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SEARCHING FOR A HEAVEN ATTAINABLE ON EARTH
UNDERSTANDING THE FEMINISM OF ANNIE BESANT

by

Mary Beth Howitt

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of History
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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• 1994 Mary Beth Howitt



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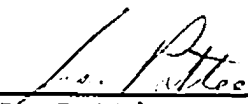
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ABSTRACT

From her birth in 1847 until her death in 1933, Annie Besant played many roles, was many things, and contributed to endless causes of the Victorian age: she was a wife, mother and daughter, she was a believer and a doubter, she was a liberal and a socialist, a Malthusian and a Theosophist. The question that is asked here, however, is whether or not she can be considered a feminist as well, and if so, what part did it play in her life, and to what extent did it govern her actions?

Besant wrote and spoke on all the roles she played; we know about her relationships with her mother, her husband and her children, we know how her crisis of faith came about, we know why she left liberalism for socialism, and how she finally came to Theosophy, but she rarely wrote on women or feminism, and when she did, it coincided with an experience in her own life which reinforced the subordinate position of women in Victorian England. Feminism was not the guiding force in Besant's life, yet she is considered a militant feminist by almost all twentieth century historians who consider her life. This thesis also seeks to explain this historiographical vacuum, and by examining Annie Besant's writings which concern feminism closely, as well as the events in her life that coincide with their publication, also hopes to fill the same vacuum.

To Laurie Penava, who was found free of cancer
the day I defended this thesis,

and to my grandmother Adeline Mac Naughton,
who is wonderful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two problems immediately surface when I write these acknowledgments: first I can not possibly mention every person who helped me in some way with this project, and secondly, I fear that words alone will not do justice to the debt of gratitude I owe to the people I must mention. I hope the following individuals will understand that I could not have accomplished this thesis or this degree without them.

First I would like to thank Margy Tiessen, who has not only been a solid and committed friend, but an endless source of support, without which I would have been lost at many intervals over the past two years. Also, I thank Natalie Cakebread, whose mere presence makes me feel happy, and I would like to thank both of them together, for keeping me in a constant state of amusement when I probably should have been sitting in front of my computer. I thank Kris Tozer for his patience and his conversation, and his endless knowledge of WordPerfect which saved me several times. My gratitude goes to Tom Pogue for giving me the time I needed to finish this thesis, to John Rainbird and Allison Davidson for covering for me at work, and especially to Vesna Stelcer, for her blind faith in me and my ability to do this. To my family I also owe a debt of gratitude, and while I think they were a little surprised to find me in a Master's program, they were always confident and encouraging.

I have saved the most important person for last. I do not know if saint-like patience and endless kindness are characteristics common to all advisors, or just to Dr. Leslie Howsam, but it is Dr. Howsam who is really responsible for this thesis, not because she pushed me to finish it, or because she showed me the direction I should go, but because I was afraid of disappointing her, and I can not adequately express the depth of my gratitude, or my respect, for her.

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INTRODUCTION

"Mrs. Besant, you are full of intellectual pride."
Dr. Pusey, in *An Autobiography*, lll.

"Of all great Victorian women," states historian Elizabeth Longford, "Annie Besant was the most extraordinary."¹ Such a statement is a sizable tribute to the memory of Annie Besant; Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, Frances Power Cobbe, to mention only a few, were contemporaries of Besant's and were, without doubt, all remarkable women of the Victorian era. It was perhaps not so much the women, as the society in which they lived, that created so many strong-minded women. Victorian society was inconsistent, and paradoxical; women were meant for the private sphere, nurturing children, catering to husbands, making a life out of their 'natural' propensity for domesticity. But at the same time, liberal theories had taken firm hold of England, and created an atmosphere whereby many causes could be espoused, and ideas could be voiced and, even if Victorian society did not necessarily want to listen, women too were able to express their minds. It was in this century, when social rules and political boundaries were thought to be carefully delineated, that movements promising to overturn the social system, such as secularism, Malthusianism, socialism and women's rights all found exponents.

¹Elizabeth Longford, Eminent Victorian Women, New York: 1981, 129.

It is perhaps because Annie Besant was born into a 'proper' Victorian home, raised in a 'proper' Victorian manner, with expectations of becoming a 'proper' Victorian wife and mother, that the actual events of her life and her activities are so extraordinary. The contradictions of Victorian society can be seen in Besant's life. The ideal of the nurturant wife, the doting mother, and the submissive, passive, private woman was lost on Annie Besant. She was public, she was outspoken, she was radical, and, perhaps most importantly, she was famous. Thus the image of the 'Angel in the House' is thrown into strong relief by the reality of Besant's life. Despite the confines that societal expectations placed on women it also left room for women like Besant to manoeuvre.

Besant was, in fact, a part of the movements mentioned above that threatened or were perceived to threaten the political, social and economic system. As we shall see, she was a secularist, she was a Malthusian, and she was a socialist. We know this; she wrote extensively on these topics, she claimed them for her own, she climbed to the top of each organization, and even owned and edited newspapers devoted to each cause. But, though considered a feminist by almost every historian who studies her life, she did not write extensively on women's rights and she did not actively support the cause: indeed, she was never even marginally involved with the organized women's movement.

This gap in the understanding of Annie Besant's life, and the forces that motivated her, thus needs to be bridged before any reliable assessments about her place in history can be made. That she deserves a place in history is undeniable; she was involved with a wide variety of causes, all radical, and she experienced so many accomplishments even in the first half of her life, that she has rightfully claimed her place. The question, however, is whether her place in history should be among feminists. That her presence on the public platform signifies an important passage in women's history is also undeniable. As a public woman, who failed as a wife and mother and who was unafraid of popular opinion, her position in patriarchal society symbolizes a strong, and loud, woman's voice.

However, was this strong, loud, voice a feminist one? This is the question that needs to be answered. It is interesting that biographers of Besant avoid the topic of her feminism entirely, while historians who refer to her in a chapter, a page or a paragraph claim her as a feminist, a leading and militant campaigner for women's rights. This is the historiographical gap that needs to be bridged; where feminism is concerned, Besant falls between assumptions and omissions. The heart of the problem is whether she been appropriated by twentieth century feminist historians who wish to associate this extraordinary woman in the ranks of the battle for women's rights, or neglected by those who either do

not consider the issue, or chose to ignore it altogether? Until these questions have been answered Besant's feminism is merely putative.

The most effective way to do this is to do what all historians do in practising their craft, but seem to have avoided in this case: to examine in detail her involvement with the causes that have implied feminist content, and analyze her writing associated with these causes to see if they were, in fact, feminist in intent. We shall explore Besant's involvement with the birth control campaign, her court battle over the publication of Malthusian pamphlets, and her own pamphlets on family limitation, and ask if they are feminist. We shall look at her thoughts and writings on marriage, divorce, and child custody and ask, again, if they are feminist. Lastly, we shall explore her efforts on behalf of socialism and trade unionism, and in particular her involvement in The Match Girl's Strike of 1888 and then ask, once more, if they were feminist.

Before we do this, however, an understanding of Victorian society must be achieved, and more specifically the circumstances of women at that time. What it meant to be a woman, what it meant to be a feminist, and what it meant to be a woman, or feminist, like Annie Besant are all concepts that need to be understood before any assessment of her own feminism can take place. Here we run into problems of definitions; it is not

possible to state clearly or concisely what womanhood meant in Victorian England, nor is it wise to generalize about the Victorian woman. The same is true for definitions of feminism. In this study, Olive Banks' definition is used, not only because it is a broad one, but also because she suggests a three - tiered image of evangelical, socialist or equal rights feminism, and Annie Besant could easily have fallen into any one of these three divisions.

Likewise, an understanding of Besant's thoughts on women can not be complete without the knowledge of what went on in her life before she made the leap to public life. The happiness of her childhood, and the misery of her brief experiences with wifhood and motherhood are potential incentives for feminist thought and need to be considered as motivational forces, and for this reason a biographical chapter has been included.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Annie Besant has been appropriated or neglected in terms of her feminism is because of the diversity of her causes. Constance Rover, in claiming Besant's feminism, concedes that although she "cannot be looked upon as an official heroine of the women's emancipation movement" the reason for this "must surely be in her inconsistency."² Indeed, the movements with which Besant aligned herself do appear, on the surface, to be

²Constance Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 107.

contradictory. Spiritually she moved from Christianity, to atheism, to the cult of Theosophy; politically she made an abrupt conversion from liberal individualism to collective socialism. With such diversity it is not at all impossible to imagine that feminism and women's rights may have been an issue that she lent her name to at some point in Besant's busy life.

However, after closer examination, we can see that the superficially inconsistent causes that Annie Besant took up were not at all disconnected, but were, in her view, closely linked as a means to an end. She was not a political or spiritual wanderer, and it was her 'ultimate concern' - that she find a 'heaven attainable on earth' - that motivated her through each movement, through each cause, and through all the criticism that followed her. Therefore, her ultimate concern, which will be described more fully below, will play a part in this study as a sub-plot, and while our primary task is to examine feminist connotations in Besant's life, it must also be explored in relation to her ultimate motivation, and how it may have fit in with the pursuit of it.

In this way it will be possible to gain an understanding of Annie Besant's feminism, and it will also be possible to gauge where her place in history should be, and, most importantly if it is in the pages of feminist history. That she was a woman worthy of historical interpretation is certain, but that she has fallen into a twentieth century

feminist history vacuum may also be true. It is this vacuum that we seek to fill. Annie Besant chose her causes and her associates so carefully throughout her long life that to be appropriated on the basis of her fame, or neglected on the basis of her 'inconsistencies,' is to malign everything she strove for and everything that motivated her. She was devoted to following her conscience; she could not ignore it, and despite her mother's training to guard one's honour above all else, she still followed her conscience as it led her to secularism, socialism, and possibly even feminism:

To the world always a brave front was to be kept, and a stainless reputation, for suffering might be borne but dishonour never... I have often thought that the training in this reticence and pride of honour was a strange preparation for my stormy, public, much attacked and slandered life.³

³Annie Besant, An Autobiography (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 16.

CHAPTER 1

"There is always an ugly duckling in Society's brood; how else should be maintained the succession of swans?"
Besant, *Why I am a Socialist*, 1.

Historians are forever emphasizing the complexities of the Victorian Age, and it is true that complexities, and even paradoxes can be seen everywhere. England was the workshop of the world, and the sweatshop. Socialists clamoured for the emancipation of the lower classes while imperialists emancipated foreign land from its native dwellers. Victorians claimed to understand the unfortunate realities of working class life, while at the same time creating a society that was based upon middle class manners and morals, to which workers could never aspire. Even more confusion, however, arises when the historian turns his or her attention to the subject of Victorian women. Here there is such a large gap between the societal expectations of wives, mothers and daughters, and the actual existence of a large, and powerful movement of women for women, that historians have, until recently, avoided the topic altogether.

The neglect of women and feminism in history can be explained from several different angles, the first and most obvious being the fact that the denial of women's history is only a logical extension of the denial of women's importance in public society. Victorian men, for the most part, did not think of women as having roles outside of the home, and

therefore neither have the historians of the period. By extension of this, another reason for the neglect of the women's movement by historians may be the belief that the emancipation of women is of little historical importance, even though it was historically, politically and personally important to many women of the day. It may also be true, however, that the lack of women's, and feminist, history has less to do with neglect than with avoidance. It is not a subject, as one author states, "to which men and women easily find their way to rational views".¹

Rationality, however, is in the eye of the beholder, and the history of written history has always been that one historian's rational is another's ludicrous. It is hardly an excuse not to write important history. This is where the purpose of this chapter begins. The neglect of women's history, whatever the reason, is less important than the fact that it has been remedied. Remedied, that is, in several directions, with many interpretations and with differing purposes. Our task is to explore this area of Victorian women's history, and to understand what it meant to be a woman in Victorian society. This is a matter of societal role-playing. In Victorian England, every middle-class woman knew what was required of her: she was to be a wife, a mother and

¹O.R. Mc Gregor, in J.A. and Olive Banks, "Feminism and Social Change - a Case Study of a Social Movement" in Explorations in Social Change, eds. George K. Zollschan and Walter Hirsch (Boston: 1964), 548.

a daughter and little else. However, as early as the 1860's the 'woman question' had become one of the most important and hotly debated topics of the day, and women themselves - particularly middle class women - were increasingly concerned with what their roles were, and what they should be.²

This leads us directly into a discussion of what it meant to be a feminist in Victorian England. To be feminist was to be radical and unorthodox at a time when orthodoxy was expected, if not demanded. Some interpretive difficulties arise here, starting from an inability to define something as large, as intangible and as emotional as feminism and ending in the subjective knowledge that the feminism of many Victorian women was something that had to be accepted, if not declared, by the women of the past, and not imposed by the historians of the present. It is important to acknowledge that, in searching for definitions of feminism, and in allowing one's self to be guided by such constructs, they are loose definitions of a movement, and do not necessarily reflect the beliefs of the individuals within that movement. In the case of Victorian feminism, definitions are guiding principles, not historical facts.

We are then led to the crux of this project, which is to attempt to understand what it meant to be a woman like Annie Besant in the middle of orthodox nineteenth-century Victorian

²Martha Vicinus, ed., The Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), ix.

society. The very traits that we today admire most in Annie Besant - her republicanism, her socialist commitments, her hatred of imperialism and racism and her fight for women's rights- are precisely what most horrified her contemporaries. The problem for today's historians, however, is that Annie Besant publicly declared her republicanism, her socialism, her anti-imperialism and her anti-racism, but never her feminism. There is thus a historiographical problem, whereby in some histories of women we find her a radical, militant feminist, and in others there is no mention of her at all. She has either been appropriated for the feminist cause by authors who wish her to be a feminist, or has been ignored by those who do not want to acknowledge her association at all. To find the reality behind her feminism, if it existed at all, we must try to understand the world in which she lived and operated. To be a woman in Victorian England was different from being a feminist in Victorian England, and to be a woman, or feminist, like Annie Besant, is another thing altogether.

-I-

According to Walter E. Houghton there are three main conceptions of woman in the Victorian period: the priestess, the wife and the mother. Of these three the best known is that of the submissive wife whose "whole excuse for being was to love, honour, obey - and amuse - her lord and master and to

manage his household and bring up his children."³ The subordination of women was crucial to the patriarchal family, and since the patriarchal family was the cornerstone of Victorian society, it was therefore also crucial to the national well-being of the Empire. The 'perfect lady's' sole function was marriage and procreation - the two were considered as one - and all her education was to bring out her 'natural' submission to authority and innate maternal instincts. Young ladies were trained to have no opinions, "lest they seem too formed and too definite for a young man's taste and thereby unmarketable as a commodity".⁴ It was not that females did not serve a purpose in society; girls became wives and wives became mothers, and while this should have been enough for any Victorian woman they were also to be an active participant in the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks such as running a household and creating a pleasant atmosphere for their husbands.

Thus, while marriage was considered the most admirable path for a woman to take, it was also expected of her, if not prescribed by the society in which she lived. Her happiness within that marriage was less important than her husband's, and, if need be, her happiness would often be forfeited for his. For young women who had been trained to be affectionate,

³Walter Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 348.

⁴Martha Vicinus, ed., Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), x.

yet asexual and mentally blank, marriage could often prove to be a sexual and emotional disaster.⁵ In situations such as these, help for the wife was not forthcoming; the etiquette books counselled the unhappily married woman to remember that "her highest duty is so often to suffer and be still".⁶

Women who failed to marry and women who failed in marriage were in a particularly miserable situation as all the forces of Victorian society came together to leave the spinster emotionally bankrupt. In an age of laissez-faire capitalism "there could be no greater failure than this. The more charitable, however, argued that the training to become a wife and mother gave a lady all that was necessary in moral precepts and, after all, she would surely become a helpful aunt in a brother's home."⁷ Others, however, were less charitable, as in the *Saturday Review*, an anti-feminist paper which declared in 1859 that a woman who failed to find a husband or lost him after marriage had "failed in business, and no social reform can prevent such failures."⁸

The cry for social reform came less from a desire to change woman's place and purpose within the home than from a desire to change the Victorian notion of 'separate spheres'.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., xii.

⁸Martha Vicinus Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3.

Since the middle of the eighteenth century the doctrine of separate spheres -he for the public, she for the private - had been gaining strength and came to full fruition in the Victorian period of the image of "the Angel in the House."⁹ Throughout the period it was customary to refer to public and private life as two separate spheres. Each was thought to be inextricably connected either with women or with men. The public sphere of business, politics and professional life was defined as the male sphere. The private sphere of love, the emotions and domesticity was defined as the sphere of women.¹⁰ The public was the male's exclusive domain, where women could not go, but the private was only presided over by women for the express purpose of providing a place of renewal for men after a long, harsh day in the competitive public world. Thus, as a wife and mother, a woman could have power, but only in a carefully delineated space.¹¹ An ideal of domesticity masked what was in fact the active exclusion of women from political, economic and social power.

This is not to say that nineteenth century women were unaware of the inequalities and restrictions that were imposed on them in a separate sphere society. They knew, but the barriers against them were immense. As Patricia Hollis views

⁹Deborah Gorham, The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 5.

¹⁰Ibid., 4.

¹¹Vicinus, Independent Women, 2.

the situation, it was a matter of stereotypes that ran very deep throughout Victorian society: "Behind parliamentary debates on law reform as it affected women; behind pamphlets opposing woman's suffrage; behind the articles which doubted whether girl's health could stand the strain of higher education, lay an image or stereotype of Victorian womanhood, which deemed that 'women in public' were unwomanly."¹² At its simplest, Hollis sees the stereotype drawing from three main bodies of ideas. The first was religious in orientation: woman had been made from and was therefore dependant on man, and she should glory in her God-given weakness. A second source of the stereotype was socio-political in origin. Society was a community of families; at the heart of the family, and therefore at the heart of social stability, was the patriarchal principal. Thus, any challenge to the husband's rights over his wife or his children was represented as a threat to all that was stable and good in the social order.

The third and most insidious stereotype concerning women came from the scientific belief that a woman's biology was also her destiny. Her ability to produce children dictated her place in society and the family, in relation to men. Darwinian arguments were applied to prove that the greatest differentiation of men and women existed in the most advanced

¹²Patricia Hollis, Women in Public: The Women's Movement 1850-1900 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 4.

societies.¹³ Women were, therefore, 'different' from men, and this was enough to relegate them to a position in society where it was their duty to make life comfortable for their men and their men's children. It was to be an important argument for the feminists that woman's distinctiveness, and their alternative perceptions of society and the needs of that society, made public life an important goal.

Thus, what it meant to be a woman in Victorian England was to be what a male dominated society deemed appropriate. In making a statement such as this one must be careful not to deny that women had a voice at all in determining their position in society. The portrayal of women as victims is common in the historiography of the period, but at the same time one must remember that within this male-dominated society the boundaries of change were in large measure set by men: male doctors defined female sexuality, male scientists defined woman's intellectual ability, male legislators their legal capacity, male employers their position at work if they did work, and of course, their husbands determined their degree of personal, emotional and financial security.¹⁴

Women could, of course, break free of a male-dominated life, and they sometimes did out of necessity, although less for financial reasons than for a need to lead a more

¹³Ibid., 5.

¹⁴Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950 (Bloomington: Wheatsheaf, 1984), xi.

purposeful life. As Martha Vicinus points out, both men and women were trapped by an ideology that proclaimed roles for each sex that were often at odds with the realities of daily life. Victorian society encouraged both physical and social mobility, individual development and hard work, but these liberal values were antithetical to the ideal of female behaviour, and, more directly, the submission of self, voluntary labour and a minimum of mobility outside the family circle.¹⁵ An idle wife or daughter might increase a man's status, but society provided a countervailing pressure by rewarding self-improvement and the conscientious performance of philanthropic duties. Therefore, contradictions within and outside the family "created an environment that made change possible."¹⁵

This is not to say that change was probable, however, for the bulk of the Victorian population a woman's only true role lay in "embellishing the existence of others".¹⁷ Many still could not understand why a woman would chose a public life, or a life of spinsterhood. W.R. Greg, a journalist writing in 1862, simply could not fathom why a woman, who had a natural calling to do what was meant for her, would chose not to, while "men, who, not having the natural duties and labours of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully

¹⁵Vicinus, Independent Women, 8.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 4.

sought occupations for themselves."¹⁵ It did not occur to Greg, at least, that it was perhaps nothing more than the option 'to carve out artificial and painfully sought occupations for themselves' that women desired.

Thus to understand what it meant to be a woman in nineteenth century Britain it is important to understand not only what was expected and demanded of women, but also to discern what was happening to the condition of womanhood at the time, shrouded as it was in paradoxes and inconsistencies. In the second half of the nineteenth century, women were increasingly able to make choices for themselves but society would decide, either by smiling or frowning upon them, whether their choices were appropriate.

The condition of womanhood was in itself conditional; women could redefine themselves but they had to do it according to the prescriptives of society. Janet Murray contends that "womanhood, as a social entity, was reinvented several times in the course of the century, making it hard for individual women to place themselves, hard for them to understand what their role in society should be."¹⁶ The many changes occurring within the century gave rise to incongruities and inconsistencies that made up the fabric of Victorian society: some women were considered too frail to

¹⁵W.R. Greg, in "Why are Women Redundant?" in *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁶Janet Murray, Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth Century England (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 5.

walk alone in the streets while other were working underground in coal mines.²⁰

Some women were certainly conscious of their abilities and potentialities, and many were also aware that they were wasted on Victorian idleness. Martha Vicinus cites the example of Florence Nightingale, who, born in 1820, despaired of finding work to meet her talents and energies until finally, after dragging through her twenties, at thirty-two exclaimed: "why have women passion, intellect, moral activity - these three - and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised? Give us back our suffering, we cry to Heaven in our hearts - suffering rather than indifferentism; for out of nothing comes nothing."²¹ Florence Nightingale certainly displayed the values a woman could offer in public life, but at the same time her pursuits followed quite closely with the socially acceptable morals and self-sacrificing motives that were an inherent part of middle class Victorian society, and particularly of perceptions of women at the time. Many women, like Florence Nightingale, did not reject the Victorian myths surrounding women and their purposes, but reinterpreted them.

The 'reinterpretation' of the patriarchal system that defined women's role in society was indeed a necessity: whatever the discrepancies between the ideal of the perfect

²⁰Ibid.

²¹In Vicinus, Independent Women, 2.

lady and the humdrum reality of daily life, large numbers of middle class women felt the pressures of this narrowly defined ideal.²¹ The ideal did not allow for much, and it was the women²² who could not exist within these confines who were the pioneers of the women's movement. They were, in some ways, redefining what it meant to be a woman. They did not argue so much for the similarity of women to men, as some feminists would, but for the existence of women's special skills with regard to children, health care, education and domestic morality. They only wanted a voice in the area to which society had relegated them due to their 'natural callings'. Such talents, when appropriately applied, not only would give the family a happier and better life, but also would help to "eliminate the most grievous wrongs of society."²³

However, the demands of women changed in many ways and a number of women began to realize more fully both the inequities they suffered at the hands of the patriarchy and their potential in the public sphere. By the late 1850's "a feminist movement demanding wider opportunities for middle class women was taking shape, seeking to replace the ideal of the self-sacrificing domestic angel with the ideal of the

²¹Vicinus, Widening Sphere, x.

²²It is important not to use the terms 'woman' and 'feminist' interchangeably. A discussion on feminism will follow; here we are discussing women.

²³Ibid.

emancipated, educated, independent woman."²⁵ The more the women's movement grew and found its way into the homes of middle class families, the more it became apparent that few women of strength and character fit the ideal of the perfect lady. Consequently, the more they moved away from this ideal, the more imperfect they became, and, in the eyes of orthodox Victorian society, the 'imperfect lady' was potentially dangerous. The danger that already existed in their society, and what was perceived to be the perpetrator of what seemed to most men and many women to be a perfectly good social system, was feminism and the feminists, and it is to this group that we now turn our attention.

-II-

According to Sheila Rowbotham, "there is no 'beginning' of feminism in the sense that there is no beginning to defiance in women".²⁶ Defiance, however, may not be a necessary element in feminism: 'discontent', at least in the Victorian period, seems to have been enough to create a feminist movement. This is not to say that defiance did not exist; it certainly did, but as in all movements there are different levels of commitment and purpose to be examined, to which we will return. Structural changes, as we have already

²⁵Janet Murray, ed., Strong-Minded Women, 5.

²⁶Sheila Rowbotham, Women, Resistance and Revolution (London: Penguin, 1972), 16.

seen, forced many middle class women to redefine their role in society. It was through this process of self-discovery that many became dissatisfied with their roles, and turned them towards the channels that produced the feminist movement.²⁷

The term 'feminism' did not exist for much of the Victorian woman's movement, coming into common use only at the end of the nineteenth century. However, its usage is justifiable on the grounds that for at least a century prior to the entry of the actual word into the popular discourse there existed the ideology which it described - "a distinct and identifiable body of ideas and aspirations commonly known as 'the rights of woman', 'the condition of the women's question', 'the emancipation of women' and so on."²⁸ This quote is as close as historian Barbara Taylor gets to a definition of feminism, and this is the first major problem of the study of the movement: there is no neat, tight definition to be had. In the considerable time span of a century, or even of the second half of the nineteenth century, where our focus will lie, feminism changed in many different ways and was never a unity, even at a single point in time. The virtual impossibility of defining feminism "in a way which

²⁷Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism (London: Martin Robertson, 1981), 5.

²⁸Barbara Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Pantheon, 1983), x.

avoids subjective elements"²⁹ demands a wide, rather than narrow definition. At its simplest level it represents a criticism of the position of women in relation to men and a desire to change that position.³⁰

The main guiding principle of feminists was a critique of the traditional subordination of women, enshrined as it was in law, custom and religion, and a claim for a new relationship between men and women which would give women greater control over their lives:³¹ control over the right to enjoy equal opportunities in education and employment, equal pay, equal guardianship rights over their children, equal citizenship rights and an end to the double standard of sexual morality. Indeed, Olive Banks suggests, "these demands may be said to represent the very backbone of nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism."³²

Feminists have always argued for a greater measure of economic and legal independence for women, as well as a greater recognition of their rights to individuality and self expression. The demand of modern feminists for the right to choose was by no means absent from nineteenth-century feminism although it was usually applied to a completely different set

²⁹Olive Banks, Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of 'First Wave' Feminism (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1986), 148.

³⁰Olive Banks, The Biographical Dictionary of British Feminism Vol. I, (London: Harvester Press, 1985), vii.

³¹Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 2.

³²Banks, Biographical Dictionary, vii.

of issues.³³ Most important, however, has been the desire to end women's subordination both in government and the family. This is evident in the demand for a single standard of sexual morality which by imposing severe restrictions on male sexuality, would end the exploitation of women by men,³⁴ but it was also the motivation behind much of the support for female suffrage, a small but spectacular part of the women's movement. Thus, "in attempting to define feminism, it is necessary to include in the definition concepts like subordination and exploitation as well as inequality."³⁵ This can be seen in the feminists' challenge of the doctrine of separate spheres and the domestic confinement it subjected them to, as well as legal and political subordination to men.

Olive Banks is one of the few historians who attempts an in-depth investigation into the nature of feminism in Victorian society, as opposed to a study of the actions of feminists. In doing so, she identifies three different feminist ideologies "which in many respects are not only different in their emphases but may even be contradictory."³⁶ By exploring these different traditions and their relative importance to the development of the women's movement it is

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 7.

possible to see how little cohesion existed; while the main objective was, in some measure, the same - the emancipation of women - there were differing opinions of how to reach that objective, what the objective meant for women, for their families and for society, and, perhaps most importantly, what they wanted to be emancipated from.

The first tradition within feminism was derived from the powerful evangelical element that existed in nineteenth century religious thought. The evangelical feminists were in many ways reluctant feminists: they did not want to change their role in society or in the family. They believed in female morality and a woman's natural calling to maternal domesticity. They did not have any great fundamental problem with the limitations imposed on them by their subordinate role, and therefore rested their case not on any doctrine of human rights but on the need to give women's special and unique qualities more significance in public life. Therefore they were reluctantly drawn into the feminist movement by the recognition that women were needed in public service and ultimately in Parliament.³⁷

The second tradition Banks identifies is the equal-rights tradition. Equal-rights feminism had roots in the Enlightenment, and was given theoretical justification in England by the publication of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. Emphasizing equality of

³⁷Banks, Biographical Dictionary, ix.

opportunity, this tradition tended to stress the removal of restrictions on woman's liberty of action to improve their circumstances, and also on the injustices of legal inequalities which denied women those rights that men enjoyed.³⁸ It strenuously opposed, therefore, the doctrine of marriage which denied women their rights as persons, and the exclusion of women from higher education and the professions, which denied them the right to support themselves.

While evangelical and equal-rights feminists occasionally joined forces to work towards certain goals - the fight for suffrage, to take an example - there were nevertheless many ways in which they differed. The equal-rights feminists tended to minimize the differences between men and women. Making use of what were essentially Enlightenment principles, they argued that such differences as did occur were the result of the limitations placed on women's experiences, caused especially by the frivolity of their education and their sheltered up-bringing.³⁹ In declaring the effects of these limitations they joined J.S. Mill in his claim that woman's

³⁸Ibid., viii.

³⁹The equal-rights feminists had been reading their Mary Wollstonecraft: "How many women thus waste life away the prey of discontent, who might have practised as physicians, regulated a farm, managed a shop, and stood erect... How much more respectable is the woman who earns her own bread by fulfilling any duty, than the most accomplished beauty!" A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) in Perry M. Rogers, Aspects of Western Civilization (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), 129.

true nature would not be revealed until her disabilities were removed.⁴⁰ The evangelical feminists, in contrast, accepted the fact that men and women differed in significant ways and they emphasized the importance of their roles as wives and mothers. Thus, whereas the equal-rights feminists were concerned chiefly with enlarging their opportunities for freedom and self-expression as individuals, evangelical feminists emphasized women's traditional virtue of service to others.⁴¹

Both of these ideologies differed significantly from Banks' third tradition, which was socialist feminism. Socialist feminism developed initially within Owenite socialism and shared with Owenism a belief that a radical change in family life would free women from both domestic slavery and legal and political subordination. To Robert Owen and his followers, particularly his feminist followers, socialism represented a struggle to achieve equality and freedom at every level of existence. It was, in essence, "a struggle which extended beyond the economic and political reforms necessary to create a classless society into the emotional and cultural transformations necessary to construct a sexual democracy."⁴²

⁴⁰Ibid., ix.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem, xiv.

Without denying the need for equality between the sexes. Owenite feminism advocated a system of communitarian socialism which would put an end to the economic dependance of a wife on her husband and, by the provision of community services, free her as well from the daily routine of housework and child care. Owen's vision was unrealistically utopian, and his version of feminism did not survive the decline of communitarian socialism in the 1840's. However, it was to be replaced at the end of the nineteenth century by a new socialist feminism which was much less radical and placed its faith in the development of a welfare state. The new feminism owed something to Marxism, but was largely reformist in its policies and traditional in its attitude toward the family. By the last decades of the century, "it would not be an overstatement to claim that socialist thinking dominated feminism."⁴³

Support for socialism had, by the end of the century, become a common feature of feminism, while at the same time feminism is an inherent part of the doctrine of socialism, in that the socialist revolution which aims to strip away all class divisions would also destroy gender inequality. This was socialist feminism according to Marx and Engels. It does not allow for immediate measures for women, as in socialist thinking, class comes first. Socialism could do little, in practice, for feminists other than offer a vague promise of

⁴³Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 149.

greatly improved status for women 'after the revolution', but in theory it offered the companionship of the oppressed and a structural plan to change the nature of that oppression. Socialism, in short, provided "a fertile soil for notions of women's emancipation."⁴⁴

Thus the individualist, liberal tradition of equal-rights feminism, with its emphasis on women's right to be free, had little in common with the collective nature of socialist feminism which tended to stress a woman's duty to society while the secular, radical elements caused it to be almost diametrically opposed to evangelical feminism. However different, all three traditions had something to offer Victorian feminism. The evangelical tradition became not less but more important as the feminist movement grew respectable and its leaders became convinced that only by accepting the moral standards of the middle classes could they hope to gain sufficient support from both men and women to achieve their aims.⁴⁵ Socialist feminism was the most radical of the three in theory, if not in practice, but at the same time it claimed a broad base of political support and drew large numbers of feminists and feminist supporters. It was to the doctrine of equal-rights that Victorian women owed most of their inspiration, and increasingly women associated the

⁴⁴Reva Pollack Greenburg, Fabian Couples, Feminist Issues, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 2.

⁴⁵Banks, Faces of Feminism, 59.

emancipation of women with equal rights. According to Olive Banks, the doctrine of equal rights had more obvious links with feminism, "simply because it was a short intellectual step from the rights of man to the rights of women."⁴⁶

All of the variations within feminism that have been discussed here, however they are labelled, have in common a sense of dissatisfaction with the condition of women's lives and opportunities, coupled with a belief that woman's disabilities arise not from nature itself, nor indeed from any of the ills which afflict humankind as such, but from the way in which women's desires and abilities have been made subordinate to the needs, desires, and interests of men.⁴⁷

This is not to say that Victorian feminists, whatever their ideological commitment, were attached singularly to the cause of the women's movement. Indeed, a large number of feminists had links with other reform causes and "by the end of the century there were many feminists whose attachment to feminist principles were secondary to their concern for welfare,"⁴⁸ for socialism, for social purity, birth control or whatever interested them. Olive Banks makes it clear that in her liberal opinion, feminism, and equal rights feminism in particular, suffered at the hands of radicalism, which seems to have drawn the attention of feminists away from the woman

⁴⁶Ibid, 58.

⁴⁷Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 164.

⁴⁸Banks, Faces of Feminism, 249.

question.⁴⁵ Therefore, to be a feminist in Victorian England was to be, not so much aware - or vocal - only of women's subordination, but to be politically aware of the faults of the society in which they lived, and moreover, committed to doing something about it. There was a familial relationship between reformist causes that allowed a degree of fluidity that was beneficial to many causes, as opposed to a single one.

The alliance to other, usually reformist, causes was not just ideological; it was also a necessary attempt to gain respectable support for women's cause through channels other than feminism. If feminism was to achieve its aim, "it had to win support for its arguments, and this involved it, from the start, in a search for allies as well as an educational programme to convert women to the cause and turn feminism into a mass movement."⁵⁰ A major problem in the search for support was the necessity to appeal to men as well as women, not just to give a broad base to the movement, but because women were excluded not simply from the vote but from most, if not all, significant areas of decision-making.⁵¹ It was a paradox that feminists were well aware of: the fight for emancipation from men could not be won without their help and support. As the huge majority of Victorian society was opposed to the

⁴⁵Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 149.

⁵⁰Banks, Faces of Feminism, 246.

⁵¹Ibid.

possibility of an alteration of the separate sphere system, the battle which the feminists were proposing to fight was one which, from the very beginning, presented enormous and potentially insurmountable barriers. Thus, in order to truly understand what it meant to be a feminist in Victorian England, it is wise to examine the nature of anti-feminist attitudes to which they were subjected.

It only makes sense that "the struggles of women were most successful when they chimed with larger social and economic needs, and least successful when they clashed with a specific power base or dominant attitudes."⁵² Even for the most conservative of feminists, active involvement in the women's movement was "a conscious and deliberate act of revolt"⁵³ of which Victorian society could not approve. It was as much the behaviour of feminists - such as speaking on public platforms, or their demands for reform, which implied changes in gender roles - as it was the actual demands of feminism at which ideological and social opposition was directed. It was not, in short, the stuff of which peaceful society was made.

Some of the opposition to feminism was political, in that the nineteenth and early twentieth-century women's movement which campaigned for suffrage was a political demand that could only be granted by parliament. However, enfranchisement

⁵²Vicinus, The Widening Sphere, xvii.

⁵³Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 9.

of women was only part of the movement, and "the demand was not taken seriously as a political issue by most politicians".⁵⁴ The real opposition, which underlay political opposition, was the prevailing ideology surrounding the nature of women and their position in the idealized bourgeois family system. Nineteenth-century opponents would argue that by their involvement in politics women would be "almost debased or degraded, their purity and modesty defiled."⁵⁵

Therefore, by direct implication the behaviour of women actively involved in the women's movement was labelled as not only unladylike, but unfeminine and unwomanly. It arose less from a fear of women in public, than from the fear of women abandoning their traditional roles in the family, the basis of Victorian society. "One feels," states historian Constance Rover, "on going through the literature of the period, that this insistence that family duties were paramount was rather overdone, but no doubt it was necessary to rebut the constant attacks on the feminists to the effect that any degree of emancipation would make women 'unfeminine' and cause them to neglect their traditional duties."⁵⁶ By threatening the omnipotent family, feminists were, in many Victorian minds, undermining the basis of society.

⁵⁴Rosamund Billington, "Ideology and Feminism: Why the Suffragettes were 'Wild Women'" Women's Studies International Forum 5(1982), 672.

⁵⁵Ibid., 666.

⁵⁶Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 98.

To be a feminist, then, was to be rather unpopular in orthodox Victorian England. It was to be radical, even for conservative feminists. It was to be unfaithful to the family, and it was to be a threat to those men, and especially women, who lived happily in their separate spheres. On a general level, anti-feminist ideas derived from the stress on domesticity in bourgeois ideology. Within the family gender roles were assigned, division of labour on gender lines occurred, and sexual identities were established. Any "social or ideological deviation from the monogamous pattern where woman was the nurturant stabilizing and socializing influence and man was the dominant member concerned with the productive world was seen as a threat to the family and the organization of social life."⁵⁷ To be a feminist was to carry a burden, given the attitudes of anti-feminists. However, it was also to live life with meaning, with purpose, and with hope for future generations of daughters and sisters.

It is necessary to be careful of victimization in the historiography of this period: the history of women has often been the portrayal of the miserable 'Angel in the House', all but chained to her parlour, while the history of feminists has presented a martyr-like image of strong-minded, tunnel-visioned women sacrificing themselves for a better society. Both of these interpretations may be true for some women some of the time, but there is little doubt that distortion does

⁵⁷Billington, "Wild Women", 665.

exist. According to Patricia Branca, our perspective on the average middle class woman has been distorted "by those who seek to profit by portraying the Victorian woman as an odd museum piece."⁵² Branca criticizes feminists historians for portraying women as victims:

In their efforts to rectify the injustices of society, they have tended to focus solely on the inequities and those who have sought to remedy them. However in doing this, they have oddly downgraded the real situation and ignored the actual struggle of the women they seek to portray; for example, the women who were not Florence Nightingales or Josephine Butlers tend to appear less worthy because they did not rebel in any visible or vocal manner.⁵³

Thus, in trying to understand why some women became feminists, or why many did not, it is important to remember, as Constance Rover points out, that "only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches"⁶¹ and that most women were motivated by personal situations that are beyond our knowledge.

Complete understanding of many women in history is something that may already be unobtainable, yet aspirations toward that end have become even more difficult as they have fallen into generalizations where they are considered only one of many, or too complex to investigate, and this is how many women fall victim to history. This is true of Annie Besant. Despite the significant amount of research that has been

⁵²Patricia Branca, Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home (London: Croom Helm, 1975), 8.

⁵³Ibid.

⁶⁰Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 2.

accomplished on the life of Besant, not one historian has attempted to investigate and understand her feminism. It is to this historiographical vacuum that we now turn our attention.

-III-

It is not that Annie Besant has fallen through the cracks of Victorian historiography. A substantial amount of work has appeared concerning her secularism, her radicalism, and her theosophy, but when the issue of her feminism arises, there does not seem to be any consensus. Many historians have claimed her for the feminist movement, while others have avoided her and her involvement. In examining the historiography of Annie Besant we will see that she is in potential danger of being appropriated for the feminist cause at the hands of twentieth-century feminist historians, while at the same time, she runs the risk of being neglected in a field where she may deserve recognition. As Constance Rover states, it is a strange aspect of the history of feminism that

Josephine Butler, who supported the civil rights of prostitutes and campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Act, has emerged an official heroine of the women's movement while Annie Besant, the first woman to advocate birth control on the public platform, has not.... few would deny that modern women's emancipation, such as it is, owes more to control over family size than to the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Annie Besant has her admirers, but there is no mention of her in

Ray Strachey's classic history of the women's movement.⁶¹

The purpose of this chapter is not to determine whether or not Besant deserves her place in the annals of feminist history, but to survey the literature that involves her; to know the state of research so that we can, in time, try to understand her feminism. It may come as a surprise that, for someone who has escaped true understanding, there are already four major biographies on her. The first, by Arthur H. Nethercot,⁶² is considered by many historians to be the first and last word written on Annie Besant. While it is true that one can know, on reading Nethercot's biography, what Besant was doing on almost a daily basis, it is also true that the topic of feminism is one that is skilfully avoided. There are discussions concerning her hatred of housewifery, her ignorance on the first night of her marriage and the disgust that followed, and her husband's belief in manly superiority and wifely inferiority, but there is no indication of how she may have reacted to these issues, except that they were met with profound unhappiness.

In fact, the word 'feminism' is mentioned only once in the book, when Nethercot rather brazenly remarks: "Being deeply involved in demonstrating in her own person the

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Arthur H. Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) and The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

equality of women and the new feminism, she resolved that her first speech should be in behalf of her own sex and announced the topic "The Political Status of Women".⁶³ Generally speaking, when one is writing a biography and makes use of a phrase such as 'being deeply involved in' it is usually preceded or followed by some explanation of what the involvement entailed. However, this is not so in Nethercot. There is no discussion and the remark that has been quoted represents Nethercot's entire deliberation on Annie Besant's feminism.

Rosemary Dinnage⁶⁴ has written the shortest, simplest and most comprehensive biography of Besant. She immediately recognizes the problems of classifying her in any category that historians may use: "Annie Besant will not fit neatly into a feminist, revolutionary image to please the twentieth century."⁶⁵ However, she does the same thing as Nethercot, in proclaiming her a feminist but not explaining her feminism: "On the questions of the day, Annie Besant was perpetually engaged in expounding the radical, subversive position. She was of course of champion of women and an advocate of woman's suffrage".⁶⁶ Here Dinnage assumes that Besant supported feminism, not because of her beliefs or experiences, but

⁶³Ibid., 80.

⁶⁴Rosemary Dinnage, Annie Besant (New York: Penguin, 1986).

⁶⁵Ibid., 12.

⁶⁶Ibid., 36.

because feminism itself was a 'radical, subversive position'. To make an assumption like this is, to say the very least, dangerous. It tends to belittle the causes that she did support, not because they were radical, but because they were important to her.

The third and fourth biographies, although both were written within the last five years, do not improve upon our knowledge of Besant's feminism. Catherine Lowman Wessinger⁶⁷ concentrates exclusively on her spirituality and her 'ultimate concern', which, since there is no mention of women, women's rights or the women's movement, cannot, it seems clear, have anything to do with feminism. Anne Taylor, on the other hand, follows in the tradition of Nethercot and Dinnage and only makes statements concerning Besant's putative feminism without backing them up with some kind of discussion or exploration of what it might have involved. To take an example, Taylor makes the statement that "Annie was the first woman publicly to advocate birth control,"⁶⁸ which, it would seem, could be considered an important issue in a woman's life as well as in her history but it receives no more attention from Taylor.

One other biography of Besant exists, although it is in the form of a brief article in *History Today*. However short, Janet Oppenheim is the only historian who, when focusing

⁶⁷Catherine Lowman Wessinger, Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism 1847-1933 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

⁶⁸Anne Taylor, Annie Besant: A Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115.

exclusively on Annie Besant, has managed to address the issue of her feminism. In her article she states that she

was determined to find significant work for herself outside the domestic confines of wifhood and maternity.... she shared with countless capable and frustrated Victorian women the dream of making her voice heard where men established all the rules. She certainly participated, directly and indirectly, in the major fights of Victorian and Edwardian feminism - for the vote, for higher education and professional opportunities, and for equal status under the law - and they satisfied, to some extent, aspects of her personality that needed to flout convention and court martyrdom.⁶⁵

She does not go further to describe how or when Besant did these things, but she does - perhaps inadvertently - explain one of the reasons why she has been excluded from much of Victorian feminist historiography, which is that "many able and intelligent women, worked the fields of feminist protest, and Besant was not a particularly good team player. She needed to be the focus of attention, the star attraction."⁶⁶

It is true that Besant never aligned herself with any part of the women's movement. This is partly because, as Oppenheim suggests, she could not be the focus of it, and there are few things that have been said about Annie Besant that are more perceptive than her need to be the 'star attraction'. However, the real paradox arises when we look at the other reasons why she did not align herself with the

⁶⁵Janet Oppenheim, "The Odyssey of Annie Besant" History Today September (1989): 17.

⁶⁶Ibid.

cause. Coincidentally enough, it is exactly the reasons why she did not belong to the organized women's movement that historians have recognized as the sources of her feminism. The first of these⁷¹ was her involvement with the birth control movement.

The Besant-Bradlaugh trial and Besant's subsequent contraceptive publications have often been cited by historians as Besant's first major feminist battle. That her interest in birth control was feminist is a claim made by historians such as Olive Banks, Constance Rover, Patricia Hollis, Barbara Taylor, Sheila Jeffreys, Reva Pollock Greenburg, F. Barry-Smith, Angus McLaren and Judith Walkowitz,⁷² to name a few, although all of these historians are also prepared to admit that the feminist movement of the Victorian period would have nothing to do with contraception, Malthusianism or Annie Besant. As Olive Banks puts it, "the birth control campaign... is much less easy to place within feminism. Although a number of feminists... supported birth control as a way of freeing women from constant child-bearing, most feminists, right up until the end of the century, shunned the

⁷¹Here we will only be taking a brief, historiographical look at these issues; a full examination and discussion will follow in later chapters.

⁷²Please see: Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 49; Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 2, 102-108; Hollis, Women in Public, 159; Taylor, Eve and the New Jerusalem, 284; Jeffreys, The Spinster and her Enemies, 44; Greenburg, Fabian Couples, 15; and F. Barry-Smith "Sexuality in Britain 1800-1900 Some Suggested Revisions" in Vicinus, The Widening Sphere, 188; Angus McLaren, Birth Control, 68; Judith Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight, 66.

movement."⁷³ Constance Rover sees the same situation in the same way, but perhaps more starkly, when she states that "to be associated with the birth control movement was, in Victorian eyes, even worse than to be connected with the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act and the white slave traffic... It takes an effort of the imagination to realize the horror with which it was viewed in Victorian times."⁷⁴ It was not the kind of radical, free-thinking and free-loving reputation that the women's movement wished to possess.

Thus, while Reva Pollock Greenburg refers to the infamous Besant-Bradlaugh trial as Besant's "first major feminist battle"⁷⁵ she also concedes that it was not fought from a feminist angle, but was born of Malthusian principles and arguments. This of course, brings up the possibility that Annie Besant's association with the birth control movement, of which she was at the forefront, was not feminist at all, and that, if it were feminist, would have been fought with feminist arguments. Again, Constance Rover emerges as the voice of reason when she states that "the celebrated trial was primarily the result of a stand taken for freedom of the press, though a contributory factor was... Besant's belief that Malthusian views on the desirability of family limitation

⁷³Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 49.

⁷⁴Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 99.

⁷⁵Greenburg, Fabian Couples, 13.

should be propagated."⁷⁶ Greenburg admits that "the highly publicized trial... was not even mentioned in the leading feminist journals of that period",⁷⁷ although the reason - that Victorian feminism did not support birth control or birth controllers - is not given.

Thus there is some question about Besant's feminist beliefs in connection to her support of birth control, and while we shall examine this issue much more closely in later chapters, it is important to note for historiographical purposes that in this matter she has very possibly been appropriated for the feminist cause by historians who, in the twentieth century, view contraception much more liberally than their subjects did a century ago. The second area in which Besant has become famous for her feminism is the failure of her marriage to the Reverend Frank Besant. Her private life certainly made her vulnerable to criticism. As a wife who deserted her husband she was, in Victorian moralist eyes, suspect, and having lived through "a marriage which she felt to be an imprisonment, Annie Besant was naturally conscious of the unsatisfactory position of married women both legally and socially."⁷⁸ This does not, however, make her a feminist.

There can be little doubt that Besant was profoundly affected by the events of her marriage and its aftermath.

⁷⁶Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 104/

⁷⁷Ibid., 15.

⁷⁸Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 103.

Frank was a harsh, cruel man who clearly did not understand the intelligence his wife possessed. Nowhere in the literature has a historian or biographer blamed Besant for leaving her husband. It was, most likely, the smartest thing she ever did. The experience of separating from her husband must have awakened her to the inferior legal position of women in Victorian England; try as she might Besant could not obtain a divorce from the courts until her husband allowed it. And it became clear to her during a custody battle for her daughter, Mabel, that the mother of a child had no rights when the father was still alive and interested in the welfare of the child.

However, statements such as Olive Banks', when she claims that Annie's "own feminism sprang very directly from the circumstances of her marriage"⁷⁵ and later that "the main result of the removal of Mabel was a hardening of Annie's feminism",⁸⁰ is perhaps to assume something that we do not yet know, and maybe even that we can not know. It is Banks herself who, in her attempt to understand how and why some women became feminists, finds that there is a much stronger correlation between happy marriages and feminism, and supportive husbands and feminists, than there is in unhappy, unsupportive situations. Besant, however, is considered an exception:

⁷⁵Banks, Biographical Dictionary, 23.

⁸⁰Ibid., 22.

Discouraging husbands, like discouraging fathers, rarely drove women into the feminist movement and in those few cases where they obviously did, like Caroline Norton, for example, or Annie Besant, the women concerned were of exceptional courage and exceptional ability. The effect of a discouraging husband was more likely, in the conditions of 'first-wave feminism' at least, to stifle a woman's initiative rather than incite her to revolt.⁵¹

That Frank had incited his wife to revolt is true; however, her revolt did not include feminism. Her revolt was towards atheism: she lost her faith because of her husband, she discovered freethought because of her husband, and it was because of her husband that she had to leave her home and marriage so that she could practice her atheism. This is something we know, because, as we shall see below, she wrote about it extensively. This brings us to the problem in this part of the historiography concerning Annie Besant's feminism and its relative importance to her marriage: she did not write about how her marriage influenced her views on women, and she did not write about where her feminism came from, although she did write on marriage and divorce, thereby contributing to a wider movement for equality in marriage. Nevertheless, her name is not to be found in Mary Lyndon Shanley's excellent study of feminism and marriage. She was a feminist, as Reva Pollock Greenburg suggests, "not by design or affiliation, but in reaction to her own circumstance and experience"⁵² and because this was the case, because her

⁵¹Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 156.

⁵²Greenburg, Fabian Couples, 13.

feminism is personal, historians must be wary of discussing it without assessing it.

The fact remains, however, that she was a public woman, she was radical, she was unafraid of public opinion. She gave speeches on "The Political Status of Women", "Anti-Slavery Women" and other topics. She displayed, in short, every active quality that makes her ripe for appropriation for the feminist cause. However, whatever the extent of her interest in women and feminism, it was always subsidiary to some other interest - freethought, socialism, theosophy - and "indeed, she was never more than marginally involved in the feminist movement"⁵³ for suffrage, higher education and workplace reform. As Constance Rover states "she can not be looked upon as an official heroine of the women's movement. One of the reasons for this is the very diversity of her activity: many of the causes she espoused were anathema to the leaders of the women's movement and... the one most closely related to the emancipation of women, the birth control movement, was unacceptable to leading feminists of the time."⁵⁴

Thus to be a woman like Annie Besant in Victorian England was to be radical, unorthodox, and unwomanly in the eyes of a very moralistic, pious and mannered society. Besant represented all that was detestable to Victorians: she was an atheist, she supported birth control, she was a socialist, a

⁵³Banks, Biographical Dictionary, 23.

⁵⁴Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 102.

trades unionist, and to some degree in her own idiosyncratic way, which we shall soon discover, she was a feminist. Worst of all, she proclaimed all of these causes from a very public platform, and it is possible to say that there were few people in England who did not know who Annie Besant was. And, to be a woman like Annie Besant in history is to be misunderstood, appropriated, neglected - and hopefully, every now and then, resurrected, reinterpreted and reappraised.

Of course distortion arises; it is not entirely excusable but it is also often unavoidable. Feminist historians have come under attack for distorting the history of the 'typical Victorian woman' by focusing too exclusively on the inequities that existed in Victorian society and the men and women who sought to rectify them. Again it is Patricia Branca who voices her fear that while feminists and eminent women of the period fit our standards of significance, they almost by definition depart from the real situation, if not the values, of middle class women during most of the nineteenth century,⁵⁵ and that historians of these eminent women have created a vacuum into which the average Victorian woman has been absorbed. However, the same vacuum can be identified on the other side of feminist history, and Annie Besant's historiography is a perfect example. By focusing a little too much on her fame, her unorthodoxies, and her strength of character she has become a feminist without any understanding

⁵⁵Branca, Silent Sisterhood, 8.

of what her feminism entailed. Twentieth century feminist historians, of course, have a vested interest in women like Besant; they fit an ideal of feminist ancestry that appeals to present - day feminists and also make for interesting history. Also, there are problems of definitions and generalizations: does one's actions constitute feminism or must feminist beliefs or opinions also be present? In the case of Besant, her actions in the public sphere can easily be considered feminist, but her beliefs concerning the same matter remain to be seen.

Thus when Patricia Branca states, in her defence of the 'typical Victorian woman', that "in fact the history of women is, or ought to be, the history of the inarticulate",³³ she is wrong. The history of inarticulate women should be the history of inarticulate women; just as the history of feminists should be the history of feminists, and, most importantly for our purposes, the history of Annie Besant should be the history of Annie Besant. It is not wise to generalize so readily about the Victorian woman, lest more vacuums be created.

³³Ibid., 11.

CHAPTER 2

"I had but two ideals in my childhood and youth
round whom twined these budding tendrils of passion
they were my mother and the Christ."

Besant, *An Autobiography*, 67.

Annie Besant is one of those historical figures who, despite the efforts of many historians, has persistently refused to be placed into any single grouping, and has succeeded in challenging both her contemporaries and her biographers to understand exactly what it was that motivated her. The previous chapter has shown that Besant's life has escaped the full comprehension of historians, and this reinforces the complexity of the late Victorian period. We have seen that in her life of some eighty-six years she played, with remarkable dedication and intense sincerity, many roles, some of which appear on the surface to contradict each other. She was a devout Christian, an ardent atheist and freethinker, an avowed birth controller and Neo-Malthusian, a Fabian socialist, a science teacher and a trade unionist, an author, editor and publisher, Indian nationalist and politician, orator, social reformer and a Theosophist. Devoted to following her conscience, Annie Besant consistently allied herself with unpopular causes: "No wonder I was denounced as an agitator, a firebrand, and that all orthodox society turned up at me its most respectable nose".¹ It is through the investigation of characters like Annie Besant that

¹Besant, Autobiography, 175.

the historian discovers that the study of some history is, indeed, the study of "the unfathomable strangeness of life among the dead."²

Today, a common view on the motivating force that propelled Annie Besant through every cause she claimed is that she possessed an illogical compulsion to be in the spotlight, to hear her voice preaching a cause she herself did not understand, and a need to align herself with strong men. Strident in proclaiming her latest belief, yet shallow in her understanding, so volatile that she changed direction as often as she attached herself to another masculine associate, this is the impression her critics tend to foster: "For in each of the spiritual crises which punctuated her anguished pilgrimage through life... a change of mind was associated with a change of heart... conversion was personified in an attachment to a new male idol".³ This analysis of Besant's life does not do justice either to her intelligence or her sincerity.

While it is true that Annie Besant does not fit neatly into a theological, feminist, or socialist image, and while it is also true that she was influenced by certain men, there was an underlying theme of continuity to all she concerned herself with. Her spiritual search for the best way through which she could serve humanity was the thread that ran consistently

²Robert Darnton, The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990), p.xiv.

³Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, The First Fabians (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 45.

through her career; this service was her 'ultimate concern,'³ her religion, and her clue to life. It was to find expression most explicitly in the motto she coined for the Match-girl's Strike in 1888: "The union of all who love in the service of all who suffer." One biographer refers to Besant's self-sacrificial walk through life as a 'martyr complex'.⁴ This is not an exaggeration. She sacrificed herself to her belief that she was placed on earth to serve, first God, and later humankind. Her efforts to serve humanity through ameliorating current social conditions and keeping the wheels of progress turning were typically Victorian, but the outlets through which she expressed them were not; and as a result she was always an outcast in orthodox society.

A close examination of the first half of Annie Besant's life will show that her own specific religious motive, to serve humanity, was what propelled her from one cause to the next, which, indeed, appear contradictory on the surface. Her accomplishments in adult life, however, cannot be comprehended without an understanding of her childhood and marriage. Such an understanding is easily obtained in the case of Annie Besant. She left behind an autobiography which offers a great deal of insight into her life, and while Besant can be found

³Wessinger, Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism, 7. Wessinger defines the ultimate concern as a "concern which is more important than anything else in the universe for the person involved".

⁴Nethercot, The First Five Lives of Annie Besant, 24.

occasionally nurturing her own image of self-importance in this book, it is nonetheless the most credible, the most informative, and the most fascinating of all the written work she left behind.

"On October 1, 1847, I am credibly informed, my baby eyes opened to the light (?) of a London afternoon at 5:39".⁵ Born into a lower middle class family, Annie Wood spent the first five years of her life in childhood bliss. When she was five, however, her father died, leaving her mother destitute. Young Annie was consequently packed off to be educated under the tutelage of a Miss Marryat, a wealthy spinster who had made a career of educating young girls of respectable birth but little means, in the belief that a lack of money need not interfere with a proper Victorian upbringing.

The foundation of Besant's education with Miss Marryat was Evangelicalism. On Sundays she was allowed to read only the Bible, and lessons were centred on stories of Christian martyrs. She developed a Christian belief that transcended mere piety, and her life soon came to revolve around weekly communions, where she often entered into "ecstatic meditations"⁶. She fasted and occasionally flagellated herself, to see if she could stand the physical pain "in case I should ever be called upon to tread the path of the sainted

⁵Besant, Autobiography, 11.

⁶Nethercot, The First Five Lives, 31.

martyrs".⁷ The desire to sacrifice herself was thus a part of her character from early girlhood.

Miss Marryat, an intensely religious woman herself, ensured that her pupils were provided with a broad education in literature, language and history as well as religion, and she was even able to take Annie Wood to France and Germany on an educational tour when she was fifteen. At the age of sixteen, Annie was sent home to her mother, more educated, and more intellectually advanced than most females her age.

She was, however, also more religious, and in reading through her *Autobiography* her religiosity almost seems overdone. At twelve she "passionately regretted I was born so late when no suffering for religion was practicable",⁸ and at thirteen her "thoughts began to turn towards some kind of 'religious life', in which I might prove my love by sacrifice and turn my passionate gratitude into active service".⁹ It was these thoughts of sacrifice, spiritualism and service, to God, that dominated her girlhood thoughts; and although her object of worship would change throughout her life, her commitment to these thoughts would not.

It seems ironic then that it was her marriage to a clergyman that weakened her Christian enthusiasm. In the summer of 1866 nineteen-year-old Annie Wood met Frank Besant,

⁷Besant, Autobiography, 66.

⁸Ibid., 42.

⁹Ibid., 57.

a school teacher in the process of being ordained, and within a week he proposed to her on the platform of a train station in the middle of his goodbyes. Astounded, she could not speak, and Frank, concluding that silence meant consent, got on the train and left. So "out of sheer weakness and fear of inflicting pain I drifted into an engagement with a man I did not pretend to love."¹⁰ As her future friend and socialist associate W.T. Stead stated, "she could not be the Bride of Heaven, and therefore became the bride of Mr. Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute."¹¹

The Besants' marriage was a failure from the outset. Having been raised in a 'proper' Victorian manner, Besant found herself in complete ignorance, followed closely by intense disgust, of the activities of the wedding night. Frank made things worse by treating his new wife with undue harshness while acquainting her with his views on the necessity of women's submission. Annie Besant accepted none of this.

Within three years of marriage Besant had borne two children, Digby and Mabel. The latter was born prematurely due to a harsh blow that was delivered by Frank when his wife tried to discuss the possibilities of limiting their family. It was after the birth of Mabel that she began to question her faith, although not yet the existence of God. She did not

¹⁰Ibid. 69.

¹¹W.T. Stead in Nethercot, The First Five Lives, 42.

understand how her God could bestow such misery, which came to her in the form of Frank Besant, upon His most devout follower. Her doubts grew until she felt she could no longer take Communion, and began to absent herself suspiciously from her husband's services.¹² In September 1873 Frank gave her an ultimatum: she was either to conform to his wishes and take Communion, or she was to leave him forever. With what Frank considered to be little thought, Annie Besant chose the latter. He gave her custody of Mabel, one quarter of his salary - "enough", she said, "for respectable starvation"¹³ - and a legal separation, and within a week she had moved to London. The separation acted as a catalyst to her atheism:

With her dead marriage riveted like a chain around her neck for the rest of her life, Annie could never remarry, and she was too much the Victorian puritan to become any man's mistress, much as she liked men and made up to them. So she threw herself passionately into every cause... she adopted not only Malthusianism, but feminism, trade unionism, radical politics, pacifism, as well as all that went with militant secularism.¹⁴

Not long after she arrived in London in 1874 Besant met Charles Bradlaugh, England's leading Freethinker and President of the National Secular Society, which she had just joined.

¹²Frank had been offered the parish of Sibsey as a result of a letter Annie wrote to her mother's cousin, Lord Hatherly.

¹³Besant, Autobiography, 72.

¹⁴Roger Manvell, The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh (New York: Horizon Press, 1976), 162. The psychobiographical approach is not particularly fruitful in terms of this investigation in that Besant offered many conscious observations on her own motivations.

Each immediately saw a need that the other could fulfil: Besant was hoping to make a life for herself writing about her atheism, while Bradlaugh recognized a woman with an ability to express herself clearly, and who was no longer afraid to do so. He offered her a job writing for the weekly *National Reformer*, mouthpiece of the National Secular Society, at a rate of one guinea per week, the first money Besant would earn that belonged to her and not her husband.

Although her failed marriage was the catalyst that pushed Besant towards secularism, it was not the foundation. Like everything to which she devoted herself throughout her long life, her social conscience formed the basis for her secularism. She had experienced a crisis of faith; her conscience would no longer allow her to take communion, to read the Bible and sing hymns; she could not be beholden to a God in whom she longer believed. In her autobiography she wrote: "Looking back... over my life, I see that its keynote - through all the blunders, and all the mistakes, and all the clumsy failures - has been this longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self".¹⁵ Annie Besant, upon the loss of her Christian faith and the acceptance of a secularist faith, merely transferred this need for self-sacrifice from God to humanity, and this formed the foundation of her atheistic thought. Christian belief bogged men and women down, and impeded their path to self-improvement by

¹⁵Besant, Autobiography, 57.

preoccupying their minds with dogma that could not be proven true.

Her main criticism was that too much time and energy were spent on thoughts of the other-worldly, while the tangible world was in need of much attention. In her autobiography she wrote of this realization as if she had experienced a kind of awakening to the problems of the world and humanity's ability to help solve them:

All hope? Why, I give you more than hope, I give you certainty; if I bid you labour for this world, it is with the knowledge that this world will repay you a thousand-fold, because society will grow purer, freedom more settled, law more honoured, life more full and glad. What is your heaven? A heaven in the clouds! ... point to a heaven attainable on earth... you serve warmly a God unknown and invisible, and not your brother whom you see at your side? There is no warmth in brightening the lot of the sad, in reforming abuses, in establishing equal justice for rich and poor? ... You have tears to shed for Him but none for the sufferer at your door?¹⁶

Besant felt that a life lived in the service of humanity was a greater reward than the orthodox hope of a life in heaven after death. As an atheist she believed that immortality was gained by being remembered for contributions made to the improvement of the future. Whereas in the past she had assumed that the good of humanity revolved around God, in her secular version she anchored it to humankind. The existence of evil no longer perturbed her because she did not have to

¹⁶Besant, Autobiography, 159.

attribute it to an intangible God. Evil was created by humankind and could be overcome by human endeavour, and the human race could progress towards perfection by its own efforts.

It is in these terms that Besant exposed herself as a believer in the doctrine of evolution: nature, and human nature, were progressive in that each life could learn from those who lived before, and the road to social perfection consisted merely of shaping oneself to the laws of Nature's inevitable progress towards that perfection.¹⁷

Evolution was the means by which 'a heaven attainable on earth' was to be realized. To further this goal, humanitarianism would become the new standard for morality; not a spiritual morality but a rational morality, guided by a desire for the greatest good for the greatest number of people, for this was "a system which everybody can understand, and which the common sense of each must approve, for by it man lives for man, man labours for man, the efforts of each are directed to the good of all, and only in the happiness of the whole can the happiness of each part be perfect and complete".¹⁸ The work of every individual counted, she asserted, for each person had the ability to create a better place on earth for human society; there was no need to implore

¹⁷ Besant, "On the Nature and Existence of God" in Wessinger, Annie Besant, p. 134.

¹⁸ Besant, "Constructive Rationalism", in Wessinger, Annie Besant, p.132.

a God for assistance, as men and women needed only to help themselves, collectively and faithfully.¹⁹

Her belief in evolution resulted in a desire for a collective salvation that manifested itself in practical work for the amelioration of current social conditions, and it was in this attempt to achieve the perfect world that Besant adopted Charles Bradlaugh's political and social views. Bradlaugh was "a republican, a land reformer, an advocate of the women's vote, a liberal internationalist, a fearless champion of free speech, a firm opponent of coercion in Ireland and a supporter of Irish Home Rule."²⁰ In addition to this he supported the necessity of promulgating information on birth control, and he was in favour of trades unions to secure worker's rights.²¹ Through his work Besant was initiated into the world of practical politics and propaganda. She wrote and lectured energetically and effectively on all the topics listed above and more.

It was also at this time that Annie Besant was to discover her talents as an orator. Without a doubt, her success in every cause she adopted was a direct result of her enormous skills behind the lectern. Even Beatrice Webb, no

¹⁹Janet Oppenheim, "The Odyssey of Annie Besant" History Today, (Sept., 1989), 14.

²⁰From John Saville, ed., A Selection of the Political Pamphlets of Charles Bradlaugh, in Wessinger, Annie Besant, p.134.

²¹Wessinger, Annie Besant, p.134.

fan of Besant, was forced to admit that "she swept her audience away by her logical and eloquent advocacy of her cause, delivered in an exquisite voice - a voice which was neither that of a man nor that of a woman; it was the voice of a beautiful soul".²² Even when faced with a heckler, which, due to her unorthodox subject matter occurred more often than not, she would "mercilessly knock them all on the head with such convincing logic, combined with chaste and poetic language and a well-cultured mind, that the heckler predicted a very prosperous future for her".²³ She could lecture for hours on end, and was never known to use a single note. In 1930, three years before Besant's death and fifty-six years after her first appearance at the lectern, Beatrice Webb rather grudgingly admitted that she was "the most outstanding Englishwoman between 1875 and 1925 - half a century and she is still lingering on the stage!"²⁴

In 1877 Besant and Bradlaugh published a small pamphlet by American physician Charles Knowlton entitled *The Fruits of Philosophy*, containing contraceptive information which, due to its explicitness in explaining the methods of contraception, respectable society found, not surprisingly, offensive, and within a matter of days they were arrested under the Obscene

²²Beatrice Webb in Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, The Diary of Beatrice Webb Vol. IV, 1924-1943, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 305.

²³Nethercot, The First Five Lives, 85.

²⁴Webb, in MacKenzie, Diary, 305.

Publications Act on the charge that they had produced "a dirty, filthy book, that no human being would have on his table, no decently educated English husband would allow even his wife to have it".²⁵ In her remarkable self-defence at the trial she spoke for two solid days on the practical need for unrestricted discussion of the question of over-population, and on the health hazards that frequent pregnancies imposed on women, particularly women of the working classes.

When the jury returned, their verdict was ambiguous: "we are unanimously of the opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motives in publishing it."²⁶ The judge considered this to be a guilty verdict, but his only sentence was to require them to surrender the pamphlet. Besant refused to do this and stated quite explicitly that not only did she intend to continue publication, but was also in the process of writing her own birth control pamphlet. An appeal was made, and Besant and Bradlaugh were later let off on a technicality. Thus the final sentence was, as Besant put it, "not guilty, but don't do it again."²⁷

²⁵These are the words of the prosecutor in the Bradlaugh-Besant trial, in S. Chandrasekhar, A Dirty Filthy Book (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1.

²⁶Chandrasekhar, A Dirty Filthy Book, 40.

²⁷ibid.

The trial gained global publicity. Frank Besant, outraged that his name had been linked to such un-Christian causes, petitioned for custody of his daughter and won, although not without a challenge from his estranged wife. At one point in the custody battle she threatened Frank that she would return to Sibsey and demand her conjugal right just to remain near Mabel. This threat frightened Frank sufficiently to allow visitations between mother and child. Her failure to retain custody of Mabel confirmed her conviction that the existing marriage laws enforced gross injustices against women. Although she lost her child, Besant saw to it that the case gain so much notoriety that "never again would the government take a child from a parent under similar circumstances".²³

Years later Besant would explain what compelled her to publish the pamphlet; it was the same problem that brought most people to the question of population control - poverty. "We recognized the horrible misconceptions that would probably arise... but the cry of the poor was in our ears, and we could not permit the discussion of the population question, in its own practical aspect, to be crushed. We did not like the pamphlet, but to stop it was to stop all."²⁴ Besant, in publishing *Fruits of Philosophy*, had wanted to challenge the right of freedom of press, but she did not arbitrarily chose

²³Manvell, The Trial, 161.

²⁴Ibid., 36.

Knowlton's pamphlets for the sake of the challenge. She believed in family limitation, and the freedom to print material concerning that issue was central to her ability to preach it; her Malthusianism was the main force behind the trial and her subsequent publication of *The Law of Population*; the amelioration of current social conditions was her primary focus.

The events of 1877-78, culminating in the loss of her daughter, caused a great deal of mental stress, and in typical Besant form, she fought back by immersing herself in a new project: a degree in science at London University, which had recently opened degrees to women. "Let me say to anyone in mental trouble," she wrote, "that they might find an immense relief in taking up some intellectual recreation of this kind."³⁰ She began in 1878, and by 1880 she was teaching botany, chemistry, mathematics, physiology and basic physics at the Hall of Science.³¹ Her success may have been partially due to her tutor, Edward Aveling. Aveling was a left-wing Freethinking radical known to possess extraordinary brilliance and an enormous capacity for organization and action. Because of this, Besant seems to have become quite

³⁰in Dinnage, Annie Besant, 49.

³¹Besant never passed her final chemistry exam, thus forfeiting her her degree. Roger Manvell states that she believed that she was failed deliberately as prejudices against her were so intense, but he offers no source for this. Nonetheless, she was the only woman in Great Britain with first class honours in botany. See Manvell, The Trial, 28.

taken by him, convincing him to write and speak for the National Secular Society. There has been much speculation on the relationship between Annie Besant and Edward Aveling. Within weeks of their acquaintance he had a key to her home, which he was not afraid to use, and they were often seen together at unusual hours. Friends of Annie Besant simply could not understand the attraction that Aveling held for her. George Bernard Shaw, who was soon to enter Besant's life as a Fabian socialist, described him as a person "who would have been interesting in a zoological museum as a reptile but impossible as a man. Short of actual deformation he had every aesthetic disadvantage."³²

Shaw, however, was not the most objective man to speak on the subject, as a few years later he would become convinced that Besant was in love with him, too. "As soon as I could afford to dress presentably I became accustomed to women falling in love with me,"³³ he said. Speculation on Besant's personal life had already arisen because of the depth of her relationship with Charles Bradlaugh. In 1877 they both moved to new homes in London which were only moments away from each other; they were rarely seen apart; the companionship they found in one another's company was obvious to all. Both

³²George Bernard Shaw, as quoted in Anne Taylor, Annie Besant A Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 141.

³³Ibid., 186. Modesty was not Shaw's clue to life; he was to say the same thing of Eleanor Marx, Mrs. Hubert Bland and May Morris.

Bradlaugh and Besant were legally married to others,³⁴ but Bradlaugh's daughter, Hypatia, wrote in her biography of her father that the two were definitely in love and would have married if not for the existing situation.³⁵

Modesty was not a characteristic often applied to Annie Besant, and in 1888 she would say that "to be honest, I have not worked with any man in close intimacy who has not fallen in love with me, but I have managed to steer clear and keep my friend."³⁶ However she betrayed herself in this belief. She lost Edward Aveling to Eleanor Marx, Shaw to Catherine Wilson and Bradlaugh when she converted to socialism.³⁷ Whether Besant was in love with these men, or whether she had a physical relationship with any of them, is less important than the fact that she was undoubtedly attracted to their intelligence, radicalism and devotion to their causes, characteristics which she herself possessed, and which were always present in every person with whom she associated. Charges of immorality were probably levied at Annie Besant by

³⁴Bradlaugh's wife was a dipsomaniac and he had sent her away in attempt to remove her from his public life. He kept their two daughters with him until they had married.

³⁵Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner, in Nethercot, The First Five Lives, 113.

³⁶In Taylor, Annie Besant, 186.

³⁷It is possible that Besant was in love with all three of these men, but it is unlikely that she ever took a lover. See Nethercot, First Five Lives, 113. Ruth Brandon is the only historian who believes without a doubt that Besant and Aveling were lovers. See The New Women and the Old Men (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), 21.

her contemporaries because she was, as a woman on the platform professing radical beliefs, a target to be taken down.

Many of her contemporaries believed that Aveling was responsible for Besant's conversion to socialism. In fact, they had little in common politically. If anything his radicalism turned her away from socialism rather than towards it. She shared Bradlaugh's critique of socialism as a system of thought which promised violence. In 1882, she had entered in a debate with Social Democratic Party leader H.M. Hyndman on a 'social reform, not socialism'³⁵ platform.

It was not until 1883 when she met John Robertson, an opened-minded and analytical supporter of the principles of socialism as well as freethought that the inhibitions against socialism which had been instilled in her mind by Bradlaugh began to break down. Robertson did not agree with Hyndman, with violence or revolution, but he did feel that socialism was an ideal that could be reached by piecemeal reform.³⁶ As with everything, she thoroughly researched the case for socialism, and throughout 1884 she "listened, read and thought much, but said little until slowly, I found that the case for socialism was intellectually complete and ethically beautiful".⁴⁰ For Besant it was not enough to foster or

³⁶Taylor, Annie Besant, 160.

³⁵Edward Royle, Radical, Secularists and Republicans Popular Freethought in Britain (London: Manchester University Press, 1980), 234.

⁴⁰Besant, Autobiography, 304.

profess socialist ideas; she had to 'live the life'.⁴¹ She had done her research and discovered socialism to be the greatest good for the greatest number, and her next move was to put her new belief system into practice.

With a certain amount of drama she petitioned George Bernard Shaw in 1885 to sponsor her for membership to the Fabian Society. The Fabians seemed the obvious outlet for Besant's socialism since they believed in gradualism, non-violence, and carefully researched plans for the improvement of humanity. The Fabians were also attractive because of their origins in the Fellowship of the New Life, a group that had congregated in 1883 under Thomas Davidson, a self-professed evangelist who focused his efforts on the regeneration and improvement of society, a theme that had obvious appeal to Annie Besant. The members of the Fellowship were all high-minded individuals with a desire to serve humanity; but some were more spiritually inclined than others, and in less than a year the pragmatists had separated from the saints.⁴² The pragmatists became the Fabians.

In sharp contrast to the infamous Annie Besant, the forty or so Fabians were young, predominantly male, and relatively unknown; the Society was still in the embryonic stages of organization. They were not convinced that they wanted a firebrand in their midst. However, the Society was committed

⁴¹Besant, in Taylor, Annie Besant, 177.

⁴²Ibid.

to the general dissemination of socialist theory, and although she presented a rather intimidating image to the arm-chair socialists of the Fabian Society, everybody knew that the dissemination of knowledge was one of Besant's specialities. Besant made a wise choice in asking Shaw to sponsor her, as he had a natural proclivity towards unusual people. In anticipation of opposition to her membership he warned that "if anyone is so steeped in bigotry as to object to Mrs. Besant's nomination I will leave the socialist party and run for election as a conservative".⁴³ The jocular threat produced the desired result and Besant became a member of the Fabian Society on August 1, 1885.

Once a member, Annie Besant had her own plans for the Fabians. Determined to drag the Society from its "drawing room obscurity into the public view and set it forth as the chief exponent of non-revolutionary socialism",⁴⁴ she immediately began a program to open Fabian branches in Edinburgh and Deptford, while many more provincial branches followed. Her appeal to the Fabians was her ability as a lecturer, writer and organizer, and while at first a little out of place with her new associates, she soon carved her own niche. She became, as Shaw put it, "a sort of expeditionary force, always to the front when there was trouble and danger,

⁴³George Bernard Shaw, in *Ibid.*

⁴⁴A.M. Mc Briar, Fabian Socialism and English Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 22.

carrying away audiences for us when the dissensions in the movement brought our policy into conflict with that of the other societies; founding branches for us throughout the country, dashing into the great strikes and free speech agitations.... and generally leaving the routine to us and taking on the fighting".⁴⁵

Although she was committed to the Fabian Society, socialism was her new religion,⁴⁶ her new expression of deep commitment to serve humanity. She deeply regretted the divided state of London Socialists and found such divisions to be a hindrance when lecturing to a group of people who, she felt, should have been allied in a common, humanitarian cause rather than detached and impotent. Besant used her new position of influence - she was a member of the Fabian executive within a year - to promote a transformation of English socialist groups. She foresaw an alliance of socialists and radicals whose common aim would be representation in Parliament, as parliamentarianism was the method through which she believed humanity could best be served. More than once she organized meetings of all collectivist groups, leagues and societies in an attempt to create an umbrella socialist party.

⁴⁵George Bernard Shaw, in Dinnage, Annie Besant, 61.

⁴⁶For a discussion of the religion of socialism see Stephen Yeo, "New Life: the Religion of Socialism in Britain" History Workshop Journal, (1977) 5-56.

In the same spirit she developed the Fabian Parliamentary League where mock parliaments were mounted in an effort to prepare Fabians who might soon enter parliament as socialists.

Besant was perhaps ahead of her time in her hopes for parliamentary socialism, if not a little utopian. However, as Anne Taylor has commented, "if Annie had succeeded in her broad aim the history of the Labour movement might have begun some years before it did, and she may have been one of the first female members of any party".⁴⁷

It seems that Besant's greatest successes in her socialist service lay in more finite causes. In 1888 she had heard rumours of appalling factory conditions at the Bryant and May Match Factory where approximately 1,600 women and young girls were employed. With her associate Herbert Burrows, a member of the SDF, she went down to the factory to investigate the depth of the problem. Her experience in the East End had prepared her for the worst, so it was not a surprise when she found over-worked, under-paid young women working in appalling conditions and suffering from chemical poisoning. "White Slavery in London" was the title of the article that Besant wrote to describe what she had found at Bryant and May. The article, with an emphasis on the lack of self-pity among the workers, was intended to gain public sympathy. This it did with remarkable success, resulting in an immediate drop in match sales for Bryant and May.

⁴⁷Taylor, Annie Besant, 182.

Bryant and May fought back by dismissing the workers whom they believed to be in contact with Annie Besant. This was the corporate rebuttal she had been waiting for; a Matchmaker's Union was formed and on July 5, ten days after the appearance of her article, the 'girls' walked out on strike. On July 17 Besant and Burrows met with representatives of the firm to discuss the terms that would end hostilities. The firm accepted each of the workers' terms without delay. Among the terms were: the abolition of all fines and deductions from wages for any purpose, an increase in the rate for piece work, all strikers to be taken back without exception, wheel barrows to transport boxes formerly carried on the head, and a breakfast room so that the girls would not be obliged to eat in the room where they worked.⁴⁵ The Matchmaker's Union was to remain in place until 1902.

The fame that came to Besant as a result of her success with the Match Girls' strike brought appeals from many other workers, among them shop assistants, tin box makers, boot finishers, and shirt makers. In every case she helped them form a union. In the same year, 1888, she ran for election to the London School Board, believing that the "foundations of complete social equality will be laid in the schools".⁴⁶ She ran on a program of free secular education and free meals and

⁴⁶Ibid., 211.

⁴⁵Besant, in Reva Pollock Greenburg, Fabian Couples, Feminist Issues (New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1987), 17.

won with a huge majority despite the efforts of some opposing conservatives. Here, significantly, she promoted the principles of trade unionism within the London School Board by arguing that trade union wages should be a condition of the all contracts concerning employees of the Board. Annie Besant won her point, and the London School Board became the first public body in Britain to insist that all contractors pay their workers a fair wage.⁵⁰ When Beatrice and Sidney Webb came to write the history of the trades union movement they graciously acknowledged the importance of her contribution to the 'new Unionism' which swept the country after 1888.⁵¹

In 1889 Annie Besant joined the Theosophical Society. Theosophy was one of many occult sects that flourished in late Victorian society as part of an international reaction to the limitations of Christianity and positivist thought.⁵² Unlike Christianity, and materialism, Theosophy promised a better future through individual evolution; it taught that everyone was responsible for nurturing a higher self through reincarnations. Besant employed the term 'karma' to designate the force that moulded a person's existence from one life to the next, but it was not an arbitrary destiny imposed upon individuals randomly; each human being constructed his or her own karma out of the actions, experiences, words and thoughts

⁵⁰Dinnage, Annie Besant, 64.

⁵¹Ibid., 212.

⁵²Oppenheim, "Odyssey", History Today, 15.

that composed a lifetime,⁵³ and carried into the next, until, by evolutionary progress, a perfect society, or 'Brotherhood of Man' had been reached.

By 1891 she had been forced out of the National Secular Society because of her new belief. She left the Fabians, stopped lecturing in science, refused re-election to the London School Board, and withdrew her birth control pamphlet. She had become the leader of Theosophy and soon moved and made a new home in India. Her friends and associates were shocked and disappointed. Freethought disowned her, while the Fabians noted her departure with a eulogy, saying that Mrs. Annie Besant, who at been at the head of the socialist cause for three years, had left rational thought and had 'gone to Theosophy'.⁵⁴ She was, as one historian states, "one of the greatest losses the cause of rationalism had ever sustained".⁵⁵

While it is true that her new cause was not rational, it is not difficult to see what Annie Besant saw in it: the basic tenent of Theosophy lay in an evolution towards a perfect society. In this way it was not different from Christianity, Secularism or Socialism as Besant interpreted those ideologies, and it was not a divergence from her belief in progress. Like the others, it was only another way to

⁵³Ibid., 16.

⁵⁴Dinnage, Annie Besant, 72.

⁵⁵Manvell, The Trial, 178.

espouse her ultimate concern, her conviction, that she was placed on earth to serve humanity. And with this new cause, she could heave a sigh of relief: she did not have to do it all within the confines of one lifetime. Theosophy was a new angle; this time she would sacrifice herself through the other-worldly. The method through which she expressed her ultimate concern was not necessarily the important part; it was that she had a belief and she devoted her life to it.

It is very easy to lose Annie Besant among the 'isms' and ideologies that she sacrificed herself to over her long life, but in the end, she cannot be considered an intellectual or spiritual wanderer. Her causes changed, her focus changed, and her politics changed, but she remained consistent in her conviction that she lived to serve, to further society's evolutionary progress towards a perfect world. She was, in the diversity of her life, representative of the late Victorian age, a period of tremendous social, political and economic upheaval. She always had faith; she was never, in the twentieth-century sense, without faith⁵⁶ and it was only the object of devotion that changed. She did not forfeit her secularist beliefs to be a socialist, and she did not forfeit her socialist beliefs to be a Theosophist. Nor was her agitation for birth control inconsistent. Connecting them was

⁵⁶Dinnage, Annie Besant, 13.

a profound faith in progress and the inevitable and eventual arrival of a 'heaven, attainable on earth.'

CHAPTER 3

"Will it always be, I wonder, as man's climbing upward,
that every step must be set on his own heart,
and the hearts of those he loves?"
Besant, *An Autobiography*, 144.

According to Angus McLaren, "the birth control and feminist campaigns were most clearly linked together in the last third of the nineteenth century in the activities of Annie Besant",¹ but unfortunately the association between Besant, birth control and feminism is neither clear nor confirmed. It is, in fact, confused. Assumptions have been made based on the fact that Besant, as a woman, propagated contraceptive information largely for the benefit of other women who found themselves at the mercy of their husband's 'needs' and their own fertility. However, if there is one thing to be known for certain about Annie Besant, it is that assumptions should not be made based upon her gender. She had already failed in the pursuits that were considered 'natural' to women and had excelled in areas that were deemed entirely inappropriate for her; she was an excellent public speaker, agitator and writer, and had, to the disgust of men and women alike, spoken publicly of human sexuality.

As indicated in previous chapters, it is dangerous to slot Besant into the feminist camp without an understanding of her feminism, but it is equally dangerous to simply place the

¹Angus McLaren, Birth Control in Nineteenth Century England New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978, p.204.

birth-control campaign within the wider context of Victorian feminism. While it is true that a few feminists may have supported contraception as a means of freeing women from constant child-bearing, most feminists shunned the birth control movement until the end of the nineteenth century and perhaps even later. The most common reason that is offered for this disassociation is that the women involved in the feminist movement "feared to be associated in the minds of the public with the 'unsavoury' doctrines of people like Bradlaugh and Besant."² Radicalism was not welcomed by the mainstream feminist movement. Parallel to the desire for equality and social justice for women was the belief that emancipation would lead to an elevated social order which was to be judged by Victorian moral standards. The atheists, socialists and others "who supported the women's cause but challenged conventional morality were not included in the mainstream."³

The attitude of the women's movement to birth control is an issue that will be considered at length below. It is certainly not tied up in appearance and reputation alone, and there are several other fundamental issues which prevented a relationship between the two movements. Also at issue is the fact that birth controllers, or Neo-Malthusians as they are more appropriately called, did not rush to join the ranks of

²J.A. and O. Banks, Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England, Liverpool: 1979, p.121.

³Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, p.55.

the feminists. After a close examination of Malthusian and Neo-Malthusian arguments and the infamous 'Bradlaugh-Besant Trial' of 1877 with its 'immoral' issues and social effects, it will be more clear as to why this was so.

Also clear will be Annie Besant's reasons for taking up the cause of birth control, her reasons for supporting its practice, and most importantly, to what extent it involved women and how much it served as a means to express her feminism, if it did at all. To achieve this, particular attention will be paid to Besant's own thoughts as expressed in her *Autobiography*, her political tracts *The Law of Population* and *The Social Aspects of Malthusianism* as well as her defence in the transcripts of the Queen v. Bradlaugh and Besant.⁴

In order to set the nineteenth century birth control movement in its context it is first necessary to establish the Malthusian League's attitudes towards the working classes, women and doctors; doctors because they could validate their ideas, women because they were the vehicles through which pregnancy occurred and the working classes because they could not support the large families that resulted from such

⁴Autobiography; The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and Its Bearing Upon Human Conduct and Morals London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1877; The Social Aspects of Malthusianism, London: Malthusian League Pub., 1880. Transcripts of the trial are found in Manvell, The Trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, 1976. Much of her defence at the trial is repeated verbatim in The Law of Population.

pregnancies. The story of the League's attempt to win these groups over to their cause was one of continual frustration. In the League's opinion, the working classes spurned Malthus for socialism, feminists preferred suffrage activities to birth control propagandizing, and doctors were either reluctant to declare themselves on the question or were drawn to the more scientifically exciting doctrine of eugenics.⁵ Malthusians resented in particular the rebuttal they received from the working classes and feminists as, they believed these two groups stood to gain the most from their doctrine.

The Malthusian League thought of themselves as the legitimate heirs of early nineteenth century radicalism and classical liberalism, and not "the bastard offspring of hedonistic sexuality and free-love as their enemies often charged."⁶ It is important to note that of the political economists who, during the first half of the nineteenth century, held a monopoly on social theory, there was "hardly a one, from Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo onward, who did not adhere to the Malthusian doctrine."⁷ The essence of neo-Malthusianism, the restrictionist policy preached by the League, is its stress upon the individual's choice between

⁵ McLaren, Birth Control, p.109.

⁶ Richard Soloway, Birth Control and the Population Question in England 1877-1930. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982, p.57.

⁷ William Langer, "The Origins of the Birth Control Movement in England in the Early Nineteenth Century" Journal of Interdisciplinary History 5(1975): p.680.

poverty and comfort.⁵ According to Malthus, population is necessarily limited by the means of subsistence, which increases at a lower level than the level of population, and therefore certain 'natural checks' such as war, famine or disease occur in order to check the increasing population.

However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, we find a new agent at work; Nature's grandest product, the brain of man... and a new set of circumstances arises. Men, women, and children who would have been doomed to death in the savage state, have their lives prolonged by civilization... the average of life is lengthened, and more and more the thought is brought to bear on the causes of preventible diseases; better drainage, better homes, better food, better clothing, all these, among the more comfortable classes, remove many of the natural checks to population.⁷

It was not really an increase in population that worried the Malthusian League; it was the increase in poverty that came with it. All Malthusians agreed that the increasing poverty found in Britain's cities was due to a superabundance of workers.¹⁶ Malthus certainly saw it in this light, and he had

⁵The difference between Neo-Malthusianism and Malthusianism, which was more commonly preached at the time of the Reverend Thomas Malthus himself is one contraception: The Malthusian League condoned and spread information concerning methods of birth control available in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

⁷Besant, Law of Population, p.14-15. I am using Besant's writing to gain an understanding of Malthusianism for two reasons, the first being the obvious fact that it is Besant that we are trying to understand. Secondly, it is also true that Besant's thoughts and writings can be seen to be representative of the League as a whole, and The Law of Population was their most popular, most read and most comprehensive publication. It can be seen in many ways as the League's manifesto.

¹⁶Langer, "Origins", p.680.

two solutions: late marriage and moral restraint within marriage.

By delaying marriage the childbearing years of a wife were decreased, thereby limiting family size naturally and avoiding the poverty that would likely accompany a larger family. It was argued in the Neo-Malthusian doctrine, however, that while "the spectre of poverty scares people back from marriage,"¹¹

Late marriage is bad, politically, socially and individually. Politically it would, if universally adopted, be injurious, because it would weaken the physique of the race...Socially late marriage is bad, because it implies a number of dwarfed and isolated lives, instead of a number of happy homes, radiating brightness on every side... Individually late marriage is bad, physically, mentally, and morally.¹²

Perhaps the worst evil to come of late marriage was the patronage

that would be given to prostitution; women were expected to remain virginal until their wedding night, but such demands were not placed on men and it was believed that in the absence of a young wife, they would take their needs to a professional. Thus the answer to the problem was to marry early and check conception, and the "great social mischief" of late marriage and all the evils that came with it "would

¹¹Besant, Social Aspects, 2.

¹²Ibid., 1.

entirely pass away, if Malthusian views were generally adopted by the people."¹³

Even the most devoted supporters of Malthus had little faith in the efficacy of moral restraint. It was most definitely a good idea, but utopian to expect from men and women who had waited to marry and who finally found themselves in the only legal institution where intercourse was acceptable, and it may be regarded as something of a mystery that Malthus himself fathered only three children during thirty years of married life. As a clergyman, Malthus could not openly accept contraception because it was considered unnatural and unchristian.

The secularist Malthusians, however, were not hindered by religious qualms or by any faith in the capability of the married poor to control family size by means of moral restraint and therefore accepted the logical necessity of artificial contraception.¹⁴ Malthusians argued that the adoption of contraception would allow members of the working class to limit the size of their family to a number that they were prepared and able to adequately support, thereby lessening poverty. By limiting the number of children in working class families, contraception was seen as the key to private independence, public respectability, and a higher

¹³Ibid., 2.

¹⁴Angus McLaren, "Contraception and the Working Classes: The Social Ideology of the English Birth Control Movement in its Early Years" Comparative Studies in Society and History 18(1976): p.238.

standard of living which, it was assumed by the middle class Malthusians, lay at the heart of all working class ambitions.

Of course the great bulk of Victorian society was not ready for these ideas and condemned them as a violation of natural laws and immoral, especially in speaking so plainly on the actual methods of contraception. Annie Besant responded by arguing that "to limit the family is no more a violation of nature's laws than to preserve the sick by medical skill; the restriction of the birth-rate does not violate nature's laws any more than the restriction of the death-rate"¹⁵ and there were few who would argue that the restriction of the death-rate was immoral. On the moral issue of the spread of such information she was characteristically commonsensical: "It is clearly useless to preach the limitation of the family and to conceal the means whereby such limitation may be effected. If the limitation be a duty, it cannot be wrong to afford such information as shall enable people to discharge it."¹⁶

For Besant the choice to practise birth control within marriage was not a moral issue but a duty which had to be performed among the labouring poor to eradicate poverty, and among the respectable classes in order to set an example. For many, however, it was a public moral issue, and while they may have condoned and even practised Besant's contraceptive arguments behind closed doors, they were nonetheless bitterly

¹⁵Besant, Law of Population, 38.

¹⁶Ibid., 31.

opposed to the indiscriminate publication and conversation that the Malthusian League generated. To maintain a modicum of respectability all Malthusians, with the exception of George Drysdale, were careful to argue that their message was intended for married couples only, and was not for use in extra-marital relationships.

Social respectability, however, was not forthcoming for the Malthusians. Most Victorians could not get past the immorality of the open discussion of private matters, and therefore most missed the essence of their argument: "it is a crime for a man and woman to bring into the world more children than they are able to feed, clothe and educate."¹⁷

At the heart of Neo-Malthusianism was the certainty that family limitation was first and foremost the rational and responsible way for men and women of all classes to adjust to economic stringencies and to preserve or improve their standard of living. Implicit issues such as personal satisfaction, sexual fulfilment and the position of women in the family and society were always subsidiary to the argument that population pressure caused poverty and therefore must be controlled.

Thus, when Besant went to trial in 1877 for publishing Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, it was not her "first major feminist battle."¹⁸ It was, in fact, her first major free

¹⁷Besant, Social Aspects, 5-6.

¹⁸Greenburg, Fabian Couples, 70.

speech battle.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that prior to her publication of the pamphlet with Charles Bradlaugh, there is no evidence of her support for Neo-Malthusian principles, but this does not necessarily mean it did not exist. Bradlaugh had espoused it as one of the strands of his secularist approach to social life and morality, and gave it considerable stress in his theory of political economy;²⁰ both the facts that Bradlaugh and Besant shared almost identical ideologies, and that she was willing to go to trial for the publication of material concerning Neo-Malthusianism would indicate that she believed in it too. However, as already stated, Besant felt that the pamphlet "at once embodied the right of publication";²¹ the propagandization of the material within was most definitely important but subsidiary to this, and the issue of women and their rights of reproduction was subsidiary even to that.

In the tradition of radicalism, Besant and Bradlaugh courted prosecution by informing the authorities where and when they would be selling the pamphlet. As anticipated, they were arrested and charged under the Obscene Publications Act, although it is interesting to note that it has never been

¹⁵Besant again defended the right of freedom of speech in the 'Bloody Sunday' event in 1886.

²⁰F.H.A. Micklewright, "The Rise and Decline of English Neo-Malthusianism" Population Studies 15(1961): 39.

²¹Besant, Autobiography, 206.

known who actually instigated the prosecution."²² The grounds for prosecution were that Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant had issued "a certain 'indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy and obscene book' and there is no doubt that many, at that time, conceived of the work in precisely those terms."²³ It is not surprising, then, to find that the leaders of the women's movement viewed the development of the campaign with some alarm.

The reaction of the women's movement did not, however, interest Besant. She was more concerned with public perceptions:

We were not blind to the dangers to which this defiance of the authorities exposed us, but it was not the danger of failure, with the prison as penalty that gave us pause. It was the horrible misconceptions that we saw might arise; the odious imputations on honour and purity that would follow... To me it was the loss of the pure reputation I prized, the good name I had guarded - scandal the most terrible a woman could face. But I had seen the misery of the poor... women with children crying for bread; the wages of the workmen were often sufficient for four, but eight or ten they could not maintain. Should I set my own safety, my own good name, against the helping of these? Did it matter that my reputation should be ruined, if its ruin helped to bring remedy to this otherwise hopeless wretchedness of thousands?²⁴

²²Micklewright suggests that it was the Society for the Suppression of Vice who began the prosecution; "Rise and Decline" p.39-40. Although Bradlaugh originally thought this true, it was never proved and it may have been city or county authorities.

²³Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 90.

²⁴Besant, Autobiography, 207-8. Besant always had a healthy sense of her own martyrdom.

Also motivational in her sacrifice of her reputation was the conviction that the spread of birth control information was not immoral, but essential, a belief that was confirmed in her opinion that the Obscene Publications Act was in place to regulate the "publication of such matters as all good men would regard as lewd and filthy... It could never have been intended to stifle the expression of thought by the earnest-minded on a subject of transcendant national importance,"⁵⁵ such as population control. Regardless, she was not prepared to push this point in her defence at the trial, lest it should harm her case, and in fact informed the jury that she "felt it was necessary to raise the question of the right to sell the work; that we have done and now, if we obtain your verdict, our interest in the pamphlet ceases."⁵⁶ She did not inform them that her interest in the pamphlet ceased because it was soon to be replaced with her own more current, more explicit and more Malthusian pamphlet, *The Law of Population*.

During the five-day examination of the trial, Besant spoke in her own defence for two solid days. She was extraordinarily eloquent on the healthful need for sex in both men and women, and for an equal need for restraint in the number of children conceived; on the new threat to Britain of over-population resulting from improved health and sanitary conditions; on the over-crowded conditions in slums and the

⁵⁵Ibid., 222.

⁵⁶Besant, trial transcripts in Manvell, The Trial, 120.

immorality that arose from this; and on the need for freedom of publication for responsible tracts dealing with the facts of contraception.²⁷ Darwinism, Malthusianism, the virtues of early marriage, the hopelessness of moral restraint, and the belief that celibacy led to lunacy in both men and women, were all given careful consideration as part of her defence.

The great majority of her argument, however, was given over to the effects of over-population on poverty, and on the miserable lives that were lived because of large families, which could be easily remedied if contraceptive information were made available to them. She testified to this in the opening sentence of her defence: "It is not as a defendant that I plead to you today -- not simply as defending myself do I stand here but I speak as counsel for hundreds of poor, and it is for they whom I defend this case."²⁸ It was not so much that she was playing upon the jury's middle class awareness of the horrors of poverty; it was very much a part of her own consciousness and of her class that it was their duty, not to help the poor, but to show the poor how to help themselves. By offering them the necessary information, the poor could limit their families and in turn comfort, possibly even happiness, could descend upon the working class home:

Can there be any doubt that it is the large families so common among the English poor that are

²⁷Manvell, in *Ibid.*, viii.

²⁸Besant, in *Ibid.*, 70.

at the root of this poverty?... The artisan with six children, forced to live in a stifling pair of rooms in a back street in London in order to be near his work, might, if he had only two, spare money enough to ride the rail to and from the suburbs, where the same rent would give him decent accommodations; and not only would he have a better home, but the two children would grow strong in the free air, where the six pine in the London street, and the two would have plenty of food and clothing, where the six lack both."²⁵

She backed this fictional account by recounting her own observations and how they had motivated her to breach the law that brought her to trial: "I myself have seen four generations of human beings crowded together into one small room, simply divided into two or three beds, and I will ask you if, after such an experience as that, you wonder that I risk even prison and a fine if I can bring some salvation to those poor whose misery I have seen."²⁶ Her defence, then, was almost completely devoted to proving the immediate need for the legal publication of contraceptive information which would eradicate the impurity, the immorality and the poverty that large families wrought on the labouring poor.

It would thus be easy to claim that Besant's involvement in the birth control campaign was motivated exclusively out of concern for the poor and had nothing to do with women or with feminism, were it not for the fact that it was, indeed, an issue which crept its way into both her defence and her writing following the trial. To what extent it played a part

²⁵Besant, Law of Population, 20.

²⁶Besant, trial transcripts in Manvell, The Trial, 95.

in her motivations, and how this meshed with mainstream feminist opinion at the time, needs now to be considered.

There is a problem in historical methodology that arises in the debate on whether birth-controllers and feminists had similar ideologies and goals. Angus McLaren contends that there was not only a connection, but an interdependence existing between the two, resting on the platform that both Malthusians and the leaders of the women's movement were deeply concerned with the welfare of mothers and their right to control their own bodies. He states that "feminism and family planning were intimately related"³¹ in the form of 'doreestic feminism', which allowed women equal say in matters concerning reproduction and the home, and, moreover, that these men and women accepted birth control as a means of reaching equality within marriage.³² Feminists also, according to McLaren, accepted birth control as a way to alleviate the burdens of motherhood and saw it as a means of self-defence against one of the many forms of male tyranny.³³

"The response of such reformers to the issue of restriction of family size is" writes McLaren "thus misrepresented if viewed as fundamentally antagonistic to that of the birth

³¹McLaren Birth Control, 101.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 197.

controllers",³⁴ as both groups were concerned primarily with the welfare of the mother.

While it is most definitely true that by the turn of the century a connection between feminism and family planning had been made, McLaren dates it earlier than any other historian and states that it "is clear that, on the intellectual level at least, the connection between a specific type of feminism and birth control was well established by the 1870's."³⁵ This is undoubtedly why he believes that "the birth control and feminist movements were most clearly linked... in the activities of Annie Besant"³⁶ who fought her birth control battle in 1877. If this were true, it could have a very considerable effect on our analysis of Annie Besant's feminist beliefs as they related to her Malthusianism.

However, there are dissenting opinions. Joseph and Olive Banks performed the first detailed analysis of the connection between feminism and family planning, and it is against their findings that McLaren reacts. According to the Bankses, a study of "the available evidence...leads unmistakably to the conclusion that the movement towards family limitation proceeded quite independently of the efforts of the feminists".³⁷ They offer a convincing argument which

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 95.

³⁶Ibid., 204.

³⁷Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 106.

demonstrates that feminists did not align themselves with birth controllers until the smaller family had already been established and proved itself to be a liberating force towards the emancipation of women by creating of body of healthier and happier women.

Much more will be heard from the Bankses before we have finished. What is important to note is that both McLaren and the Bankses believed Besant's activities to be feminist; the difference is that the first regards it as her motivating force in taking up the cause of contraception and the symbolization of an already existing connection while the latter considers it only one issue, albeit an important one, in a wide variety of beliefs. It would be naive to suggest that one or the other must be correct and that there are no other possibilities. Thus, to search for other possibilities there must be a deeper analysis. Here we will analyze all of Besant's references, statements and arguments that concern women, and, by comparing them to what may be considered mainstream feminist opinion, it can be discovered whether or not her sentiments were feminist. By this analysis it can also be discovered whether or not the birth control and feminist movements were, as McLaren put it, 'fundamentally antagonistic' to each other.

The first issue on which Besant and the feminist movement diverge is a moral issue. In the trial of 1877 Besant and Bradlaugh were charged with

unlawfully and wickedly devising, contriving and intending... to vitiate and corrupt the morals as well as of youth and as of divers other liege subjects of our said lady the Queen, and to incite and encourage the said liege subjects to indecent, obscene, unnatural, and immoral practices, and to bring them to a state of wickedness, lewdness, and debauchery... and did print, publish, sell, and utter a certain indecent, lewd, filthy and obscene book called *Fruits of Philosophy*, thereby contaminating, vitiating and corrupting the morals.³²

As already stated, it was the immorality and inappropriateness of

Besant's actions and writings which caused the women's movement to keep their distance from her; they were aware that without public respectability they had little hope of moving forward in their endeavours. Besant was not without morals, and in fact her morals were typical of those of her class. Her views on morals, however, went deeper than mere appearances, and it was reflective of her Malthusianism that one of the greatest causes of immorality - over-crowding - had to be eradicated:

Modesty must be an unknown virtue, decency an unimaginable thing, where, in one small chamber, with the beds lying as thickly as they can be packed, father, mother, young men, lads, grown and growing-up girls - two and sometimes three generations are herded promiscuously; where every operation of the toilette, and of nature - dressings, undressing, births and deaths - is

³²In Manvell, The Trial, 61.

performed by each within the sight and hearing of all; where children of both sexes, to as high an age as 12 or 14, or even more occupy the same bed; where the whole atmosphere is sensual, and human nature is degraded to something below the level of swine."³³

Thus it was not immoral to spread information that could bring morality to the working class: "It is immoral to give life where you cannot support it,"⁴⁰ and it certainly "is not right, it is not moral, that mothers of families should thus ruin their health"⁴¹ through multiple pregnancies. Her Malthusian principles were dictated by the middle class moral duty to show the poor the way to a better life, and therefore it was her deep conviction that "conjugal prudence is most highly moral."⁴²

This argument had its merits, but it failed to win over the leaders of the feminist movement, most likely because Besant went one step further and stated that intercourse was necessary, intercourse was good, and intercourse was as natural as any other survival instinct:

I put it to you that there is nothing wrong in a natural desire rightly and properly gratified. There is no harm in feeling thirsty because people get drunk; there is no harm in feeling hungry because people over-eat themselves, and there is no harm in gratifying the sexual instinct if it can be gratified without injury to anyone else, and without harm to the morals of society, and with due

³³Besant, from trial transcripts, Manvell, The Trial, 95.

⁴⁰Besant, Law of Population, 38.

⁴¹Ibid., 24.

⁴²Ibid., 38.

regard to the health of those whom nature has given us the power of summoning into the world."⁴³

While Besant does show concern for women in this statement, the licentiousness which the women's movement, or most of society for that matter perceived in it, was unacceptable and immoral. It was feared by feminists that, although Besant regarded sexual indulgence as a marital practice only, her radicalism would suggest to the unmarried that they could indulge their desires. The problem with Besant's spread of contraceptive knowledge was that "it would tear down one of the greatest protections public morality has: the fear of conception outside of marriage."⁴⁴

Thus her argument that it was not her teachings, but the lifestyles of the labouring poor that were immoral. This may have won over a few middle class feminists, but her recommendation that couples indulge in their desires, and her instruction on how to do so without procreation, was simply unacceptable to leaders of the feminist movement. They could not afford to be associated with such sentiments.⁴⁵ Besant, in turn, did not direct her thoughts on the moral issue towards women in particular; it was an issue which involved society as a whole.

⁴³Besant, trial transcripts, in Manvell, The Trial, 84.

⁴⁴Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 117.

⁴⁵Jeffreys, Spinster and Her Enemies, 56.

However, when the question was shifted from morality to the potential loss of women's purity, she was very defensive of her gender. Women were supposed to be kept ignorant of sexuality until their wedding night. Annie Besant herself "was left defenceless to face a rude awakening" and after the consummation of her marriage her feelings were not of perfect union, love or togetherness, but of "helpless bewilderment and fear".⁴⁶ A little information, Besant believed, could only help the marriage as "many an unhappy marriage dates from its very beginning, from the terrible shock... and no mother should let her daughter, *blindfold*, slip her neck under the marriage yoke."⁴⁷ Thus on the question of what birth control information would do to women's innocence Annie was slightly indignant:

never from English women's hearts will fade the maiden and matronly dignity which makes them shield their love from all taint of impurity, and bid them only surrender themselves where the surrender of heart and faith have led the way. Shame on those who slander England's wives and maidens with the foul thoughts that can only spring from the minds and lips of the profligate!⁴⁸

Her support the married woman's modesty was, therefore, sound; no doubt men and women, feminist or not, enjoyed the reassurance that an English wife's modesty was unshakable.

⁴⁶Besant, Autobiography, 71.

⁴⁷Ibid. Besant's italics.

⁴⁸Besant, Law of Population, 39.

But again connected to the moral issue was the question of what unmarried women might do with Besant's information, and this shifted the issue from a married woman's modesty, which was pure but no longer ignorant, to a single woman's purity, which was a combination of the innocence and ignorance that existed, or was expected to exist, in all women who had not yet experienced a marriage relation. She could not be as positive about this charge: "The fact is that anyone who could misuse the knowledge that is given here, is so far gone already that there is very little to gain by keeping this knowledge from her. If a woman has been so carried away by passion as to desire the book for purposes of passion, she will not be pushed any further by the possession of this knowledge."⁴⁵

This woman, the unmarried woman 'so carried away by passion', was a loss to society, a failure of the Victorian moral system. However, the married woman who publicly acknowledged that she supported fertility control was not much better. Thus, the feminists' fear of being associated with Besant's immoral teachings to the working class carried over into their fear of being associated with something that might lead to the impurity of women. "It is difficult", states Olive Banks, "to comprehend the horror with which the open advocacy of artificial checks to parenthood was received."⁴⁶

⁴⁵Besant, in Manvell, The Trial, 115.

⁴⁶Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 90.

Henry and Millicent Fawcett, two of the few feminists who acknowledged the worth of Besant's work, would not testify on her behalf at the trial, and Henry Fawcett "threatened to send his wife out of the country rather than that she should appear as a witness in the case."⁵¹ Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, also prominent in the women's movement as one of the first professional women, was hostile to Besant's teachings, although she was a pioneer in her advocacy of sexual education among young girls.⁵²

While Besant supported married women and their morals and their purity, she received no support from the women's movement, primarily because of their differing purposes. Besant showed little interest in the welfare of single women; her interest lay in wives and mothers. She proposed early marriage as a means of obtaining happiness and health. If a couple married early, they could enjoy each other in youth, they could have children - as many as they could support - in their youth, and they could control their fertility when they saw fit, and live out the rest of their lives in relative comfort. Mainstream feminists were more concerned with enlarging economic and educational opportunities for women, and the option of remaining single, although it may have been ideal for a few women of means and ambition, was not a solution in terms of the broader society. Late marriage was

⁵¹Ibid., 92.

⁵²Ibid.

a preventive check which only replaced one evil with another: "The more marriage is delayed, the more prostitution spreads... men do not and will not live single; and all women, and all men who honour women, should protest against a teaching which would inevitably make permanent that terrible social evil... the state of the streets at nightfall is the result of deferred marriage..."⁵³

Besant's concerns were for society as a whole; she wanted to see the end of the evil of prostitution, she wanted to see smaller families living in comfort, and she wanted to see wives and mothers in good health. Because she did not condone extra-marital sexuality, she had little concern for the single woman, as, in this matter, it did not involve her. The women's movement, however, was quite the opposite. One of the most remarkable features of the movement "was their outstanding lack of interest in the position of the wife and mother in a stable family relationship, and there can be little cause to doubt that the reason for oversight was the overwhelming concern of the middle class about the fate of their single women."⁵⁴ It can fairly be said that a large part of feminist activity at the time of Besant's birth control agitations was taken up with topics that were of particular concern to the unmarried as opposed to the married woman, especially in terms of their demands for greater

⁵³Besant, Law of Population, 27.

⁵⁴Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 27.

economic and educational opportunities. A woman's right to control her fertility was not an issue, or at least an issue that gained much of their attention.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that "the majority of the 'orthodox' feminists of the period subscribed to the view that the place of the wife and the mother was at home."⁵⁵

Indeed, this was reinforced by the leaders of the women's movement themselves. Emily Faithfull, in a paper read before the Social Science Congress in 1863, said that "No one disputes that household management and the nurture of children are good true womanly work. No one wants to take women from homes where there are duties to perform."⁵⁶ Feminists did not take up the banner for family limitation until the turn of the century when the new pattern of family size was already established.

Therefore, in addition to the fact that the leaders of the women's movement did not wish to be associated with the unsavoury issues of Besant's campaign, it is also true that her issues were not high on their list of priorities. And Besant, assuming that only married women would benefit by her teachings, did not see the relevance of addressing herself to single women. Their goals were thus conflicting. The only area where some common ground was reached, although very tenuously, was in the conviction shared by Besant and

⁵⁵Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 97.

⁵⁶In Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 41.

feminists that a woman should have complete control over her own body. Even here, though, they agreed for different reasons. For Besant at issue was the health of the mother: "there is no question that amongst the women of the poorer classes there is a vast amount of suffering caused by over-rapid child-bearing."⁵⁷ At the trial and in *The Law of Population* Besant described in detail the consequences of near-constant pregnancy on women, including *prolapsus uteri*, or 'fallen womb', and of the inability to remain in bed after delivery. Also detrimental to the health of a mother was her husband's demands shortly after a baby had been born, and here Besant used very strong language when she claims the "absolute right of women to complete repose from sexual disturbance during this slow recovery of the normal condition of the womb."⁵⁸

Besant felt that while it was an unavoidable matter of biology that women carried the burdens of bearing children, it was not necessary and it was not fair that they should be punished for it. "You do not expect a young man to live an absolutely celibate life after marriage. If he does not, what happens? You get a strong man and a delicate woman. That which is necessary to the health of man is fatal to the health of the woman."⁵⁹ By allowing the option of fertility control

⁵⁷Besant, trial transcripts in Manvell, The Trial, 107.

⁵⁸Besant, Law of Population, 23.

⁵⁹Besant, Law of Population, 110.

marriage would be more equal, and therefore more comfortable. But, "where the mother's health is sacrificed, the happiness of the home must suffer"⁶⁰ and soon "the husband is overweighted and consequently ill-tempered, and draws an unfavourable contrast between the active girl he married and the languid woman who is his wife. Who is to blame for the change, save the husband and wife themselves for their lack of conjugal prudence."⁶¹ This defence of Neo-Malthusianism may have been excessive, but it does show a genuine concern for the health and happiness of married women, which she certainly considered to be of equal importance to that of the husband.

While the women's movement shared Besant's belief that women should have control of their own bodies, it was not for the same reasons. They viewed it as point on which men and women could be considered equal;⁶² men certainly controlled their own persons. The feminists used this argument most forcefully in the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, which allowed prostitutes to be subjected to medical examinations against their will. However, it did not play a large enough part in their doctrine to cause them to join the birth control movement.

⁶⁰Besant, Social Aspect of Malthusianism, 3.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Soloway, Birth Control, 134.

Another area where Besant and the feminists should have been able to reach common ground involves the notion of sexual equality within marriage. Undoubtedly, Besant made some of her most feminist statements in this context. The first of these statements is made, again, on extenuating circumstances resulting in a woman's poor health due to excessive child-bearing:

It is easy for a man to complain that he does not find a companion in his wife, and that she takes no interest in the larger life outside the house, and does not feel the throb of intellectual movement of the age; if the man were in the woman's place, if he were in constant weariness of body, if he had to care for and watch and tend half a dozen young children, while his own condition needed physical rest rather than physical exertion, perhaps he might be indifferent to the strife of opinion, and be too much taken up with the problem of babes to solve the problems of sociology. Intellectual sympathy will never be thorough between husband and wife, while the wife is over-burdened and over-harassed by the care of a family too large for one woman to tend.¹³

Implicit in this statement is not so much a demand that women enjoy the same pursuits and interests of their husbands, but an assumption that, if less burdened with children, they could and would.

It must be remembered that while Besant was an extremely intellectual woman who constantly engulfed herself in 'the problems of sociology', she had been at one time a wife and a mother and this instinct had been stifled in her by her husband. She found her intellectual emancipation outside of

¹³Besant, Social Aspects of Malthusianism, 4.

marriage, but not every one could or would want to make the same decisions as she did. What she wanted was for women to find within marriage what she found outside.

But is woman to be regarded only as wife, as mother, as nurse, as housekeeper? Is she never to be thought of as an individual, but always in relation to someone else? Has a woman no right as an independent human being? We do not regard man only as a husband and father: why should we regard a woman only as wife and mother?... It is the radically false notion of 'woman's sphere' which twists men's views of these questions. Woman is not only for man; she also a right to her own life, and to condemn her to child-bearing... is a grave injustice to society.⁶⁴

As a statement of woman's independence this is most definitely feminist. It is interesting to note, however, that the sentiments she expressed here were resolvable into the issue of birth control. Woman's emancipation came, not from the vote, economic or educational opportunities, but in emancipation from large families. Like the feminists of the women's movement, Besant did not want women to abandon marriage or motherhood for the sake of gaining their own independence, but unlike the feminists, she realized, and wanted women to realize, that equality in marriage could offer them both. When they had fewer children to care for and more time to pursue intellectual interests, and when their husbands took an interest in their thoughts and respected them for their intelligence as well as homemaking abilities, then marital equality would be reached. Only then, "when her

⁶⁴Ibid.

intellectual life is fuller and stronger, when she recognizes her duty to the world as well as to her duty to the home"⁶⁵ will a woman find her own individuality.

However, according to Olive Banks, it is precisely because of this emphasis on equality between the sexes that feminism must not be assumed to entail the ideas of the birth controllers. The feminists did not see the large family as a disability weighing more heavily on the woman than on the man, or even as imposed upon her by him. Victorian feminists focused much of their energy on middle class women like themselves, and the married women with whom they associated would have had servants to care for their children; and therefore the burdens of large families or women may not have been so apparent to them. Very few feminists "regarded the smaller family as providing opportunities for a wider emancipation of women and hence as a means to equality; and... in so far as a discussion was provoked on the relationship between the sexes, it did not turn on this question at all but on the biological and social basis for equality."⁶⁶ One of the few areas where an alliance might have been made between Besant and the feminists, they failed to do so. They were, very simply, arguing the same thing from different angles.

On the issue of the double standard of sexual morality, however, the feminists were outwardly hostile to Besant and

⁶⁵Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 9.

birth controllers. The double standard was based on the egocentric male adage that "women exist primarily for sexual ends" and that feminist claims that this was oppressive, unfair, and untrue were "both a crime against society and a threat to the physical well-being of men whose inevitable need calls for preferential consideration over the sentimental grievances of women."⁶⁷ The double standard of sexual morality was attacked vigorously and frequently, but the professed alternative was not greater freedom for women but greater self-restraint for men.⁶⁸ The option of contraception, could, in the eyes of the women's movement, have "the effect of reducing the wife's role to that of a whore;"⁶⁹ by taking away the threat of pregnancy men would indulge in their insatiable desires with greater frequency. Prudent family restriction based upon continence and self restraint, then, not only conformed to popular morality but to feminist sensibilities as well.

Annie Besant did not have a good answer for this charge. She maintained that "celibacy is not natural to men or to women: all bodily needs require their legitimate satisfaction, and celibacy is a disregard of natural law"⁷⁰ but it did not answer the feminist charge that contraception

⁶⁷S.H.Halford, cited in McLaren, Birth Control, 207.

⁶⁸Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 110.

⁶⁹McLaren, Birth Control, 201.

⁷⁰Besant, Law of Population, 28.

would enslave women to male lust. It seems probable, though, that because Besant believed that smaller families led to sexual equality within marriage, she hoped the issue of the double standard of sexual morality would dissolve with gendered inequalities. She did, however, believe that the use of prophylactics was different from other contraceptive techniques and considered them "license for male sexual indulgence."⁷¹ Regardless, she was not able to counter this charge with convincing logic, as she was with all other issues.

Angus McLaren's contention, that the feminist response "to the issue of restriction of family size is thus misrepresented if viewed as fundamentally antagonistic to that of the birth controllers",⁷² loses some credibility when subjected to careful analysis. Part of the reason for this is his view of the Malthusian League, which he depicts as a group almost completely devoted to women: "their response to the question of family limitations varied according to preoccupation but the goal - to win for women the right to control her own body - was the same."⁷³ This severely underestimates the purpose of the League, of Neo-Malthusianism, and of Annie Besant. It is true that women were a question with which they had to deal, but their primary

⁷¹Soloway, Birth Control and the Population Question, 136.

⁷²McLaren, Birth Control, 197.

⁷³Ibid., 198.

goal was to limit families to relieve poverty. Besant did, as we have seen, involve women in her defence at the Bradlaugh-Besant trial of 1877, and in her writings which followed. But by far her over-riding interest was in the poor and their large, over-crowded families.

Even contemporary anti-feminists, always searching for a new angle against the women's movement, did not see a connection between feminism and family planning. As the Bankses convincingly point out:

so far as we can tell, family planning propaganda played no part in the demands of the feminist movement until the fall in the size of the family was well under way... and anti-feminists... while seeing many undesirable consequences in the efforts of the reformers, such as a retreat from marriage altogether on the part of single women with a career, and the neglect of their homes on the part of married women who had tried to combine both, at no time included birth control amongst them. Publicly, attacks on feminism were not linked with attacks on family planning.⁷⁴

However, it must be remembered that publicly, there was almost no support for Malthusians from any corner. Their doctrine was too scandalous to discuss openly, but this does not disclose what went on in the privacy of the Victorian home.

There can be no doubt as to the interest aroused by the trial and the enormous publicity which attended it. The sale of *Fruits of Philosophy* increased from a previous average of about seven hundred copies a year to no less than 125,000

⁷⁴Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 10. This statement is corroborated by Richard Soloway in Birth Control and the Population Question, 133.

copies between the months of March and June in 1877. Besant's *Law of Population*, which replaced *Fruits of Philosophy*, sold at least 175,000 copies by 1891.⁷⁵

The trial was dealt with very fully in the national and local press, and, as the *Daily News* of June 22, 1877, expressed it, "the whole subject was put with the morning and evening newspapers on the breakfast table and drawing-room table in thousands of homes."⁷⁶ The arguments in favour of limiting the family had never been presented to so many homes and so large an audience. There was, however, no mention of it in *The Englishwoman's Review* or *The Victoria Magazine*, the leading feminist journals of the period.⁷⁷

The interest in the trial and its issues does not mean that the public taboo was raised from the discussion of contraception and no doubt the feminist press knew it. Besant herself would admit in her autobiography what it cost her in terms of friends and social ostracism, as well as the loss of her daughter.⁷⁸ Those who bought birth control literature or carried out contraceptive techniques did so discreetly. Nevertheless the falling birth-rate in the last quarter of the nineteenth century serves as evidence that, in the middle and

⁷⁵J.A. and Olive Banks, "The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial and the English Newspapers" Population Studies 8 (1954): 24.

⁷⁶In *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁷Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 104. See also Greenburg, Fabian Couples, 15.

⁷⁸Besant, Autobiography, 172.

upper classes at least, family limitation was accepted as part of married life.⁷⁵ This can not be exclusively attributed to Besant and her trial, but the newspaper reports which detailed the issues of the case reached people who would never have bought a Malthusian pamphlet, while the burdened householder, anxiously counting the cost of his growing family, was provided with a rationale for the adoption of birth control techniques just by picking up the evening news.⁸⁰

It is possible, then, that many feminists who would not openly condone Annie Besant and her controversy gave their silent approval. However, against the background of the women's movement's almost total boycott concerning birth control, it must be concluded that they were, as a whole, if not entirely hostile, relatively indifferent to the topic.⁸¹ They did not see it as an issue that needed or deserved their energies. At the same time, Annie Besant, despite views which can at times be characterized as feminist, did not emerge as one of the heroines of the movement. On the issues where she exposes her feminism she still is not in line with majority feminist opinion. She was concerned with the position of women as wives and mothers, but this was not her primary concern, and certainly not her reason for taking up the cause of birth control. As Constance Rover states, it was

⁷⁵Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 91.

⁸⁰Banks and Banks, "Bradlaugh-Besant Trial", 33.

⁸¹Banks and Banks, Feminism and Family Planning, 132.

perhaps a lack of imagination which prevented an alliance between the two. The connection between family limitation and the emancipation of women, which seems obvious to us, was by no means clear to the Victorians.⁸²

⁸²Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 100.

CHAPTER 4

"In society a lover may be known by his attention
to his betrothed, a husband by his indifference to his wife."

Besant, *Marriage, As it Was, As it
Is, and As it Should Be*, 45.

As a wife estranged and separated from her husband after a marriage that she considered an imprisonment, Annie Besant was very aware of the unequal position of married women in society, legally, politically and economically. She wrote her pamphlet *Marriage, As it Was, As it Is, and As it Should Be - A Plea for Reform* early in 1878, during her custody battle with Frank Besant over their daughter Mabel, and while she never mentioned her own situation it is obvious to an informed reader that she was analyzing the problem from her own perspectives and experience, though not without the usual extensive research and persuasive arguments that legitimized everything to which she turned her attention. In *The Biographical Dictionary of British Feminism* Olive Banks makes the statement that Besant's "feminism sprang very directly from the circumstances of her marriage",¹ and of all the assertions made by various historians concerning Annie Besant and her feminism, this may very possibly be the only one that can be supported by her own words, thoughts, and arguments.

Indeed, if one takes Banks' broad definition of Victorian feminism, that it was "a critique of the traditional

¹Banks, *Biographical Dictionary*, 23.

subordination of women, enshrined as it was in law, custom, and religion, and a claim for a new relationship between men and women which would give women greater control over their lives",² it seems as if she could be describing Besant's argument in *Marriage*, as this is exactly what she criticizes in the pamphlet. A careful examination of Besant's *Marriage* will show that it is, in fact, a deeply personal and purposeful statement of feminist thoughts and hopes with regard to a married woman's position both in the home and in society, as well as her political status as an unenfranchised and unrepresented member of that society.

Before we embark on this investigation it is necessary to first clear away a historiographical problem in the dating of this document. According to Joan Perkin, *Marriage* was written in 1850 and made an important contribution to the issue of easier divorce during the 1850's.³ However, in 1850 little Annie Wood was three years old, and it seems Perkin was confused in her dating by some thirty years. Carol Dyhouse, as well as Barbara Taylor⁴ also misdate the pamphlet, citing its publication in 1882, and while a second edition did appear in this year, *Marriage* had already become an important piece

²Banks, *Becoming a Feminist*, 2.

³Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth Century England*, (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 1989), 220.

⁴Carol Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880-1939*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 145; Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, 284.

of literature in reformist circles by that time. The actual date of publication is significant because Besant wrote the pamphlet, in serial form in the *National Reformer*, during the months of February and March 1878, which were also the months of her custody trial. The one-volume edition was published by the Freethought Publishing Company, which she owned with Charles Bradlaugh, in April 1878, immediately following her trial.⁵ The significance is that the verdict of the trial, which denied her both custody rights to her child and a legal divorce *a mensa et thoro*, crystallized her opinion that the legal bonds of matrimony had the effect of stripping women of their rights.

In Victorian society the pressures placed upon women to marry were enormous. The plight of women who did not marry, or, to use the parlance of the age, those who had been "left on the shelf",⁶ could be economically as well as socially disastrous as legal rules, social practices, and economic structures all worked together to induce a woman to marry and it is not surprising to find that in the 1871 census nearly 90 per cent of English women between the ages of 45 and 49 were or had been married.⁷ These social and economic pressures

⁵John Saville, A Selection of the Social and Political Pamphlets of Annie Besant (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1970), xi.

⁶Mary Lyndon Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 9.

⁷Ibid.

made it very difficult for a Victorian woman to chose a single life, and once married, the same social, economic and legal structures insured that she would be dependant upon and obedient to her husband, and also made it nearly impossible for her to leave her husband if she wanted to. While the bonds of matrimony were not necessarily kind to women, Victorian society continued to idealize marriage and the family as a woman's destiny and duty.

Women, in turn, also tended to idealize marriage throughout their education and preparation for it, and did not view it as their impending imprisonment; they had a clear idea of what they hoped to achieve in marriage. They wanted affection and companionship, they wanted a home of their own, children, a husband with a legal obligation to maintain his family, and an acknowledged status in the community as a wife and mother.⁶ While many marriages were undoubtedly successful, others resulted in disillusionment, abuse, and, as in the case of Annie Besant, complete misery, leaving women with unhappy existences which they could not leave as there was no legal recourse for them to turn to. Thus while most mainstream feminist objectives were centred on single women, there was a very considerable reformist movement of feminists which rallied around the plight of the married woman.

The feminists who took it as their task to expose the falsity of the idealization of marriage, and to show how

⁶Perkin, Women and Marriage, 7.

repressive it could be for women, collided head-on not only with popular depictions of marriage, but also with contemporary liberal theory concerning the relationship between husband and wife and between the family and the state. Liberal theory held a clear distinction between the public world of politics and the private world of family life and, in the interest of maintaining the status quo, wished to keep the system of separate spheres firmly in place. Feminists, of course had a different view, and insisted that since the family was a locus of male power that was sustained by the judicial authority of the state, the legal, social, political and economic subordination of women through marriage was, in fact, a public matter that needed to be remedied through legislation.

Although the feminists were able to procure many of the changes they sought in marriage law, to which we must now turn our attention, no piece of legislation ever fully reflected their guiding principle which was that the only proper basis for marriage law was full legal equality between husband and wife.⁹ Annie Besant approvingly quoted Harriet Taylor Mill in *Marriage* citing her sentiment that "it is time to do away with the oak and ivy ideal and teach each plant to grow strong and self-supporting."¹⁰ Unlike her contraceptive beliefs,

⁹Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 4.

¹⁰Besant, Marriage, As it Was, As it Is, and As it Should Be - A Plea for Reform, Second Edition, London: 1882, 30.

Besant's ideas in *Marriage* were quite in line with the thoughts of the feminists, who also gave their time and energy to the legal position of married women. However, there is no evidence that she allied herself with them, that she supported them, or indeed that she was even conscious of their activities. Besant's views on marriage, divorce and custody rights derived from her own battles, and other than her writing at this time she was not to use her intelligence or her experience for this purpose again.

Besant began her plea not from the point of view of married women, but for all women by contending that "women, as well as men, are born and remain free and equal in rights" and that women as well as men have "natural and imprescriptible rights which are liberty, property, safety and resistance to tyranny."¹¹ To deny women these rights "is to deny that women form a part of humanity; if women's rights are denied, men's have no logical basis, no claim to respect...either all human beings have equal rights, or none have any."¹² While this argument was a logical one, it likely did not have much effect on the male legislators who, being men, possessed a great many legal rights in English law, and were not concerned that women did not.

Thus, in the words of an editorial in May, 1876 in *The Englishwoman's Review*, "so long as the law makes an

¹¹Ibid., 4.

¹²Ibid.

insurmountable difference between men and women... women must be spoken of as a separate class."¹³ As with all classes, there were internal distinctions which differentiated the rights enjoyed by single and married women. As Besant would point out as a means of getting at the main issue at hand, "unmarried women of all ages suffer under comparatively few disabilities; it is marriage which brings with it the weight of injustice and of legal degradation."¹⁴ She moved from this statement to her main purpose - to describe 'marriage as it is'.

Besant began this process in her typical manner - by simply stating the facts:

Blackstone lays down, in his world famous 'Commentaries on the Laws of England' that the first of the absolute rights of every Englishman is the legal and uninterrupted enjoyment of his life, his limbs, his body, his health and his reputation... The second right is personal liberty... The third is property... A subordinate right, necessary for the enforcement of the others is that of applying to the courts of justice for redress of injuries. I shall proceed to show that a married woman is deprived of these rights by the mere fact of her marriage.¹⁵

Having made this very clear statement of purpose Besant began to prove her thesis and listed the ways in which married women were stripped of their 'absolute rights'.

¹³In Patricia Hollis, Women in Public, 336.

¹⁴Besant, Marriage, 5.

¹⁵Ibid., 8.

It would be nearly impossible, according to Besant, for a married woman to explore the 'uninterrupted enjoyment' of her life, limbs, body, health and reputation because, upon marriage, she is stripped of these attributes. "This is the fundamental wrong from which all the others flow:" wrote Besant, "'Husband and wife are one person, and that one is the husband.' The wife's body, her reputation, are no longer her own. She can gain no legal redress for injury, for the law does not recognize her existence except under cover of her husband's suit."¹⁶ The mere fact that a married woman had no identity beyond that of her husband's wife in the law, "excepting in some few cases when it becomes conscious of her existence in order to punish her for some crime or misdemeanour"¹⁷

also meant that she had no recourse to the law when she had been injured because "she is not a damaged person; in the eye of the law she is a piece of damaged property, and the compensation must be made to her owner."¹⁸

Thus while a married woman had no rights beyond the protection of her husband in English law, she also had no right to control her own body or health within her marriage; by the bonds of matrimony, her body was placed at the service of her husband. "A married woman", she wrote, "loses control

¹⁶Ibid., 9.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 11, Besant's italics.

over her body; it belongs to her owner, not to herself; no force, no violence, on the husband's part in conjugal relations is regarded as possible by the law; she may be suffering, ill, it matters not; force or constraint is recognized by the law as rape, in all cases, save that of marriage."¹⁵ In effect, this particular facet of the law placed a married woman in a degrading and humiliating position, because it demonstrated that the patriarchal system of laws existing in England considered a husband's right to satisfy his passions to take precedence over a woman's right to control her own body.

This, to Besant, was probably the most odious of the many violations of a woman's rights, because it subordinated a woman to her husband in the one private area where equality, if it was to be found, was most likely: "The English marriage law sweeps away all the tenderness, all the grace, all the generosity of love, and transforms conjugal affection into a hard and brutal legal right."¹⁶ Liberal theory, which contended that the Victorian home was no place for politics, thus wears a little thin here as it is exposed as a legal system which not only creeps into the home, but into the bedroom as well. However, liberalism's defence against this was that consent was given at the altar, and therefore married women had no justifiable basis to complain about their

¹⁵Ibid., 13.

¹⁶Ibid., 14.

position. Besant did not accept the principle of consent as a forfeiture of rights for life, because a woman, at least a proper Victorian woman, did not know at the altar what married life may hold for her: "the consent given in marriage is held to cover the life, and if - as sometimes occurs - a miscarriage or premature confinement be brought on by the husband's selfish passions, no offence is committed."²¹

The feminists who concerned themselves with the plight of married women also used liberal theory in their argument against male superiority in marriage. They drew heavily on liberal principles of individual liberty and bodily autonomy, which were undeniably lacking in a married woman's life. The right to liberty was meaningless, the feminist argument went, if it did not encompass the fundamental right of control over one's body, self-ownership of one's own person.²² This was Besant's point as well, but Besant and the feminists also agreed on the principles surrounding the other two 'absolute rights' afforded men but not women.

The second right of 'personal liberty', according to the laws of England, was that the "confinement of a person in any wise is an imprisonment", but it seemed that in this case 'a person' meant 'a man' because "a husband may legally act as his wife's gaoler".²³ Besant described in detail many legal

²¹Ibid., 13.

²²Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 187.

²³Besant, Marriage, 14.

cases where women, running from their husbands after years of excessive cruelty, were forced to return to their husbands who kept them legally imprisoned in their own homes. "But would men admit," she asked, "that under similar circumstances, a wife should have legal power to deprive her husband of liberty? If not, there is no reason in justice why the husband should be permitted to exercise it."²⁴

Feminists referred to a married woman's lack of liberty as a 'civil death', a death provided by English marriage law which grossly violated a married woman's rights to freedom and equality by taking away her independent legal personality, her personal liberty, when she married. Marriage law subordinated her to her husband's will, and subjected her to restrictions that did not apply to unmarried women or to any man. The only other persons who suffered anything like the civil deaths of married women were children, whose legal dependance ended when they reached their majority, idiots, who were incapable of fully rational activity, and criminals, who forfeited their rights through their own actions.²⁵

The difference, however, between married women and minors, idiots and criminals was that minors, idiots and criminals would either come of age, restore their mental health, or pay their dues, and eventually gain or regain their personal liberty. Married women could not. "Was matrimony

²⁴Ibid., 15.

²⁵Shanley, Feminism, Marriage, and the Law, 10.

such a crime for a woman" asked Besant, "that she deserved to lose her rights for taking such a step, or was a woman who married so irrational that she should be treated as an insane person?"²⁶ Feminists pointed out that "marriage law was based on the premise that a wife owed obedience to her husband, and where she did not voluntarily follow his will the law would leave her no other option";²⁷ the feminists and Annie Besant were aware that it was the law, and not the woman, that was irrational.

For the feminists, one of the most striking manifestations of the marital 'slavery' English marriage law placed women in was the fact that under the law a wife was regarded as the property of her husband,²⁸ which leads to the third right that women did not enjoy, that of personal property. This right "has no existence for married women... a *feme sole* may own real or personal estate, buy, sell, give, contract, sue, and be sued, just as though she were of the 'worthier blood'; it is marriage that, like felony and insanity, destroys her capability as proprietor."²⁹ Upon marriage, all property was vested in the husband, to be disposed of at his pleasure. Upon his death a wife's property did not revert to her, but to whom he willed it; if she

²⁶Besant, Marriage, 16.

²⁷Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 8.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Besant, Marriage, 15.

inherited while married the inheritance went directly to the husband. Likewise if she owned land prior to marriage and he chose not to appropriate it, all rents and profits were his.³⁰

Francis Power Cobbe believed that what was really at the bottom of the opposition to married women's possession of their own property was the feeling that "a woman's whole life and being, her soul, body, time, property, thought, and care, ought to be given to her husband; that nothing short of such absorption in him and his interests makes her a true wife."³¹ If a wife were to be economically independent she would thus also be independent of her husband and this, as we have seen, was contrary to the essence of English marriage laws. Feminists were aware, as was Annie Besant, that economic independence was essential for a married woman, as the small amount of autonomy it could provide for her could also lead in some measure to a restitution of personal liberty. For this reason, the majority of feminist activity in the 1870's, in relation to married women's rights, centred around a campaign for reform of property laws. Coming as they did from work for women's employment, higher education and suffrage rights, it is not surprising that their arguments relied extensively on the equal right of men and women to control their own property

³⁰Ibid., 16-18.

³¹Frances Power Cobbe in Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 62.

regardless of marital status and that the expropriation of an adult woman's property upon marriage was a violation of an individual's right to own property.

Men's and women's unequal resources, particularly women's inability to be economically independent, led feminists to assert that legal and social constraints made marriage a relation of domination and subordination, regardless of the attitudes or wishes of the marriage partners.³² This, as John Stuart Mill stated in *The Subjection of Women*, "was a monstrous contradiction to all the principles of the modern world."³³ Besant echoed this sentiment when she summed up the precise position of married women and their denial of natural rights by patriarchal English law:

This is exactly the position of the wife under English law; the husband has the right of flogging and imprisoning her... she cannot possess property - she cannot contract, except as his agent; and he alone can sue if she is libelled or suffers a personal injury; while all the husband is compellable to do for her is to pay for necessaries. It is astonishing that a law founded on such principles, should have survived to the nineteenth century.³⁴

For Victorian feminists and for Annie Besant the achievement of equal rights in the public realm was integrally related to their determination that parliament cease legislating for women on the basis of their sexual and

³²Ibid.

³³Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 174.

³⁴Besant, *Marriage*, 19.

reproductive capacities. The individualism of liberal theory served them well in this pursuit; it made evident the broad range of issues on which the law treated women as beings defined by their sexuality. Until the law ceased to regard women as defined by their social roles as wives or mothers and treated them as equal citizens with men, feminists knew that marriage law reform would be elusive and partial at best.³⁵ For this reason feminists took aim first at property reform, in hopes that, if they gained or retained their property and successfully managed it, they might be viewed as economically intelligent and independent of men, and through this channel enlarge the position of women in Victorian society from being defined not as wives and mothers, but as individuals.

Annie Besant acknowledged that "some great and beneficial changes were made by the Act of 1870", and that while the Married Woman's Property Act was "certainly a step in the right direction... the main principle of English law remains unaltered by recent legislation, that a married woman has no property."³⁶ By the 1870 Act only some of a wife's property was removed from her husband's control, and then only by creating a fictional trust rather than by giving a married woman the same ability to control her property as a single woman enjoyed. The Married Woman's Property Act did not provide that a married woman's property should be treated as

³⁵Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and Law, 102.

³⁶Besant, Marriage, 20-22.

if she were a *feme sole*, which was the feminists' aim, but only that certain kinds of property should be treated as a married woman's separate estate.

The Act which was adopted departed so substantially from the measure originally sought by its proponents that they were reluctant to accept it, and, as Mary Lyndon Shanley has stated "the friends of married women's property reform scarcely knew whether to regard the Married Woman's Property Act of 1870 as a victory or defeat,"¹⁷ for while they had won recognition that the common law rules worked insupportable hardship on some women, they failed to gain parliamentary endorsement of their contention that a woman's loss of her independent legal personality upon marriage was unjustifiable.

Besant found the fact that "the Act applies only to those women who have been married subsequently to their passing"¹⁸ a particularly odious inclusion in the Act, as the position of all women married prior to 1870 remained unaltered. She also pointed towards the circular nature of the Act in that it really did not offer women greater financial freedom because a woman still, as before the Act, could not be sued because she was not a legal entity outside of the protection of her husband. Thus, "while a woman may now, under some circumstances, sue, no machinery is provided whereby she may be sued - without joining her husband... It cannot be too

¹⁷Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 68.

¹⁸Besant, Marriage, 20.

plainly repeated that non-liability to be sued means non-existence of credit."³⁵ Therefore little was changed by the Married Woman's Property Act of 1870, and Besant as well as feminist agitators were profoundly disappointed. After their years of struggle and agitation feminists had gained some measure of reform but not much, and they had failed to win legislative recognition of the principle that a married woman had a right to a legal status independent of and equal to that of her husband, which was their main purpose.

The first third, then, of Besant's *Marriage* is devoted to describing marriage 'as it is'. In the remaining pages she concerned herself with marriage 'as it should be', and it is not surprising that she had many thoughts, ideas and opinions on this subject. Her hopes for marriage and English marriage law were simple and straightforward: "When marriage is as it should be, there will be no more superior and inferior by right of position; but men and women, whether married or unmarried, will retain intact the natural rights 'belonging to every Englishman.'"⁴⁰ "The law" according to Besant, "has no right to dictate the terms of the marriage contract; it is for the constructing parties to arrange their own affairs as they

³⁵Ibid., 21.

⁴⁰Ibid. 31-2.

will... A marriage is a partnership, and should be so regarded by the law."⁴¹

The concept of marriage as a partnership was radical, to say the very least, ensconced as marriage was in laws which provided a husband with ownership of a wife, and not an equal partner. Besant was likely drawing on the ideas of John Stuart Mill, whose idealistic fourth chapter of *The Subjection of Women* sang the praises of a transformed relationship between husband and wife based on true friendship. Mill's "ideal of marriage" was a "union of thoughts and inclinations" which would create a solid friendship between husband and wife,⁴² in turn abolishing the inequalities of marriage by mutual respect for each other and mutual dislike for the law.

In making her suggestion that the state stay out of marital matters, Besant was drawing on liberal sentiments which wanted little more than to avoid the quagmire of domestic relationships, while retaining the status quo. However, this reliance on liberal arguments was a double-edged sword for feminists: Besant wanted legislators to change - or better yet, annul - the laws pertaining to marriage thereby closing the subject to them, while she recognized that at the same time it was difficult for Parliament to reject or ignore arguments that claimed unequal legal treatment, although, in

⁴¹Ibid., 35.

⁴²Mill, Subjection of Women, 212.

the case of married women, "they frequently managed to find ways to do so."⁴³ The theoretical basis of liberalism dictated that legislators were compelled to - at the very least - listen to arguments concerning personal liberty.

However, the use of liberalism as an argument against inequalities between married men and women was also the one issue where Annie Besant and feminists diverged in their reasoning. Feminists spoke and wrote as if the enactment of legal equality by itself would bring about equality between husband and wife, while ignoring the profound effect of the sexual division of labour both inside and outside the home. Despite the radical nature of the feminist critique of marital domination and subordination, they accepted the notion that in a marriage women were responsible for the care of the household and children, and men, for providing the family income.⁴⁴ Even Mill, women's most famous and powerful spokesperson, accepted the traditional division of labour within the household and wrote in *The Subjection of Women* that "when the support of the family depends on earnings, the common arrangement, by which the man earns the income and the wife superintends the domestic expenditure, seems to me in general the most sustainable division of labour."⁴⁵

⁴³Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 67.

⁴⁴Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵In Ibid., 65.

Victorian feminists working towards marriage law reform also did not challenge the way in which gender-based division of labour in the home created barriers to spousal equality. Their attack on separate spheres was meant to provide opportunities for women to participate in male-defined structures; they did not ask that women be relieved of some of their domestic responsibilities in order to move into the male world, nor that men participate more actively in the home.⁴⁶ Annie Besant, however, did advocate such changes, and asserted that

as means of livelihood become more accessible to women the question will be more and more easily arranged; it will no longer be the fashion in homes of professional men that the husband shall over-work himself in earning the means of support, while the wife over-rests herself in spending, but a more evenly divided duty shall strengthen the husband's health by more leisure, and the wife's by more work.⁴⁷

Equality within the home was, to Besant, essential both in theory and in practice. Thus while most advocates of marriage law reform believed, like Mill, that legal equality of opportunity would solve the problem of woman's subjection, while sexual division of labour within the home and the inequality of income remained intact,⁴⁸ Besant believed that both would change, and for the betterment not only of women, but of men.

⁴⁶Ibid., 13.

⁴⁷Besant, Marriage, 29.

⁴⁸Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 65.

All of the parties working for marriage law reform did agree, however, that the common law doctrine of coverture worked great harm not only on women as wives, but also as mothers. The laws which denied a married mother all rights to her children were particularly offensive to Annie Besant, having herself been subjected to, and deprived of her child through them. In *Marriage* she states that

In dealing with the wrongs of the wife, according to the present English marriage laws, the wrongs of the mother must not be omitted. The unmarried mother has a right to her child; the married mother has none... The father's right to the custody of legitimate children is complete; the mother has no right over them as against his....⁴³

Perhaps the unfairness of the law is provided by the doctrine of separate spheres, which dictated that a woman was to stay home to bear and nurse children, as it was their 'natural' calling, and yet mothers had no right to the product of their 'nature'. Besant was also aware of the inconsistency of this law: "Thus the married mother has no rights over own children; she bears them, nurses them, watches over them, and may have them torn from her by no fault of her own, and given into the care of a stranger."⁵⁰

Feminist agitators were no less aware of the unfairness of the custody laws, but Members of Parliament did not listen to the feminists' persistent demand that Parliament put husband and wife on a completely equal footing with respect to

⁴³Besant, *Marriage*, 32.

⁵⁰Ibid.

custody, just as it had refused to do with married women's property laws.⁵¹ A father's right to dispose of his children any way he wished was a powerful tool with which he could control his wife; the latter being completely dependant on her husband to keep her children near her. The fact that a man held paternal authority over his children as well as marital authority over his wife placed him clearly, firmly and legally at the head of the family.

Feminists employed the usual arguments based on the liberal principles of individual freedom and equality, insisting that consent to bear children did not mean consent to relinquish all hold on them, but there was no reform in custody law until 1886, when it was too late for Annie Besant. When the Infant Custody Act of 1886 was finally enacted it was not considered an unqualified feminist success by any means. While it did ameliorate the plight of some mothers, it did not embody the central tenet of coequal parental responsibility⁵² that Annie Besant and feminists had hoped for.

The issue of easier access to divorce played a large and important role in Besant's pamphlet; although she never said it directly, it is safe to assume that she would have liked to have had the right to a divorce from her husband. Her views on divorce were closely related to her ideas of what a marriage should be - a contract between equals. Indeed, she

⁵¹Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 154.

⁵²Ibid., 131.

saw marriage as a contract that was largely inhibited by unjust laws: "Marriage differs from all ordinary contracts in the extreme difficulty of dissolving it."³³ A loveless marriage was not a marriage, as far as Besant was concerned, and this attitude was largely shared by the feminists. They too believed that marriage should be based on love, and they deplored the pressures, economic and social, that not only forced women into loveless marriages but kept them there.³⁴

Prior to the Divorce Act of 1857 it was extremely difficult for a woman to extricate herself from the bonds of matrimony. The only way to end a marriage, other than by ecclesiastical annulment which were not abundant, was by private Act of Parliament, an enormously complex and expensive procedure.³⁵ Even under the Divorce Act, only if a husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial, in addition to being adulterous, could a wife obtain a divorce, while a husband had only to provide reasonable evidence that his wife was guilty of adultery.

This was unjust, to say the very least, and Besant attacked it vigorously:

The first reform here needed is that husband and wife should be placed on a perfect equality in asking for a divorce... the principle, then, which should be laid down as governing all cases of divorce, is that no difference should be made in

³³Besant, Marriage, 38.

³⁴Banks, Faces of Feminism, 54.

³⁵Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 9.

favour of either side; whatever is sufficient to break the marriage in the one case should be sufficient to break it in the other.⁵³

However, Parliament had been ready to accept and uphold the sexual double standard in divorce law in 1857, claiming that while a husband's adultery was just adultery, a wife's adultery could lead to 'spurious offspring'.⁵⁷ Despite feminist agitation throughout the 1860's and 1870's, legislation did not alter this double standard, which can be seen as a reflection of men's desire to change the traditional law of marriage and the traditional status of married women as little as possible.⁵⁸

This did not deter Besant, who went on to suggest that after men and women were on equal footing in asking for a divorce, the next thing that should be abolished was the system of judicial separation. "No useful end is gained", she wrote, "by divorcing people practically and regarding them as married legally. A technical tie is kept up, which retains on the wife the mass of disabilities which flow from marriage." ⁵⁹

This was a miserable way to live, which she was well aware of

⁵³Besant, Marriage, 40.

⁵⁷According to Roger Manvell, Frank Besant had his wife watched but was unable to bring a case against her on the grounds of adultery. However, the author does not provide a source for this information, and Manvell may, like other facets of the book, simply be examining more interesting but less factual information for his sensationalist study of Besant and Bradlaugh's forbidden love affair. See The Trial of Annie Besant, 43.

⁵⁸Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 44.

⁵⁹Besant, Marriage, 40.

from the circumstances of her own failed marriage and separation. A wife separated, but not divorced from her husband, "can obtain no relief, and is compelled to live on, without the freedom of the spinster or the widow, or the social consideration of the married woman."⁶⁰

Besant maintained that the grounds of divorce should not be limited merely to adultery, but should also include cruelty. Under English common law, a husband had a legal right to use corporal punishment to discipline his wife, and while excessiveness was in theory punishable by law, it rarely was.⁶¹ It was to the issue of cruelty within marriage that feminists turned their attention in the 1870s, and their efforts in this respect were directed towards changing the laws dealing with wife abuse, in order to make it possible for a battered wife to leave her husband and live as a *feme sole*, even if she were not permitted to divorce him. As a result of their agitation, Parliament passed the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1878, the same year as Besant's pamphlet appeared, which allowed a wife beaten by her husband to apply for a separation order from a local magistrate's court. While the Act did not give a wife the right to leave a brutal husband, it did give her the right to appeal to a court to let her do so. This was a step in the right direction, but it also meant that a

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 41-2.

woman's ability to claim her independence from an abusive husband relied on the discretion of a male magistrate.⁶²

Some women did gain their autonomy through the Matrimonial Causes Act, but the fate of a woman's life merely shifted from one male authority to another, and there were few Victorian gentlemen who supported a woman's right to leave her husband on any grounds. Victorian men, and undoubtedly many traditional Victorian women, feared that increased access to divorce would demean the meaning of marriage and the commitment it entailed. Besant, however, disagreed and argued that "marriage is far more dishonoured by making it a chain to tie together two people who have for each other neither affection or respect."⁶³ If divorce were more easily obtained "marriage would last exactly so long as its continuance was beneficial, and no longer: when it became hurtful it would be dissolved."⁶⁴ Society, however, could not accept such radical notions. The family was the cornerstone of Victorian society and legislators, envisioning a nation of broken homes, free love societies and motherless children were not prepared to open the divorce laws despite the pleas of Annie Besant or feminists.

⁶²Shawley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 169.

⁶³Besant, Marriage, 43.

⁶⁴Ibid., 48.

The mainstream feminists of the second half of the nineteenth century were concerned primarily with educational and economic opportunities for women as well as the omnipresent battle for the vote, but this is not to say that feminists agitating for marriage law reform were disinterested in such pursuits. There was, in fact, a strong connection between political and marital emancipation which the feminists did not fail to foster, and which legislators did not fail to deny. For several years supporters of women's suffrage had circulated petitions among unmarried female ratepayers, putting forward their claim that they were taxed but unrepresented in Parliament. If the married women's property agitation had been more successful, making it possible for married women to enter into contracts as householders, they too would have been able to use a 'taxation without representation' argument.⁶⁵

There was, in 1870, one moment when suffrage and married women's property reform came before Parliament in quick succession, and it appeared briefly that the Commons might vote both to give women the parliamentary franchise and to overturn coverture as it affected married women's property rights. "The joy in feminist circles must have been as intense as it was brief"⁶⁶ but both bills failed in their aim, and although a full married women's property law passed in

⁶⁵Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law, 129.

⁶⁶Ibid., 76.

1882, it was much longer until suffrage had the same success. The suffrage question complicated the struggle for married women's property rights throughout the 1870s and into the 1880s by exacerbating the fear that women's economic rights would undermine male hegemony both in the family and the political spectrum, and male legislators were in no way prepared to allow such radical change.⁶⁷

As the movement for improving the legal status of married women gained in intensity in the 1860s and 1870s, however, reformers and their opponents alike increasingly emphasized the connection between women's legal subordination and their lack of a vote. Women could not be full citizens as long as they were subordinate to their husbands, and they could not be their husbands' true companions and partners in marriage while they were their political inferiors.⁶⁸ Besant also lent her voice to this debate. Her first public speech for the secularist movement, on 25 August, 1874, Besant chose to speak on "The Political Status of Women", was less an argument for the enfranchisement of women than it was a refutation of the arguments against it.

In answer to the anti-feminist charge that the political incompetence of women received too much attention when there were more pressing matters for Parliament to attend to, Besant responded, not surprisingly, by charging that there were few

⁶⁷Ibid., 104.

⁶⁸Ibid., 47.

wrongs that needed more urgent remedy than the plight of married women:

we will win the right of representation in Parliament, and when we have won that, these laws will be altered: there will no longer be a law that women, on marriage, become paupers... marriage will have ceased to bring with it these disabilities. There will no longer be a law which gives to a father despotic authority over the fate of the child... There will no longer be a law which sanctions the consignment of thousands of women to misery and despair, in order that men's lives be made more safely luxurious.⁶⁸

To Besant, then, women needed to vote in order to protect themselves from the 'civil death' of marriage; she was less concerned with political equality than marital equality, although the fact that she chose to defend suffrage as a means by which she could support married women certainly demonstrates that she was well aware of the connection.

To the charge that women were 'naturally unfit' for the exercise of the franchise, Besant responded with the sarcasm that she reserved for particularly absurd arguments:

If natural inferiority of women be a fact, one cannot but wonder how nature has managed to make so many mistakes. Mary Sommerville... George Eliot, Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, were made, I suppose, when nature was asleep. They certainly show no signs of the properly-constituted feminine intellect. But, allowing that these women are inferior in mental power to the uneducated artisan and petty farmer, may I ask why that should be a *political* disqualification? I never remember hearing it urged that the franchise should only be conferred on men of genius....⁶⁹

⁶⁸Besant, The Political Status of Women (London: 1874), 5-6. Besant's italics.

⁶⁹Ibid., 6.

The contention that women were unfit for the vote was in essence a reassertion of the belief that women were really fit for only one thing - domesticity, which to Besant and feminists was really domestic slavery.

The fear was not that women, through their incompetence, would somehow cause a political disaster, but that they would be drawn away from their husbands and children, the care of whom was their natural calling. This anti-suffrage argument fit in nicely with their next and perhaps greatest fear, which was that political power would withdraw women from their proper sphere and act as a source of domestic annoyance. Again Besant responded with logic:

This allegation is a very odd one. Men are lawyers, doctors, merchants; every hour of the day is pledged, engrossing speculations stretch the brain, deep questions absorb the mind, great ideas swell the intellect. Yet men vote. If occupation be a fatal disqualification, let us pass a law that only idle people shall have votes."

Traditionalists must have felt that the exercise of the vote meant that women would experience some kind of full emancipation - not just political - and would leave their homes in droves. Besant did not think, however, that political emancipation would be quite so liberating as to cause women to throw off the chains of domesticity. She did not expect women to create new lives around the polling booth, but to merely vote, and this could hardly cause a domestic

²¹Ibid., 10.

revolution: "Do you say it is not so - that the delivery of a vote takes up a very short time at considerable intervals?"⁷²

Such political responsibilities were unlikely to disrupt the Victorian social system of separate spheres, but Besant did not forget to point out that "admitting, for argument's sake, the absurd idea that women would neglect their homes if they possessed the franchise, may I ask by what right men restrict women's action to the home?"⁷³ As we have seen, men found this right in the marriage laws of England which sanctioned such restrictions upon married women, but we already know that Besant denied the foundation of these male rights specifically because they did not include women.

Another favourite anti-suffragist argument was that women did not need a vote since they were already sufficiently represented by men, but Besant scoffed at this, stating that they were represented by men who appropriated their property, their bodies and their liberties: "and yet it is urged that women have no need for votes, their interests being so well looked after by their fathers, husbands and brothers!"⁷⁴ Women were represented by "those whose interests lie in keeping them in subjection" when in fact the reality was that "we don't agree with some of your views; we don't like some of

⁷²Ibid., 11.

⁷³Ibid., 12.

⁷⁴Besant, Marriage, 23.

your laws; we object to some of your theories for us. You do not really represent us at all; what you represent is your own interests."⁷⁵ Legislators could hardly be considered representatives of women, since they were not elected by women.⁷⁶ Besant also applied the same argument that the wider feminist movement applied to the suffrage struggle, that women "share the duty of supporting the State, and we claim the right of helping guide it. Taxation and representation run side by side, and if you will not allow us to be represented you have no right to tax us."⁷⁷ In a speech in 1867, the year of Annie Besant's marriage, John Stuart Mill had made a similar claim on behalf of women, acknowledging the "that there should be no taxation without representation."⁷⁸

Mill also attested to the "personal fitness of women to exercise the vote",⁷⁹ opposing the contention that voting was 'unnatural' for women. Feminist arguments for suffrage paralleled Besant's. In response to the charge that women had duties in the home, and not in politics, feminists argued that the same applied to men, and that occasional voting would

⁷⁵Besant, Political Status, 9.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Constance Rover, Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain 1866-1914 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 31.

⁷⁹Ibid.

hardly cause women to neglect their domestic obligations.¹⁰

Suffragists, by the very nature of their agitation, did not accept the charge that the issue of voting rights for women obscured more important parliamentary debates.

Besant, however, advocated the enfranchisement of women not only because she saw it as a natural right, but also because she saw woman's inclusion in the franchise as a means to an end: as each of her arguments against anti-suffragism show, she was concerned above all with married women's rights, and she was aware that they would not change without support from Parliament. A vote, then, was a stepping stone to righting wrongs.

The position of married women, however, complicated the issue of enfranchisement, and Parliament's desire to keep women in the home and without representation was apparent when a clause was added to an 1874 Women's Suffrage Bill that no married women would be entitled to vote in a parliamentary election, a clause which merely added a statutory disability to the already existing common law disability.¹¹

Besant and feminists were aware that they were fighting a male prejudice which intended that women should remain an 'angel in the house', as Mill would attest in a speech to the House of Commons when he stated that "there is an obscure feeling... as if women had no right to care about anything

¹⁰Ibid., 48.

¹¹Ibid., 21.

except how they may be the most useful and devoted servants of some man."⁸²

The issue of domination and subordination within marriage was crucial to Annie Besant as it embodied the loss of liberty, independence and individuality. The men who usurped these absolute rights were not interested in reform as they saw no violation; as John Stuart Mill would ask, "was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?"⁸³

Besant was vocal on the issue of married women's rights in this context, stating that "marriage ought no more to affect a woman's position than it does a man's, and should carry with it no kind of legal disability; 'marital control' should cease to exist, and marriage should be regarded as a contract between equals, and not as a bond between master and servant."⁸⁴ If this statement of hopes and desires for women is compared to Olive Banks' definition of feminism, that it was a "critique of the traditional subordination of women, enshrined as it was in law, custom and religion, and a claim for a new relationship between men and women"⁸⁵ it is possible to assert with confidence that Besant's thoughts on marriage were indeed feminist.

⁸²Ibid., 38.

⁸³Mill, Subjection of Women, 24.

⁸⁴Besant, Marriage, 28.

⁸⁵Banks, Becoming a Feminist, 2.

Unlike her activities as a birth controller, her efforts were for women as women, whether they were betrothed, married, or separated. Still, one has to be careful in making this statement, as her speech on *The Political Status of Women* and her pamphlet *Marriage, As It Was, As It Is, and As It Should Be* were, in an energetic career of pamphleteering, the only efforts she made exclusively for women. Although her thoughts on marriage paralleled those of the wider feminist movement, she was not a part of it, and the women's movement did not dare accept her, a militant, radical and infamous anti-Christian birth controller.

CONCLUSION

"I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the
battlefield; 'Who will go? Who will speak for me?'
and I sprang forward with passionate enthusiasm,
with resolute cry: 'Here am I, send me!'"
Besant, *An Autobiography*, 168.

-I-

During the interim between Besant's writings on marriage and her controversial move to socialism in 1885, Annie Besant's life seems to have settled into a crowded schedule of taking and teaching classes at the Hall of Science and travelling throughout the country lecturing on materialism, secularism, and individualism. Of course many, or most, socialists were non-believers; those two movements were compatible. But Besant's liberal individualism, as well as her Malthusianism, of the 1870s and early 1880s were entirely incompatible with socialism, and it was this enormous leap in political thought that she has been, as a public figure, called upon to answer, not only by her contemporaries but also by her biographers and the historians who study her.

Angus McLaren has stated that "Besant entered the socialist cause out of her conviction that it alone could bring women to full equality" and that "in her opinion only socialists claimed complete equality for women and it had been for this reason that she had entered the movement."¹ Where this information comes from is unclear; McLaren cites no

¹McLaren, Birth Control in England, 178-9.

source, nor does he confirm his statement concerning Besant's 'convictions' and 'opinions' with evidence from Besant or any one else. The task that lies ahead, therefore, is to search her writings for such evidence, and to discover if it was for this reason, as McLaren suggests, that she made the leap to socialism. Likewise, the issue of her participation in the Trades Union movement must undergo a similar investigation; the leadership that she provided in the Match Girls' Strike of 1888 has led to similar assumptions of feminist intent. Presumptions such as these have to be addressed as part of this endeavour to uncover Annie Besant's feminist - or lack of feminist - objectives in each of the movements in which she took part.

Besant was well aware of the unpopularity of socialism in 'respectable' circles; in her pamphlet *Why I am a Socialist* (1886) she began her explanation with the sarcastic statement "A Socialist! you don't mean to say you are a Socialist! Such is the exclamation with which anyone who adopts the much-hated name of Socialism is sure to be greeted in 'polite society'. A Socialist is supposed to go about with his pockets full of bombs and his mind full of assassinations."¹ The derogatory label placed upon socialists could not have bothered Besant too much; it had been a long time since she was accepted in

¹Besant, *Why I am a Socialist*, 1.

'polite society', and social ostracism had never, in the past, held her back from joining a cause in which she believed.

The unpopularity of socialism did not derive from its members, or even so much from its member's activities, but in the fact that, by its very definition it threatened to overthrow contemporary social, political, economic and religious systems:

Socialism is the recognized label of the school which holds as its central doctrine that land and the means of production should be the property of the social union, and not of privileged individuals in it; it is the one name of those who are opposed to political, religious, and social tyranny in every land;... of those who are on the side of the poor and the toiling everywhere...³

Besant had been convinced of its merits on two levels: "Socialism in its splendid ideal appealed to my heart, while the economic soundness of its basis convinced my head."⁴ Persuaded, as she was, both emotionally and intellectually, she set about explaining the "three main lines of thought along which I travelled towards Socialism".⁵

She was a socialist, first and foremost, "because I am a believer in Evolution."⁶ It was, in Besant's opinion, easy to see that society was evolutionary; it had "been seen evolving from lowliest savagery, from the embryonic state of

³Ibid., 2.

⁴Besant, Autobiography, 304.

⁵Besant, Why I am a Socialist, 2.

⁶Ibid.

barbarism, through nomad life to settled order, through tribes to nation, through feudalism to industrialism, through industrialism to -- Nowhither? Evolution complete? Future progress barred? Not so."¹ Socialism promised a perfect society, a 'brotherhood', and "this one thing I know" she stated, "that come it will, whether men work for it or hinder; for all the mighty, silent forces of evolution make for Socialism, for the establishment of the Brotherhood of Man."²

The industrial society in which she lived could not be the end of the evolutionary line, and this she knew for certain, through her second reason for becoming a socialist, "because of the failure of our present civilization." "Is it necessary", she asked, "that while civilization brings to some art, beauty, refinement - all that makes life fair and gracious - it should bring to others drudgery, misery, degradation, such as no uncivilized people know?... Civilization has robbed the toiler of all natural beauty and physical joy, and has given him in exchange -- the slum."³ The simple unfairness suffered by the proletariat in an industrial society, witnessed through her years of travel from platform to platform throughout the country, was one of the reasons she had become a socialist.

¹Ibid., 3.

²Besant, The Socialist Movement, 1887, 24.

³Besant, Why I am a Socialist, 4-5.

Besant's third reason for turning to socialism was "because the poverty of the workers is, and must continue to be, an integral part of the present method of wealth production and wealth-distribution."¹⁰ Under this method, "land, capital, and labor, the three factors in wealth-production, are divorced from each other, and landless, capitalless labor - which must sell itself to live - lies at the mercy of the privileged classes."¹¹ The remedy, of course, was that "land and capital must be made common property"¹² and it was this tenet of socialism that so frightened Victorians. Besant was not calling for violence, but for "methods of legislation rather than methods of dynamite."¹³

It seems safe to assume that if, as McLaren suggests, Besant's motivations for becoming a socialist were feminist, she would state them in *Why I am a Socialist*, but she does not, and in fact the issue of gender does not appear anywhere in the pamphlet. Likewise, gender issues do not arise in Besant's *The Socialist Movement (1887)*, *Modern Socialism (1890)*, or *Radicalism and Socialism (1887)*, all of which are traditional espousals of non-violent socialist doctrines of public land ownership, the 'Brotherhood of Man', and personal

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 6.

¹³Besant, Socialist Movement, 7.

liberties: nothing new, nothing tremendously radical, and nothing gendered.

Also, the Fabian Society, which she joined in 1886, was not, at that time, particularly progressive on women's issues; they were, in fact, quite unconcerned with the Woman Question¹⁴ until after Annie Besant left their ranks. Undoubtedly the Fabian Society was attractive to Besant because of their freedom of thought and action; as H.G. Wells stated, "Anti-socialists in those far-off days used to accuse the Socialists... of having their wives in common. As a matter of fact, the Fabian Socialists did not even have their ideas in common."¹⁵ This, at least, would have allowed Besant the freedom to pursue feminist goals if she had wanted to, but she did not, and according to Edward Pease, secretary of the Fabian Society,

The Fabian Society and British Socialism owe much to Mrs. Besant for the assistance she gave it during five important years. Her splendid eloquence, always at our service, has seldom been matched, and has never been surpassed... She had, when she joined us, an assured position amongst the working class radicals... and through her socialism obtained a sympathetic hearing in places where less trusted speakers would have been neglected.¹⁶

He makes no mention of feminism, feminist aspirations or intentions, or feminist accomplishments, and indeed, Pease makes it quite clear that her greatest attribute, as far as

¹⁴Wessinger, Fabian Couples, 22.

¹⁵In McLaren, Birth Control in England, 186.

¹⁶Edward Pease, The Fabian Society, 98-99.

the Fabians were concerned, was her "command of a certain amount of political machinery"¹⁷ including her magazine *Our Corner* in which the column "Fabian Notes" was a regular.

Annie Besant's involvement with the Match Girls' strike in 1888 has also been considered an outlet for her feminism; Constance Rover refers to the strike as "an aspect of Annie Besant's life that had feminist connotations."¹⁸ While there is little doubt as to the importance of the strike, its importance does not lie in the realm of feminist achievements but as an episode which "gave dramatic impetus to the movement of 'New Unionism', so significant in its consequences for the labour movement as a whole."¹⁹ The conviction that Besant's strike was enormously important to "New Unionism" is shared not only by McBriar, but also by Janet Horowitz Murray, Barbara Drake, Sheila Lewenhak, and Judith Walkowitz.²⁰ This new trade unionism was a shift from unions of skilled workers to unskilled workers, who, in Besant's opinion needed protection simply because of their lack of skills, and she was happily able to point out in her pamphlet *The Trades Union*

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 105.

¹⁹McBriar, Fabian Socialism, 5.

²⁰Murray, Strong-Minded Women, 341; Barbara Drake, Women in Trade Unions, (London: Virago, 1920), Reprinted 1982; Sheila Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement, London: 1977, 79; Judith Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian England Chicago: 1992, 76.

Movement (1890) that "the new Unionism is being leavened by a strong Socialist party... and [socialist members] are bringing into them the spirit which seeks to transform society."²¹

Perhaps the reason that Besant's actions with the Match Girls' may appear to have feminist connotations is the simple reason that she was a woman leading other women into battle, where the oppressors were exclusively male. However, this does not play a part in Besant's own reporting of her motivations of taking up the cause:

'Someone ought to do it, but why should I?' is the ever re-echoed phrase of weak-kneed amiability. 'Someone ought to do it, so why not I?' is the cry of some earnest servant of man, eagerly forward-springing to face some perilous duty. Between those two sentences lie whole centuries of moral evolution."²²

Besant clearly felt that she had travelled these 'centuries of moral evolution' and therefore there was little for her to do but to right the wrongs she had seen at Bryant and May Match Factory. Even then, when she wrote "*White Slavery in London*" to expose them, she did not play upon the gender of the workers, and she did not suggest that the factory conditions were particularly offensive because it was women who were working in it, but because the conditions themselves were unbearable for any human being.²³ At no point in this article

²¹Besant, *The Trades Union Movement*, 28.

²²Besant, *Autobiography*, 335.

²³Besant, "White Slavery in London" in Murray, *Strong-Minded Women*, 347.

does Besant refer to the workers as women; they are either 'workers', 'toilers', or 'white wage slaves',²⁴ but never women.

Although there was no connection between Besant's involvement with the Match Girls' strike and feminism, it cannot be denied that, to contemporaries, there must have been a recognition of a strong gender component in the activities of Besant and the workers. The contrast between the workers - helpless, poor, a symbol of a "degenerate urban landscape"²⁵ - and Annie Besant - an infamous, intelligent woman who literally swooped down upon their cause and quickly remedied it²⁶ - must have been obvious to everyone who believed in the equal abilities of women and men; the difference between what a working class woman often was, and what, despite her unpopularity, a woman could be. To others less concerned with gender issues, the "notable victory in 1888 of the Match Girls' against the firms of Bryant and May demonstrated how, with the aid of a sympathetic press and public opinion, the poorest and most helpless portion of the community could triumph over the wealthiest and most powerful firms in the metropolis."²⁷

²⁴Ibid., 346-8.

²⁵Walkowitz, City, 78-9.

²⁶Of course Besant had much help in this; Herbert Burrows was actively involved as well as Clementina Black, and the Women's Trade Union League.

²⁷Walkowitz, City, 77.

This was undoubtedly the picture Besant wished to portray for the public; the working classes were quite capable of throwing off their chains, and it was part of the inevitability of socialism that they should do so. As she stated in one of her pamphlets, "the Trades Union movement is but a part, and a small part, of that vast onward movement of Labor which begins in Slavery and will end in the transformation of Class Society into a Brotherhood of equal workers."²⁶ Thus when Constance Rover stated that her involvement with the Match Girls' strike had 'feminist connotations', she also conceded that "it was not feminist so much as socialist in intent"²⁷ and, as we have seen, her socialism was not feminist so much as it was an evolutionary spiral towards the kind of heaven she believed was possible to achieve on earth.

Besant continued her activities as a socialist and trade unionist until 1889, when she experienced her third, and last, crisis of faith:

Ever more and more had been growing on me the feeling that *something more than I had* was needed for the cure of social ills. The Socialist position sufficed on the economic side, but where to gain the inspiration, the motive, which should lead to the realization of the Brotherhood of Man?³⁰

²⁶Besant, The Trades Union Movement, 3.

²⁷Rover, Love, Morals and the Feminists, 106.

³⁰Besant, Autobiography, 338; Besant's italics.

It was at this time in her life that Annie Besant was introduced to H.P. Blavatsky, leader of the Theosophical Society in London, and before long she had found her inspiration. The central tenet of theosophy, which all theosophists were required to commit themselves to was "to be the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood"³¹ and this had obvious appeal to Besant; she had always intended to be the nucleus of everything she had a hand in, but the search for 'Universal Brotherhood' had been her life's work, at least since she left Christianity.

The potential of this promise was enough for Besant, and in her pamphlet *Why I Became a Theosophist* (1889) she stated that "The answer to the inquiry, 'why did you join the Society' is very simple. There is sore need, it seems to me, in our unbrotherly anti-social civilization, of this distinct affirmation of a brotherhood as broad as Humanity itself."³² Besant's turn to theosophy, while heavily criticized by contemporary secularists and socialists, was not as abrupt or as groundless as it seemed. She had never lost the fervent emotionalism that had been a major feature of her Evangelicalism, and she was as impassioned an anti-Christian as she was a Christian. Also, it had become clear that neither her socialism nor her secularism was working

³¹In Besant, *Why I Became a Theosophist*, 13.

³²*Ibid.*, 14.

successfully to achieve the brotherhood of man, the heaven, that she wanted. It was, in short, time for a change.

Theosophy provided that inspiring message that Besant was looking for; the message that evolutionary process was not random, but that there was a goal towards which the individual progressed, and that moral justice guided every step of the way.³³ It therefore held everything that was the fabric of Annie Besant's life: progress, evolution, service and sacrifice, brotherhood. However, the question has to be asked, did her move to theosophy have anything to do with feminism? Janet Oppenheim states that it did, that "theosophy served Besant's particular blend of feminist aspirations. She was determined to find significant work for herself outside the domestic confines of wifedom and maternity".³⁴ But did she have a choice in the life that she led as a wife and mother? Maternity was a choice that was taken away from her by the court system and English marriage law, and the circumstances of her marriage were made so impossible that she had little choice but to leave, at least, if she wished to be true to herself.

Annie Besant was not 'determined to find significant work for herself'; it never occurred to her to do otherwise. And while, after H.P. Blavatsky died and she became leader of the Society in Europe and India, theosophy gave her the "global

³³Oppenheim, "Odyssey", History Today, 16.

³⁴Ibid., 17.

status inconceivable in the setting of the Sibsey vicarage,"³⁵ which she craved, it was not so much as a woman, but as a leader. There is no evidence, in any of her writings, that she was conscious of her position in society as a woman; that it was at all unusual, that it was unacceptable in respectable society. There is no evidence that she might have been aware that the reason that "all orthodox society turned up at me its most respectable nose"³⁶ was because she was a woman who espoused secularism, Malthusianism, socialism or theosophy, but that it was because of the radicalism of those causes. She did not consciously lead as a woman; she merely led.

Theosophy kept Annie Besant to the end because it provided her with a church which she could dominate unchallenged. It also gave her a little piece of mind, in the knowledge that she was not obligated to bring the 'brotherhood' to society that she was convinced would be the result of the evolutionary process; it would happen anyway, in one of her subsequent lives. It was, in fact, perfect for her; if theosophy had not existed, she would have had to invent it herself.³⁷ Her focus was shifted from causes and theories and activities which hoped to bring a 'heaven attainable on earth' to persuading people that if they simply believed in Theosophy and its 'karma', it would happen anyway,

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Besant, Autobiography, 175.

³⁷Oppenheim, "Odyssey" in History Today, 18.

and it would happen sooner. But Victorian and Edwardian society were not ready for such a leap of faith, nor were they particularly interested in giving up imperialism, industrialism, capitalism or even war. "Be it so" wrote Annie Besant, "I have seen and I can wait."³⁵

-II-

An assessment of Annie Besant's feminism is a difficult task, since the espousal of such beliefs was never a vital issue in the pursuit of her ultimate concern, and yet her mere presence upon the stage, behind the pen, and in the community symbolizes a stronger, louder woman's voice; so loud in fact that it was heard throughout all of England, Europe and India. Annie Besant, although a radical, was able to show in some eighty-three years of life that women were quite capable of thinking for themselves, voicing those thoughts, and even have an important effect on the population, both male and female. Even more remarkable, however, is that Besant did not choose this path so that she could show the world women's abilities, and she was not consciously working towards women's emancipation. She chose platforms according to their abilities to help her realize her ultimate concern: the Brotherhood of Man, a heaven attainable on earth.

³⁵Besant, Autobiography, 345.

The issue, however, is further confused by the fact that women, and feminism, did play a part in some of her activities and writings. Her Malthusianism, while not feminist in intent, did have feminist connotations and concerns. It was in a narrow sense that she considered women; she believed that smaller families would lead to a more balanced relationship between husband and wife, and thus emancipation would come to many married women by the virtues of family limitation. On this issue she was at odds with the organized women's movement, who not only considered the issue of birth control to be immoral and impure, but who were largely unconcerned with married women, and extremely unconcerned with Annie Besant, a radical with whom they did not wish to associate. Besant, too, expressed no desire to join their movement, probably because their purpose was not as important to her as other pursuits, and because she was not particularly good at sharing spotlights, which she would have had to do in the women's movement.

Besant's thoughts on marriage were, without doubt, feminist in their expression, and the publication of her pamphlets signifies the only times that she lent her name and voice to the wider cause of equal rights and women's emancipation. Besant and contemporary feminists were for a brief time in agreement on the 'civil deaths' experienced by women upon marriage, and although this is important, it must also be remembered that Besant added her piece, but was not

directly involved with the movement, and that she did not participate actively in the campaign for Married Women's Property Acts. Most important here is that her most feminist statements concerning personal liberty, property, divorce and child custody, and her drive to change them, are resolvable into her own experience. She forfeited her liberty and property when she married, she was refused a divorce, and she lost custody of her children. Thus Annie Besant's most feminist thoughts derive from her own experience. This in no way minimizes her commitment to these beliefs, and in fact makes them more powerful, more certain and more clear. Annie Besant was able to take her personal experiences and create, from them, a political manifesto.

This point is further evidenced by the fact that in both cases where she displayed feminism - vaguely in the case of birth control and explicitly in the case of English marriage laws - she was concerned only with married women. Even in her defence of suffrage, she related all her arguments for the vote to the need for married women to protect themselves. In contrast, mainstream feminism focused their efforts on educational and economic opportunities for single women. Besant's feminism, when it surfaced, was thus very narrowly defined; she concerned herself only with married women, and only when she was either reminded of the 'civil death' that married women experienced, such as the removal of her daughter from her custody and the denial of a divorce, or when it

chimed with a larger concern, such as woman's role in the necessity of family limitation.

It is possible, then, to say that Annie Besant was a feminist, but it was a feminism that was very narrowly defined and that never played a major role in the pursuit of her ultimate concern. Thus in answer to the question of whether she has been appropriated by twentieth century feminist historians, or whether she has been neglected by them, we can answer that both are true in the history of Annie Besant.

The fact that Besant was never involved with the organized women's movement should sound warning bells for historians, and yet she appears in many studies to be a heroine of women. This is not to say that all feminists were involved in the moment; of course a woman could have feminist opinions and not align themselves with the cause. Undoubtedly, there were scores of Victorian wives who agreed with and supported women's emancipation, but never expressed their belief. However, in the case of Besant, it is an issue which should be addressed, and yet it is not.

Likewise, it is not possible to claim Besant as a feminist and not explain her feminism, as occurs in the case of her activities as a Malthusian and her thoughts on marriage. Assumptions, as we have seen, have been made based on the fact that she adopted the cause instead of what her motive for taking it up was. The result of our discoveries here - that she did possess some feminist views - does not

excuse her appropriation in the history books, because the assumptions have been made without an understanding of her feminism, which, as we have seen, derives from personal experience.

Besant and her feminism have also been neglected in history in two ways. First, her biographers avoid the issue almost entirely, and this does not do justice to her thoughts on marriage, divorce or child custody, all of which merit considerable attention as part of her expression of her life experience. One can only assume that a biographer would wish to address these issues, and while the story of Besant's failed marriage and the loss of her daughter is told by all of Besant's biographers, the expression of the effects of them is not. These same historians, and many others, also neglect Besant by discounting the importance of her activities upon the platform, in journalism and in the community, and the fact that she was a woman. It is doubtful whether Besant herself was very aware of this; nowhere in her writings does she comment on her presence in public as a woman, but only as an individual proclaiming radical causes in which she fervently believed. In a brief passage in her *Autobiography* she remarks that

the antagonism which... blazed out against me from the commencement of my platform work, was based partly on ignorance, was partly aroused by my direct attacks on Christianity, and by the combative spirit I myself showed in those attacks,

and very largely by my extreme radicalism in politics.³⁵

It does not occur to her that some of the hostility that society directed towards her was because of her gender, and the fact that she had broken every rule that Victorian society imposed upon women. However, her extraordinarily public life is more important than the causes she took up; her fame, her radicalism, and her strong and loud voice signify a passage in women's history when it became possible, though not generally admired, for women to express themselves.

Although the importance of this stronger, louder voice is essential to an understanding of Annie Besant and her history, it is not likely how she had intended to be remembered. Her life was devoted to her ultimate concern - to obtaining the 'Brotherhood of Man' which was to her a 'heaven attainable on earth'. This was always her primary goal, and every cause she clung to, every word she wrote, and every speech she gave was in service, or sacrifice, to it.

She served, first God in the belief that heaven was the only thing to which she should aspire, and then atheism and materialism, in the belief that such a heaven could evolve on earth. With her new focus on humanity as the key to earthly heaven, she lent her name and voice to Malthusianism, in an effort to alleviate the misery of the poor, to socialism, because it promised a new system of equality that was

³⁵Besant, Autobiography, 170.

inevitable, to trade unionism, as a stepping stone to the realization of the socialist state. When she lost her faith in doubt, she turned to Theosophy, because it too promised the evolution of a perfect society as well as future lives of service. "In life, through death, to life," she wrote, "I am but a servant of the great Brotherhood."⁴⁰

Feminism, however, does not fit neatly into Besant's ultimate concern. Without doubt, she considered spousal equality to be a crucial element of her perfect society, but it was an inevitable part, and therefore it was not necessary to work towards it. Besant's feminism was personal, and while she exuded feminism publicly, she experienced it privately and this is why it should not be taken out of its context and amplified based on the assumption that it equaled the radicalism of her many causes.

In the end Annie Besant was motivated by her need to serve; it is not at all an exaggeration to suggest that while she lived to serve she also served to live. If she had not believed that there was some greater truth in the world that could lead to a heaven attainable on earth, she may not have lost her faith, she may not have taken up radical causes that brought to her antagonism and criticism, and she would not have sacrificed herself to Theosophy and several lifetimes of service. It was her pursuit of what she considered the

⁴⁰Ibid., 364.

inevitable truth of an earthly Brotherhood that provides the continuity in her life and the obsession with her ultimate concern, and also cost her her marriage, her children, many friends, and a great deal of respect. Despite all this, she was still able to state, when she wrote her *Autobiography* in 1908 at the age of sixty-one, that she had followed the only goal open to her:⁴¹

She may lead me into the wilderness, yet I must follow her; she may strip me of all love, yet I must pursue her; though she slay me, yet I will trust in her; and I ask no other epitaph on my tomb but

SHE TRIED TO FOLLOW TRUTH.

⁴¹Ibid., 358.

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