

SEXUAL RADICALISM AND THE CONTESTED NORM

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The line between sexual radicalism and orthodoxy is sometimes hard to draw in the Jacksonian period, a time when orthodoxy itself was an emergent «reform movement». Radicalism was partly defined by the assumptions it shared with orthodoxy, and these assumptions actually helped generate both movements (which ultimately constituted two sides of a single movement). The sexual ideology that emerged during the middle decades of the nineteenth century led in two ostensibly opposite directions: toward monogamy and self-restraint – «Victorian morality» – on the one hand; toward free love, feminism, and self-expression on the other. Yet both were reform movements. Each rejected traditional patriarchal values in favor of a commitment to individual self-fulfillment.

Theorists of both camps believed that the only viable sexual relationships were those wholly based on personal intimacy and mutual respect, not on some imposed institutional affiliation. They both detested arranged marriages, and dismissed or ignored the old patriarchal convention that a marriage would centrally engage each partner's family of origin. Yet at the same time both groups were profoundly fearful of the constant potential of sexual excitement to produce exhaustion, debility, and disease. It is no accident that some people moved from orthodoxy to radicalism and even back again, and that they contained «orthodox» elements within their radicalism – or «radical» ones within their orthodoxy.

I have written elsewhere about the repressive aspect of radical sexual ideology and practice and its fundamental debt to the orthodox health reformer of the 1830s, Sylvester Graham¹. What I propose to do here is to discuss in brief the more «expressive» sexual theories devised in the 1840s by men, notably by the phrenologist Orson S. Fowler (who continued to accept Graham's theories as well). Students of Jacksonian sexuality should not neglect this side of its sexual ideology – the side which stressed self-expression, self-fulfillment, and intimate mutuality. I will argue that this expressive side of Jacksonian sexual reform, whether orthodox or radical, was surely

¹ Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform*, Westport, 1980.

liberating for many people, both men and women (in different ways) who were in the process of entering the new bourgeoisie. But it generated burdens of its own for those same people – burdens that we, as their descendants, carry with us today.

The reformers of the 1840s recognized that the institutions of the local community were no longer able to stabilize and sustain urban marriages and other human relationships. It was their hope that those institutions could be substantially or wholly replaced by (or redefined as) self-contained and intimate relationships based on mutual personal affinity. Within marriage itself, the apotheosis of intimacy was sexual love. These reformers were forced to redefine the nature of sexual love – or, perhaps, to define it for the first time. As long as marriage had been conceived in public, institutional terms, there was nothing troublesome in the knowledge that physical excitement and pleasure were at the core of human sexuality.

But once marriage was conceived largely in terms of bonds of personal intimacy, that knowledge began to be unsettling. After all, sexual satisfaction did not necessarily depend on mutual love, and physical excitement and gratification could not be securely harnessed to the cause of intimate mutuality. After all, it could be achieved outside marriage, or through masturbation. (Masturbation, especially the ease with which this act could be performed was a stark revelation of the power of sexual pleasure unredeemed by intimacy).

Reformers therefore had to reshape sexuality; they needed to convince themselves and others that true sexual satisfaction really did depend on mutual love. As the apotheosis of mutuality, sex could seal and sustain a marriage – but as sheer lust it would destroy the same marriage. The reformers of the 1840s laid equal stress upon both sides of this critical, delicate equation. They chose to idealize and sentimentalize sexuality (just as they also, and for similar reasons, chose to sentimentalize women and children). They sacralized sex just as they were sacralizing the nuclear family. Sexual intercourse became a form of « communion », the « holy of holies », the « inner temple of life ». By using this laden rhetoric, these reformers strained and misrepresented the capacity of human sexuality (just as they were straining and misrepresenting the nature of women and children). And it may even have been partly for that very reason that they also came to intensify their existing fear of its power. These reformers tried to believe that sexual intercourse served a social purpose beyond that of producing children.

That purpose was the consummation of intimate union between a wife and her husband. In the process, they tried to deny a legitimate place in sexual experience for purely physical excitement. They lifted sexuality out of the ordinary range of human activity and imposed on it a set of expectations that it was unable to satisfy. Even at the beginning, the tension generated by these attempts to bridge the gulf between sexuality as expectation and

sexuality as actual experience would have been disturbing. It may have been partly because of this tension that these reformers became so obsessed – the word is hardly too strong – with the destructive potential of sexuality. Almost anything might rouse uncontrollable sexual desire: alcohol, meat, spice, tea and coffee; day-dreaming or reading fiction; even the anxieties of life in the marketplace.

As my single representative of this branch of emergent sexual orthodoxy, I have chosen the influential phrenologist and publisher Orson S. Fowler². My radicals will be John Humphrey Noyes and the married couple Mary Gove Nichols and her husband Thomas Low Nichols. Orson S. Fowler (1809-1887) was for many years the leader of the phrenological movement in America. (Phrenology was an early theory of localized brain function; Fowler transformed and popularized it with the promise that a careful examination of the contours of people's skulls would reveal to them their natural character and aptitudes). Fowler made phrenology a big business. Operating out of a New York City office, he lectured across the country and booked lecture tours by other phrenologists. (Among the thousands of people who flocked to Fowler for their own phrenological examinations were John Brown, Joseph Smith, Sylvester Graham, Clara Barton, Horace Greeley, and even two men who served as Presidents of the United States – John Tyler and James Garfield). Fowler wrote, edited, published, and proselytized prolifically on a wide variety of subjects, all of which he incorporated into a phrenological framework. Finally, Fowler owned and managed an important publishing house on Broadway, an enterprise which lasted into the twentieth century, and through which he wrested some real control (surely greater than most other writers and reformers ever did) of the means of ideological production.

Prominent among Fowler's own titles were an ongoing series about diet, health, and (especially) sex. On this last subject Fowler seems to present a jumble of attitudes. To begin with, he was a committed Grahamite who came out – as often, and as loudly, as Sylvester Graham himself – against the use of animal food and the usual catalogue of stimulants, and he wholeheartedly endorsed not only a vegetarian diet but also the virtues of Graham bread, baked from unbolted whole-wheat flour. Fowler also followed Graham in believing that animal food and other stimulants aroused lust and other dangerous feelings; as a phrenologist, he added only that they did so inflaming that area of the brain which controlled the physical drives and emotions. Fowler's 1842 book *Amativeness* warned against the dangers of « excessive and perverted sexuality », categories that included masturbation and even

I know and fear the terrible dangers of relying on a single example. But Fowler was important, and I believe that his influence (as writer, publisher, lecturer and publicist) was great, perhaps especially in the 1850s. Frankly, I have not had the time to gather the evidence I would have liked: I know it is there, and I hope many of you will recognize my themes in the fiction and poetry of the time.

frequent marital sex (which « fills the whole being, mental and physical, full of wild, excited, preternatural, irregular, abnormal action », and the only cure for which was to « abstain totally » from both sexual and dietary stimulants). And it was Fowler's publishing house that brought out Graham's books on sex and diet, and kept them in print for almost half a century.

But superimposed on his Grahamism and in apparently peaceful coexistence with it, Fowler expressed a new vision of sexuality – one I have not encountered before the 1840s. Sylvester Graham himself, writing in the previous decade, was simply not really interested in justifying marriage. Graham's only apology for marriage was that monogamy was sexually boring after a while, and that because unexciting sex was less debilitating than sex that was deeply arousing, marriage was therefore less harmful than other forms of sexual expression. Even in the 1830s, this was hardly a compelling argument. Orson Fowler had a better idea.

Fowler accepted the centrality of marital sex, In a book he called *Love and Parentage* – it was first published in 1842, and printed, bound, and presumably read together with *Amativeness* – Fowler sometimes sounds like a different person altogether. Marriage, he now insisted, was ultimately nothing more than a sexual contract, a mutual « convenanting with each other to participate together in this ultimate repast of love ». And he went on to ask prospective brides and grooms:

What but this do you seek and proffer in forming this alliance? Affected prudishness may pretend to frown upon this home truth; but, viewed in whatever light you please, the long and short, warp and woof, and sole embodiment, of both love and matrimony..., consists in the anticipation and pledging of each to participate [in] this function... The bridegroom justly thinks him self *entitled* to these rites, because the very act of the bride in becoming his wife consists simply in a surrender of her celibacy... Other advantages grow incidentally out of marriage, but are only incidental.

Fowler's point may seem obvious enough, even if brazenly asserted. But during the early nineteenth century those « other advantages », of marriage that Fowler so easily dismissed would not have seemed « incidental » to it at all. (These « advantages » would have included the assumption of adult status in the community, and, for the male, becoming the head of an independent household and an owner of property). There may have been an edge, then, to Fowler's reduction of marriage to a stark sexual contract.

What Fowler feared was not sexual pleasure in itself, but sexual excitement and gratification for its own sake. Fowler made a crucial distinction between what he termed « spiritual love » and « animal love ». « Spiritual love » did not mean love without sex, as the phrase might seem to indicate. What it did mean was simply a relationship generated by affinities that were not primarily sexual ones. « Spiritual love » involved the attraction of minds (or spirit) as well as bodies. Fowler based his idea of « spiritual love » on the premise that « physical gender alone, does not exclusively constitute the whole of either

the masculine or the feminine » (in modern terms, that gender meant more than anatomy). Both women and men have the same number of « organs and functions ». But they differ in « their temperament and texture, or tone of organization » – in « the tone and cast of all their feelings and mental operations ». Those differences constituted what Fowler called « mental and spiritual sexuality »³. And it was they that formed the physical basis of « spiritual love », which was in fact « the communion and commingling of the spiritual in man with the spiritual in woman ».

« Spiritual love », then, could be physically consummated – indeed, it was the sole necessary requirement for physical consummation. Fowler suspected that something deep and mysterious might take place between a man and a woman during sexual intercourse, something beyond mere pleasurable sensation – something « primitive » and « constitutional ». Fowler called this a « spirituo-sexual communion », the « intercommunion of kindred spirits ». It is important to remember here that people like Fowler were groping for a language of emotional nuance that as yet scarcely existed or needed to exist (but which they were surely helping to invent), a language which might capture the newly nuanced emotions that now alone seemed to bind people together in meaningful relationships, and which might reveal how sexuality in particular might bear the social burden they were now imposing on it⁴.

Most often they employed the language of « nature ». The 1840s was a period in which all kinds of social arrangements were being redefined (and also recreated) in terms of « natural » affinities, in contrast to the « artificial » patterns imposed by traditional patriarchal society. All over the northern United States, established « institutions » were being replaced, first in fact and soon afterwards in theory, by voluntary (and natural) « associations » of like-minded people who operated on what a later age might have termed the some « wave-length ». These associations included clubs and lodges as well as reform organizations, communitarian settlements, political parties and even magazine subscribers. Reformers such as Fowler were responding to this pattern of change (and at the same time reinforcing it) by reconstruing marriage itself as one of these voluntary associations.

Sexual intercourse was of course the ultimate natural expression of the deep affinities that sustained marriage, the innermost seal of « spiritual love ». Fowler and others speculated that the mutual attraction of two lovers who were bound together by « spiritual love » might be related to such natural

³ This was perhaps most palpably expressed in the physical arrangement of many Spiritualist seances, at which participants with strongly positive (or « male ») characteristics were seated directly opposite those people with strongly negative (or « female ») characteristics, all in order to generate a potent spiritual « field ».

⁴ A similar development took place during the 1840s in literary style, too, beginning with the new mass-market magazines: the emergence of an intimate conversational voice, one-on-one, chatty, and *soft*, as if it were a form of unmediated contact between the authors' spirit and the reader's. I am currently studying this development in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and N.P. Willis.

forces of attraction as electricity and magnetism. He speculated that the « mental entity » of love « consists in magnetic fluids » (that is, psychological tendencies within each gender which may attract and be attracted to the correspondingly opposite forces of the other). « Magnetism », Fowler wrote, « may yet fully explain » the nature of spiritual love. Or perhaps electricity; « Now is not that inter-communion of kindred spirits which constitutes love analagous to this commingling of electric and other fluids ». (The early 1840s, when Fowler was writing these words, was the heyday of the mesmeric trance and « animal magnetism », and it also saw the development of the daguerreotype and the electromagnetic telegraph).

In any case, Fowler believed that what took place when « spiritual love » led to sexual intercourse was a mutual exchange of some actual vital energy. This quasi-magnetic exchange preceded the orgasmic exchange of bodily fluids and was unrelated to it. (I have argued elsewhere that Sylvester Graham had been less fearful of the male loss of semen during orgasm than he was of the drain of vital energy that accompanied sexual excitement itself). Orson Fowler called this exchange of energy a « spirituo-sexual communion ». It insured that sexual intercourse would be a healthy and life-giving act. But without it, sex would be little more than a severe drain of precious vital energy.

This spiritual-love argument had a double edge. In the very act of providing the only appropriate basis of a good marriage, the argument threatened to render marriage irrelevant. If spiritual love was not simply *one* prerequisite to healthful sex but in fact its *only* prerequisite, then marriage as a legal institution did not come into the picture at all. The spiritual love argument threatened to subvert the very institution it was devised in some measure to justify.

Love and Parentage was written as a guidebook for « Lovers and the Married ». It was one of a variety of marital and parental handbooks written and/or published by Fowler, and not intended as a critique of marriage. But in the middle of this book, Fowler makes an unexpected and startling statement about the implications of spiritual love; « This perfect oneness of feeling and confluence of soul... alone constitutes true marriage – that divine ordinance *which entitles those who thus love each other to the rites of wedlock* ». Once again, several pages later, in discussing the need for both parties to be in love with each other before getting married, Fowler returns to the same point: « SPIRITUAL LOVE IS MATRIMONY, and entitles to its prerogatives ». This time, in a lengthy footnote, he goes on to explain his intention:

Matrimony, wedlock, and kindred terms, are used throughout this work as kindred terms with the spiritual love of sec. V, without the least regard to the presence or absence of the legal ceremony, which is only its public acknowledgement merely, not its constituent element, nor any way essential, pro or con, to its integrity. If, and as far as, it is created by the civil law or ceremony, is it a HUMAN institution merely [sic]...; whereas our doctrine places it on ground as infinitely higher, as the LAW OF GOD is more obligatory and sacred than human legislation. As long as

the legal ceremony is allowed to make and break marriage, so long... will the legal husband possess the dowry of the wife, (?) and her gallant [will possess] her person. Those who make property-matches for their children and wards, perpetuate matrimonial sacrilege, and legalize carnality; while those who interdict affianced lovers, separate « what God hath joined together » in that holy covenant of nature which marries its votaries and entitles to its rights independently of law, and in its very teeth.

What Fowler was *trying* to say here, if I read him right, is that arranged marriages are immoral because they fly in the face of true love, and that a couple who are really in love deserve the right to get married even in the face of fierce parental opposition. I suspect it is almost despite himself that he goes somewhat further than that, and strongly implies (without absolutely saying so) that love alone is enough to justify their sleeping together. It is a sign of the degree to which emergent nineteenth-century sexual ideology was still plastic and susceptible to arguments that questioned marriage along with other political, economic and cultural expressions that Orson Fowler revealed a tentative willingness during the 1840s to let his argument be swept along on the tide of its own logic until it veered into just so radical a conclusion⁵.

Fowler was a male writer. But he was not alone. His efforts at sexual reform reflect a critique of patriarchy that was shared by many feminists, domestic feminists as well as radical ones. For them, traditional marriage had merged with the patriarchal reduction of women to what we would now call (and Fowler nearly did then) sex objects. And, as I will show later, Fowler was sensitive to female concerns, and indeed would confirm feminist demands that women control the marriage bed. In the process, as Nancy Cott has shown, women would simultaneously shatter the sexual definition of themselves and become the « pure » spiritual creatures of bourgeois ideology.

John Humphrey Noyes (1811-1886) was a different kind of reformer, one who followed every assumption to whatever lengths it might lead. At his communitarian establishments in Putney, Vermont and Oneida, New York, Noyes openly celebrated sexual desire as « the first and noblest of the social affections »; his system of « Complex Marriage » encouraged shifting heterosexual relationships and banned monogamy. But even Noyes qualified this arrangement by superimposing upon it another practice, which he called « Male Continence ». According to this system, the male party in a sexual act was not permitted to reach the point of orgasm. Instead, he would remain

⁵ Think of how readers of *Love and Parentage* would have reacted to Hester Prynne's situation in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne sets the reader up to sympathize with the adulterous Hester, by contrasting her bad « institutional » marriage with her good « associational » one. Hester's legal marriage had been an arranged one, and to an older man at that. (If Hawthorne had wished to emphasize Hester's real sinfulness, he could at least have made her legal marriage a free choice). The man she truly loves, Arthur Dimmesdale, is young, handsome, and sympathetic; there is complete affinity between the two. I think that the reform ideology I am discussing in this paper, including books like *Love and Parentage*, made it possible for books like *The Scarlet Letter* to have been written, and read, in this way. Nobody, Noyes argued, would claim that the male excretion of urine is connected with sexuality; why, then, is the excretion of semen by the same organ any different?

motionless within his partner's vagina until his erection subsided, sometimes hours later. Noyes believed that orgasm was debilitating, a « drain of life on the part of man ». Noyes radicalism made explicit what was only implicit in Fowler's orthodoxy: the need to reshape sexuality by desensualizing and spiritualizing it.

Noyes rationalized this practice in an 1848 booklet, *The Bible Argument*, Noyes' reasoning went this way: what is commonly and mistakenly regarded as sexual intercourse really amounts to two separate and distinct acts, the « amative » (the term was a phrenological one, devised by Orson Fowler) and the « propagative ». The « amative » act was performed by the « organs of love or union » (that is, the penis and vagina/clitoris), while the « propagative » act was performed by the « organs of reproduction or procreation » (that is, the testes and uterus). Of these two acts, only the « amative » was truly sexual in its nature. Sexual intercourse « pure and simple », Noyes argued, consisted only of « the conjunction of the organs of union, and the interchange of magnetic influences, or « conversation of spirits », and it did not essentially involve the organs of reproduction'.

The penis conveyed not only urine and semen, but also « social magnetism ». Noyes system of Male Continence, then, removed the extraneous reproductive element from sexual relationships and rendered them more purely sexual – in a sense that Orson Fowler would probably have recognized. As Noyes put it, « amativeness » was « the first and noblest of the social affections »: by the applying of that principle in practice sex remains what it was always intended to be – « a quiet affair, like conversation ». Or again: « sexual intercourse becomes a purely social affair, the same in kind with other modes of kindly communion ». After all, « the natural instincts of our nature demands frequent congress of the sexes, not for propagative, but for social and spiritual purposes », and the « amative function » is not a matter of physical excitement at all; it consists « in a simple union of persons ». As for the purely physical excitement and gratification associated with male orgasm, that had nothing do with true sexual « union »:

The discharge of the semen and the pleasure connected with it, is not essentially social, since it can be produced in solitude... The pleasure of the act is not produced by contact and interchange of life with the female, but by the action of the seminal fluid on the internal nerves of the male organ.

Noyes's distinction between union and procreation echoes Fowler's distinction between « spiritual love » and « animal love ». It is the difference between sex for the sake of increased intimacy (« communion ») and sex for the sake of physical excitement and pleasure. To be sure, Noyes's system of Male Continence also functioned as a means of birth control, and Noyes became increasingly sure over the years that this had been its purpose all along. But it is significant, I think, that in the 1840s he did not choose to justify it in that way. In any case, even birth control can be seen as part of Noyes' radical

pattern of severing sexuality from all its traditional institutional consequences – including the exchange of property and the establishment of permanent households as well as the elimination of children. In this way Noyes embarked on a radical transformation of marriage from overdetermined institution into purest « association ».

Both Mary Gove (1811-1902) and Thomas Low Nichols (1815-1883), the man she married in 1847, had impeccable Grahamite credentials when they turned in the early 1850s to the theory and practice of free love. She had been delivering and publishing Grahamite lectures to women in the mid-1830s and had even opened a « Graham Boarding School » in 1838. He had been a leader of both the water-cure and the vegetarian movements. But by the early 1850s both of them had turned against marriage and, in two provocative books (*Esoteric Anthropology* and *Marriage*), embraced an extreme free-love position. In 1856 the couple established a small free-love community in southern Ohio. But even in this period the Nicholoses continued to express unalloyed their Grahamite ideas.

People were always to be free in their choice of sexual partners – but sex itself should not take place more than once each month, because « there is no passion so exhausting as amativeness [Fowler's phrenological term, again]. Its abuses are proportional to its uses ». Those abuses – as one might expect, masturbation was prominent among them – actually produce « two-thirds of all the diseases of mankind ». Much like Fowler and Noyes, then, Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols apparently felt no contradiction between celebrating sexuality and fearing it.

The Nicholoses, too, avoided this contradiction by employing Fowler's theory of spiritual love, which alone redeemed sex from its destructive power:

When two persons, loving each other... come together in the sexual embrace, nature has provided that a portion of the nervous expenditure of each goes to strengthen the other, and that there is comparatively little loss. In a union without love, or where all the enjoyment is on one side, the loss is greater, for there is less compensation. A merely sensual union is destitute of spiritual and magnetic compensations; but where there is the simple, artificial, and utterly unnatural excitement of the orgasm, without reciprocity, compensation, or use, the result is only evil.

But like Noyes, the Nicholoses took the institutional implications of this principle further than Orson Fowler ever dreamed, and used it to ground their radical assault on marriage. The irretrievable flaw they discovered in marriage was that it tended to subvert just the kind of intimacy and reciprocity that could alone redeem physical sex. It forced men and women to live together permanently, so that sexual contact became the function of a legal and institutional bond rather than the free expression of mutual love. And marriage permitted a couple – virtually forced them, even – to engage in sex merely to satisfy their sensual needs. It eliminated choice and sanctioned the

worst abuses of sexuality – it legalized rape. In the marriage-free world that the Nicholsons envisioned for a time, these abuses would simply disappear. In fact, as they were obliged to insist all the time, such a world would mean *less* sex, not more: « There is no doubt that the amative propensity attains a morbid activity in the constraints and repressions of civilization, and it is certain that [sexual] freedom would result in a more healthful moderation ». And the couple insisted: « Freedom, let us repeat the thousandth time, is not licentiousness, but is the only safeguard of purity and virtue ».

What seems to distinguish these sexual radicals from certain more orthodox reformers, is not their attitude about the function of sexuality, but their sense of the kind of social arrangements by which that function could best be articulated. For the orthodox, that arrangement continued, sometimes tentatively, to be monogamous marriage (now reconceived as a natural « association »), which promised to provide a rich and durable vein of meaningful interpersonal contact. For the radicals, on the other hand, the new isolation of associative marriage from the wider community revealed it to be a barren institution that fostered only boredom, mutual hostility, and sexual exploitation, stifled the intimate feelings it was intended to nourish, and exposed sensual lust as a source of special danger. As the Nicholsons put it:

With greater affectional riches, or more scope for both friendship and love, we should not be so craving for a particular object. When a man or woman is totally absorbed in one passion, it must become morbid. This love absorption is as sick as it is sickening. Enlarge the sphere of both sexes, and we should have the soul flowing out into other channels.

In a sense, it was the sexual radicals who were trying to preserve, in a new form, an older tradition in which there was no easily defined boundary between the household and the wider community, between the private realm and the public. And it was the orthodox reformers who accepted the new isolation of the private domestic unit and tried to impose on it – especially on its wives and children – the entire weight of shared feelings and activities that the larger community had once born.

As I have tried to show, the line between sexual orthodoxy and radicalism is hard to draw. It was easy for the Nicholsons to move toward orthodoxy, as they did with astonishing speed in the mid-1850s, moving from free-love to total celibacy, and then to a conservative Roman Catholicism – all within a period of months. (A few years later the Nicholsons moved to England because they could not support the Civil War). Their shift was only more extreme than most. John Humphrey Noyes edged into rigid authoritarianism over the years, and increasingly devoted himself to using sex for purposes of breeding a master-race at Oneida. Even Orson Fowler chose to dull his radical edge after the Civil War. By the time his final sexual compendium, *Creative and Sexual Science*, was published in 1870, Fowler had eliminated all references to the irrelevance of the « legal ceremony » to a real marriage.

In the meantime, the « spiritual love » theory helped justify real-life affairs. Most famous among them, perhaps, was the sensational Beecher-Tilton adultery scandal of the early 1870s (which was, like *The Scarlet Letter*, an adultery between a charismatic minister, Henry Ward Beecher, and one of Beecher's married parishioners. Beecher had been Orson Fowler's Amherst College classmate and close friend. (It had been Beecher who persuaded Fowler that phrenology was valid, and the two friends – both searching for a career – actually toured the Connecticut Valley together just after their graduation in 1832, lecturing on the subject). Both Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton justified their relationship (without ever admitting that it had been consummated) on grounds of « spiritual love ». Another well-known radical, Stephen Pearl Andrews, testified in Beecher's behalf. But by this time the implications of the spiritual-love doctrine had become clear, and conventional writers were declining to assert it. A new orthodoxy was finally becoming dominant, free now of the radical possibilities that had once bubbled up in the volatile ideological cauldron of the Jacksonian period.

But the ideology first articulated in the 1840s had long-term consequences nonetheless. These consequences were based on the heightened demands on sexuality that had first been generated in the Jacksonian period, and which are still too much with us. The strong decline in American birth rates during the nineteenth century, in the absence of easily-accessible birth control, suggests that married couples did engage in sexual relations less frequently than their parents (or they themselves) had once done. But if I am correct, this diminished sexual frequency resulted only in part from the fear of sex purveyed during the 1830s by such reformers as Sylvester Graham. In a long passage in *Love and Parentage*, Fowler alerted his readers to the possibility that what might at first strike them as bad news was really the best news they could imagine; frequent sex was not only harmful – but it actually diminished sexual pleasure. Saving sex for that special occasion would enhance its rewards: « Partake less often, that it may be with a keener relish ». « Do we not enjoy a single meal, when really hungry, more than scores when not so? So here, frequency begets satiety, and gluts the appetite and enjoyment ». Fowler reasoned that if the New Year were to come along every week instead of just once a year, it would lose its holiday flavor. So he urged his married readers to « diminish frequency so as to enhance ecstasy »⁶:

Bear in mind, that we write to PROMOTE sexual pleasure instead of to curtail it. We recommend abstinence in order to increase the sum total of enjoyment, and deprecate frequency, because destructive of the very pleasure sought. The epi-

⁶ There is something suggestive in this connection about Fowler's many references to sexual intercourse as a form of « communion ». Fowler was a New Englander by birth (he later studied briefly for the ministry at Lane Seminary), and members of New England churches were not in the habit of taking *their* communion very often and not at all when they were out of good fellowship with their fellow members. The idea was to enhance the act's personal and social effect.

curean philosophy is the true one. Self-denial forms no part of our creed. We go for SELF-enjoyment in the fullest sense of that term... [A]s the gourmand can never know exalted gustatory pleasure, so the cloyed advocates of connubial frequency necessarily deprive themselves of most of the pleasures they seek...

Fowler went still further. He argued that frequent sex not only diminished sexual pleasure, but that it would also lead to revulsion for the other party: it « breeds disgust for its paramour ». Fowler continued in terms strangely prescient of much more recent language (the italics are his own): « We are compelled by a law of mind, to regard a frequent partner of sensuality as a kind of *animal tool*, a mere sexual *thing*... ».

I think that this adds up to something new that was emerging in the 1840s – not just a new argument designed to scare people off sex. If we take seriously Fowler's claim that voluntary « abstinence » will lead to « exalted » sexual pleasure, we can interpret his argument to mean that sex should become a more tender, expressive, and mutual experience than it may have been for most people. There is reason to believe that this is just what he intended: Fowler urged both wives and husbands to give heed to « the feeling and spirit with which [sex] is participated in ». And he even suggested that couples engage in extended foreplay prior – and even without – male penetration:

Those soft accents and tender caresses [in bed] are vastly more pleasurable than ultimate indulgence, because [it allows] that spirituo-sexual magnetism... to be imparted and imbibed... from a large serous surface [that is, I assume, the naked body], besides being perpetual, and increasing by exercise...

« Indeed », Fowler concluded, « this pure and protracted embrace... imbodies the highest and holiest emotions contained in our nature and yields the most soul-hallowing and exalting repast on which mortals can banquet ».

Fowler was clearly suggesting that on those special occasions when sex did take place, it should keep going for a long time. What his vision suggests is something not really all that different from the protracted sexual « conversation » that John Humphrey Noyes was trying to enforce with his system of Male Continence. In any case, what it amounts to is a critique of casual, rushed, unloving sex, which Fowler called « brutalizing ». It seems to have been his intention that sex make up in quality what it lost in quantity. (Was that also, as some historians believe, what « traditional » sex – sex without full privacy – had mostly been like?).

Fowler's vision of sexual utopia depended on voluntary abstinence for long periods of time. But *how* long? And how would a married couple know when the time was right? Fowler's answer to these questions may not be terribly surprising, but as far as I know it was new – just as the questions themselves were new. His answer was to ask men to put a sexual veto, and even the sexual initiative, *into the hands of women*. Husbands should never force themselves on their wives, or assert their right to their wives bodies: « To *promote desire* is your only plan.. by soft words and tender manners

only ». Men should continue their courtship after marriage – « to excite those feelings which alone can render your wishes acceptable to the partner of your love » – and then wait for their wives to take the lead. « Why, then, should not woman be the umpire? ».

Woman as sexual umpire. Here, then, was a « universal guide as to frequency »:

[M]an should wait on woman in this matter of frequency, and not woman on man[.] [M]an should never obtrude on woman, but simply hold himself in readiness, subject to those invitations which woman knows full well how to give, without the shadow of impropriety, and, in reality, leading while she seems to follow[.] She, then, is that final umpire by which every husband should never fail to abide, and which if allowed to control this whole matter of frequency, will conduct nearly every married pair to complete connubial felicity. (134. Also p. vii).

In short, Fowler was proposing that women assume control of the bedroom as well as the parlor. Such a reform, he hoped, would mean that sex would take place less often than before – perhaps far less often – but also that it would be more protracted, more tender, more expressive, more mutual.

A reasonable verdict on all this must remain mixed. Some of it may have been to the good, and may even mark the origins of a more « modern » sexual behavior. These ideological reforms surely played a role in the liberalization of divorce laws in many states in the later nineteenth century. And, transferred into only a slightly different arena, they may have helped lead the way as well to new expression of homosocial friendships: to both the « female world of love and ritual » explored by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and the still-shadowy cult of male friendship, intense and self-conscious, that emerged during the nineteenth century.

But at the same time these reforms also placed an enormous burden on newly-transfigured sexuality, the burden of sustaining the entire weight of male-female relationships. That burden was only intensified by the great and concurrent fear of sexuality's destructive power, a fear that has only recently begun to fade. And what has probably not begun to fade is the assignment of radically different characteristics to men and to women – a doctrine that lay at the very core of the theory of « spiritual love », and which was first expressed in the name of « nature » itself⁷. It might be possible to say that the assault on the traditional but newly-weakened patriarchy soon generated a more familiarly romantic form of sexism. In any event, if a viable tradition of sexual freedom and equality did exist in the Jacksonian period, it is not to be found among the bourgeois reformers.

⁷ William Leach has most recently analyzed the weaknesses of « the feminist reform of sex and society », which he dates back to the 1850s, but some of them were surely derived in part from the doctrines of the 1840s with which I have been dealing.