Dudes, Prudes, and Statute Moralists Had Better Not Read This: PR, Feminism, and Nineteenth Century 'Sex Radicalism'

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Senior Honors Thesis

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Bachelor of Arts
March 19, 2023

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Introduction

"Mrs. Woodhull…[is not]…a person who could put the humblest decent man upon his purgation by any thing she might allege, under any circumstances whatever. I should render myself liable to persecution from Mr. Comstock, if I were to describe the 'free life' of [this woman] as it is notorious in down-town conversation, provable by unimpeachable evidence…" – Anonymous Letter

On January 9th, 1873, a 33-year-old woman named Victoria Woodhull stood outside the Cooper Institute in New York City. She had been booked months earlier to give a speech on the supposedly impending social revolution, women's suffrage, and the dangers of moral censorship. Despite her invitation to speak, though, she was far from welcome. She had been arrested several times in the prior few months, and she knew the authorities were looking to put her back in jail. The area in front of the Cooper Institute, one of the largest secular lecture halls in the city, was swarmed with people: federal marshals, protestors, and eager lecture guests alike. She knew the wise thing to do, certainly, was to go back to her office and hunker down there, evading capture for as long as she could. But she did not. Instead, in the anonymity of the crowd, Woodhull donned a heavy cloak, thick shawl, bonnet, and veil, disguising herself as a frumpy old Quaker woman. She made her way inside the lecture hall right under the noses of the state marshals. The crowd inside was lively and tense—they had been waiting over an hour for the speaker to emerge, while the marshals attempted to convince them to leave. The disguised Woodhull shuffled her way past the audience towards the podium as they snickered at her odd appearance. Suddenly, she burst onto the stage and cast off her disguise, raising her hands high in the air, revealing herself as the bold, magnetic, and passionate Victoria Woodhull.[1] The crowd went wild. Woodhull proceeded to deliver a lengthy speech, promising her listeners that soon they would be freed from the shackles

[1] "Arrest of Mrs. Victoria C. Woodhull at the Cooper Institute Last Night," *New York Times*, January 10, 1873, New York Times Archive.

of moral tyranny and sexual unfreedom.[2] After the speech, federal marshals arrested her and she was returned—seemingly unphased—to the Ludlow Street Jail, where she ended the night with dinner with the warden and slept in her husband's arms in the cell.[3]

This is only one of the daring escapades of Victoria Woodhull. This thesis highlights her story alongside the story of a later bold woman, Lillian Harman. In 1869, Woodhull burst onto the New York scene as a scandalous socialite and activist. She was 'the first of her kind' in many respects: the first female stockbroker on the New York Stock Exchange, the first woman to testify before the House Judiciary Committee, and the first woman presidential candidate. Woodhull was also a suffragist, socialist, Spiritualist and self-proclaimed medium able to communicate with the dead, and devout free love advocate. She emerged onto the scene at around the same time as another figure: Anthony Comstock.

Anthony Comstock was born in 1844 in New Canaan, Connecticut. New Canaan was a deeply evangelical community, and Comstock took his faith very seriously. Most people think that separation of Church and State is a fundamental American value enshrined in the Constitution; Comstock would think such a notion ridiculous. Comstock's experience during the Civil War as a Union soldier opened his naive eyes to the disgusting depravity, sin, and obscenity which characterized American cities in the mid nineteenth century.[4] He resolved to dedicate his life towards fighting sin and enforcing his version of moral purity on the American people. He knew exactly the place to start: New York City, a hotbed of depravity and vices such as prostitution, alcohol, gambling, and daring new ideas about sexuality. After moving to the big city in 1866, he began to establish his reputation as a small-time vice fighter. He would patrol the streets, looking

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[2] Victoria C. Woodhull, "The Naked Truth," *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, January 23, 1873, Vol. 5. Issue 9. edition.
[3] Amy Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women* (New York City: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).
[4] Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 29-49.

for men soliciting prostitutes, vendors selling sex toys or contraceptive tools, and newspapers publishing material/advertisements he deemed obscene.[5]

By 1872 Anthony Comstock was no longer an annoying but ultimately impotent character. He had gained powerful wealthy allies, established a leadership position at the Young Men's Christian Association (hereafter referred to as the YMCA), and his vigilantism was finally landing people in jail. He successfully lobbied for the passage of an anti-obscenity state law known as the Comstock Law, which imposed strict criminal penalties on 'obscenity' but left the actual definition of 'obscenity' up in the air. His influence outside of New York City was still nonexistent, though. As it turned out, Comstock's persecution of Victoria Woodhull would be the moment that finally vaulted him to national fame,[6] ushering in a dark age for free speech on sexuality and access to contraception in America that would last until the 1920s.

This thesis, though, is not about Anthony Comstock. The story of how he went from a minor prudish vigilante to America's arbiter of morality is an interesting and complex one—but that is not the subject of this thesis. Historians much more accomplished than I have studied and analyzed the infamous Comstock in great depth over the past century. Instead, this thesis seeks to tell the story of those brave and defiant women who fought back against moral censorship during the age of Comstock. What were their views towards sex and sexuality? How did they promulgate these views, during a dark age for free speech *and* women's rights?

This work will bring new light to the understudied topics of nineteenth century radical feminism and free love. Adjacent topics, such as moral censorship and Anthony Comstock, have been well-studied. These topics provided crucial context to my own research. Pivotal works in this respect include *Lust on Trial* by Amy Werbel and *Imperiled Innocents* by Nicola Beisel. Werbel's

[5] Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2018), 53.
[6] Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2018), 79.

thesis—that bold and free-thinking New Yorkers never stopped fighting back against Comstock's oppressive intrusion into their lives—is one I accept implicitly. Woodhull and Harman are two examples of brave people who dared to challenge Comstock. Other historical literature provided important context on free love and Spiritualism; two ideologies that became closely intertwined in the mid-nineteenth century. Woodhull was both a Spiritualist and a free lover, while Harman was just a free lover. Important sources here included Barbara Goldsmith's *Other Powers* and Taylor Stoehr's *Free Love in America.* Most of the secondary source information regarding Victoria Woodhull came from *The Man Who Hated Women* by Amy Sohn, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* by Joanne Passett, *Rereading Sex* by Helen Horowitz, and Amy Werbel's *Lust on Trial* mentioned earlier. Passet's work was heavily relied on, because she is one of the only historians to discuss Lillian Harman in depth apart from her father. Amy Sohn's book in particular provided an important inspiration for this thesis—her book was guided by the same mission as my thesis, giving brave and forgotten women their due in history while also sharing a deeply interesting (and at times hilarious) story. Helen Horowitz also authored multiple other journal articles that were helpful to understanding Woodhull's ideologies and motivations.

There are several terms that are used with such frequency throughout the thesis that it is pertinent to define them here prior to laying out a central argument. Victoria Woodhull, Lillian Harman, and other free lovers in their connected network are referred to as 'sex radicals'. This is not a term contemporaries would have used to describe them, but I use it here for a couple of reasons. First, it is an appropriate description of how they would have been *perceived* by others and by themselves—both women believed that it was acceptable to love (both romantically and sexually) whomever one wished; in the late nineteenth century, this was a shockingly radical thought. Second, the term has been used with effectiveness by historians such as Joanne Passet

and Amy Sohn because it is easy to understand and readily distinguishes between free love radicalism and the mainstream suffrage movement or Spiritualism. Next, I make frequent references to 'public spectacles', 'political spectacles', and 'political theater'. I use these three terms synonymously to avoid extreme repetitiveness. The first two terms should be understood in their commonsense usage: a dramatic and controversial event a person stages publicly to gain attention for a particular cause. As for 'political theater', this is a term I borrow from historian Amanda Frisken that refers to the same, but for an explicitly political cause. The noun 'Comstockism' is used as well. This refers to the cultural and legal environment /ethos of censorship, fear, and free speech persecution that infected the United States between 1872 and 1910. Finally, Lillian Harman is referred to as an 'anarcha-feminist'. I use this term for two reasons. First, to signify her significant ideological differences from the late nineteenth-century women's movement. Second, to place her deep belief in personal freedom from governmental intervention to the forefront. There are other terms used in chapters one and two that require definition, but it is more appropriate to define them there in context rather than here at the beginning.

My main argument is that in their fight against Comstockism and in favor of social freedom and free love, sex radicals such as Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman engineered public spectacles to meet two goals: advocating for their radical ideologies and generating enough profit to fund their livelihoods. To make this argument, this thesis uses two comparative case studies: that of Victoria Woodhull, who has already been introduced, and a later sex radical named Lillian Harman. The two body chapters tell the stories of these women by focusing on a political scandal they engineered. Because of the shockingly radical nature of their ideas, these free lovers have largely been excluded from mainstream American feminist history. I argue that continuing to

dismiss their impact on modern feminism would be a mistake, because they were early pioneers of ideologies we typically associate with second-wave feminism.

Chapter One is a discussion of Victoria Woodhull. It begins with a brief biography of her and her newspaper publication. This chapter focuses on how Woodhull intentionally revealed a salacious sex scandal about New York's elite to advance her political goals. In this chapter I argue that her scandalous strategies marked an early use of public relations (hereafter referred to as PR) and established a model for later sex radicals to follow. An analysis of how Woodhull's intelligence and accomplishments have been dismissed by both her male contemporaries and historians is also a focus.

Chapter Two centralizes the story of Lillian Harman, an anarcha-feminist who followed in Woodhull's footsteps and has been almost entirely forgotten by history. It opens with a biography as well. This chapter analyzes Harman's contributions to her family's radical newspaper as well as her personal ideology. Connections between Woodhull and Harman are drawn, particularly in terms of their beliefs on abortion, marital rape, extramarital sex, and access to contraception. The focus of this chapter is the 'extrajudicial' marriage of Harman and a prominent free lover, a coupling referred to as "The Lucifer Match."

Chapter Three ties together the stories in chapters One and Two by comparing the beliefs and scandals of Woodhull and Harman as well as what the public reaction to their writings reveals about Gilded Age society. This chapter argues that Harman followed the model Woodhull established for women who sought to make a political difference but were disempowered by their sex and lack of financial resources. I argue that not only were both women pivotal to the establishment to the field of PR, but also their rhetoric and beliefs served as a clear predecessor to the sexual liberation movement of the 1970s. I argue that the belief that sexuality is central to

human life and the recognition of 'marital rape' as a real crime did not originate in the free-wheeling era of the late 1960s, but instead with the shockingly progressive and astute ideas of sex radicals such as Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman.

A disclaimer regarding racism and abolitionism is also Important to make here. The scope of this work is necessarily limited for being an undergraduate thesis. The research for this paper was focused on the suffrage movement, Anthony Comstock, free speech, Spiritualism, and free love. Abolitionism, Reconstruction, and the fight for the Black vote were not researched in depth and are not treated in this paper. Still, it is important to acknowledge the context of abolitionism and Reconstruction. Before the 1860s, the most significant moral reform movement in the Eastern cities was abolitionism. Abolitionists, both Black and white, pioneered important political and activist tactics. There was also tremendous overlap in people who supported abolition back in the 1840s-60s and those who fought for women's suffrage contemporaneously or in later years. Historians have also convincingly shared the story of the tension, union, and disunion between the women's movement and abolitionism/the Black vote; the two movements fighting for the rights of different marginalized groups were far from fraternal. It is possible (perhaps even likely) that the public spectacle tactics used by the sex radicals were indirectly inspired by abolitionist political spectacle tactics, such as the abolitionist performance at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London. This paper's lack of discussion on the abolition movement and the early battle for civil/political rights should not be taken as a denial of the possibility that Woodhull and Harman were copying abolitionist tactics; it should merely be taken to mean that the scope of my argument was limited to ensure that my subject matter is treated with sufficient depth.

Chapter One: Victoria Woodhull v. Victorian Morality

"We shall proceed to detail facts with more particularity than will be pleasant to the parties who are to make the great atonement for the wrongs done women in all the past and present. If immolation is necessary, then they must be immolated." – Victoria Woodhull

Early Years

The woman who would go on to be known as the "notorious Victoria Woodhull" was born Victoria California Claflin in rural Ohio in 1838. Beginning in her childhood years, her father, "Buck" Claflin, a deceitful snake oil salesman, roped Victoria into his schemes. He branded her as a medium and touted her ability to communicate with the spirit world to make a living.[7] Although Victoria's introduction to the world of Spiritualism was originally hoisted on her by her family, in her adult years she believed in its tenets wholeheartedly. She also continued to represent herself as a medium able to communicate beyond the veil—though I doubt she truly believed she had this ability.

At the age of fourteen, Victoria married Canning Woodhull. Her first husband, who fathered her child, as well, soon proved himself to be a raging alcoholic.[8] After a few years, the teenaged Woodhull took her son and left Canning.[9] Even then, she was fiercely independent and confident in her ability to find her own way in the world—even at a time where women (especially women of a low social station, such as herself) had limited resources and opportunities. Still, she retained Canning's last name; whether she did this as a matter of convenience, or because she imagined it sounded more imposing and majestic than her own, we do not know. As we shall see, she was a cunning engineer of her own public brand, and so

[7] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 37.
[8] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 40.
[9] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 40.

a tactical decision to retain a more 'impressive' sounding last name is within the scope of her character.

Around these years of her life, two people became very important to her: her younger sister, Tennessee Claflin (who later went by Tennie C. Claflin— clearly, the sisters' parents had an affinity for distant states) and her lover, Colonel James Blood. Eventually, the three of them moved to New York City, where Victoria's infamous career as a Spiritualist leader, editor, and Suffragist presidential candidate began.

As mentioned earlier, Woodhull was always a Spiritualist. Spiritualism was an incredibly popular movement in the United States from the early to mid-nineteenth century. Its adherents believed in a higher, spiritual world above the earthly plane. This dimension was the ideal world: its denizens were perfectly equal, there was no corruption or immorality, and everyone was free to be united and love one another.[10] Despite spiritualism's later association with the free love movement, there is nothing necessarily sexual about spiritualism. The strong connection between the two ideologies arose from the belief that in the spirit world, no one is permanently partnered up with another spirit. If this is the relationship between men and women in the *pure, idealized* spirit world, it followed for many spiritualists and those who dabbled in its doctrines that in the real world, people should not confine themselves to one partner in love for the entirety of their existence. This is what drew many Spiritualists—including Woodhull—to free love.

Free love was a more radical ideology than Spiritualism. It preached that it was unnatural for people be confined to only one romantic relationship over the course of their lives. Part of this ideology was a belief that it was unnatural to limit oneself to just one *sexual* partner, but

[10] Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers* (New York City: Alfred, Knopf Inc, 1998).

sex was only one dimension/iteration of the deeper, higher love that free lovers aspired to.[11] To reduce free love to a kind of 'free lust' is a misunderstanding of the movement. A crucial theoretical approach free lovers such as Woodhull took involved basing their beliefs in notions of the natural human condition, moral purity, and social purity. For Woodhull, the reason that one should love freely—both romantically and sexually—was not mere desire and excitement. Rather, free love was the more advanced, moral, and pure way to live. To her, traditional, marital monogamists were slaves to an evangelical tradition and public opinion.

Like her successor Lillian Harman, Woodhull chose the institution of marriage as her primary enemy. Some historians believe this was due primarily bitterness due to the neglect of her first loveless marriage, but ascribing such emotionalism to Woodhull is unfair. She had a rational basis for hating marriage—during this period, women were the property of their husbands with little recourse to fight back against mistreatment, unwanted sexual use, or physical abuse. Most marriages were not a 'love match', but instead occurred due to what Woodhull saw as an outdated social custom.

The First Woman Broker

By the time Victoria saw the city of New York for the first time, she was already a fiercely passionate Spiritualist and free lover. According to her own writings, she was instructed to go to New York City by an angel named Demosthenes. Under his orders, her, Tennie, and Colonel Blood appeared on the doorstep of the fabulously wealthy Cornelius Vanderbilt. The Claflin sisters quickly became friends with him, and Vanderbilt adopted the women into his confidence. Much to the chagrin of his family, he trusted Victoria's medium abilities, and it is

[11] Taylor Stoehr, "Radical Free Love," in *Free Love in America: A Documentary History* (New York City: AMS Press, 1979), 319–82.

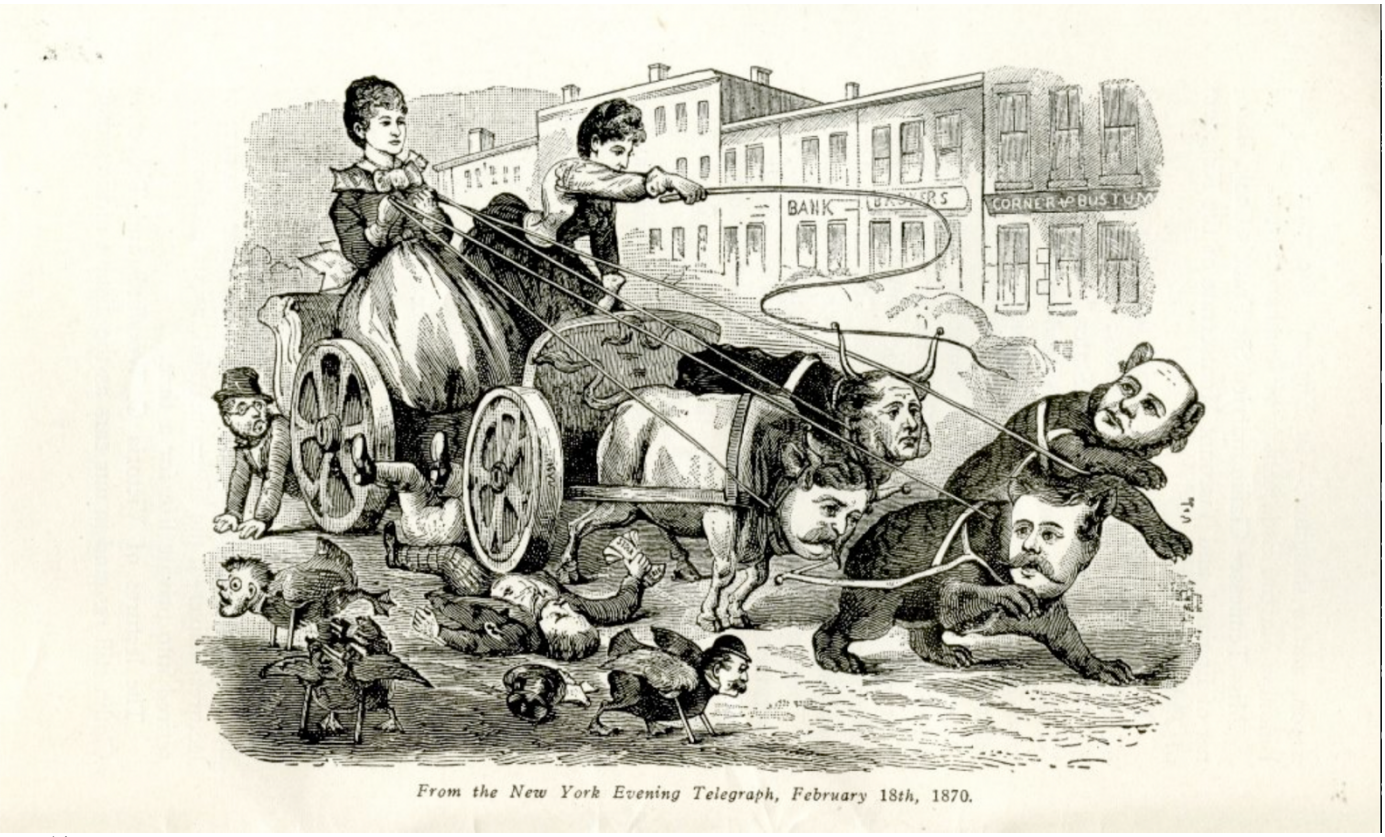
probable that he was involved in a romantic relationship with the lovely Tennie.[12] Through her relationship with Vanderbilt, Victoria became introduced to New York City's power players—both the wealthy families of the upper echelons, and influential individuals in the city's intellectual life, such as Theodore Tilton, Henry Ward Beecher, and the prominent women of the suffrage movement.

Vanderbilt helped the Claflin sisters open the first woman-owned brokerage firm on Wall Street. What drew Woodhull to this line of work in the first place? First, Woodhull was preoccupied with wealth, perhaps due to her humble origins. To one newspaper reporter in 1870, she bragged that she and her sister were worth $700,000.[13] Second, she fervently believed that women could enjoy just as much success as men in politics and business, areas of work typically coded as masculine. She also deeply wanted to convince others of this same fact, as evidenced by the content of many of her articles in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*. Vanderbilt's Wall Street connections made this a realistic opportunity for her. She likely also knew that the public (and investors) would be deeply fascinated by the notion of a female stockbroker. At minimum, this would get her name in the papers, and at best it would result in enormous profits for her.

The news of the sisters' daring foray into the men's world of business made headlines and quickly drew ugly responses. Prominent men's sporting journals, such as *The Days Doings,* published sexualized drawings of the women's work in the office. The way the public and media responded to the "bewitching brokers" is significant for two reasons. First, the public's blatant sexualization of Woodhull's body exemplifies a common thread in how she was treated by contemporaries. By reducing her to a cunning temptress—or, even worse, a sex

[12] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 42-44.
[13] "The Queens of Finance," *New York Herald*, January 22, 1870.

object—they minimized her revolutionary behavior and impressive achievements. Unfortunately, this treatment would continue throughout her political career and even in the historical scholarship on her. Second, while the men's sporting journals and their audience clearly disapproved of the sisters and saw them as overstepping the boundaries of their sex, they simply could not look away. It was exciting and interesting to see two daring and lively women push the limits of propriety. This illustrates a broader trend in the history of the battle between Victorian morality and its transgressors: evangelical purists such as Anthony Comstock were doomed from the start, because it is impossible to truly censor obscenity when one assumes such a broad definition of it, because humans are intrinsically fascinated by it.



From the New York Evening Telegraph, February 18th, 1870.

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[14] "Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin.", *New York Telegraph,* February 17th, 1870.

The Women's Movement and the Equal Rights Party

Woodhull's eventual involvement with the suffragists reveals the limitations and values of the mainstream women's movement. When Victoria first joined their ranks, she was an outsider. Although prominent leaders such as Susan B. Anthony were not born amongst Manhattan's elite, Woodhull's roots as a trance medium, an alleged prostitute, and free lover set her apart from the middle and upper-class women that made up much of the movement. Everyone knew that she had a seat at the proverbial table because of her connections with elites such as Vanderbilt. Thus, Woodhull's involvement with the women's movement marked a moment where her public image was positive. She was an influential figure. She brought a significant amount of financial support to the movement, and she quickly proved herself to be an awe-inspiring and fierce speaker.[15] Thanks to her well-known beauty, salacious free love ideals, and daring job as a stockbroker, she was quickly becoming famous along with her sister, Tennie.

The First Woman Presidential Candidate

In May of 1872, Woodhull was formally nominated for the presidency by the small and newly formed Equal Rights Party. She had impressed the women's movement with her powerful argumentation that a new amendment did not need to be passed to secure the franchise, because the Fourteenth Amendment already theoretically granted women the right to vote.[16] She embarked on a speaking tour across the country, delivering speeches that laid out her views on Spiritualism, free love, and the women's question. In February of 1871, Woodhull was invited to speak to the House Judiciary Committee on behalf of the National Women's Suffrage

[15] Helen L. Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth Century America* (Penguin Random House, 2003), https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/82906/rereading-sex-by-helen-lefkowitz-horowitz/, 343-346.
[16] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 349.

Association. This was seen by many Americans as an impressive move, and even the ever-critical *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* praised Woodhull's performance in an article entitled "The Feminine Invasion of the Capitol", referring to her as the "learned and judicious Woodhull of Wall Street'' and describing her arguments as "taking far higher ground than has usually been assumed by her coadjutors."[17] She had even begun to win some of the popular press to her side.

Before long, though, Woodhull's ideological differences with the bulk of the women's movement began to breed division. This occurred for several reasons. First, she had publicly come out as a varietist, seemingly spontaneously, during one of her speeches.[18] Varietists were an even more radical group of free lovers who maintained their right to have multiple romantic partners at once (not just multiple romantic partners throughout their lives). Free love was already a controversial ideology that made suffrage leaders uneasy, in terms of what a perceived connection to free love could do to the reputation of the suffrage movement. It's possible that Woodhull's new proudly proclaimed endorsement of varietism put them over the edge. Or perhaps Woodhull was blackmailing leaders such as Susan B. Anthony, as the latter woman alleged. Either way, the distance between Woodhull's presidential campaign and the suffrage movement began to grow. It was this rift, Woodhull's controversial radicalism, and the attacks suffrage leaders mounted against Woodhull's character that led to her being forgotten by popular feminist history, whereas Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—her one-time friends—remain household names.

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[17] "The Feminine Invasion of the Capitol," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 4, 1871, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers.

[18] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 347.

Woodhull Gains Bad PR

Woodhull's image began to suffer serious hits beginning in 1871. Examining the factors that began to lead to her downfall reveals the inherent limits on a woman's power in the nineteenth century, and the values that Americans were most defensive of when they were attacked.

In the summer of 1871, the Claflin sisters' new newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* published Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto. They were the first American periodical newspaper to do this. Victoria began attacking capitalism in earnest, publicly describing herself as a socialist.[19] Obviously, Woodhull's attack drew the ire of New York elites such as the Vanderbilt family, who finally convinced Cornelius Vanderbilt to cut his ties—both financial and personal—with the Claflin sisters.

On November 20, 1871, Woodhull was booked to give a lengthy speech titled "The Principles of Social Freedom" in the famous Steinway Hall in Midtown, Manhattan. She had always been a controversial woman, but lately, her name had been jeered at because it had been revealed in a court complaint that Victoria's sick alcoholic first husband lived with her in the home of her second husband.[20] The audience was filled with both her fans and her enemies. Theodore Tilton, the recently vacated editor of the New York Tribune and a well-respected society man introduced her to the crowd. He vouched for her character to the audience: "Notwithstanding all insinuations the contrary, [Victoria] is a virtuous woman, and I can vouch for it."[21] This quelled some of the complaints and managed to get the crowd under control to an extent.

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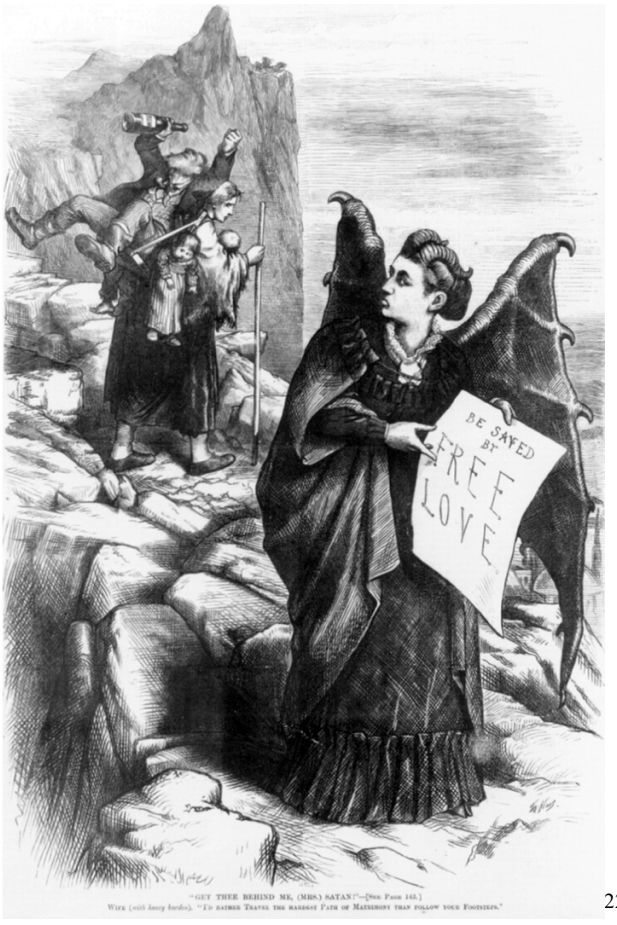
[19] "Manifesto of the German Communist Party.", *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly,* December 30, 1871, 3-5.
[20] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 347.
[21] "The Principle of Social Freedom, Involving Free Love, Marriage, Divorce &c. Lecture by Victoria Woodhull.", *New York Times,* November 21st, 1871.

Tilton's endorsement of Victoria's morals was necessary. On her own, Victoria Woodhull could never be respectable enough to brush shoulders with the likes of the Beechers or deliver speeches at Steinway Hall. She derived her power and the appearance of respectability from the testimony of others, whether that was powerful men like Tilton and Vanderbilt, or her scores of admirers amongst the regular people of the city. As a well-known spiritualist, divorcee, and woman of business, she was limited in her ability to be independent from these men, because they were unfortunately necessary to her. This would prove to be problematic for her, because as she grew increasingly more radical—attacking institutions such as capitalism and monogamy—her allies began to drop like flies.



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[22] Nast, Thomas, Artist. *"Get thee behind me, Mrs. Satan!" / Th. Nast*. United States, 1872. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/95512460/.

Victoria Woodhull needed powerful men on her side, but these men—despite their progressive words—were not committed to total freedom and gender equality the way she was. Thus, she found her agenda continually frustrated. The loss of Vanderbilt's patronage and the protection and wealth it afforded the sisters was disastrous for Victoria and Tennie. Within just a few short years, Victoria had become fabulously wealthy (according to her boasts, she was a millionaire), but then lost it all. According to the *New York Times,* by 1872 the bewitching brokers were "not worth a single dollar."[23] Up until July of 1872, the women had published an edition of their lengthy periodical every single week.[24] They could afford the rent for an office on Broad Street. According to records, however, publication of *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* ceased for nearly five months. The periodical did not return until November 21st. In that edition of the newspaper, the sisters explained their five-month long disappearance.

Victoria dedicated nearly two entire pages of the three-column newspaper—a lot of text— to justifying their absence. This was an incredibly common trend in the periodical in general: desperately trying to boost credibility, maintain an image, and lash back at enemies. We will see later that Lillian and Moses Harman's periodical, *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, was the same. This excessive preoccupation in radical periodicals of the late nineteenth century with credibility and constantly being on both the offensive and defensive suggests some wider truths on the free love radical movement in general. One one hand, their views regarding marriage, women's rights, sex, and freedom from governmental intrusion were considered obscene, especially once Anthony Comstock and the power of his eponymous legislation arrived on the scene. Yet on the other hand, sex radicals wanted to spread their ideology by convincing non-adherents of free love's inherent rightness and purity. They not only believed free love was more

[23] "The Woodhull's Debts: She Is Not Worth a Single Dollar.", *New York Times*, August 28, 1872, 2.
[24] IAPSOP Digital Archive.

enjoyable than traditional marriage, but also that free love was more advanced, intellectual, and morally pure.[25] Because the free lovers tied their arguments back to moral and social purity, they were left constantly defending their ideology's credibility and attacking their opponents for being moral hypocrites and cowards.

Thus, it is in line with the tone of the rest of the periodical that Victoria included a lengthy excuse, bitter attack, and cry for pity in the November second, 1872 edition of *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* in an article titled "To the Public". Here, she explains the sisters' multiple evictions as necessary sacrifices they made as martyrs of the movement. "When we began the publication of the *Weekly* we were able to surround ourselves with the comforts of life, but when it became necessary to the continuation of the paper, one by one they were sacrificed." The entire tone of this article is sanctimonious self-sacrifice and distaste for her 'allies' who did not come to her aid. Much like the *Lucifer* editors would several years later, Woodhull is careful to emphasize that people refused to provide her housing not because they did not agree with her ideas, but because they were moral cowards afraid of the social condemnation they would face (reading Woodhull's writings, one gets the impression that people were constantly proclaiming themselves moral cowards to her).

Later within the same "To The Public" article, Woodhull makes a prophecy. Speaking in grand, dramatic prophecies about the future was something she did frequently, as a medium with supposedly profound spiritual powers. She wrote,

> The *Weekly* is now to make its reappearance. It may struggle for existence for a time; but it will live. It has been sleeping-not dead; and we feel a conviction that so soon as what we have struggled with becomes known— that we have our all in the cause of reform— those who are really earnest seekers after a better humanitarian

[25] Joanne Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

> condition will sustain us… a great social convulsion is about to burst open the world to startle it from its present lethargic future.[26]

While this style of writing and speaking was common for Woodhull, the extent to which prophecies featured in this November second edition of the *Weekly* was new. In reality, her words were not just prophecies—they were *hints.* Driven by desperation, anger, and clever strategy, Woodhull was laying the foundation to release a scandal of epic proportions over the next two weeks. She had been keeping a delicious secret close to her chest for nearly three years: the beloved and famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher (son of Lyman Beecher and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) was having a lengthy adulterous affair with Elizabeth Tilton, the wife of Theodore Tilton, former editor of abolitionist newspaper *The Independent* and a friend of Woodhull's.[27]

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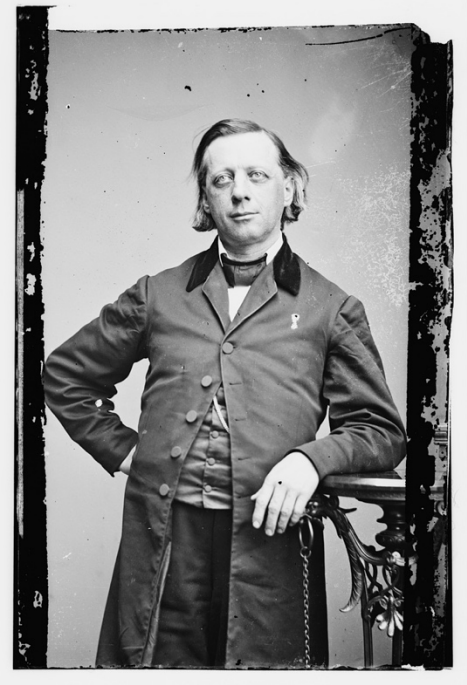

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[26] Woodhull, "To Our Subscribers."
[27] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 346.
[28] Matthew Brady, "Portrait of Henry Ward Beecher." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.
[29] Napoleon Sarony, "Theodore Tilton." *Digital Commonwealth.*

Woodhull knew that this secret and the ridiculously dramatic story behind it would create an enormous public spectacle. Crucially, though, she recognized that *her exposure* of the scandal and control of its narrative could generate publicity for her ideas, increase recognition of her name, and boost sales of her struggling periodical. It was the intentional, calculated public element of her decision to expose the scandal that is notable. Plenty of scandals were exposed in the United States prior to this. But the concept of national celebrity was new in the 1870s,[30] and Woodhull's self-conscious creation of a scandal that she knew would serve her interests was a novel thing. As a vilified, largely uneducated woman who had fallen out of favor with her powerful friends, she had limited resources at her fingertips. What she *did* have at her disposal, though, was her intelligence, secrets, and the public's endless captivation with her. She understood her limitations and wielded her tools to the best of her abilities to engineer a political spectacle at the expense of Henry Ward Beecher and Theodore Tilton. She was successful in some ways, and unsuccessful in others. Thus, Beecher-Tilton scandal which Victoria Woodhull revealed to the American public, and which will be analyzed in detail below, is significant for multiple reasons: first, it marked an early deployment of public relations strategy; second, it represents an example of a daring nineteenth century woman cunningly using the limitations of her sex to her own advantage; and third, Woodhull's engineering of the Beecher-Tilton scandal set a model for later radical feminists such as Lillian Harman.

[30] Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 56.

The Beecher-Tilton Scandal

Woodhull released a new edition of *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* on November second, 1872, for the first time in months.[31] This edition contained, as mentioned above, a lengthy article of excuses for the paper's absence, pages of ads for insurance services, clairvoyants, and medicinal creams, and transcriptions of some of Woodhull's recent letters and speeches.[32] Most important was an article titled "The Beecher Tilton Case: The Detailed Statement of the Whole Matter by Mrs. Woodhull." The entire article is five pages long—by far the longest component of that week's periodical. Woodhull starts off by explaining her motivations for revealing Beecher's secret and reassuring her audience that her sources are credible. She framed her cause in martial terms: she was engaged in a "social revolution on the marriage question" and expected that her article would "burst like a bomb-shell into the ranks of the moralistic social camp."[33]

A central motivation Woodhull had in exposing these New York elites was what she perceived as their terrible moral cowardice and infuriating hypocrisy.[34] She had been attacked ceaselessly by jeering audiences for her free love lifestyle which she loudly and proudly advocated. Yet, some of the most respected people in society—in this case, Henry Ward Beecher, publicly disavowed free love while privately embracing its tenets (read: sleeping with people other than their spouses). According to Woodhull, once she exposed the free love lifestyles of well-known New Yorkers, people would stop forcing themselves to adhere to monogamy and accept the advanced purity of free love.[35]

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[31] Victoria C. Woodhull, "To The Public," *W&CW*, November 2, 1872, 8-9.
[32] Victoria C. Woodhull, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, November 2, 1872, 1-16.
[33] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 9-14.
[34] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.
[35] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 9.

The style in which Woodhull wrote her lengthy exposé is the greatest indication that she understood she was creating a public spectacle, rather than merely reporting the facts of a juicy scandal. In fact, she admits verbatim that she was well-informed on the case for years, but "24eserve[ed] publicity of [her] knowledge for a more convenient season."[36] Many of the claims she makes, justifications she insists on, and quotes she attributes to various characters are simply too exaggerated and dramatic to be true. After explaining her motivations for exposing the story, she provides an in-depth dramatic account of the indecisive turmoil she faced before coming to the decision to publish the scandal. It was against her free love ideals to publicly expose the private sex life of another person, but she also felt it was necessary to free society from the chains of marriage.[37]

She also claimed that she was compelled by higher spiritual powers to divulge Beecher and Tilton's secret. Describing a speech two days prior in which she had aired the scandal to a much smaller audience, she wrote:

> Standing there before that audience, I was seized by one of those overwhelming gusts of inspiration which sometimes come upon me…and made by some power stronger than I, to pour into the ears of that assembly…the whole history of the Beecher and Tilton Scandal. I know perhaps less than any of those present all that I did actually say. They tell me that I used some naughty words on that occasion…[38]

Thus, Victoria claimed that she originally revealed the secret "almost unintentionally, and by a sudden impulse."[39] This is not true, but it is certainly what she wanted it to look like. Here, as in other examples, Woodhull was attempting to paint a picture of the scandal that would present her, her periodical, and her ideologies in the best

[36] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.
[37] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 9-13.
[38] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.
[39] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.

possible light,[40] much like a brand in the modern age will use social media, sponsorships, and hashtags to advance their profits.

The fact that Woodhull was engaging in public relations and not just doing her "solemn duty" to share the truth is evidenced by the structure she uses for a majority of this article. After explaining her motivations and duties, she relays the actual salacious details of the scandal in the format of an interview, that a reporter asks her questions, and she responds to them.[41] In reality, she likely made this reporter and their questions up. It merely added to her credibility as the mouthpiece of the scandal that she framed it as a press interview.

> A reporter was then specially detailed to interview me that the matter might be published in certain of the New York papers. Why that interview has been suppressed is not possible to affirm with certainty, but it is easy to guess. There are those who would readily pay thousands to shut the columns of the press against this exposure. Fortunately I have a near-verbatim copy of this report… and I shall now present it to the public.[42]

The fabricated existence of this reporter is apparent when one considers the scripted and deferential nature of the "reporter's" questions: "Indeed! Is Mrs. [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton also mixed up in this affair? How could the matter been kept so long quiet so many people are cognizant of it?",[43] "Do you not fear that by taking the responsibility of this expose you may involve yourself in trouble?", "you speak like some weird prophetess, ma'am."[44] All of the 'reporter's' questions are perfectly designed for Woodhull to tee up a response attacking the moral cowardice of Beecher and Tilton and uplifting her own personal integrity.

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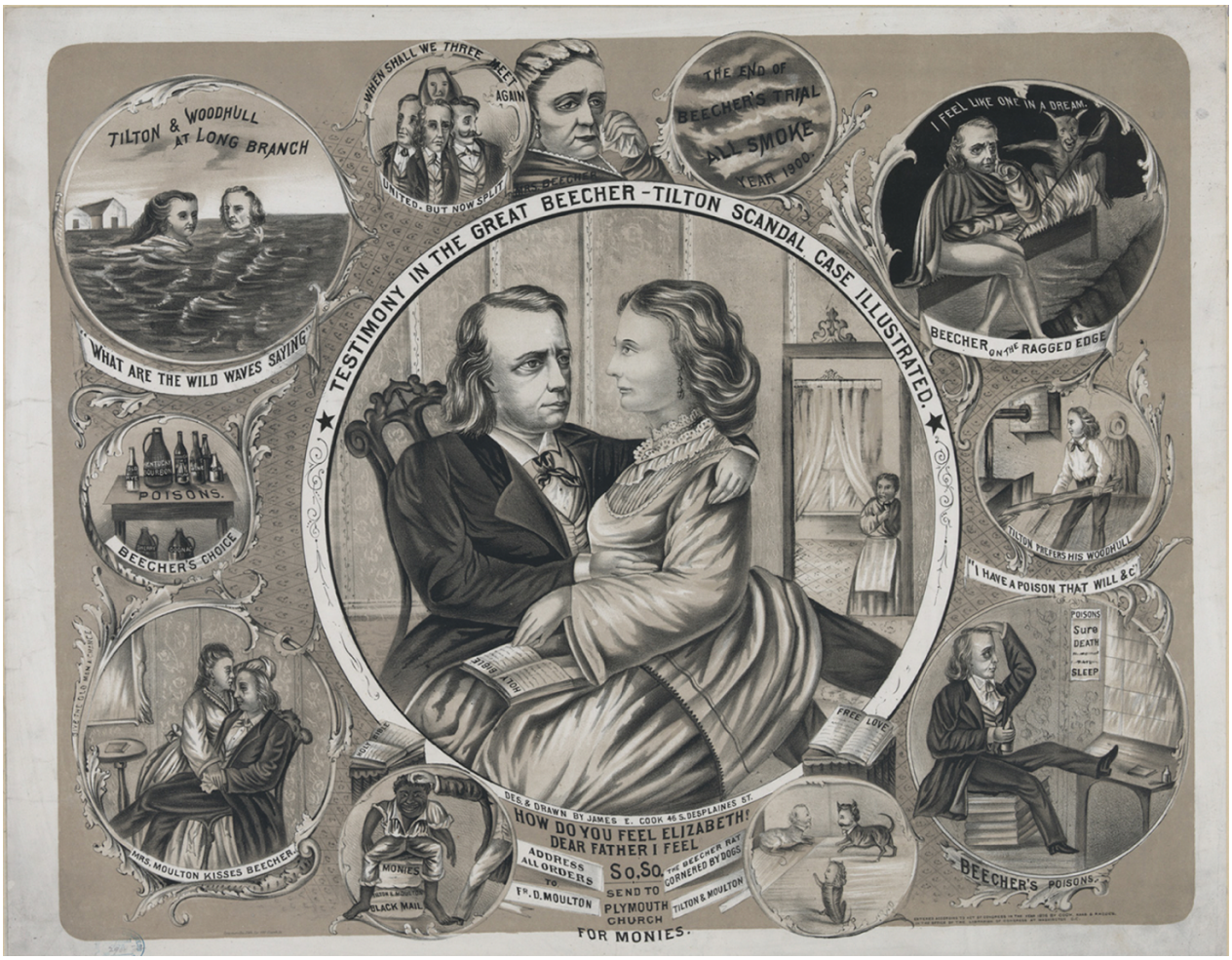
[40] Joanne Passet, "We Are Cowards and She Is Not," *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* 91–112.
[41] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.
[42] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10.
[43] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "Extract From A Letter," November 2, 1872,11.
[44] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 11.

Woodhull's responses to this fictitious reporter—the actual story of the affair—are designed to create an engaging and shocking story for her readers. She both paints a melodramatic picture of the events of the story to keep her audience captive. Woodhull's story, worthy of any soap opera storyline, involves: Elizabeth Tilton miscarrying her baby due to heartbreak, Theodore Tilton ripping the wedding ring from her finger and burying it in the family graveyard, shattering the portrait of Henry Ward Beecher—his best friend—that hung in the living room, a visit to Beecher's home with a pistol (intent on shooting him), and Beecher begging on his knees for Victoria's forgiveness.[45] The diction also exceeds even the typical flowery language typical of the time. Throughout the entire article, she repeatedly reminds her readers that of all the press, only *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* had the honesty, bravery, and commitment to do the right thing and reveal the scandal.[46] Finally, to further interest her audience and boost her own credibility, she also name-drops other significant characters such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Pauline Wright Davis, Isabella Beecher Hooker, and Susan B. Anthony.[47]

[45] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 11-13.
[46] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 10-11.
[47] Victoria C. Woodhull, *W&CW,* "The Beecher-Tilton Scandal Case," November 2, 1872, 9-12.



A cartoon depicting Elizabeth Tilton on Henry Beecher's lap, surrounded by vignettes of their adulterous affair as Woodhull detailed it.[48]

Historiographical Treatment of Woodhull

Woodhull's cunning approach to wealth, fame, and influence was a crucial and early deployment of public relations in the form of political spectacle. Many historians have argued that Victoria Woodhull was one of America's first national celebrities.[49] Before we had Kim Kardashian, Meghan Markle, or Alexandria Ocasio Cortez—all intelligent women conscious of

[48] James E. Cook. "Testimony in the Great Beecher-Tilton Scnadal Case Illustrated." Commercial Lithograph Co. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
[49] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 57; Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 56; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 96-97.

the power of public spectacles and public relations—there was Victoria Woodhull, nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier.

She used her tremendous charisma and cunning strategic choices to meet three central goals: personal fame, financial success, and the advancement of the causes of free love, individualism, and women's rights, though she would never have admitted that her tactics were anything short of angelic, righteous, and pious. She used her newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, to expose the salacious story of the Beecher-Tilton sex scandal, liberally sprinkling in extra details and exaggerations to ensure she kept her audience satisfied. By doing this, she met three of her central goals: boosting her own fame, increasing sales of her periodical during a period of financial instability, and spreading the ideologies of free love, spiritualism, and sex radicalism. In some respects, she succeeded: after the publication of the November second, 1872 edition of the *Weekly*, the press all around the nation—not just in New York City—ran stories both on the scandal and on Victoria Woodhull. Granted, much of what they had to say was negative,[50] but perhaps to Woodhull "any press was good press." She certainly met her financial goal: Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly sold more copies of that edition than any before or after. In fact, the price of a single copy skyrocketed to forty dollars after news of its contents spread.[51]

Consequently, though, Woodhull drew the unwanted attention of the ambitious new vice censor of New York City: Anthony Comstock. Promptly after the publication of the *Weekly*, Comstock arrested the Claflin sisters for violating New York's state Comstock Law and burnt

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[50] "Arrest of Mrs. Victoria C. Woodhull at the Cooper Institute Last Night," *New York Times*, January 10, 1873, New York Times Archive; "Obscene Literature," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, July 17, 1873, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3013475129/NCNP?sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=e143d8a9.; "Woodhull and Claflin in Jail: They Are Charged with Sending Obscene Literature by Post," *New - York Tribune (1866-1899)*, November 4, 1872.

[51] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 69.

their stock.[52] Their subsequent trial for violating the state obscenity law would make headlines across the country and skyrocket Anthony Comstock to national fame.[53] Woodhull and Claflin, on the other hand, never recovered their reputations in the United States and shortly after moved to England, where Woodhull became once again a wealthy woman and (interestingly) a devout Christian.[54]

Ironically, Woodhull's public spectacle intended to boost her own national fame ended up empowering Anthony Comstock to a new level. He rode the publicity of his persecution of the Claflin sisters all the way to Washington D.C., where he successfully lobbied for the federal Comstock Act. This piece of legislation granted Anthony Comstock the sole right to dictate the definition of 'obscenity' in the United States—a duty he took on with great relish and seriousness.

The body of historical scholarship on Victoria Woodhull is vast, yet many historians have treated her one-dimensionally. On the one hand, a significant number of historians—particularly male ones working in the twentieth century—have minimized her contributions to her radical periodical, free love, and the women's movement. Another common trend in historiography is an overemphasis on Victoria's sexual wiles. It is almost certain that Victoria had multiple sexual partners. She believed that sex was central to human life, and she was a woman well-aware of her own appeal. But some historians have centralized her sexuality excessively, inadvertently resulting in a minimization and trivialization of her intelligence, political acumen, and powerful activism. The reality of Woodhull is far more complex than this: she did wield her sexuality to

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[52] "Social Uncleanness," *Morning Republican*, December 6, 1872, Volume 6, Number 208 edition, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3011758461/NCNP?sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=5571906c.
[53] Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 58.
[54] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 89.

her advantage, but she also wielded the more traditionally respected tools of rhetoric, money, and writing. Many people—both her male contemporaries, who looked down upon her, and modern historians—claimed that Woodhull did not actually write anything in *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly.*[55] This claim is largely unsupported—it is only unfairly concluded because she had a minimal formal education and had a few male writers contribute to the *Weekly*.[56] My analysis of Woodhull emphasizes her cultivation of her public image through public spectacles of both a written and oral nature. Her skill for creating public spectacles to boost her personal and ideological goals is notable because not only does it diverge from the tactics of her mainstream feminist contemporaries, but she also wrote the playbook for feminists outside the mainstream who came after her, such as Lillian Harman.

[55] Victoria C. Woodhull, *Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull*, Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers, edited by Cari M. Carpenter. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), v.
[56] Victoria C. Woodhull, *Selected Writings of Victoria Woodhull*, edited by Cari M. Carpenter, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), loc. 405-419.

Chapter Two: Lillian Harman's Attack on the 'Monstrosity' of Marriage

"In the sex association, as everywhere else in the realm of personal rights and reciprocal duties, we regard intelligent choice—untrammeled voluntaryism—coupled with responsibility to natural law for our acts, as the true and only basis of morality." – Moses Harman

Lillian Harman's Work

The young Lillian Harman played a crucial role in her father's radical publication, *Lucifer the Light-Bearer.* From the age of thirteen, she worked alongside Moses Harman and a small team of workers in the print office to help format, print, and distribute the periodical.[57] She also contributed to the periodical. She did this less in her youth, but into her twenties and thirties her name popped up more frequently as the author of hundreds of articles.[58] *Lucifer* had a very small team behind it, but they consistently printed lengthy and dense periodicals every single week. Their readership eventually ballooned to the thousands, yet it remained a small operation. Lillian's labor was crucial both to the continued publication of the periodical as well as its skyrocketing popularity. Despite this, she never received credit on the face page of the publication. Instead, her father Moses Harman was always listed as the senior editor (which he was, in all fairness), but the names of junior editors and major contributors were also listed beneath his name. Lillian's never was, despite the significance of her contribution to *Lucifer's* success.[59] She was a prominent actor in *Lucifer's* brushes with the law and used political spectacles to actively challenge Comstockian morality. Again, though, her brave efforts were dismissed. As we will see, this erasure of Lillian's intellectual thought and physical labor is emblematic of the wider way her beliefs and efforts were minimized by her male contemporaries.

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[57] Joanne Passet, "The Lucifer Match," in *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, n.d.), 135.
[58] 'Lucifer the Light-Bearer' in *Everyday Life & Women in America,* Adam Matthews Digital Collection.
[59] 'Lucifer the Light-Bearer' in *Everyday Life & Women in America.*

Free Love, Anarchoindividualism, and Women's Rights in Lucifer

Even into the 1880s, the free love ideology remained particularly influential. In the most basic sense, 'free lovers' believed that men and women had the right to love whomever they wanted, for as long as it felt natural to them.[60] Beyond this, the specifics of the beliefs of various free love movements in the nineteenth century diverged in the details.[61] Some free lovers were 'varietists' who believed that it was appropriate—even necessary—to have multiple sex partners at the same period of one's life. Most free lovers of the 1880s believed that while it was beneficial to have multiple sex partners throughout one's life, these various love affairs should be taken one at a time. Many believed that nature dictated the centrality of sex to life.[62] The team behind *Lucifer* fell in this camp. In the late nineteenth century, daring to publish material that described sex as a positive thing almost always brought about a very negative consequence: the attention of Anthony Comstock. Throughout its decades-long history, *Lucifer* regularly faced persecution under the Comstock obscenity laws. Even when the periodical was not specifically being investigated under an obscenity law, the specter of Comstockism hung over it,[63] a reality that will be revealed over the course of this chapter.

In addition to its free love beliefs, *Lucifer* and its editorial team were also secular, individualist, anarchist, and anti-capitalist.[64] Examining the writings of Lillian Harman as well as other major contributors to *Lucifer* reveals an overt distaste and condescending attitude towards

[60] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 268-270.
[61] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 284.
[62] Horowitz, *Rereading Sex by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz*, 260-284.
[63] Moses Harman, "Should Be Suppressed.," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, September 24, 1886, Vol. 4 No. 26 edition.
[64] Joanne Passet, "The Power of Print," in *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, n.d.), 46-47.

religion and all other forms of 'skepticism',[65] a result of free love's Enlightenment roots. Most obvious throughout all of Lillian's writings—from her youth all the way up to the end of what we know about her life—is a profound centralization of the values of individualism and freedom. Above all, Lillian valued the freedom and autonomy of all people.[66] Like many other free lovers, she believed that women were denied their rights to freedom more than any other demographic. Like her predecessor free lover woman's rights advocate, Victoria Woodhull, Lillian decided to embody her radical beliefs to a dramatic extent through engineering a public spectacle.

The *'Lucifer* Match'

Beginning in early September of 1886, *Lucifer* began hinting at an upcoming daring event in the private lives of its publishing team. In brief notices throughout their weekly newspapers, Moses Harman intentionally previewed the upcoming marriage of his daughter, the sixteen-year-old Lillian Harman, and the junior editor of *Lucifer*, Edwin C. Walker (almost always referred to as E.C. Walker). The latter was almost forty years old (although Lillian would have disdainfully looked down on those who sought to condemn their union based on their age gap). According to an article published by Moses Harman, the two had met at the office and fallen in love within a span of roughly six months.[67] *Lucifer's* decision to publicize the upcoming wedding must have been conscious and intentional.[68] The Harmans wanted to draw public attention to the nuptials, because it would be no ordinary wedding.

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[65] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, October 1, 1886, Vol. 4 No. 27 edition, IAPSOP; Harman, "Who Will Oppose Autonomistic Marriage?".
[66] Lillian Harman, "An 'Age of Consent' Symposium," *Liberty, Not the Daughter but the Mother of Order*, February 9, 1895, Vol. 10 iss. 2 edition, American Periodicals, ProQuest.
[67] E.C. Walker, "To Jail and There, Cell No. 2 of the County Jail," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, September 24, 1886, Vol. 4 No. 26 edition, IAPSOP.
[68] Hal Sears, *Sex Radicals,* 91.

On September 19th, Lillian Harman and E.C. Walker were married in the private Harman home, an hour outside of Valley Falls, Kansas. According to the *Lucifer* edition for the following week, present were the newlyweds, Moses Harman, and two witnesses, including W.F. Hiser, Lillian's half-brother. The couple were 'married' without the presence of a clergyman or an officer of the law.[69] This was scandalous, unconventional, and to some people, even obscene.

The couple called their marriage a 'common law' marriage. Their reasons to do this were twofold. First, as free lovers and anarchists (they called themselves 'autonomists'), they firmly believed that the state had no right to interfere in people's private lives. They believed the sole responsibility of the state was to safeguard the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of its citizens— not to regulate their marriage/sex lives. As far as they were concerned, the state only had a right to intervene when someone's rights were abridged by another, such as through violence or theft.[70] The *'Lucifer* Match', as the union came to be called in other newspapers, had been sealed "extrajudicially" (i.e., without the mediation or sanction of clergy or a justice of the peace) because it was in accordance with their personal beliefs. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the couple sought to engage in civil disobedience and create a public spectacle.[71] They knew that their 'autonomous marriage' would draw the shock and condemnation of the religious people, Comstock supporters, and Republicans of Valley Falls, Kansas. They hoped that the scandal their marriage created would provoke their prosecution and eventually draw the attention of the Kansas Supreme Court, where they hoped to set a precedent and overturn that state's marriage laws.[72] Similarly, they wanted to boost *Lucifer's* renown and readership. As we will see, they succeeded in some respects and failed in others.

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[69] Moses Harman, "Personal," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, September 17, 1886, 2.
[70] Moses Harman, "Autonomy—Self Law," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, September 17, 1886, 1-3.
[71] Passet, "The Lucifer Match." 135-136.
[72] *State of Kansas v. E.C. Walker and Lillian Harman*, No. Case File #4312 (Kansas Supreme Court March 4, 1887).

[73]

The Wedding

The details of the unconventional wedding ceremony were fastidiously reported in the September 24th, 1886, edition of *Lucifer*. Moses Harman included a word-for-word transcript of what Walker, Lillian, and himself said in their speeches at the wedding. Considering his motivations for doing so reveals the real reason the *Lucifer* Match was arranged—to generate publicity through civil disobedience. The *Lucifer* team knew that their readership (and their

[73] J.E. Tutt, "Lillian Harman & E.C. Walker," ca. 1886-1892. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library *Special Collections.*

enemies) would find the details of the wedding intoxicating and they hoped that hearing the passionate words straight from the lips of Walker and Lillian would cause the backwards-minded, traditional, and 'stupid' people to see the 'reason' in the autonomistic ideals articulated by the happy couple. This strategy echoes back to the tactic of political theater that Victoria Woodhull pioneered in the 1870s, over ten years before. Lillian and her coworkers had learned from Woodhull's example. Taking to print to disseminate a bold and unconventional action (in Woodhull's case, airing Beecher's dirty laundry) was a surefire way to get the public discussing your radical ideas as well as make more money for a financially troubled publication. Clearly, these published speeches did make waves. At Harman and Walker's trial a few months later, the *entirety* of the speeches was read into evidence and preserved in the record,[74] where I found them almost one hundred fifty years later.

According to the transcript of the speeches published in *Lucifer*, Moses Harman went first and made the lengthiest speech. As I seek to establish in my broader argument of this chapter, despite *Lucifer's* professed feminist ideals, even these sex radical publishers regularly fell back to patriarchal hierarchies and traditional Victorian gender norms. Moses, as the patriarch of the family and Lillian's sole guardian, always took the spotlight and managed the narrative. He delivered a lengthy speech explaining to all those present the values of autonomistic marriage. Explaining that marriage was a solely personal matter, he emphasized that women should be the "primary voice of control" when it came to marriage.[75] This was a common argument made in *Lucifer*. Harman elaborated on this, saying it was because it was women who had the most to gain

[74] State of Kansas v. E.C. Walker and Lillian Harman.
[75] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, October 1, 1886, 1-2.

and lose from the institution of marriage. Unlike men, who had their own careers and endeavors in the public sphere, marriage for a woman was "the epic of her life".[76]

As the sex capable of getting pregnant, women risked their lives far more than men in pregnancy. During the nineteenth century, pregnancy and childbirth were terrifyingly dangerous. It was a regular occurrence for a mother to die in childbirth or much before. Adding to this danger was the reality that wives spent most of their childbearing years either pregnant or nursing. While birth control existed and grew ever more popular (to Anthony Comstock's outrage), it was still difficult to access for many women, especially those living in rural areas. Sex radicals of the 1880s knew of this fact, and it was this gendered danger that women experienced that made Harman argue passionately that women should oversee the institution of marriage—a very radical idea. Harman also reiterated his belief that the only way marriage could be inoffensive to morality is if its existence and termination were wholly voluntary, and women retained all their rights and individuality.

Next, E.C. Walker made his vows. These were also published in *Lucifer.* The most interesting quality of his vows is that they sound radical, even to a twenty-first century audience. Disdainfully pushing aside the traditional sexist vows, Walker dedicated his vows to reaffirming Lillian's rights. He spoke:

> While regarding all public marital ceremonies as essentially and ineradicably indelicate, a pandering to the morbid, vicious, and meddlesome element in human nature, I consider this form the least objectionable. I abdicate in advance all the so-called 'marital rights' with which this public acknowledgement of our relationship may invest me. Lillian is and will continue to be free to repulse any and all advances of mine as she has been heretofore… In legal marriage, woman surrenders herself to the law and to her husband, and becomes a vassal. Here, it is different; Lillian is now made free.[77]

[76] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, October 1, 1886, 1.
[77] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, October 1, 1886, 1.

Walker's words reflect the belief that he and the Harmans held that legal marriage murdered the autonomy and individual identity of a woman, subsuming her beliefs and endeavors under that of her husband's.[78] They also reflect a feminist concern that would become central to Lillian's life work: sexual autonomy. Husbands were in charge of their wives, including their bodies. Women were culturally understood as constantly available for sexual intercourse with their husbands, regardless of if they wanted it or not. It was simply seen as his right. During this period, the concept of unwanted sex between a husband and a wife being classified as rape would have been ludicrous to most people, and marital rape was certainly not recognized as a crime by any state's laws. Lillian saw this as one of the most problematic parts of traditional marriage. This is why Walker placed such an emphasis on Lillian's right to "rebuff" him in their marriage. Like Moses lectured right before, women should always be the gatekeeper of sex, and the true mark of manliness was exercising self-control.

Next, Lillian made her vows. Hers were considerably shorter than both her father's and fiancé's. She said she did not care much for words, because actions spoke much louder.[79] Her woman's rights advocate predecessor, Victoria Woodhull, felt the exact same way and embodied her convictions much in the same way that Lillian was now doing. Lillian made sure to emphasize that she was engaging in this autonomous marriage of her own free will and in accordance with her own beliefs. She would reiterate this point many more times in her short articles in *Lucifer*. She felt a need to do this, likely because people were regarding her as an unwilling victim in this situation, forced to conform to her father's 'heathen' radical ideologies.[80] Indeed, throughout

[78] Moses Harman, "Statement of Principles in Regard to Marriage.", *LLB,* September 17, 1886, 2.
[79] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized," *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, October 1, 1886, 1.
[80] Passet, "The Lucifer Match.", 137-138.

multiple articles published by opponents of the *Lucifer* Match, most of them brutally criticized Moses Harman and E.C. Walker for the marriage, not Lillian.[81] For many people, it seemed obvious that the defenseless, delicate Lillian could have played no part in this sinful behavior. To them, it was inconceivable that a young woman should freely choose a marriage not sanctioned by God or the law. This reflects broader misogynistic beliefs of the era that women were weak-willed, incapable of deep political thought, and easily led astray.

The *Lucifer* edition issued the day after the wedding focused on defending the concept of autonomous marriage. Holding the right of sex association to be paramount, Moses Harman explained the dire consequences should the government intrude upon this private rite. The language he used to justify the dangers of governmental intrusion on sex is an exemplar of the broader patterns of argument free lovers used in the 1880s to attract people to their side. In a lengthy article on the first page of *Lucifer*, Harman wrote that sexual privacy was critical for two reasons: the happiness and fulfillment of the couple as well as the development of "healthy, normal, well-formed, and intelligent offspring."[82] Using the dramatic language typical of nineteenth century radicals, multiple articles referred to sex in loveless marriages as 'legalized prostitution'.[83] Lillian and her family believed that healthy and pure children could only be born of a loving marriage. Disabilities, disease, and immorality arose in children who were the product of loveless lovemaking. They considered these beliefs to be very scientific, and always framed their actions for the "furthering of the race" or the "purity of society".[84]

Many historians have considered nineteenth century sex radicals' turn towards eugenics in the 1900s as marking a dramatic swing to an opposite ideology. How could people wholly

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[81] Seward Mitchell, quoting Benjamin R. Tucker, "Can You Afford to Pay the Costs?", *LLB*, December 31, 1886, 3.
[82] Moses Harman, "Autonomous Marriage Practicalized.", *LLB*, October 1, 1886, 1.
[83] Moses Harman, "Respectability.", *LLB*, October 1, 1886, 2.
[84] Moses Harman, "Friends of Liberty, Attention!", *LLB*, September 17, 1886, 2.

committed to sexual freedom 'suddenly' start believing that it was appropriate for the government to regulate the ability of various people to reproduce? Closely examining the language of sex radicals such as the Harman family even in the nineteenth century, however, reveals that the 'jump' from hereditarianism, selective breeding, and voluntary motherhood to eugenics and sterilization was not as wide of a jump as historians originally posited.[85] Even Victoria Woodhull—active in politics two decades before Lillian Harman—had beliefs like this. She believed that birth control was the solution to mental illness and alcoholism because children born unintentionally would be more prone to morality. I

Even though the Lucifer Match was obviously intended as a political stunt —they had publicized it for weeks prior and several articles in that week's *Lucifer* were dedicated towards expounding on autonomous marriage—the periodical insisted on pretending that the wedding was a personal, non-political affair. In a column on the second page of the paper entitled "Personal", the senior editor noted that "an event occurred… that deserves perhaps a passing notice…" referring to the wedding. He went on to reiterate the proceedings, making sure to emphasize that Lillian declined to take the last name of her new husband.[86] The Harmans' decision to frame the wedding as a personal, innocent, and apolitical matter was very intentional, strategic, and technically dishonest. As explained earlier, Lillian and Walker wanted to attract public outrage, public support, and the attention of the law. By framing their crime as just two innocent people minding their own business in an innocuous way, they were setting the stage to be seen as victims (not agitators) to the public once their anticipated legal battle got underway, which would very soon.

[85] Joanne Passet, "Motherhood in Freedom," 160-170.
[86] Moses Harman, "Personal.", *LLB,* September 17, 1886, 2.

The Arrest

One day after the wedding, Lillian Harman and her husband were arrested. A complaint had been made against them by her stepbrother, W.H. Hiser, for violation of Section 12 of the Kansas Marriage Act.[87] In the complaint, preserved by the Kansas Historical Society, Hiser accused the couple of unlawfully cohabitating—also known as living together—despite not being married.[88] Interestingly, Lillian's stepbrother only chose to report the marriage *after* the wedding had already taken place. He could have easily done so beforehand, avoiding this entire fiasco and the alleged corruption of his younger stepsister. *Lucifer* explained this somewhat suspicious decision by claiming that Hiser only reported the extrajudicial marriage because the family had received threats of mob violence for their controversial actions, and he was merely attempting to keep Lillian safe.[89] I am skeptical of this claim, however. It is far more likely that Hiser was in on the *Lucifer* team's plan to stage this public spectacle to advance their cause and boost their readership, and this was merely his part to play in the unfolding drama.

The article immediately following the "Personal" column, wherein Harman fleetingly recounted the wedding, is titled "ARRESTED!" With Woodhullian drama, he claimed:

> Scarcely was the foregoing in type, and as the forms were getting ready for the press, our sanctum was invaded by an officer of the great state of Kansas armed with a document authorizing him to arrest E.C. Walker and Lillian Harman, charged with 'feloniously' violating the laws of said state![90]

Here, he was alleging that literally immediately after finishing the "Personal" article, officers burst into the *Lucifer* printing office to seize Harman and Walker. This sounds like a far-fetched tale, but it was part of the public spectacle the free lovers sought to create, in the tradition of Victoria

[87] Moses Harman, "Friends of Liberty, Attention!", *LLB*, September 17, 1886, 2.
[88] State of Kansas v. E.C. Walker and Lillian Harman.
[89] Moses Harman, "A 'Disgraceful Affair', Is It?" *LLB*, September 21, 2.
[90] Moses Harman, "Arrested!" *LLB*, September 21, 2.

Woodhull. The article goes on to ask its readers, "Is this Free America, or is it Russia?".[91] Condescendingly claiming that most Americans were blind 'statute moralists', he implored them to reject governmental intervention. Without naming the New York City vice censor explicitly, Harman was certainly referring to Comstock and his followers. This, he wrote, was the only way to achieve social purity.

This article, along with many others published during the next couple of months, drew an explicit distinction between morality and legality. Harman wrote that laws governing the marital/sex lives of individuals were 'artificial' laws and 'pretend crimes'. He attacked the subjective and arbitrary character of the "moral" standards set by obscenity laws and the like as an attempt to dictate the private lives of individuals. Harman's repeated insistence on the difference between 'artificial laws' and morality was a reaction to the proliferation of state obscenity laws and Anthony Comstock's increased social influence. Comstock's persecution of Victoria Woodhull marked the beginning of his national relevance; by 1886, the year of Lillian's autonomous marriage, he was at the zenith of his power. Sex radicals such as the Harmans were well-aware of the danger Comstock's reign posed to their values. Thus, it is no surprise that they saw their fight for freedom from governmental intrusion particularly crucial that year.

To clarify a technicality, the Kansas Marriage Act was not an official Comstock law. This act was passed in 1867, the same year Anthony Comstock moved to New York City and began to practice vigilantism. The persecution of Lillian Harman is still directly tied to Comstockism, however. The reason that Valley Falls mainstream newspapers covered the extrajudicial marriage with such horror and the Harmans *knew* it would become a public spectacle was because of the specter of Anthony Comstock. Americans in the 1880s were particularly anxious about enforcing

[91] Moses Harman, "Arrested!" *LLB*, September 21, 2.

propriety, suppressing sexuality, and maintaining a moral status quo. Lillian's arrest in 1886 was rooted in the same social anxieties that motivated Comstock and his followers.

Prison and Bail

According to *Lucifer*, the couple were carried off to the Oskaloosa County Jail where they were detained with bail set at one thousand dollars.[92] They did not pay this bail, although their stated reasons for this were not in accord with their real political motivations. According to *Lucifer*, the radical community failed them and refused to contribute towards posting the bail. Multiple articles in the September 21th, 1886, edition of *Lucifer* are dedicated towards castigating and shaming their allies. The editorial team seemed particularly concerned with proving that the lack of public interest in contributing towards the bail did not mean that they were without supporters or that their cause was unworthy. Rather, they pointed to more practical reasons that their allies had failed them— fear of social ostracism, fear of personal violence, and the fact that most of their readership did not reside in Valley Falls, Kansas, but in other states in the Midwest and West.[93] This shaming tone the editorial team took towards the 'moral cowards' of their city is very reminiscent of Woodhull in the wake of her arrest for obscenity charges.

In reality, Lillian and E.C. Walker would not have paid their bail and freed themselves, regardless of whether they had the financial resources to do so. They wanted to remain in prison to make a political statement, much like Victoria Woodhull, who also declined bail and various bribes so that she could have her PR moment in a county jail. Again, this was part of the public spectacle of painting themselves as the victims in the situation rather than heathen criminals.

Yet at the end of the day even these sex radicals subscribed, at least in part, to Victorian gender roles. Though both Lillian and E.C. had been arrested, Lillian was swiftly allowed to leave

[92] Moses Harman, "Brief Comment.", *LLB*, September 21, 1886, 2.
[93] E.C. Walker, "The Defence Fund," *LLB*, October 1, 1886, 2.

the jail without posting bail be because she was "needed at the office".[94] Walker remained in prison, where he wrote lengthy articles regarding his plight. It is evident that Lillian did not want to return home; she explicitly said she wanted to stand with her husband. According to both Moses Harman and E.C. Walker, Lillian insisted on remaining in the prison, but both overruled her.[95] Somewhat ironic, considering both men had just waxed poetic for dozens of pages about how the most pressing issue to society was that women did not have the autonomy to make decisions over their own bodies. This illustrates a trend we shall see repeatedly in our discussion of Lillian Harman's trials and tribulations—her beliefs and efforts were regularly overshadowed because of her gender. This erasure was not only committed by her conservative enemies, but also by radical men who claimed that their goal was to centralize women's voices. Much like the reporters of other newspapers such as the *Register,* who published articles chronicling the affair that assumed that Lillian was a manipulated young girl who had not freely chosen her autonomistic marriage, Lillian's own family likewise assumed that, as a woman, she was unfit to dedicate herself as fully to the good fight as her male counterparts.

Both Lillian and E.C. directly contributed their own opinions to the September 24th edition of *Lucifer*, which was almost wholly dedicated to explaining their autonomistic marriage principles and aggressively responding to objections made to them in other newspapers. Tellingly, though, E.C. got significantly more space in the periodical than Lillian did. On the third page of the periodical, E.C. wrote an article titled "To Jail and There: Cell No. 2, the County Jail, Oskaloosa, Kansas, September 23, '86.' This was a *long* article, covering two entire newspaper columns. Throughout, E.C. fell back on female gender roles that served to limit the opportunities women had to fully participate in society. He condemned a free thought organization in Kansas, the

[94] Moses Harman, "Half Sheet.", *LLB*, September 21, 1886, 2.
[95] E.C. Walker, "To Jail and There,", LLB, September 21, 1886, 3.

American Secular Union, for not paying their bail, and "stand[ing] back in cowardly indifference… while a pure and tender woman will be thrust into the noisome crowded cell of the county jail."[96] Here, E.C. was playing on societal notions of inherent feminine weakness/fragility to arouse sympathy for the couples' cause. Harman, a fervent supporter of the women's movement and as we saw earlier, a firm advocate for her own autonomy, certainly would not have appreciated the tone he took. Later in the article, Walker decries his arrest for the crime of "dar[ing] to love the brave little woman at his side." Again, this language belittled Lillian and painted her as a supporting character to Walker's noble fight.

In contrast to her husband, Lillian's contribution to *Lucifer* the week she was arrested was tiny. Totaling only six sentences and about a quarter of a single column, her article did not even receive a title. In it, she reiterates the principal content of her wedding vows: that she chose to enter this marriage of her own free will. She firmly states, "I intend to stand by our principles as long as I believe them to be true, which I think will be as long as I live and retain my reason."[97] Clearly, Lillian was not oblivious to the fact that no one was taking her personal convictions seriously. The latter half of Lillian's brief article explains that she only had room to write this short piece because "there is already matter enough to more than fill up the paper." Indeed, the periodical was rife with discussion of the *Lucifer* Match and autonomous marriage, but no other portion of it came from Lillian's perspective or the perspective of any other woman. Furthermore, in this same edition of *Lucifer* Moses Harman reiterated that women should always be the "primary voice of power" in marital and sexual affairs yet violated his own principle. Clearly, even E.C. Walker and Moses Harman—two men whose views were considered shockingly radical and perhaps too far ahead of their time even by other freethinkers— suffered from limited imaginations of what

[96] E.C. Walker, "To Jail and There,", *LLB*, September 21, 1886, 3.
[97] Lillian Harman, untitled article. *LLB*, September 21, 1886, 2.

women could freely do, and despite Lillian's attempts to lead her own Woodhullian political spectacle, her autonomy was brushed aside.

Chapter Three: Comparative Reflection

"Man's natural rights have been thus summed up: Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness imply and include the right to choose the means, *agencies, and methods of securing and promoting happiness. This simply another way of saying that man's natural rights are summarized in this one word, AUTONOMY—SELF-LAW."* – Lillian Harman

Introduction

The lives, beliefs, and trials of Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman are significant for several reasons. Examining them reveals to us the under told story of sexual radicalism during the reign of Comstock. The postal inspector did all he could to suppress the publications and beliefs of women like Woodhull and Harman, burning tens of thousands of artworks, newspapers, cartoons, circulars, and more. Due to his zealous efforts, vast swaths of the history of sexual radical advocacy and moral obscenity have been lost to us. Not to mention the surely extreme amount of self-censorship that dozens of writers doubtless subjected themselves to, for fear of persecution by Comstock.[98] Who knows what fascinating writing may have been preserved for our generation if the authors of the Gilded Age had felt they lived in a free and secular enough society to write and publish these works.

Some unbelievably courageous people, though, like Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman boldly defied Victorian morality and social norms, knowingly risking the castigation of their peers and Anthony Comstock and dared to advocate for their radical beliefs anyway. Despite this, compared to their contemporary suffragette peers such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, they have been largely forgotten. They are taught neither in high school or college history courses, nor are they considered revered ancestors of the modern feminist movement. While it is not my contention that Woodhull and Harman should be treated just as

[98] Werbel, *Lust On Trial,* 175.

significantly in the history of American feminism as Anthony and Stanton (Harman in particular was certainly a more minor figure than the two suffragists), the fact that they are almost completely forgotten by mainstream history does not reflect the importance of their legacy nor the depth of their contribution to gender equality.

Beyond their direct contribution to the women's movement, perhaps the most important part of the women's stories is that they pioneered the field of public relations. To put it simply, no one was using the media the way they did before Victoria Woodhull broke across the national stage. She revolutionized the nascent world of public relations, and in doing so paved the way for not only Lillian Harman but countless other media-savvy women that have followed the pair throughout the next 150 years.

The next significant comparison between the two sex radicals is the tool they used to advance their beliefs— the pen. Both Woodhull and Harman primarily relied on their skill and passion for writing to increase awareness of their ideas, boost their own personal fame, and rake in enough income to support their activism and lifestyle.

Finally, the way both Woodhull and Harman were simultaneously reviled and fantasized over reveals underemphasized critical tensions in American gilded age Victorian society. Writing about prostitution, birth control, and a woman's fundamental right to freely choose her own sexual partners was, to Victorians, clear sexual obscenity, and a grave breach of Victorian morality. Women should not be allowed to testify before the House Judiciary Committee, become stockbrokers, or use their weddings to make a political statement. Committing these acts resulted in disgust, condemnation, horror, and outrage from politicians, mainstream newspapers, and a certain postal inspector alike. Yet, there is a clear reason that both of women's newspapers' sales shot through the roof in the wake of their daring

transgressions of Victorian morality.[99] There is a reason that mainstream newspapers could not stop writing about them, elaborating unnecessarily on the women's beauty, regal demeanor, and clear intelligence.[100] While Americans were threatened by sex, they were also deeply fascinated by it, a paradox that must have brought them tremendous shame, confusion, and other complicated feelings. The unrelenting pull of sexuality and 'immoral' behavior in Americans who publicly espoused such straight lace values—Americans ranging from the writers of the *New York Times* and *Topeka Chronicle* to the powerful Henry Ward Beecher—sheds light on an ironic truth. Perhaps the contradictory reactions of mainstream Americans to the ideas of the free love advocates prove sexual radicals like Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman were right all along that sexuality is central to human flourishing and sex is an inextricable element of human nature.

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[99] Werbel, *Lust on Trial,* 58; Passett, "The Lucifer Match," 136.
[100] "The Queens of Finance."; Passet, "The Lucifer Match," 137.
[101] "The Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives receiving a deputation of female suffragists…" *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 4, 1871.

The Dawn of the Age of Public Relations

Victoria Woodhull was one of the first (if not the first) women to take advantage of the increasing circulation of public information, opinion, and news in post-Civil War America. Her actions and strategies provided a blueprint for Lillian Harman who followed in her footsteps the following decade. The two sex radicals' manipulation of the media to achieve their personal and ideological ends has been adopted by countless later generations of media-savvy women. Victoria Woodhull was America's first national celebrity. She was certainly revered for her beauty and intelligence, but it is probable that she never would have achieved her degree of national prominence but for her self-conscious awareness of how to engineer public scandal.

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[102] Matthew Brady, "Portrait of Victoria Woodhull."

While Lillian Harman would have been a young girl in 1873 when Victoria Woodhull broke the Beecher-Tilton Scandal, by the time she reached adulthood she would have known of Victoria Woodhull. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, Woodhull was a notorious celebrity and the first female Presidential candidate. Second, and perhaps providing even more conclusive certainty that Harman would have been very familiar with Victoria and her strategies, is the fact that they were both Victorian sex radicals with the same community and allies. Between 1870 and 1900, there was a cohesive and recognizable body of sex radicals in the United States, spanning from New York City to California. Members of this group regularly corresponded with each other and contributed to each other's publications.[103] The same names crop up in association with each other over the decades. Both Woodhull and Harman were very familiar with this cast of characters and regularly included their writings in their newspapers, so there is no doubt that at minimum Harman would have known about Woodhull. It is uncertain if Woodhull would have been familiar with Harman, however—the former had been residing in England for nearly a decade by the time Harman broke headlines with the Lucifer Match.

Intelligent female celebrities of succeeding generations such as Josephine Baker, Jayne Mansfield, and Marilyn Monroe all utilized scandal and the power of the media to increase their own personal wealth and fame. This was a viable and intelligible strategy for them and their publicists to pursue because of the path Victoria Woodhull paved before them. The legacy of the Victorian sex radicals' strategies in modern celebrity culture does not end there, though. Like Woodhull and Harman before them, female celebrities have used the power of scandal to advance their social and political activist causes. For example, think of Marilyn

[103] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women,* 17-18.

Monroe visiting the American troops stationed in the Korean Peninsula in 1954 in a scandalous tight dress.

Woodhull and Harman's legacy extends beyond the Old Hollywood starlets, though. The dawn of the digital age and social media has created a new, ever-evolving kind of public relations and celebrity culture. The sensationalism of today is perhaps even more similar and tied into the public relations used by Victoria Woodhull in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* and Lillian Harman in *Lucifer the Light-Bearer* than it was in the interceding generations. In the era of social media, one does not need to be a newspaper editor, presidential candidate, or have a public relations manager to engineer a public spectacle. Every day, regular people or 'influencers'--young mini-celebrities whose original source of fame is social media—fashion public spectacles to achieve their various agendas, whether that is gaining more followers, making more money through advertisements, or raising awareness for a cause they are passionate about. Before Kim Kardashian 'broke the Internet' in 2014, Victoria Woodhull broke the newspapers in 1873. While it is not my contention that Victoria Woodhull is a direct, conscious source of inspiration for the scandalous celebrities of the twentieth and twenty first century celebrities, there is a clear historical link between them, and she pioneered the field of public relations.

Marilyn Monroe performing in front of the U.S. Army in 1954, U.S. Army Archives.

Their Weapon of Choice

A natural question arises when one considers how extensively Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman relied on the power of public spectacle to advance their agendas. *Why did they choose to resort to sensationalism, public scandal, and manufactured spectacles to achieve their ends?* The answer is, they had little other options. In Gilded Age America, women had limited opportunities. In addition to this, they were disadvantaged in every single one of their endeavors because they were not taken seriously by virtue of their sex. To their society, they were automatically more shallow, morally weak, and incapable of serious

political thought, simply because most people imagined that it was not natural or proper for women to be politically active.

It is very likely that Harman and Woodhull's ideas about sexual freedom and gender equality would have gone unheard outside of their small radical networks if they had not created a sensational spectacle to draw attention to their ideologies. Both women would have been cognizant of the strategies and the reception of the mainstream suffrage movement: speech-making, marching, and writing letters. These more mild and familiar strategies had not succeeded so far for the suffragettes— they had been fighting for the right to vote for years with little progress, and at the time they were an exhausted, deeply-divided camp as well.

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[104] Elizabeth Cady Stantion and Susan B. Anthony, ca. 1870. NWP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (027.00.00)

While still seen as an overreaching nuisance by many Americans, the mainstream suffragettes still pursued a form of respectability politics. They sought to align themselves with well-respected figures in American society and emphasized that their primary priority remained motherhood and maintenance of the home. Woodhull and Harman were not satisfied with the results these methods derived, and what's more, their beliefs were far more radical than most of the suffragettes. Even if they strived after it, achieving any meaningful modicum of respectability amongst the American public would have been unrealistic. Cognizant of this, Woodhull and Harman knew that spectacle, sensationalism, and basically being *as loud as possible* was the most realistic and efficient way for them to achieve their ends.

It is also no minor detail that Woodhull and Harman used writing to engineer this political theater. As intelligent, self-educated women involved in the suffrage movement, they were well-aware of the fact that the pen was just as mighty as the sword. Further, another benefit of using writing as advocacy was that it could be monetized. The mainstream women's movement also took advantage of the publication medium, but this was less central to their strategy, as they relied instead primarily on writing letters, giving speeches, and participating in marches. As convincingly argued by biographer Amy Sohn, the period between 1848 and 1920 was a rich period of radical publishing. Newspapers such as *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* and *Lucifer the Light-Bearer,* small operations with little funding, still enjoyed a wide readership across the entire nation.[105] Thus, the two women's identities as writers should not be minimized or undercut. Their successful use of writing to

[105] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 100.

achieve social and political ends is a powerful and opportune reminder for us that change can be achieved in a variety of ways. The prominence of sex radical publications during the Gilded Age is also interesting when compared to our modern society. One would be hard-pressed to name a small, cheaply funded, radical publication that has a national reach/wide readership in 2023. The world of media has changed to the point that it is quite unlikely that such a publication would be able to retain an audience and successfully compete against the massive media conglomerates of today. The heyday of newspapers like *The Weekly* and *Lucifer* is far behind us.[106] Small, independent publications like *The Weekly* and *Lucifer* would likely fare poorly in 2023.

The Origins of Sexual Liberation

The popular historical narrative credits second-wave feminism with the development of arguments in favor of the rights of sex workers, the right to choose one's sexual partner or have multiple sexual partners, the naturalness of female enjoyment of the sex act, access to birth control, and—most centrally for my purposes—the denormalization of a husband's sexual ownership of his wife (what we, today, would call marital rape). Most people—including those generally aware and interested in American history—consider the aforementioned fights for rights to have originated in the late 1960s and 1970 as a part of the sexual liberation movement. We imagine these battles to be firmly within the domain of second-wave feminism. This is because even within feminist history we associate first-wave feminism exclusively with the right to the franchise. When one thinks of first-wave feminism, they think of mild-tempered arguments in favor of women's suffrage couched in moral respectability and watered down to reassure conservative politicians and alarmed

[106] Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women*, 298.

husbands. This generalization is largely accurate for the mainstream women's movement of 1848-1920 (a period referred to later as first-wave feminism), but what we forget is that there were radical, shockingly progressive, and prescient feminists too. Woodhull and Harman were among the most notable of these.

Both *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* and *Lucifer the Light-Bearer* regularly dared to brand unconsensual sex between a husband and a wife marital rape, a radical idea at the time. In 1873, Woodhull argued for the need to protect and empower wives against the sexual onslaughts of their husbands. Not only did forced copulation traumatize a woman, but this violent union could also supposedly beget damaged and deformed children.[107] Thirteen years later, in 1886, *Lucifer* began raising awareness to the issue of marital rape in earnest. In a September article, the editors wrote, "the husband is allowed to assert his 'marital rights,', and under this 'license,' this legal 'patent,', he may outrage the person of his wife—he may subject her to legal rape every day or night of the year, and the law *provides absolutely no redress*."[108] Later that same year, *Lucifer* published a graphic letter from a reader which detailed how a wife was left grievously injured after her husband forced himself on her mere days after she suffered birth complications from the delivery of their child. The horrified author of the letter asked, "Can you point to a law that will punish this brute? What is rape? Is it not coition with a woman by force, not having a legal right? Would it have been rape had he not been married to her?"[109] During the nineteenth century, a man who sexually assaulted his wife was seen to be merely exercising his natural right to her person. The *Lucifer* team—

[107] Victoria C. Woodhull, "Beginnings of the Battle." and Amy Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women,* pp. 49-51.
[108] Moses Harman, "Autonomy—Self Law." *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, September 24, 1886, 1.
[109] Moses Harman, "An Awful Letter." *Lucifer the Light-Bearer,* June 18, 1886.

including Lillian—and Victoria Woodhull were all violently opposed to this hegemonic belief, setting them apart from mainstream society.

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One of the only surviving photos of Lillian Harman.

It is important to draw attention to these marginalized women advocates for multiple reasons. First, to have as accurate a history of first-wave feminism. Second, it is normatively important to give Victoria Woodhull, Lillian Harman, and the larger group of sex radicals their due. As a twenty-first century audience, we have almost unparalleled rights to freedom of speech, expression, and consumption. It is hard for us to imagine the dictatorship of

[110] Lillian Harman, *Legitimation League.*

censorship and imposition of moral values that the sex radicals lived under— it was truly a dark age for freedom of speech. It surely took an almost inconceivable amount of bravery for women like Woodhull and Harman to daringly defy the Comstock obscenity laws. Even if they were eventually exonerated, they were labeled as social pariahs for years afterwards. Both women would have been well-aware of this real risk every time they picked up their pen or gave a radical speech— and yet they continued to defy Comstock anyway, repeatedly, year after year. It is due to the unrelenting courage of free speech advocates such as Woodhull and Harman that Anthony Comstock eventually lost the reins of power,[111] and the Comstock laws became more like the *laughingstock laws* by 1918.

A third reason it is critically important to reinsert Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman into the history of the feminist movement is because of the connections it reveals. As hinted earlier, both Woodhull and Harman regularly advanced arguments about birth control, marital rape, and gendered double standards in sexuality that were shockingly prescient. One could read an excerpt from one of the sex radicals' speeches and be genuinely convinced that the excerpt originated in the 1970s rather than the 1870s. One could not receive that same impression from the speeches of mainstream women's movement leaders, whose ideas come across as clearly rooted in the nineteenth century. Unlike other feminists of their time, both Woodhull and Harman exercised genuine compassion and open mindedness towards prostitution. While neither of them would have ever described prostitution as a moral good, they understood that women's lack of rights and independent economic viability forced many of them into prostitution, and thus the solution to the issue of prostitution in the cities was not to shame and stigmatize its victims, but rather provide them with aid and education.[112]

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[111] Werbel, *Lust on Trial*, 262-269.

[112] Victoria Woodhull, "The Principles of Social Freedom,"; Joanne Passet, "The Lucifer Match, 137-140.

The mainstream women's movement shied away from any discussion of sex, because of their desire to maintain respectability and stay laser-focused on the franchise. Woodhull and Harman had no such reservations. Even a twenty-first century reader could find herself shocked and embarrassed at the graphic details and unpretentious arguments about sex contained in *The Weekly* and *Lucifer.* Woodhull directly called out individual rapists in her newspaper,[113] and Harman accurately pointed out the massive amount of hypocrisy that a man could assault a stranger in the street, and it would be rape, but if he did this *exact same thing* to his wife, he would be perfectly within his rights. Today, most people would accept that nonconsensual sex between a husband and a wife is marital rape,[114] so perhaps some would take it for granted that this is a long-standing belief. In fact, however, before the 1970s most people did not adhere to the belief that a husband could rape his wife. At the time that Woodhull and Harman were active, almost no one believed this. It took *years* of feminist advocacy for marital rape to finally gain a place in criminal law. As evidenced by Woodhull and Harman's writings, that fight did not begin in the 1970s, but nearly one hundred years prior.

Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman share several characteristics which make them worthy case studies. They were both sex radicals, free lovers, writers, spectacle creators, and persecuted victims of Victorian morality. Woodhull, one of America's first national celebrities, preceded Harman in prominence by 13 years. She helped lay the early groundwork for a powerful form of manipulation of the media that Harman followed to engineer her own political spectacle. These women's strategies constitute an early use of public relations in American history. They also engineered political theater to achieve the

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[113] Tennie C. Claflin, "Mr. L. C. Challis, *W&CW,* November 2, 1872, 14.
[114] Lillian Harman, "An 'Age-of-Consent' Symposium,", *Liberty, the Mother, Not the Daughter,* February 9, 1895, 8.

same ends: advocacy for their radical ideology, boosting awareness of their own name, and increasing profits of their struggling small newspapers. Connecting these two women's stories and reinserting them into the mainstream feminist historical narrative reveals key points that have been largely forgotten by historical scholarship on the Gilded Age, moral censorship, and the fight for the women's franchise: feminism had a crucial early role in the development of the modern field of public relations, and progressive arguments about marital rape, birth control, and sexual freedom have their origin not in the second wave feminism of the 1970s but rather the sexual radicalism of the late nineteenth century.

There are multiple areas of research that remain understudied in this field. The connection between the political theater of the sex radicals and earlier abolitionist political spectacles, such as the London Crystal Palace Abolitionist Exhibit of 1851, merits further study. The history of women's rights and Black civil/voting rights is one fraught with tensions and complications. Another distinct but just as important area for further research is the connection between nineteenth century free love ideologies and the turn towards eugenics that many sex radicals (including both Woodhull and Harman) eventually took in the opening years of the new millennium.[115]

[115] Passet, 156-171; Sohn, 49-50.

Epilogue

"'If an omelet has to be made some eggs have to be broken.'" – Victoria Woodhull, quoting Otto von Bismarck

There are multiple areas of research that remain understudied in this field. The connection between the political theater of the sex radicals and earlier abolitionist political spectacles, such as the London Crystal Palace Abolitionist Exhibit of 1851, merits further study. The history of women's rights and Black civil/voting rights is one fraught with tensions and complications. Another distinct but just as important area for further research is the connection between nineteenth century free love ideologies and the turn towards eugenics that many sex radicals (including both Woodhull and Harman) eventually took in the opening years of the new millennium.

In the United States in 2023, we take our freedoms perhaps slightly for granted. We perceive it as normal (and owed to us) to have freedom of speech, thought, publication, leisure time, and love. As such, I believe it is near impossible for us to truly grasp how vastly different the circumstances were in Eastern and Midwestern cities of America a mere 160 years ago. One could face prosecution for attending the theater, or purchasing a naughty lithograph, or subscribing to a magazine that extolled the benefits of sex. Americans constantly lived with the specter of Anthony Comstock hanging over them. Even if Comstock was not on their scent, it is almost certain that artists, writers, and freethinkers (perhaps even subconsciously) engaged in an extreme amount of self-censorship to insulate themselves from legal trouble and ruination.

Yet, even in this dark age for free speech, people continued to express radical ideas, knowing that it could destroy their reputations, livelihoods, and families. Many of these people were women, such as Victoria Woodhull and Lillian Harman. Both women flaunted danger because their convictions and fervent belief in their right to make free decisions about their own minds and bodies was so strong. Both women were imprisoned for their actions. Their ideas

regarding the centrality of sex to life, the importance of access to contraception (and even abortion, in limited circumstances), and marital rape were shockingly prescient to the point that their words were echoed—almost verbatim—by radical feminists almost exactly one hundred years later. They also were among the first to pioneer the tactics of modern public relations, nearly fifty years before the Old Hollywood starlets began to do so.

Despite all of this, the sex radicals of the late nineteenth century have been almost entirely forgotten by mainstream history. They are not taught in high schools, nor are they taught in most college history courses. Even students of history and gender studies have not heard the name of Victoria Woodhull, much less the names of lesser-known sex radicals. Whether this occurred because they were rejected by the mainstream suffrage movement or because they did not possess the resources of their NWSA/UWSA peers, it is true. Thus, it is time to give these women their due.

Acknowledgements

The first person I must thank is Professor Steve Zipperstein, who gave my ideas a chance and agreed to be my primary advisor on this project. His support, feedback, and wise suggestions were invaluable to this thesis, and I am deeply grateful. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Debra Blumenthal, my thesis seminar director. Her genuine enthusiasm for, thoughtful commentary on, and impressive dedication to the success of this thesis were crucial to its completion. I must also express deep thanks to Professor Emerita Dr. Patricia Cohen, who dedicated hours of her time towards suggesting potential areas to explore during the incipient stages of this thesis. It was her insight that first led me to *Lucifer the Light-Bearer,* which in turn led me to the fascinating and mysterious figure of Lillian Harman. Next, thank you to Dr. Erika Rappaport, who provided me with valuable insight regarding researching women's history and who always expressed enthusiasm for my work. I owe an enormous and sincere thank you to each of my thesis-writing peers in the seminar. Specifically, I thank my peer reviewers Emma Barrera and Gina Kim, for proofreading my work, discussing feminist history with me, and enriching my thesis experience with their loyalty and humor. I also thank the URCA staff and Dr. Anita Stahl for funding some of the research for this project. I thank the librarians at the Library of Congress for digitizing sources for me and answering my questions. Finally, I would be remiss to not express gratitude to my mom, Parvin Jahanbakhsh, and my partner, Nicholas Wenstad. They were both there for me every step of the way in the writing and research process and tolerated my ceaseless blathering about Victoria Woodhull, Lillian Harman, and Anthony Comstock. And finally, thanks to whoever is reading this thesis, for managing to make it to the end.

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