, March 1893, p. xxvi.

<sup>9</sup> Flower, “Masculine Immorality,” vol. 3, February 1891, p. 381.

among which are intoxicants and opium” – yet another example of the interplay between temperance and feminism at the time.<sup>10</sup>

Flower, Stanton and Willard were fighting for a broad radical agenda and did not focus – like their counterparts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - on one issue, usually suffrage or temperance.<sup>11</sup> They considered moral regeneration to be the mainstay of reforms – it would radiate out and lead to individual, social, economic, political and family transformations. Most of the reform organizations Flower publicized were big-tent women’s organizations (working girls’ clubs, the WCTU, the White Ribbon).<sup>12</sup> He modeled his own Arena clubs on women’s clubs. This Sunday afternoon program is an example of the wide range of reforms Flower’s Arena clubs supported – these clubs were optimistic, morally tinged, eclectic; they were anchored both in contemporary economic and political debates as well as concrete reform work (cf. figure 4).<sup>13</sup>

#### THE YOUNG WOMEN’S ARENA CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA

Meets every Wednesday evening at 230 Pine Street. Object— Mutual improvement and service to mankind. Ideal— A happy world and a perfected humanity. Ignorance displaced by science, poverty abolished, and coöperation made universal.

Program for Sunday, Oct. 1, 1893: 3 to 3.30 P. M., a beautiful scene with music— sound waves made visible to the eye in brilliant colors by means of a stereopticon, with scientific explanation by Professor D. S. Holman, of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Science; 3.30 to 4 P. M., solo, duet, and quartette singing, instrumental music on violin, mandolin, harp, and piano; 4 to 4.30 P. M., short pointed lectures, “Employment and Idleness,” by Walter Vrooman, and “Women and Social Reform,” by Miss Diana Hirschler; 4.30 to 5 P. M., general social, reception, and handshaking with members of the Young Women’s Club; 5 to 6 P. M., classes in Political Economy, American History, English language, Biography, Single Tax, and General Literature.

Tickets for the afternoon exercises, including classes, 10 cents each.

Figure 4. Example of Sunday afternoon program of Women’s Arena Club of Philadelphia, in Hirschler, Diana, “Union of Philadelphia,” *The Arena*, vol. 9, March 1894, p. 551

#### Purity and “evolutionary republicanism”

Male and female crusaders who took up the cause of women were in the vanguard of civilization. Moral reform was rooted in an evolutionary perspective that saw female pioneers as the future of the “race,” what historian Beryl Satter calls “evolutionary republicanism,” i.e. republicanism blending with a “reform Darwinist perspective.” Women’s “exaltation mean[t] the elevation of the race” and their “splendid spirit of altruism” would solve “fundamental problems”— female virtue and spirituality would steer society towards a higher moral ground and put an end to materialism and male desire that only led to Social Darwinists’ acceptance of *laissez faire* and the manly, brutish laws of the jungle.<sup>14</sup> Flower took the jungle metaphor literally – in his racialized and gendered rhetoric, Flower associated male immorality with primitivism and barbarism. Men, when they indulged in their most bestial instincts, were no longer real men - “manhood is eclipsed” as Flower put it - and that endangered womanhood and country as a whole. Flower used the example of the Carmencita ball at Madison Square garden in 1891 to illustrate his point. After wealthy capitalists took their wives home, they came back to the ball and rushed into debauchery – if the actual details remain euphemized, the savagery and sinfulness of the scene were conveyed by Flower’s racially charged comparison of men ominously jumping up and down like the “wild Sioux in a ghost dance.”<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, civilized men “had evolved the capacity to suppress their unmanly

<sup>10</sup> Flower, “Well-springs of Immorality,” vol. 8, August 1893, p. 394-400.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Willard asserted that “Our policy is ‘The Do-everything-policy, and do it all the time.’”

<sup>12</sup> Flower, “Some of Civilization’s Silent Currents,” vol. 6, November 1892, p. 766.

<sup>13</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, p. 131. For more details about Arena clubs and Flower’s “association campaign”: Payne, “Woman militant,” p. 174-175.

<sup>14</sup> Satter, Beryl, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875–1920*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999, p. 184-188.

<sup>15</sup> Flower, *Civilization’s Inferno*, p. 171.



passions.” Virility implied rationality, self-control and republican virtue. As Mrs. French-Sheldon had done in Africa, real men could conquer savagery, here the “Dark Continent” within themselves.<sup>16</sup>

This progressive vision was understood within an apocalyptic framework. Flower naturalized purity, claiming that, like oxygen, it was literally vital for the country: the “fate of home, nation and civilization” was predicated upon the protection of women and their purifying influence on society. Flower drew an explicit parallel with the fate of Greece and Rome – ancient civilizations died when they gave up on their republican virtues and pandered to men’s baser instincts.<sup>17</sup> Spencerian arguments combined with nationalistic feelings – the US had to give women their proper place in order to keep its status as an exceptional nation and remain at the top of the evolution scale. The “Purity Movement” in particular was supposed to enable a laggard America to catch up with the onward march of history.

## *Flower and the “Purity Movement”*

“Prostitution within the marriage bond”

THE NATIONAL PURITY CONGRESS.

SOME CAUSES OF PRESENT DAY IMMORALITY AND SUGGESTIONS AS TO PRACTICAL REMEDIES.

BY B. O. FLOWER, EDITOR OF THE ARENA.

In the brief space assigned me, it would be impossible to touch upon the numerous complex and often subtle causes of present day immorality. I shall, therefore, only briefly notice a few of these wellsprings of death which impress me as being fundamental in character. These I would classify as follows:

- I. Prostitution within the marriage bond, or a disregard of the sacred right of the wife and child.
- II. Prostitution without the marriage relation.
- III. The influence of the liquor traffic.
- IV. Unjust social conditions.
- V. The lack of knowledge and the absence of high ideals in the mind.

Figure 5. Flower’s speech at the 1895 American Purity Alliance conference in Baltimore

Moral reform implied the protection of women and an attack on the “well-springs of immorality.”<sup>18</sup> In a paper prepared for the Social Purity Congress at the Chicago World’s Fair and in another American Purity Alliance conference in Baltimore in 1895, Flower expounded the causes of immorality: prostitution – within and without marriage -, low age of consent laws, economic inequalities, ignorance about sex and alcoholism<sup>19</sup> (cf. figure 5). His reform agitation aimed at putting an end to “the conventionality that

<sup>16</sup> Bederman, Gail, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Flower, “Well-springs of Immorality,” p. xxi, 394; “White Slaves of New York,” vol. 3, April 1891, p. 640.

<sup>18</sup> Flower, “Well-springs of Immorality,” p. 394-400.

<sup>19</sup> Flower, “Social Purity Congress at the World’s Fair,” vol. 8, August 1893, p. xxi; “Well-springs of Immorality,” 394-400; “Some Causes of Present Day Immorality and Suggestions as to Practical remedies,” in Powell, Aaron M., *The National Purity Congress, its papers, addresses, portraits. An illustrated record of the papers and addresses of the first National Purity Congress, held under the auspices of the American Purity Alliance, in the Park Avenue Friends’ Meeting House, Baltimore, October 14, 15 and 16, 1895*, New York, The American Purity Alliance, 1896, p. 306.

tolerates immorality in men.”<sup>20</sup> He did not believe in the inherent depravity of “fallen women.” He shifted the blame instead on male lust and exploitation, opposing it to women’s spiritual superiority. Women were described as asexual beings, while men’s deviant sexuality was “rampant” and “hard to control.”<sup>21</sup> Flower kept repeating that “*the ethical standard for man must be raised, or the degradation of woman will follow.*” This symbiotic relationship between male and female morality demanded equality between and women in order to advance “the race.” His moral standard was nothing less than “absolute purity” and “the triumph of love over lust, the moral over the animal, the soul over the body.”<sup>22</sup>

For Flower, the bond between a man and a woman was sacred and foreordained by God. As a result, loveless marriages were not real and divorce, he claimed, “more perfectly secure[d] the divine than a continuation of the compact.” A “bitter medicine: divorce” could lead to “enhanced purity.” Flower saw the idea of indissoluble marriage as pernicious because it forced married women into sexual intercourse and compelled them to have children with husbands who were “addicted to drink or the victims of revolting diseases” – a corruption of the holy marriage compact that he condemned as the “unholiest prostitution.” Flower saw in Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata* the perfect illustration of this problem.<sup>23</sup> Male “gross sensualism” led to “prostitution within marriage” and “crimes against the unborn” because fathers’ lust would “poison” their offspring, even if their wives were “pure.” As a result, children would be predisposed towards immorality, poverty, and criminality – a “curse to the race.”<sup>24</sup>

### Discourses on purity: science and radical traditions

Flower kept underlining the “mysterious influence of the little understood law of heredity” and the “measureless influence” of home, “the fountain” of morality. In his rhetoric, the scientific discourses of heredity and environmental determinism prevalent at the time blended with fringe beliefs like the importance of pre-natal influences – children were affected by their mothers’ “mental impressions.” Flower followed the advice of Dr. Sydney B. Elliot: mothers should elevate their fetuses by exposing them to Mozart or Robert Burns for instance.<sup>25</sup> Using the same kind of printing metaphor he used to explain the role of photography in his reform work (illustrations were used “to *impress* terrible facts vaguely believed but not realized by the great majority of our thoughtful people”; italics mine), mothers had to *impress* the plastic mind of children with uplifting images – their very womb therefore became, with playgrounds or model tenements, a key locus of environmental meliorism.<sup>26</sup>

Flower’s moral reading of medical and scientific discourses prevalent then carried on abolitionist ideals into the home – like slaveholders usurped the place of God when they dominated slaves, husbands usurped the place of God when they dominated their wives. Self-sovereignty was paramount in both contexts. Purity crusaders opposed the regulation of prostitution and called for its abolition; many were, for that matter, former abolitionists. Flower’s conception of marriage was also part of the “free love” tradition, which, at the time, meant the sanctity of spiritual bonds between individuals: no religious and

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<sup>20</sup> Flower, “Is This You Son, My Lord,” vol. 2, November 1890, p. 761.

<sup>21</sup> Lindley, Susan Hill, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Flower, “Masculine Immorality,” p. 380

<sup>23</sup> Flower, “The Postmaster-General and the Censorship of Morals,” vol. 2, October 1890, p. 542; “Conservatism and Sensualism an Unhallowed Alliance, vol. 3, December 1890), p. 127-128.

<sup>24</sup> Flower, “Leprosy of the Soul,” vol. 3, April 1891, p. 635-638; “Hon. Carroll D. Wright on Divorce,” vol. 5, December 1891, p. 139, 143; “Well-Springs and Feeders of Immorality,” vol. 8, August 1893, p. 397; “Prostitution within the marriage bond,” vol. 13, June 1895, p. 70; *Progressive Men*, p. 260-261.

<sup>25</sup> Flower, “Home Influence and The Child,” vol. 3, March 1891, p. 506, “Well-Springs and Feeders of Immorality,” p. 395.

<sup>26</sup> Flower, *Civilization’s Inferno*, 115. Flower published Dr. Elliot’s book where the physician explained that every child had the right to be well born – drink and lust would increase crime and insanity whereas moral purity, an uplifting atmosphere, dieting, and “hygiene and physiology of generative life” would move the “race” onward. Flower, “Books of the Day. *Aedoeology*,” vol. 7, April 1893, p. viii-ix; Elliot, Sydney Barrington, *Aedoeology: A Treatise on Generative Life; Including Pre-Natal Influence, Limitation of Offspring, and Hygiene of the Generative System*, Boston, The Arena Publishing Company, 1893.

civil authorities “[had] in their power to determine matters related to the heart.”<sup>27</sup> “Free love” was radical because it challenged Calvinist ideas of marriage as an indissoluble contract and favored divorce. Its advocates were also part of radical circles that included former abolitionists, freethinkers and spiritualists. Ironically, the romantic love fantasy they promoted has become mainstream today.

#### The exaltation of purity: romantic love and art

“Prostitution within marriage” was a symptom of an immoral society that tolerated archaic inequalities between men and women. The solutions for Flower were first “to exalt marriage,” in other words to elevate pure, romantic love as a model for family and interpersonal relationships, and secondly to push for the moral right of women to own independent property and to decide what to do with their bodies and their sexuality:

If wives were given absolute control of their bodies, and the right to say when they would become mothers, if at the altar they became possessed of one half the property interests of their husbands, it would be infinitely better for humanity, and the servitude and dependence which now compel numbers of women to become slaves to their husbands' passion, would disappear; while husbands who now take advantage of the privileges accorded by the wife's dependent condition would come to treat their companions in deed and fact as equals.<sup>28</sup>

Sexual and financial independence would emancipate women and lead to gender equality.

Art had a key role in the exaltation of purity since it could “impress” uplifting images on the mind of people. Flower in particular promoted Helen Gardener's realistic novels.<sup>29</sup> *Is this your son, my lord?* “boldly unmask[ed] masculine immorality” and called for the same moral standards for men and women. Gardener asserted she wanted to do for the “fallen woman” what Harriet Beecher Stowe had done for slaves. The novel tells the story of the ruin of Minnie Kent, a 15-year-old innocent working class girl, by two outwardly respectable men – Mansfield, a rich and pious mill owner and the owner of the department store where Minnie works, and his son Preston.<sup>30</sup>

#### The crusade against white slavery: prostitution at work and urban poverty

Gardener's novel was part and parcel of Flower's campaign in favor of “the white slaves of New York.” Framing his crusade in abolitionist terms, he considered the victims of prostitution at work – the many Minnie Kents that peopled American urban workplaces - as new slaves. Narratives of seduction were a commonplace of reform literature then: “men of status and wealth took advantage of poor, innocent young women,” usually white working-class girls lost in the city. In the end, they fell into prostitution and met a disastrous end.<sup>31</sup> Because they did not vote, voiceless women had to suffer the burden of the feminine condition in the workplace. Women had to accept the dreadfully low wages that often led them to “starve or sin.” Flower particularly admired the powerful “feminine character” that resisted “seductive temptation.” His campaigns prompted other reformers to carry on the struggle. Rev. Louis Banks wrote his own study of “white slavery” after reading Flower's articles.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Morita, Sally, “Unseen (and unappreciated) matters: Understanding the reformatory nature of 19th-century Spiritualism,” *American Studies*, 1999, vol. 40-3, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, 261; “Well-Springs and Feeders of Immorality,” p. 398.

<sup>29</sup> Gardener, Helen H. Hamilton, *Is this your son, my lord? a novel*, Boston, The Arena publishing Company, 1890; *Pray you, sir, whose daughter?*, Boston, The Arena Publishing Company, 1892.

<sup>30</sup> Odem, Mary E., *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, University of North Carolina Press, 1995, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> “This narrative of seduction had long been popular in nineteenth-century melodrama and romance novels, but reformers adapted it to their own social context and political purposes.” Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Flower, “Society's Exiles,” vol. 4, June 1891, p. 37-54. Louis Albert Banks, *White Slaves; or, The Oppression of the Worthy Poor*, Boston, Lee and Shepard, 1892.

Like Jacob Riis in New York, Flower studied poverty in Boston and used the power of photography to document the life of the underprivileged in a book entitled *Civilization's Inferno, or, Studies in the Social Cellar*.<sup>33</sup> His study - part sociological survey based on fieldwork and statistical analysis, part *mise en scène* of poverty and a modern rewriting of Dante's circles of hell to shock readers into action - revealed the gendered nature of urban poverty at the time. His description of the case of a widow and two children working in an underground tenement was, for him, "typical" of problems at the time (cf. figure 6).<sup>34</sup> Flower, like many middle-class reformers, was shocked by the discovery of women's poverty and the dangers it posed to their purity. For Flower, the written word failed to describe the "social cellar" - only "a few glimpses of the horrors of the abyss" could be caught.<sup>35</sup> The word "abyss" and the darkness metaphor evoke all the unspeakable dark mysteries of the industrial city and the seemingly bottomless immorality it produced, the metaphor encapsulating in one vague, ominous term the various moral, religious, physical, racial, gender and imperial aspects of a complex phenomenon: the inexplicable squalor in a country of abundance, female degradation, male immorality, crime, and the explicit analogy between investigators' "studies in the social cellar," and the exploration, in the wake of Stanley, of the "Dark Continent" and its savagery.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 6. An example of "typical" poverty of the time: "widow and two children in under-ground tenement"

Helen Campbell also discussed the "social question" in terms that revealed the interlocking of economic and feminist issues. She published a six-part series of papers on "women wage-earners" in *The Arena* where she described vignettes of female poverty in New York. She concluded that women could only

<sup>33</sup> He published a series of illustrated articles in *The Arena* between February 1891 and March 1893. He then reprinted the articles in a book with the telltale title: *Civilization's Inferno, or, Studies in the Social Cellar*.

<sup>34</sup> Flower, "Society's Exiles," p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Flower, *Civilization's Inferno*, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> About the "Mysteries of the Great City," see: Trachtenberg, Alan, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, 1st ed., New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, p.101-139. The "abyss" metaphor was widespread. Flower for example promoted a report about *Chicago's Dark Places*. He was outraged at the extremes of poverty and the inability of government to take care of the situation: children were like savages in a "semi-nude condition." Flower, "Cancer Spots in Metropolitan Life," vol. 4, November 1891, p. 761-762; *Civilization's Inferno*, p. 123. About the "abyss" metaphor, see: Bender, Daniel E., *American Abyss: Savagery and Civilization in the Age of Industry*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2009.

improve their working conditions by organizing workers' associations and Consumers' Unions.<sup>37</sup> Even though Flower wanted women to directly take part in public debates and in social work, his analysis nonetheless testifies to a gendered reading of economic and social problems. Female reformers were seen as maternal figures – Campbell “possessed the mother heart.”<sup>38</sup> It was logical for Flower: reform work was the extension, in the public sphere, of the alleged selfless, pure love and noble virtues mothers exhibited within the home. Poor women were supposed to be vulnerable mothers and were accordingly the main recipients of the relief campaign organized by *The Arena*.<sup>39</sup> They would give birth to future citizens, that's why the degrading factory and tenement environments were especially a cause of concern. Protecting women meant protecting the future; women, in other words, were progress embodied.

### The campaign to raise the age of consent

“Has law ever touched a lower depth of degradation?” – such was the indignant rhetorical question that started Flower's crusade to raise age of consent laws. In 1891, in 36 US states, the age of consent was under 15, in 10 states it was 10 and in Delaware it was 7 years old. This shameful, barbarous legislation was enacted by “fathers, husbands, and brothers for the furtherance of animal lust,” hence the necessity of woman suffrage to moralize society.<sup>40</sup> He stressed that all reforms were interdependent: in states where women had the right to vote, like Wyoming and Kansas, age of consent had risen from 14 to 18.<sup>41</sup> Flower popularized the movement on a national scale and followed the model of English editor William T. Stead: he had used his newspaper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to tear “the mask of hypocrisy” and forced politicians to pass a sterner law. For Flower, if the people knew, they would not tolerate “social evils”; as a result, exposing problems ought to lead *naturally* to reforms. Only underhand scheming by corrupt men could stop progress, like the “secret sessions” to discuss age of consent legislation that were so “unfit and demoralizing” for girls.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Campbell, Helen, “Association in Clubs with Its Bearing on Working Women,” vol. 5, December 1891, p. 61-6; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. First paper,” vol. 7, January 1893, p. 153-172; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. II. Rise and growth of trades up to the present time,” vol. 7, February 1893, p. 321-336; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. III. Present wage rates in the United States,” vol. 7, March 1893, p. 433-440; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. IV. General conditions for English and continental workers,” vol. 7, May 1893, p. 668-679; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. V. General Conditions in the Western States,” vol. 8, June 1893, p. 32-38; “Women wage-earners; their past, their present, and their future. VI. Specific evils and abuses in factory life and in general trades,” vol. 8, July 1893, p. 172-184.

<sup>38</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, p. 124-125.

<sup>39</sup> Flower, “Our Poor Fund,” vol. 6, July 1892, p. lvi.

<sup>40</sup> Flower, “The Age of Consent,” vol. 3, February 1891, p. 381-382.

<sup>41</sup> Flower, “Well-Springs and Feeders of Immorality,” vol. 11, January 1895, p. 192-215.

<sup>42</sup> Flower, “More Facts and What They reveal,” vol. 3, February 1891, p. 382-384. “Demoralizing” should be understood in its archaic sense of corrupting morals as well as shattering hope.

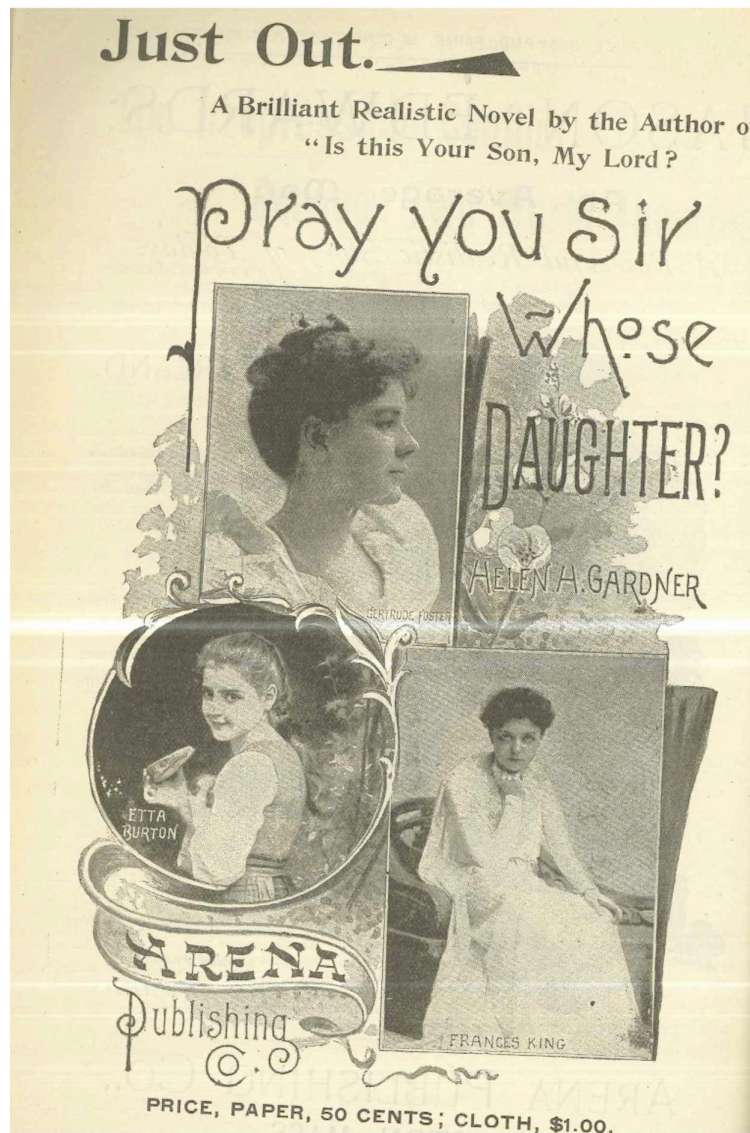


Figure 7. *Pray You Sir, Whose Daughter?* book cover

Like journalism, art had to play a role in the crusade. Flower published Gardner's *Pray You, Sir, Whose Daughter?* and considered it the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for the "white ribbon army," i.e. the purity crusade (cf. figure 7). A department store manager takes Ettie Berton, his employee, to Coney Island; he seduces her but since she is over the age consent he is blameless while she gets fired: she is then ostracized and dies alone. Her moral decline is contrasted with another story: Gertrude Foster, a college-educated daughter from a respectable family, saves another shop girl, Frances King, from the same fate. She embodies the work of "friends of purity" – she influences legislators and sets up working girls' clubs, where women could find recreation and moral instruction.<sup>43</sup> Flower was one of these "friends of purity." In January 1895, he organized a symposium on what he called the "the shame of America" with male and female contributors. His "nine defenders of home" included American Purity Alliance leader Aaron M. Powell and Frances Willard (cf. figure 8). Flower also promoted the "Petition of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union for the Protection of Woman" and its "black list of states" where "*a little girl may consent to her ruin*" (cf. figure 9).<sup>44</sup> Agitation turned into political lobbying: Flower urged readers to

<sup>43</sup> One can also notice here middle-class reformers' fear of the fateful influence of urban modern environments on girls, whether it be modern amusement parks or modern workplaces like department stores. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, p. 17-18.

<sup>44</sup> Gardner, "II. What Shall the Age of Consent Be?" vol. 11, January 1895, p. 196-198; "A Battle for Sound Morality, or The History of Recent Age-of-Consent Legislation in the United States, Part II. The Victory in Colorado, Nebraska, and Missouri," vol. 14, September 1895, p. 1-32; "A Battle for Sound Morality. Part III," vol. 14, October 1895, p. 205-220; "A Battle for Sound Morality. Final Paper," vol. 14, September 1895, p. 401-419.

flood their representatives with letters.<sup>45</sup> For all his talk about a radical and broad purification of society, a single-issue campaign finally did prove more effective - by the end of 1895, the age of consent was raised in six states.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 8. "Some defenders of the home"

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Flower to Henry Demarest Lloyd, June 12, 1895, reel 6, *The Papers of Henry Demarest Lloyd* (microfilm edition), State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1970.

<sup>46</sup> Flower, "Social Purity Congress at the World's Fair," p. xxi. "The Purity Conference," *New York Times*, October 17, 1895. Powell, *The National Purity Congress*. Engs, Ruth C., *The Progressive Era's Health Reform Movement: A Historical Dictionary*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003, p. 273.

**REVISED BLACK LIST FOR 1896.**

Below we give the black list of states, showing the limit at which fathers, brothers, and husbands have placed the age at which a little girl may consent to her ruin.

<p><b>SEVEN YEARS.</b> * Delaware.</p> <p>* Delaware has other stringent laws up to 15, but her rape law "with consent" holds to 7 only.</p>
<p><b>TEN YEARS.</b></p> <p>North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, *Mississippi, *Florida.</p> <p>* Abduction and finable offences up to 16, but rape law "with consent" ends at 10.</p>
<p><b>TWELVE YEARS.</b></p> <p>Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Indian Territory, Nevada.</p>
<p><b>THIRTEEN YEARS.</b></p> <p>New Hampshire, Iowa, Utah.</p>
<p><b>FOURTEEN YEARS.</b></p> <p>* Georgia, Maine, Vermont, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, New Mexico, California.</p> <p>* The wording of the Georgia law may permit a jury to place the age at 5 or any other age up to 14.</p>
<p><b>FIFTEEN YEARS.</b></p> <p>Texas.</p>
<p><b>SIXTEEN YEARS.</b></p> <p>Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, *New Jersey, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Oregon, Arkansas, † Pennsylvania, ‡ District of Columbia.</p> <p>* It is merely a finable misdemeanor in New Jersey, which should rule this state out of the 16 list.</p> <p>† Must prove previous good character after 10 years, which does not place Pennsylvania justly with the 16 list.</p> <p>‡ District of Columbia has a very stringent law which is superior in its provisions to that of most of the states. This covers the National Park, all vessels under United States control, etc.</p>

**OUT OF THE BLACK LIST.**

**EIGHTEEN YEARS.**

NEW YORK, KANSAS, COLORADO, ARIZONA, WYOMING, IDAHO,  
\* NEBRASKA, † MISSOURI.

\* The requirements in the Nebraska statute make it almost worthless after 16.  
† The requirements and penalties in Missouri are the most defective of all, and will prove practically worthless in operation.

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Figure 9. Blacklisting states with a low age of consent

Purity, the free discussion of sex and spirituality

Flower did not oppose purity to the open and free discussion of sex. On the contrary, he denounced "mock modesty" that led to women's ignorance and eventually prostitution, and called for "*purity through knowledge, not innocence through ignorance.*"<sup>47</sup> Not only was the "ostrich method" dangerous for women because ignorance made them "easy prey of vice" but Flower also contended that debauched men and reactionary bigots were objective allies. For him, "conservatism and sensualism forged an unhallowed alliance" - fanatics like anti-obscenity activist Anthony Comstock actually "protect[ed] vice by assailing all who seek to purify life." There was nothing to fear from a true-to-life, photography-like representation of reality.<sup>48</sup> To moralize society meant to purify, in other words to "expose" or "boldly unmask" injustice. Flower's language blended journalism and photography with surgery in one metaphor of revelation: "they who dwell in stagnant depths of conservatism (...); who believe in allowing the social body to rot with eating, cancerous ulcers rather than uncover the loathsome sores that the surgeon's knife may be applied and the body saved."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Flower, "Some Causes of Present Day Immorality," in Powell, *The National Purity Congress*, p. 317.

<sup>48</sup> Flower, "The Postmaster-General and the Censorship of Morals," p. 547, 552; "Conservatism and Sensualism an Unhallowed Alliance," p. 127-128; "Masculine Immorality," 379; "Home Influence and The Child," p. 506.

<sup>49</sup> Flower, "Is This You Son, My Lord," vol. 2, November 1890, p. 760; Flower, "The Postmaster-General and the Censorship of Morals," p. 542.



Flower condemned “mock modesty which sees immorality where a pure mind beholds only beauty and grace.” The author’s *pure intentions* redeemed realistic descriptions of “morbid pruriency.”<sup>50</sup> What mattered was to reach the deeply rooted psychological cause of immorality, the image buried deep down, and then replace it with exalting images that would modify people’s behavior accordingly. This kind of transparency fantasy had actually already materialized in the radical reform work of *the* ultimate model of purity – Jesus. Jesus assailed the very thought of sin, “the *thought* which prompted the deed.”<sup>51</sup> Regenerating America therefore implied changing people’s representations and intentions, hence Flower’s constant emphasis on journalistic exposures, realistic novels and “thought-molders.” He took the term literally: not only did he believe in the power of mind to mold other minds but he thought mind could also influence matter.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, he was very much interested in scientific research and religions that could explain the mechanics of the inner self and the power of mind, for example “psychical research,” hypnotism, Christian Science and New Thought.<sup>53</sup>

Flower published a utopian novel in 1893 that developed this vision - *Unveiling a Parallel: A Satirical Romance*.<sup>54</sup> The novel reversed gender roles on Mars and “unmask[ed] double standard of morals,” laying bare “how horrible impurity is in either man or woman.” The narrator visits two societies: Caskia and Paleveria. In Paleveria, women are reduced to their bestial passions. They are described as “spiritually dead” and bodies without a soul. In Caskia, “exalted morality” has led to gender equality and, consequently, to an egalitarian society. Gender equality is shown as intrinsically linked to spirituality. As Flower remarked, “the spiritual world is to them [Caskians] a real world.” The Caskians had put into practice Flower’s ideal of psychological and moral transparency – in their society, the very thought of lust was already adultery and was censured accordingly in order to protect children from inheriting a “curse of lust.”<sup>55</sup> Marriage was pure; even sexuality was spiritualized: children were “conceived in immaculate purity.”<sup>56</sup> In the coming civilization, women would be “pure and exalted” and “the servant of the spirit.” In short, Flower radicalized Victorian assumptions about purity, which euphemized female sexuality, and disembodied women.

### *The ambiguous trajectory of “female purity”*

#### Purity and Christian Science

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Flower saw in Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, the embodiment and the logical outcome of his feminist struggles (cf. figure 10). She personified his spiritual conception of feminism and the culmination of decades of progress for women. Eddy was “the greatest religious leader in the New World” and “the most famous woman in the world.” Christian Science was the first American religion and the first religion to be established by a woman. Most of its devotees were women. In Christian Science, since faith could cure and matter was unreal, bodies were spiritualized, which enabled the “emancipation of the soul.” The climax of Flower’s discourse of imagined purity, which had always belittled bodily desires, therefore left women completely disembodied.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Flower, “The Postmaster-General and the Censorship of Morals,” p. 542; “Sound Morality *Versus* Morbid Pruriency,” vol. 36, December 1906, p. 656-658.

<sup>51</sup> Flower, “Home Influence and The Child,” p. 506.

<sup>52</sup> Flower, “A Transition Period,” vol. 3, December 1890, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup> Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*, p. 182-183.

<sup>54</sup> *Two Women of the West*, *Unveiling a Parallel*, Boston, The Arena Publishing Company, 1893. The “two women” in question were two housewives from Iowa, Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant. Home could therefore be the locus of challenges to the social order.

<sup>55</sup> Flower, “Books of the Day. *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance*,” vol. 8, September 1893, p. iii-viii.

<sup>56</sup> *Two Women of the West*, *Unveiling a Parallel*, p. 102-103.

<sup>57</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, p. 193-194; “Mary Baker Eddy,” *The Twentieth Century Magazine*, vol. 3, January 1911, p. 358; “The Founder of Christian Science. Part II,” *The Twentieth Century Magazine*, vol. 3, February 1911, p. 526-534. “The most famous women in the world,” *The Boston Sunday Herald*, June 25, 1905.



MRS. MARY BAKER EDDY

*From a photograph taken while living in Lynn*

Figure 10. Mary Baker Eddy

For some of his reformist friends, Flower spent too much time defending Christian Science and not enough fighting for progressive practical reforms; for Flower, both were part of the same struggle. His friends did have a point though. With Christian Science, women's concrete progress remained subservient to religious regeneration and, after his involvement with Christian Science, Flower no longer embarked in another progressive feminist crusade – since spiritual purification was the solution to both individual and social problems, then why try to reform society structurally and push for women-friendly legislation?<sup>58</sup>

#### Flower's essentialist reading of feminism

For all his talk about the “era of woman” and his support for crusades to achieve “absolute justice and perfect equality,” Flower never subverted the “root causes” of female inferiority, that is to say Victorian mentalities. In his discourse, the boundaries of gender stereotypes were not shifted. Firstly, his exhortations were predicated upon essentialization. Women and children - the “mothers of the race and the oncoming citizenship of the land” – were seen as vulnerable victims as well as the embodiment of natural purity; women could also be the helpless receptacles of male corruption. Women could radiate out purity – they worked in terms of influence, not of direct action. That meant they could be a force for good while remaining passive. Male desire, when it was not liberated from bestiality by spiritual purification,

<sup>58</sup> Zueblin, Charles, “The Outer Office,” *The Twentieth Century Magazine*, vol. 6, December 1912, p. 63-64.

turned men into degenerate libertines; otherwise, men were the chivalrous protectors of women, here not traditional knights but fearless investigators following truth and supporting good causes, like Harvey Ball in Gardener's *Is this your son, my lord?* or Flower himself.<sup>59</sup>

Secondly, Flower's writings still promoted the traditional postulates of Victorian culture, notably sentimentalism and the centrality of home. Flower celebrated the sacredness of marriage as a romantic relationship. Home was no longer the traditional Victorian fortress that allegedly sheltered womanhood from the corrupt public sphere. Flower, on the contrary, wanted women to transform society. Nevertheless, home still acted as the moral referent and women, so his argument went, had to impose their domestic, maternal virtues on a corrupt society. Women were never supposed to put behind them the values of domesticity. They had to fulfill their role as mothers on the nation as a whole, as if the boundaries of home expanded but, in reality, never shifted. Women changed places but not roles.

Flower's language also revealed the persistence of gender stereotypes and his ambivalence towards femininity. For example, Flower explained that the "robust realism" of writers like Gardener or Tolstoy epitomized American *masculine* virtue. On the other hand, he felt no sympathy for "the flippant, effeminate, and senile cry" of the followers of art for art's sake and their "conventional intellectual effeminacy, (...) the echo of a decaying civilization, the voice of Greece and Rome in their decline."<sup>60</sup> Femininity therefore evoked European decadence, which for a republican like Flower conjured up everything he despised – everything that was affected, artificial, aristocratic, imperialistic, entropic, listless and indifferent to social problems, in one word corrupt. Manhood remained Flower's implicit frame of reference. Emancipated women were described as manly. For instance, "moral advance" was the result of "the sowers of *virile* thought-seeds throughout the land, chief among whom was Frances E. Willard" (italics mine).<sup>61</sup> The germination metaphor even takes on awkward undertones as it hints at male sexuality. Another example is Flower's praise of American poet Katrina Trask, the embodiment of "a higher and truer *manhood*" (italics mine).<sup>62</sup>

### Catholicism vs. feminism

In Flower's evolutionary perspective, women were bound to win their battle for progress – only an all-powerful immoral power could stop them and Flower cast the Pope in this role. In the last years of his life, between 1915 and his death in 1918, Flower embarked on a crusade against the "menace" of Catholicism. This menace also concerned women. Flower's anti-Catholic episode reveals the nativist potential of imagined purity, as he tolerated nothing short of an ethereal "feminine" idealism. Since he believed Catholicism (its rituals and its infamous depraved convents) to be linked to sensualism, it ran counter to his vision of pure, spiritual feminism.

Flower shared with feminists the perception that Catholicism was antidemocratic since it aggressively opposed woman suffrage.<sup>63</sup> Tensions over temperance and woman suffrage between Catholics and Protestants could also account for his anti-Catholic moment. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evolution also condemned Catholicism. In republican France for instance, anti-Catholicism was part of the progressive agenda in the same way as antimilitarism, anti-imperialism, and government intervention to fight poverty. Even Mexico exemplified what a genuine republican policy was since convents were

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<sup>59</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Flower, "An Epoch-Making Drama," vol. 4, July 1891, p. 247; "An Idealistic Dreamer Who Sing in a Minor Key," vol. 6, August 1892, p. 288-289.

<sup>61</sup> Flower, *Progressive Men*, p. 269.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146. Keller, Rosemary Skinner, Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America: Women and Religion: Methods of Study and Reflection*, Bloomington, Ind., Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 158.

forbidden by the government. The subject of convents was crucial for Flower as it revealed the threat Catholicism posed to women.<sup>64</sup>

Flower perpetuated a long nativist tradition that saw convents as dens of vice for pure Protestant women. Anti-Catholic writers took up the “white slavery” trope that was prevalent then in anti-prostitution literature. Convents were seen as prison-like brothels and sinister priests, much like debauched husbands or the male bosses that took advantage of their female employees, seduced vulnerable nuns, notably at the confessional. The seduction narratives that pervaded purity literature in the 1890s were adapted to the new crusade, blending with the old captivity tale tradition and the escaped nun motif.<sup>65</sup> Flower never wrote explicitly fanatical pieces like ex-priest Jeremiah Crowley’s book that made the Pope the “chief of white slaves” but he nonetheless publicized it in the pages of his new newspaper, the aptly named *The Menace*.<sup>66</sup> Flower’s tone was more measured. However, the fact that Catholics refused to open the doors of their convents for state inspections and that they were “terror-stricken” at the idea of an “impartial investigation” cast doubts over their intentions and was suspicious to say the least. If convents were not defiling female purity, his argument went, then why object to inspections that would lift suspicions? If Flower was cautious about stories of sexual abuse, he nonetheless described women as victims of violence. He denounced the Houses of the Good Shepherd - these convents for juvenile offenders turned out to be brutal prisons for girls.<sup>67</sup>

In another parallel with his crusade against prostitution, Flower denounced Catholics who used the anti-obscenity Comstock laws to stop fearless investigators like *The Menace* from revealing Romanist wrongdoings. In January 1916, *Menace* editors were prosecuted in Joplin, MO.: they were charged with publishing an indecent article about the alleged seduction of a young girl and an extract from Crowley’s book which contained lewd questions prescribed for girls’ confessions.<sup>68</sup> The Joplin trial outraged Flower and confirmed his anti-Catholic convictions.<sup>69</sup> Even if Flower never explicitly blamed Catholics for defiling Protestant girls, he saw in Catholic-inspired prosecutions an ominous admission of guilt and considered the *Menace* journalists as defenders of purity: “that journal did what decent journals must do if the purity of society is to be maintained, viz., expose what appear to be immoral and vice-breeding conditions.”<sup>70</sup> *The Menace* was eventually acquitted and Flower noted that, while the jury was deliberating, “the Protestant women of Aurora, Mo., the home of the defendants, were holding prayer meetings in the churches, praying for the acquittal of the editors.”<sup>71</sup>

Flower wanted to enlist both sexes in the fight, but his description of womanhood took stereotypical forms.<sup>72</sup> Girls who entered convents were supposed to be weak and naïve. Female activists remained

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<sup>64</sup> Flower, “The Rupture Between the French Republic and the Vatican,” vol. 32, October 1904, p. 430; “Prime-Minister Combes Outlines The Policy of The French Government,” vol. 32, October 1904, p. 430-431.

<sup>65</sup> The most famous example of these stories, Maria Monk’s *Awful disclosures*, dates back to the antebellum period - a time when Irish and German Catholic immigration was in full swing and anti-Catholic hostility was rampant (the 1834 Ursuline Convent Riots near Boston is a case in point.) The book featured high in *The Menace* Publishing Company catalog (see: “Your Everyneed Catalogue of Publications,” Anti-Catholic Printed Material Collection, University of Notre Dame Archives, UNDA). Monk, Maria, *Awful disclosures of Maria Monk, as exhibited in a narrative of her sufferings during a residence of five years as a novice, and two years as a black nun, in the Hotel Dieu nunnery at Montreal, with additional information. To which is added, The Nun, or, Six months, residence in a convent*, London, W. Nicholson & Sons, 1836. Nordstrom, Justin, *Danger on the Doorstep: Anti-Catholicism and American Print Culture in the Progressive Era*, Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 2006, p. 142.

<sup>66</sup> Crowley, Jeremiah, *The Pope – Chief of White Slaves, High Priest of Intrigue*, n.p., published by the author, 1913.

<sup>67</sup> Flower, *The Patriot’s Manual, dealing with the irrepressible conflict between two mutually exclusive world theories of government; a compendium of facts, historical data, reasons and present-day chronicles, showing why every friend of fundamental democracy must oppose politico-ecclesiastical Romanism in its un-American campaign to make America “dominantly Catholic.”* Fort Scott, Kan., Free Press Defense League, 1915, p. 219-220.

<sup>68</sup> Maury, Reuben, *The Wars of the Godly*, New York, Robert M. McBride & Company, 1928, p. 262-264. No source mentions which of Crowley’s books was incriminated.

<sup>69</sup> “The Free Press Defense League,” *The Menace*, 6 November 1915, p. 3. Nations, Gilbert O., “Benjamin Orange Flower,” *The Menace*, 4 January 1919, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Flower, *Story of the Menace Trial*, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> The Free Press Defense League, “The Free Press Defense League,” *The Menace*, 6 November 1915, p. 3.

paradoxically passive – they prayed, radiating out their inherent purity, while men would “[bear] the brunt of the battle.” Men travelled on the lecture circuit: in Flower’s list of the “most widely known patriotic speakers,” only 2 out of 22 were women and they were ex-nuns, i.e. victims, telling about their experiences, not intellectuals analyzing a trend (Anna Lowry’s *Martyr In Black* and Helen Jackson’s *Convent Cruelties*). *The Menace* was a masculine world where women were employed in menial jobs like stenographers or secretaries. Men were described as fighters who were part of an “army of patriots” who opposed “militant enemies” on the “firing line.”<sup>73</sup> In short, they conformed to “gendered expectations of proper manly roles of vigilance and military mobilization in defense of women and children.”<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

In his study of the “paranoid style” in American culture, historian Richard Hofstadter claimed that anti-Catholicism had always been “the pornography of the Puritan.”<sup>75</sup> Was Flower’s final crusade his own stint at pornography? Such an obsession with purity could hide repressed desires that found expression in his support for lurid anti-Catholic literature. Such an assessment of Flower’s strange trajectory is self-defeating though, as that would imply peering into the depths of his own *intentions* – such psychohistorical considerations would essentialize his contingent trajectory. Flower’s own brand of feminism was central in his evolution because it set him against Catholicism from the beginning and because the growing popularity of “feminist” ideas like woman suffrage and temperance in the 1910s reoriented his reform energy towards anti-Catholicism. Flower was a “reluctant modernist” and a member of the “radical middle-class,” in other words a “genteel radical.”<sup>76</sup> His stance on “the woman question” reflected this ambivalence – he pushed for radical reforms, like women’s right to divorce and to control their bodies for example, while clinging to Victorian gender stereotypes.

49 281 characters, spaces, footnotes and bibliography included

## Illustrations

Figure 1. Benjamin Flower at the Purity Congress in Baltimore in 1895

Figure 2. Advertisement for symposia on “Women’s Clubs” and “Woman’s Dress” in *The Arena*

Figure 3. Mrs. French-Sheldon, the “intrepid woman” who explored East Africa

Figure 4. Example of Sunday afternoon program of Women’s Arena Club of Philadelphia, in Hirschler, Diana, “Union of Philadelphia” *The Arena*, vol. 9, March 1894, p. 551

Figure 5. Flower’s speech at the 1895 American Purity Alliance conference in Baltimore

Figure 6. An example of “typical” poverty of the time: “widow and two children in under-ground tenement”

Figure 7. *Pray You Sir, Whose Daughter?* book cover

Figure 8. “Some defenders of the home”

Figure 9. Blacklisting states with a low age of consent

Figure 10. Mary Baker Eddy

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<sup>73</sup> Flower, *The Patriot’s Manual*, p. 223-232. Lowry, Anna, *The Martyr In Black: Twenty Years of the Convent Life of Sister Justina O.S.B.*, Ritzville, Wash., Published by the Author, 1913. Jackson, Helen, *Convent cruelties, or, My life in a convent: a providential delivery from Rome’s convent slave pens: a sensational experience*, Toledo, Ohio, Helen Jackson, 1925. A description of the *Menace* staff and a photograph of its female employees can be found in Peters, Frank, “Few who saw it will ever forget restless, glowering – The Menace,” *Springfield, Mo. News-Leader*, February 21, 1960 in Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Vance Randolph Collection, AFC 1941/001, Box 7 Folder 86 “The Menace.”

<sup>74</sup> Nordstrom, *Danger on the Doorstep*, p. 149.

<sup>75</sup> Hofstadter, Richard, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and other essays*, New York, Vintage Books, 2008, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> What historian Cline calls “radicalism of a genteel type.” Cotkin, George, *Reluctant Modernism: American thought and culture, 1880-1900*, New York, Toronto, Twayne Publishers, Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992. Smith, Bernard, “Howells: the Genteel Radical,” *The Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 11, August 11, 1934. Johnston, Robert D., *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2003. Cline, Howard Francis, *The Mechanics of Dissent: Benjamin Orange Flower and his Arena, the story of a man and his magazine* (senior honors thesis, Harvard, 1939), Harvard University Archives, p. 13.