

"The Word Made Flesh": Language, Authority, and Sexual Desire in Late Nineteenth-Century America

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In a letter written to Ezra Heywood, editor of an obscure monthly newspaper called *The Word*, a reader described an experience she had had with her daughter. "The other day," she wrote in 1881, "my little girl, who is in her twelfth year, came to me and said, 'Mama, what does "fuck" mean?'" The girl's mother quickly asked her where she had heard such a word. "Why, today at school, Willie ——— said to

me, 'Mamie, won't you fuck me?'" her daughter breezily replied. Rather than express shock or condemn her child's youthful inquiry, the woman responded by telling her "exactly what it meant." In doing so she described the act in "plain English words of four letters" and used her own body, as well as "a well-executed photograph of the male organ in [a] state of erection," to demonstrate the physiological issues involved in sexual intercourse.

On the face of it, the writing and publication of this letter is startling. In an age that has been characterized by its prudery, reticence, and censorship, such sentiments and such language seem quite out of place. This reaction, however, is primarily the result of a gap in our understanding of the diversity of the sexual culture of nineteenth-century America. Although recent scholarship has done much to supplant the traditional view of the monolithic power of the repressive sexual morality that emerged by the 1830s, we still know much more about Victorian efforts to shape sexual ideology and behavior than we do about those who opposed them. Little is known, for example, of the activities of nineteenth-century sexual radicals—the self-described "Free Lovers"—who rejected the ideas advocated in Victorian "primers for prudery." Studies that have been done on these reformers have concentrated primarily on the legal struggles that accompanied their efforts to disseminate birth control information or to defend First Amendment freedoms. These studies, however, have not paid sufficient attention to the battles over words—the politics of language—that were central to the conflicts that occurred between competing sexual ideologies. The goal of this essay is to examine these struggles to define the nature of public language from the perspective of those who attempted to expand the limits of sexual discourse as well as from the point of view of those who sought to constrict it.

Throughout the nineteenth century, heated debates occurred over the meaning of words and their proper usage. These linguistic controversies took a variety of forms and reflected large-scale changes in the structure of American life. Urbanization, industrialization, social and geographic mobility, and the emergence of a democratic culture all worked to undermine stable patterns of deference by multiplying the ways in which all forms of knowledge were communicated. The number of voices making themselves heard, as well as the linguistic styles they used, was expanding. Preexisting boundaries, based on gender and class distinctions, that had served to limit access to the public domain of expression and expertise were being destroyed. As a result, the question of who could speak and write and the context in which this would occur became politically divisive issues. These battles over language were an outgrowth of the struggles between competing groups who strongly believed that words could shape the new social world that was emerging.

Waging war against the growing use of vernacular forms of speech, for example, linguistic conservatives argued that diction, syntax, and word choice reflected the essential character of men and women and determined the nature of society itself. The sensuality aroused by the use of slang undermined the internalized hierarchy of reason over desire. Further, colloquialisms and informal language created a false intimacy that destroyed the "natural" hierarchy between the refined and the vulgar, which was the basis of a stable social order. These linguistic purists—whose numbers included journalists, clergymen, and educators—insisted that the proper use of words would promote reticence and reserve, rather than garrulity and familiarity,

and would recreate a social world in which proper deference would reign over an unchecked egalitarianism.

Nowhere was the struggle between linguistic purity and vulgarity more evident than in the conflict over words used to describe sexuality. Although the contending voices in this dialogue supported diametrically opposed ideas on the nature of sexuality and the role it should play in the creation of their vision of the ideal society, all were convinced of its power and sought to monitor and guide it. Linking consciousness to conduct, the participants in this struggle believed that the erotic imagination and the behavior it inspired could be controlled if the words used to describe sexuality were carefully chosen. They all believed, in short, that language could be used to regulate the expression of sexual desires.

Efforts to use language to control erotic images and impulses escalated throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, they played a central role in the development of Victorian sexual ideology. Motivated by their distrust of sensual desires, Victorian moralists worked to inculcate a sense of shame in response to erotic stirrings and promoted chastity in thought and speech as well as in conduct. Convinced that individual health and social stability required the strict regulation of sexual desires, they correspondingly attempted to circumscribe the social geography of sexual discussions by sharply distinguishing between language that was appropriate for public and for private life. Their attempts to eradicate linguistic and artistic forms of "obscenity" that began with local, extralegal actions of vice societies in the 1830s and culminated in the enactment of the Postal Act of 1873 (known as the Comstock Act) grew out of this desire to restrict sexuality to the private arena.

By severely limiting what could be said, where it could be said, and who could say it, Victorian moralists attempted to suppress any discussion of sexuality that had not been carefully neutered. Those empowered to discuss this topic—clergymen, physicians, and moral reformers—engaged in conversations filled with biblical images of sin and redemption, medical metaphors of sickness and health, and obtuse euphemistic references that carefully filtered out any hint of sensuality. Fearful of the stark imagery connoted by vulgar language, they condemned words that incited forms of sexual behavior threatening to the institutions and relationships they had created to control erotic desires. Rather than reflect a conspiracy of silence that sought to eliminate all discussions of sexual issues, the goal of Victorian prudery was to use language to properly socialize desire.

Within the expanding terrain of public language in the nineteenth century, however, there were also many attempts to create alternative ways of writing about sexuality. The most radical attempts were made by the Free Lovers. The Free Lovers first appeared in the 1850s, when the term "free love" became more than a derisive epithet used to describe any form of sexual behavior that deviated from prescribed norms. It instead denoted a system of ideas that challenged Victorian sexual ideology. During this time the term "Free Lover" was also capitalized and used as a descriptive noun to indicate membership in a loosely knit but highly self-conscious group of politically and socially active men and women. Drawing on the ideas of utopian reformers of the early nineteenth century, the Free Lovers sought to regenerate society by reconstructing the relationships that regulated the expression of human emotions.

One of the most important ways in which the Free Lovers sought to achieve their goals centered on their use of "obscene" language. Their use of such language to

promote their radical ideas, they claimed, was not motivated by a desire to titillate their audience. Rather, it reflected their fundamental desire to eradicate a sexual culture they saw as corrupt and corrupting. Much more was at stake here than simply free speech: the Free Lovers' war against Victorian prudery was an attempt to fundamentally transform American society through the revitalization of language.

Like their orthodox counterparts, the Free Lovers believed that what was said in public influenced what was performed in private. In contrast to conservative moralists, however, they argued that the unwillingness to candidly discuss every aspect of human physiology led not to purity and health but to vulgarity and disease. By exercising their right to investigate the "sexual question" and to communicate their findings, they tried to create an alternative sexual discourse. Sexual health could be achieved, they maintained, only after "the prudishness, the false modesty that shrinks from open and fearless discussion of everything pertaining to the sexual nature of men and women" had been overcome. Not denial but confrontation, not euphemisms but direct expression, not "suppression or prohibition, but education and enlightenment" would destroy unhealthy behavior and return the sexual appetites of men and women to their "natural" condition. In their reform ideology, the purification of the physical body as well as the body politic depended on the open examination of human sexuality.

In order to use language to transform consciousness and behavior, the editors of Free Love newspapers published materials that challenged the fundamental tenets of Victorian sexual ideology. Among the most influential were Moses Harman, editor of *Lucifer, the Light-Bearer*, and Ezra Hervey Heywood, editor of *The Word*. These newspapers provided a forum in which they and their audience could describe their sexual experiences without fear of censorship. For example, they published articles that rejected the image of childhood as a state of sexual innocence and argued for an education that would expose children to the "facts" of human sexuality rather than the "soothing-syrup of legalized duplicity and fashionable deceit!" Defending their right to disseminate birth control information, these editors also printed advertisements and articles that described a variety of contraceptive practices, and they initiated a series of debates on the benefits and problems created by their use.

Heywood and Harman also paraded before the eyes of their readers striking examples of "aberrant" sexual behavior. Their newspapers were filled with vivid accounts of wives driven to illness or early graves by the unbridled lusts of their husbands. Sadie Magoon of Los Angeles, for example, related a typical case of one woman who had married what most considered to be "a good man." His constant sexual demands, however, soon destroyed her health. "The sparkle left her eye, and the bloom her cheeks. She grew thin and had a peculiar gait, and at last could no longer walk at all, and was confined to her bed and in time became partially paralyzed." But the horror continued. Even while bedridden and placed under a nurse's care, when her day nurse left she was at the total mercy of her husband, a "human brute," who continued to gratify his desires. "Through his constant nightly abuses she was, to quote from her nurse and my informant," wrote Magoon, "'raw as beef steak.'" The plight of this woman, as well as the experiences of countless others who were similarly treated, were publicized as examples of "the hidden mysteries of the marriage institution." Since the "secrets of the inner temple of home" were

guarded more closely than "those of the cloister," the Free Lovers insisted that the conspiracy of silence had to be broken for the liberation of the enslaved to begin.

In addition to these stories of "women who slowly perished" as a result of the "sexual excesses forced on them" by their husbands, the editors of Free Love newspapers also published accounts of other forms of sexual "perversion." In a letter that found its way into the columns of *Lucifer* in 1890, for example, Dr. Richard V. O'Neill, a New York physician, described his treatment of a woman whose mouth and throat were filled with "venereal ulcers" as a result of her husband "putting his private organ into his wife's mouth," as well as his contact with a man who sought a cure for his "insatiable appetite for human semen [emphasis in original]." The patient, who claimed to have inherited this disease from his father, complained that he had traveled far and wide in order "to find men to allow him to 'suck them off' as he says." Further, the patient confessed that he had often engaged in oral sex with members of his family, men as well as women, who would "suck each other's private parts in the presence of each other."

In the hands of the Free Lovers, deviant behavior was neither celebrated nor condemned. Rather, they believed that only by publicly acknowledging these acts of perversion in clear language could they be understood and eliminated. As Harman argued, the "cancers that are eating the life out of our social system can never be cured by the covering up or plastering over process. The evil must be laid bare in all its native hideousness. The healing influences of nature's air and sunshine must be allowed to do their work if ever the patient is to be cured." Straining against the conspiracy of silence that confined the discussion of these "hidden crimes" to "private circles," these sexual muckrakers publicized them in order to create a groundswell of public outrage and inspire political action that would effectively meliorate the conditions they described. . . .

By far the most radical nineteenth-century critique of linguistic prudery was carried on by Angela Fiducia Tilton Heywood and her husband and comrade, Ezra Heywood. Together, they achieved considerable notoriety in the 1870s and 1880s by using words that offended almost everyone, including some Free Lovers. While the Free Lovers regarded themselves as supporters of "the most unpopular of all unpopular reforms," the Heywoods' ideas on the power of words to effect changes in consciousness and behavior placed them at the cutting edge of even this most radical of movements. Stephen Pearl Andrews, an ardent critic of many aspects of Victorian society, observed in 1883 that the "boldness of speech" in which they expressed their views on marriage and sexuality "frightened and repelled the conservatives on the one hand, and even more their own associates in the reformatory world, who were not ready to be committed to so much." In the important struggle for the freedom to speak openly about the "sex question," Andrews concluded, they were "the extreme case; if they can be endured, anybody can."

As the publisher of unorthodox notions and obscene language, it was Ezra Heywood who faced the wrath of the censors and the judicial system empowered to impose their will. It was Angela Heywood, however, who provided the most outspoken defense of their "habit of saying naughty words, and shocking the whole world by saying them." Such words, she argued, effectively exposed the gap between private behavior and public language. The use of "naughty words," however, would do more than illuminate the hypocrisy of the old moral order. The language

of sexual candor also held the power to transform social relationships. For Angela Heywood, words were symbols of vibrant truths, the expression of which would destroy the artificial inhibitions that sustained all forms of inequality. By enabling men and women to communicate their emotions in a more direct way, words could liberate them from destructive forms of consciousness and behavior.

Angela Heywood's desire to openly discuss every aspect of human sexuality developed at an early age. "As a girl," she recalled in 1889, "I used to say, in myself, 'When I grow up I shall deal with men's penises, write books about them; I mean to and I will do it.'" An odd goal for a nineteenth-century woman, yet it was one that she realized nonetheless. Her ambitions were in part inspired by her intellectual heritage. Born in Deerfield, New Hampshire, she traced her lineage on her mother's side to John Locke. From her mother, Lucy M. Tilton, Angela inherited her distaste for the prudery of "'learned' men and 'refined' women" as well as the corresponding view that sexuality was worthy of "respect and study." Raised on a farm and alerted to the natural processes of animal reproduction, she early learned to regard human sexuality with reverence. "From babyhood," she wrote in 1884, "I was taught to have sacred regard for the human body-form and all its belongings, to call penis 'penis' and womb 'womb'; it never occurred to me that it could be considered indelicate or 'vulgar' to speak, orally or writtenly, of sex organs by their proper names."

Moreover, as a young woman she was drawn to the ideas of a circle of abolitionists and transcendentalists whom she regarded as her "immediate teachers," which included William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. As a result of her contact with what Stephen Pearl Andrews described as "the old antislavery ranks," when she began to explore the sex question she "carried their *Abolitionist* boldness of speech into that subject." While the antislavery radicals may have inspired her willingness to speak out, the essential element of Angela Heywood's critique of linguistic prudery—the belief in the redemptive power of words themselves—was most influenced by what [literary critic] F. O. Matthiessen has described as the "transcendental conception of language."

By the mid-nineteenth century, writers such as Emerson, Parker, Alcott, and Whitman had developed a sharp critique of the linguistic shifts that accompanied the development of Victorianism as a cultural system. Modern civilization, with its emphasis on "respectability," conformity, and materialism, had alienated man from his natural environment. Reflecting this fall from grace, the essential link between words and the physical and spiritual realities they represented had been destroyed. As Emerson argued in 1836, the "corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language." . . .

For these transcendentalists, the solution to both forms of corruption lay in the redemptive power of language. By reconnecting words to things, language would be revitalized. It could then provide men and women with a clear, coherent, and ultimately harmonizing vision of their physical desires, the natural world, and the spiritual truths they symbolized. Influenced by German idealism and English romanticism, the transcendentalists looked to the language of the "folk"—in this case, the earthiness of Elizabethan Saxon English—as the source for authentic forms of communication. The rehabilitation of language and society, they argued,

would only occur when the words and phrases spoken in fields and streets replaced the language found in dictionaries and literature. . . .

In addition to democratizing the sources of language, the transcendentalists expanded the perimeters of what it could describe. All experiences, ranging from cooking and cleaning to courting and loving, were worthy of discussion. Moreover, as Emerson argued, such discussions should include words—even “obscene” words—normally “excluded from polite conversation.” Carrying this idea further, Whitman insisted that the reconnection of words to things would only occur after the “forbidden voices . . . of sexes and lusts” had been freed from the censor’s grip. Once men and women had learned to “publicly accept, and publicly name, with specific words” every aspect of human sexuality without resorting to the euphemisms of genteel society, that which had formerly been “indecent” would be “clarified and transfigur’d.” . . .

Along with ideas imbued by her mother or learned from radical thinkers, Angela Heywood’s desire to challenge the linguistic purity created by what she referred to as “the compound of silks, insinuation, laces, and mincing called society” was also driven by her own experiences as a working woman. Taught the value of work at an early age, Angela engaged in a variety of occupations, ranging from domestic servant, seamstress, farmhand, and innkeeper to librarian, writer, and platform speaker. As one who maintained a lifelong sympathy for the plight of working women, Angela always resented the fact that “shop-girls, mill-girls, and house-girls [are] regarded below par in social life simply because they work and have not means accumulated from others’ earnings.” Moreover, as Stephen Pearl Andrews observed in 1883, her contempt for “the superciliousness and pretension of superiority by the rich and ‘cultured’” was influenced by the ways in which working girls were verbally and physically treated by the men and women of the professional and leisured classes. In a short biographical sketch, Andrews perceptively noted that Angela Heywood and “others of her order were constantly approached and tempted or insulted by men of the so-called superior classes.” From such contacts she early learned that the “private language and lives” of these men were “utterly corrupt,” but in public their words and deeds “were delicate and refined to the last degree.” Angela Heywood’s firsthand experience with the “organized hypocrisy” of genteel society, combined with her “natural and inherited revolt against a pretended sanctity, propriety and culture on the part of the polished hypocrites,” led to her firm “determination that folks shall hear openly talked about what in secret they dwell on as the staple of their lives; that the hypocrisy shall be exposed; that the inflated pretense of virtue which does not exist shall be punctured and collapsed.”

As a self-described “word painter,” Angela attempted to use words to reveal the brutality and unhappiness bred by Victorian sexual ideology. Her goal was to communicate the inner truths obscured by genteel language and reintroduce men and women to what she referred to as a transcendent “throbbing” or vitalistic “rhythmic Reality.” By enunciating “words of fire and power,” connections could be drawn between the symbol and the truth it represented, dissipating the foggy mists spun by Victorian prudery. In pursuit of what she called “Fleshed Realism,” she sought to make the word flesh, a transforming force that would draw its power for change from the essential truths it reflected. The radical alteration of the sexual lives of men

and women—the rehabilitation of desire—would result from the revitalization of the language used to describe sexuality.

Angela Heywood’s efforts to revise what she termed “sex-nomenclature” extended even to the very names of the sexual organs and their functions. This became a cause célèbre when she began advocating the use of the “Anglo-Saxon” designation for “two well known objects and their associative use”—namely, “c[ock], c[unt] and f[uck].” Her use of the infamous “three words” created quite a stir, not only among genteel moralists, but within the Free Love movement itself. Notoriety, however, was not her goal. Her defense of the use of these words grew out of her earlier attempts in the 1870s to include the word “penis” in her lectures. Angela’s insistence that this word be used in public discourse was inspired by her belief that a new language would equalize the relationship between men and women. Since women did not possess “formulas of expression concerning the male generative organ,” she insisted, “woman’s generative organ has, for ages, been a foot-ball in men’s talk.” Because of this gap in women’s vocabulary, “no companionable exchange in dialect” had been possible. The dialogue between men and women thus had always been lopsided, in favor of men.

Seeking to realign the balance of power, Angela Heywood argued that in *The Word*, as well as in nature, “Penis goes with Womb,” and she warned that their “‘cultured’ readers” would have to get over their distaste for it. “If man says ‘womb’ without rising heat or dishonest purpose,” she argued, “why should not woman say ‘penis’ without blushing squirm or sheepish looks.” “Penis and Womb,” she announced, “have arrived in Literature” and should become permanent fixtures in any discussion of the intimate lives of men and women.

Eventually, however, Angela grew dissatisfied with the Latinate designations of the sexual organs. For her, the term “penis” no longer adequately described the male organ’s power and vigor. “What mother can look in the face of her welcome child and not religiously respect the rigid, erect, ready-for-service, persistent male-organ that sired it?” she mused in 1887. “Penis is a smooth, musical, almost feminine word,” she argued, and should be replaced by the word “cock” as the symbolic designation of the male organ. “Built projective, carrying the seed of Life, ordained to propose what woman may accept, man is instinctively true to nature in coining the word cock to define creative power,” she insisted. Preferring Saxon words, she maintained that they “exactly define sex-organs and their mutual use.” Why should people be afraid of such words, she wondered. “In literature we have cocks as weathervanes, cocks as faucets, cocks as fowls, cocked hats, cocked rifles and cocks as leading gentlemen members of clubs.” This word would have more power, and be truer to its function, if it were used to describe the male reproductive organ. Even though “Latin names and devious phrases prevail in literary and scientific discourse,” she urged Americans to incorporate “plain English” designations of the “sexual organs and their use” into their everyday speech and writing. Only then, she insisted, would “predatory penis-commerce” cease to exist.

For Angela Heywood, it was “not the pen only, but the penis” that was “mightier than the sword.” Or rather, it was the penis guided by the pen and what it represented—conscious thought, discussion and choice—that would lead to the regeneration of public and private life. As long as sexual desire is not “spoken out about, in the mental, social, and literary world, so long will disaster mar sex-experience.”

While in the past the improper use of man's sexuality had transformed it into a powerful force of destruction, by discussing its nature and the consequences of its expression men could learn to control their desires and redeem themselves by treating women with respect. "An *irresponsible* penis manufactures 'prostitutes,' 'harlots,' 'whores,' 'strumpets,'" she stated, but "a conscientious penis *glorifies* woman."

Stressing the importance of "intelligent, natural, honest, plain-speaking," Angela emphasized her belief that communication should precede physical contact. When men and women speak honestly to one another, the "light beam of thought" creates cooperation through understanding. "Such graceful terms as hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, fucking, throbbing, kissing, and kin words, are telephone expressions," Angela argued, "lighthouses of intercourse centrally immutable to the situation." While feelings can be communicated through touch, a more intimate form of contact would be established if men and women demonstrated a "spontaneous, expressive candor." Once they "think" about each other as well as "feel" one another, once they place "man's penis under scrutiny of day-light Thinking as well as in test of physical, mid-night Feeling," the unhealthy images fostered by the prudery of orthodox morality would be erased and the dark side of sexuality would disappear.

Through her creation of a new "human grammar," Angela sought to realize "Sex-Unity," or the harmonious relation between the sexes. Such a "natural mode" of expression would free women from forms of communication that reinforced their powerlessness. . . . By controlling language and "keeping the mysteries of Sex, the secrets of coition, the momentous potencies of Love and Parentage deep *hidden* in dark places" beyond their reach, men maintained their control over women. Autonomy for women would be achieved only after a revolution in the ways in which affectional relationships are discussed, envisioned, and experienced. And the agent of revolution, Angela asserted, will be "the force of woman's tongue" calling men's "penises, over-loaded with white, child-making blood . . . to order." In the past, she concluded, women had been "ears and men mouths; now we must speak also."

By eliminating the artificial boundaries that separated public life from private life and exposing the hypocrisy of social elites, Angela sought to inaugurate a revolution in class as well as in gender relationships. The liberation of women from their bondage to men was part of a larger struggle to free both women and men from a system of economic and political domination. Striking out at the oppression bred by the centralized control of knowledge, Angela argued that those in power were fearful of the circulation of ideas. The "church-state grip" on sexual knowledge, she wrote, keeps "women and labor" in a condition of "subjected destitution." The power of elites, she contended, was maintained by their "usurpation of the means of education, legalized censorship of the press, of behavior and morals." As a result, "propertyless workers" were rendered the "helpless slaves of privileged robbers." Economic and political equality would only be realized after the power that orthodox moralists gained by "falsifying words" had been destroyed.

Just as women, properly armed with an expressive sexual vocabulary, were to be responsible for their own liberation in private life, the economically downtrodden and politically powerless were to be revolutionary agents for change in public life. . . . The raw language used by the "girls and boys of the street," who described their bodies without the affectation of restraint, would redeem society. True civilization, she concluded, "comes up from the masses, not down from the classes."

For Angela Heywood, the reconstruction of gender and class relationships awaited the revitalization of the language of sexual discourse. "When fit words please the ear as physical-human beauty pleases the eye, when sentences are quick with warm, throbbing life; when LANGUAGE, in original power and charming surprise, is the perennial miracle Spontaneity allows it to be; when souls know bodies, and mind informs matter well-enough to help us meet and work in the realm of ethical possibility," the millennium will be at hand. A "new literature," she argued, would create "new social harmonies, a new heaven and a new earth." Reconnecting words to things, obscene language would inaugurate the social and emotional transformations that Victorian moralists were struggling to forestall. As a result of her linguistic innovations, class and gender hierarchies would be destroyed, and equality and intimacy would replace inequality and formality in *public* as well as in *private* relationships.

From the perspective of both the Free Lovers and those who tried to censor their efforts, the restriction or expansion of sexual discourse held the key to the structure and character of the social order itself. While both groups celebrated a common vision of an ideal world in which health and virtue flourished, each was convinced that the ideas and patterns of behavior advocated by their opposing faction led only to disease and immorality.

Anthony Comstock, for example, who spent his professional career putting gamblers, pornographers, and quack doctors behind bars, claimed that he knew of "nothing more offensive to decency, or more revolting to good morals" than the publications of Free Lovers such as Angela and Ezra Heywood. He found them to be "foul of speech, shameless in their lives, and corrupting in their influence," and he warned of certain "ruin and death" awaiting those entranced by their doctrines. Their goal, he argued, was to destroy the moral "restraints" that ensured premarital chastity and marital fidelity. In pursuit of this end, they held "public meetings where foul-mouthed women" lectured to audiences who were reduced to an "enervated, lazy, shiftless, corrupt breed of human beings, devoid of common decency, not fit companions, in many cases, to run with swine."

In their struggles "to protect the morals of the community" and prevent "the libertine and rake from poisoning the minds" of the young, moralists such as Anthony Comstock underscored the power of words to unleash or restrain "the baser passions." This is clearly demonstrated in Comstock's description of a young man confronting a piece of "obscene literature." . . . In the conservative Victorian imagination, mental purity was maintained only by avoiding words and images that elicited sensual thoughts. "Good reading refines, elevates, ennobles, and stimulates the ambition to lofty purposes," Comstock concluded, while "evil reading debases, degrades, perverts, and turns away from lofty aims to follow examples of corruption and criminality."

In contrast, the Free Lovers envisioned themselves as sexual scientists pursuing knowledge that would liberate men and women from the corrupting influences of orthodox morality. Moses Harman clearly expressed this in his response to a reader's request for aid in obtaining "obscene books and pictures." "Lasciviousness and salacity are signs of abnormality or perversion, due primarily to ignorance," he wrote, "and the pure minded will make use of these symptoms as the physician does

the symptoms of disease, and guided by these symptoms try to assist the sufferer to health or sanity."

For the Free Lovers, mental purity was gained through education. They explained away the heightened prudishness displayed by censors like Comstock as a manifestation of the guilt they felt toward their own overheated sexual imaginations. "If Anthony Comstock will seriously and carefully examine into his own emotional condition," wrote one of Angela Heywood's supporters in 1890, "he will find himself troubled, and seriously so, with perverted and depraved emotions, which he should immediately try to correct, by a scientific course of hygiene." As Angela herself argued, the "pretense that English words, which so exactly define sex-organs and their mutual use, are indelicate, is a part of that mental disease which, insisting that ignorance guarantees social purity, enacts 'obscenity statutes' to hinder increase of physiological knowledge!" Rather than an effort to maintain moral purity, the Free Lovers viewed the activities of these censors as a conspiracy on the part of church, state, and genteel society to perpetuate economic and emotional slavery.

While they shared a common goal—mental purity—orthodox moralists and sexual radicals were thus divided by their differing views on how to realize it. In contrast to genteel efforts to avoid discussing unsavory topics, the Free Lovers fought to expand the dimensions of public discourse to include the exploration of private issues. This difference cost the Free Lovers dearly. The "war of words," wrote David W. Hull after the arrest of his brother Moses Hull in 1876, often led to "actual battles" fought by men and women who were willing to "come forward and face the danger."

In rural areas and in small towns, for example, linguistic prudery was enforced primarily by community leaders who controlled access to knowledge, as well as through more informal controls, such as gossip, social ostracism, and the ever present "scarecrow" of respectability, Mrs. Grundy. In these village environments, the Free Lovers also faced mobs of local citizens, who torched their homes and printing offices and confiscated and burned their publications. Further, it was not uncommon for those on the lecture circuit to be attacked by armed toughs who threatened, and frequently delivered, violence against their persons as well as their property.

In urban centers, where knowledge was more easily disseminated and a consensus on moral issues was more difficult to maintain, efforts to censor language relied on more formal controls. With the passage of the Postal Act, which empowered Comstock and his agents to examine letters, newspapers, journals, and books sent through the mails for "obscene" content, the federal government joined ranks with the growing number of local reform societies after the Civil War who used the police and courts to prosecute sexual radicals. Ezra Heywood, for example (whose experience was far from unique), was arrested and convicted in 1890 for publishing the letter quoted at the beginning of this essay. At the age of sixty-one, he was sentenced to two years in prison.

Even though, as Walt Whitman observed in 1882, the linguistic prudery of "good folks" found in "good print everywhere" seemed to "lingeringly pervade all modern literature, conversation and manners," it is important to remember that it did not go unchallenged. It is equally important to note that this challenge provoked an intense reaction. Throughout the last three decades of the nineteenth century,

the Free Lovers were confronted by a wide range of enemies. "Mobs from the streets, local and national 'government,' 'religious' intolerance, lascivious superstition, the Pharisees of 'morality' and the Pharisees of 'culture' have all in turn wrestled with the Free Love Idea," Ezra Heywood defiantly proclaimed, "and all have been thrown by it."

While Ezra Heywood's views on the Free Lovers' ability to circumvent the forces that sought to silence them were overly optimistic, the hardships they endured as a consequence of their battles with censorship were essential to shaping sexual discourse in the nineteenth century. Unlike pornographers and abortionists, whose acts were clothed in secrecy until exposed by Comstock and his agents, the Free Lovers courted prosecution in order to uncover the duplicity of genteel society. "Called to public discourse on sex-issues" in response to the efforts of orthodox moralists "to suppress [the] investigation of [sexual] questions by invasive 'statutes,'" as Angela Heywood observed in an article tellingly entitled "Penis Literature," they met the forces of censorship head on and openly challenged their power to place controls on sexual discourse. In consequence, the Free Lovers faced the full wrath of their censors and continually tested the limits of their authority. As one of their contemporaries argued, by publishing "words morally certain to provoke arrest," the Free Lovers expanded the margins of free speech and provided a buffer that "marked the limits of safety" in which more moderate critics of Victorian society and culture could operate.

Moreover, by bringing to light the "wail of suffering" and the "cries of distress" of those ill served by Victorian sexual ideology, the Free Lovers showed many people that their discomfort was not unique and emboldened them to speak out against Victorian ideas and institutions. By revealing the private experiences hidden by public discourse, they were able to criticize Victorian moralists for not living up to the very values they espoused. . . .

. . . The Free Lovers exposed the connection between the language used by the "upper" ten" and the "'lower' million" in order to eliminate the destructive consequences of the hypocrisy bred by the separation of public and private life and by the rift between words and things. To accomplish this, they liberated sexual discourse from the mincing words of prudes and from the sniggering vulgarity of back-street conversations and promoted a vocabulary that allowed men and women to regain control over their erotic and emotional lives. . . .

While their willingness to shock "public sensibilities" by exploring issues previously "tabooed or held to be improper for public discussion" was the source of their strength as reformers, it was also responsible for the unsavory reputation the Free Lovers gained at the hands of conservative moralists. Held up as symbols of depravity, they were relegated to the margins of social discourse, both in their own day and in the decades that followed. Zacariah Chafee, Jr., for example, while researching an entry on Ezra Heywood for the *Dictionary of American Biography*, noted in 1929 that because Heywood had "strayed so far from the paths of orthodoxy," no other biographical dictionary had been "willing to soil its pages with any mention of him." More than sixty years later, the radical ideas and activities of Free Lovers such as Moses Harman and Angela and Ezra Heywood still remain largely unexplored. Nonetheless, in order to understand the battles that shaped the sexual

culture of nineteenth-century America, it is necessary to restore their efforts to re-define the limits of public language to the historical record.

Seeking to understand the relationship between language, authority, and desire, the Free Lovers used words to bring subconscious ideas into the arena of conscious thought and rational control, celebrated their power to regenerate the individual and transform society, and explored the relationship between language and the construction of the gendered self, the social self, and, in ways that intertwined the two, the sexual self. Only by viewing these activities within the framework of the broader nineteenth-century concern with the power of words to shape consciousness and behavior—as well as with the powers that words represent and serve—can we fully understand the reasons why the Free Lovers risked so much to expand the discourse of desire.

The Criminally Obscene Women of Chicago

SHIRLEY J. BURTON

Perhaps the most famous woman ever denounced as obscene in Chicago was Fahreda Mahzar, who assumed the stage name "Little Egypt" when she performed at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition. Dressed in a gauze shirt, vest, and skirts reaching nearly to her ankles, Mahzar moved her feet and legs only slightly as she danced, swaying her arms and torso in an undulating motion which critics condemned as indecent, but Little Egypt's performance was one of the most popular attractions of the fair, which also boasted a spectacular electrical lighting display, a scholarly symposium introducing Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, and a new mechanical amusement called the Ferris wheel. Little Egypt's promoters described her performance at "A Street in Cairo" as the *danse du ventre*, but Anthony Comstock, the nation's foremost censor, called it the "hootchie cootchie" and demanded it be shut down.

When a newspaper reported that Bertha Palmer, queen of Chicago society and president of the fair's Board of Lady Managers, had taken a group of friends to Little Egypt's performance, Palmer indignantly denied the accusation and added her voice to that of George Davis, one of the fair's most influential committeemen, who demanded that the show be closed. In the flurry of controversy that followed, Ida Craddock, a Chicago shorthand expert, sex counselor, and Social Purist, sent Palmer a four-page defense of the dance, describing it as "a religious memorial inculcat[ing] purity and self-control." Bertha Palmer remained publicly unpersuaded, but Little Egypt stayed in business, probably because the show was simply too popular for the fair directors to close.

While Little Egypt avoided the censorship of the law, Ida Craddock did not. Continuing her defense of the performance, Craddock wrote an article called "The Danse du Ventre," which was published in the *Chicago Clinic*, a medically oriented

called obscene. Yet a trade is permitted in a class of nostrums the very advertisement of which, no matter how carefully and delicately worded, must have a very injurious effect upon the minds of both sexes. One of the most dangerous of these moral effects is the result of the open manner in which the sale of these nostrums is carried on, and the character of the magazines and newspapers which publish the advertisements. To suppress the advertisement, either in newspapers, or by circulars or handbills, of any drug or mixture which is claimed to act as an emmenagogue, or to correct menstrual irregularity, of whatever name or nature, must be as legitimate a matter for corrective legislation as the liquor-traffic, or any other evil, the suppression of which is deemed for the good of society.

In offering, therefore, for the consideration of the Medical-Legal Society, an amendment to the law of 1868, I do so with great diffidence as to the legal part of the remedy, but not with lessened faith that the enactment of such an amendment, and its rigid enforcement, would be a lasting measure for the correction of public morality.

3. Anthony Comstock Condemns Obscene Literature, 1883

Each birth begins a history. The pages are filled out, one by one, by the records of daily life. The mind is the source of action. Thoughts are the aliment upon which it feeds. We assimilate what we read. The pages of printed matter become our companions. Memory unites them indissolubly, so that, unlike an enemy, we cannot get away from them. They are constant attendants to quicken thought and influence action.

[Good reading refines, elevates, ennobles, and stimulates the ambition to lofty purposes. It points upward. Evil reading debases, degrades, perverts, and turns away from lofty aims to follow examples of corruption and criminality.]

This book is designed to awaken thought upon the subject of *Evil Reading*, and to expose to the minds of parents, teachers, guardians, and pastors, some of the mighty forces for evil that are to-day exerting a controlling influence over the young. There is a shameful recklessness in many homes as to what the children read.

The community is cursed by pernicious literature. Ignorance as to its debasing character in numerous instances, and an indifference that is disgraceful in others, tolerate and sanction this evil.

Parents send their beloved children to school, and text-books are placed in their hands, while lesson after lesson and precept after precept are drilled into them. But through criminal indifference to other reading for the children than their text-books, the grand possibilities locked up in the future of every child, if kept pure, and all the appetites and passions controlled, are often circumscribed and defeated at its threshold of life. This book is a plea for the moral purity of children. It is an appeal for greater watchfulness on the part of those whose duty it is to think, act, and speak for that very large portion in the community who have neither intellect nor judgment to decide what is wisest and best for themselves. It brings to parents the question of their responsibility for the future welfare of their offspring.

If a contagious disease be imported to these shores in some ship, at once the vessel and her passengers are quarantined. The port is promptly closed to the disease. The agent that brings it is estopped from entering the harbor until the contagion has been removed. It is the author's purpose to send a message in advance to parents, so that they may avert from their homes a worse evil than yellow fever or small-pox. Read the facts, and let them speak words of warning.

The author, during an experience of nearly eleven years, has seen the effects of the[se] evils. . . . If strong language is used, it is because no other can do the subject justice.

This work represents facts as they are found to exist. If it shall be the means of arousing parents as to what their children read, of checking evil reading among the young, or of awakening a public sentiment against the prevailing wickedness of the day, the writer will be content. . . .

Because men will deny, scoff, and curse is no reason why these truths should not be laid before the minds of thinking men and women. . . .

Our youth are in danger; mentally and morally they are cursed by a literature that is a disgrace to the nineteenth century. The spirit of evil environs them.

Let no man be henceforth indifferent. Read, reflect, act. . . .

This moral vulture [obscene literature] steals upon our youth in the home, school, and college, silently striking its terrible talons into their vitals, and forcibly bearing them away on hideous wings to shame and death. Like a cancer, it fastens itself upon the imagination, and sends down into the future life thousands of roots, poisoning the nature, enervating the system, destroying self-respect, fettering the will-power, defiling the mind, corrupting the thoughts, leading to secret practices of most foul and revolting character, until the victim tires of life, and existence is scarcely endurable. It sears the conscience, hardens the heart, and damns the soul. It leads to lust and lust breeds unhallowed living, and sinks man, made in the image of God, below the level of the beasts. There is no force at work in the community more insidious, more constant in its demands, or more powerful and far-reaching than lust. *It is the constant companion of all other crimes.* It is honeycombing society. Like a frightful monster, it stands peering over the sleeping child, to catch its first thoughts on awakening. This is especially true where the eye of youth has been defiled with the scenes of lasciviousness in the weekly criminal papers, or by their offsprings, obscene books and pictures. The peace of the family is wrecked, homes desolated, and society degraded, while it curses more and more each generation born into the world. . . .

4. Victoria C. Woodhull Denounces "The Scare-Crows of Sexual Slavery," 1873

My Brothers and Sisters.—I am going to tell you some plain truths to-night. I know I shall not please all your ears. I value the good opinion of you all, but I value the truth more, and if to gain the former I must withhold one iota of the latter I shall fail in securing it. Your good opinion I crave, for I feel that you are my friends—friends to

5. Ezra Heywood Advocates Sexual Self-Government, 1878

Love, in its dual manifestations, implies agreement, he who loves and she who reciprocates his feeling therein binding themselves, neither to hurt the other, nor evade any moral or pecuniary obligation which the incarnate fruits of their passion may present. When a man says of a substantial girl, "She suits me"—that is, she would be to him a serviceable mate,—he does not often as seriously ask if he is likely to suit her; still less, if this proposed union may not become an ugly domestic knot which the best interests of both will require to be untied. Whether the number outside of marriage, who would like to get in, be greater or less than the number inside who want to get out, this mingled sense of esteem, benevolence, and passionate attraction, called love, is so generally diffused that most people know life to be incomplete until the calls of affection are met in a healthful, happy and prosperous association of persons of opposite sex. That this blending of personalities may not be compulsive, hurtful, or irrevocable; but, rather, the result of mutual discretion—a free compact, dissolvable at will—there is needed, not only a purpose in lovers to hold their bodies subject to reason; but also radical change of the opinions, laws, customs, and institutions which now repress and deprave natural expressions of love. Since "falling in love" is not always ascension, growth, (as it should be), but often degradation; as persons who meet in convulsive embraces may separate in deadly feuds,—sexual love here carrying invigorating peace, there desolating havoc, into domestic life,—intelligent students of sociology will not think the marriage institution a finality, but, rather, a device to be amended, or abolished, as enlightened moral sense may require. . . .

. . . The popular idea of sexual purity, (freedom from fornication or adultery, abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage, and fidelity to its exclusive vows afterwards), rests on intrusive laws, made and sustained by men, either ignorant of what is essentially virtuous, or whose better judgment bows to Custom that stifles the cries of affection and ignores the reeking licentiousness of marriage beds. Is coition pure only when sanctioned by priest or magistrate? Are scandal-begetting clergymen and bribe-taking statesmen the sources of virtue? The lascivious instincts prevalent among men, the destructive courses imposed on women, and the frightful inroads of secret vice on the vitality of youth of both sexes, all show the sexual nature to be, comparatively, in a savage state, and that even public teachers have not begun to reason originally on questions of love, virtue, continence and reproduction.

While love denotes movement in one person towards another, and tends to over-leap unnatural barriers, its proposals are, nevertheless, subject to rejection; created and nourished by the object of attraction, it is self-limiting. Free love, then, generates, but never annuls moral obligations. If selfish, love is invasive; but, the person assailed, has a natural right of resistance; and, if a woman or girl, her effort in self-defence will be reinforced by disinterested strength around her. . . . She is "safe" among men, not through laws which deny liberty, but by prevailing knowledge of

the fact that Nature vests in herself the right to control and dispose of her own person. If lovers err, it is due, not to liberty, but to ignorance, and the demoralizing effect of the marriage system. If free to go wrong, disciplined by ideas, they will work out their own salvation in the school of experience. The free love "delusion" consists in the belief that persons recognized in law as capable of making a sexual contract are, when wiser by experience, morally able to dissolve that contract; and that love is not so depraved as to be incapable of redemption and self-government.

An original impulse of Nature, love has laws of its own; but, coerced by custom, its natural intent and scope are not generally understood. We were all trained in the school of repression, and taught that, to love otherwise than by established rules, is sinful. To get out of one's body to think, to destroy all his old opinions, is almost necessary, to enable him to approach and investigate a new subject impartially. The grave tendencies of the love question, its deep-seated hold on human destiny, its momentous relations to government, religion, life, and property, make any revolution in its doctrines, or institutes, difficult and alarming, if not perilous. But, since nothing is fixed but natural right, the most radical method of treatment is the most truly conservative. Evils like libertinism and prostitution, which have baffled the wisest human endeavor, will yield only to increasing intelligence, and the irresistible forces of Conscience. I beg my readers, therefore, to bring to this subject honest intent to know truth and obey it. That the grand impulse of love is capable of greater good than has yet come of it, is certain; that this noblest element of human being does not logically lead to the marital and social ills around us, is equally evident. The way out of domestic infelicity, then, must lie through larger knowledge of the nature of love and of the rights and duties involved in its evolution. . . .

Though man may "propose," and woman "accept," a notion inhabits the average male head that the irresistibly attractive force of woman's nature makes *her* responsible for any mutual wrong-doing. Thinking woman at the bottom of all mischief, when a male culprit is brought into court, the French ask "Who is she?" In saying that Mrs. Elizabeth R. Tilton "thrust her love on him unsought," the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher thereby indicates how much there is in him of the "old Adam," who said to the "Lord God," interviewing him after he had indulged in the "forbidden fruit," "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." The insanity plea put forward in courts of law by aggrieved "husbands" who . . . murder men that are attracted to their "wives," also affirms, in a round-about way, the supposed inability of a man to control himself when under the spell of woman's enchantment. Contrary to the old law which regarded the husband and wife as one, and the husband that one, when the twain sin, *she* is held responsible, and he is excused on the ground that he was over-persuaded, and too weak to withstand her wishes. From the Garden of Eden to [Henry Ward Beecher's] Plymouth Church, skulking has been the pet method of man to escape from the consequences of sexual indiscretion. Beecher's confessions and "letters of contrition," with his later denials, sadly illustrate the pathetic penitence, the sniveling cowardice, and brazen-faced falsity with which "great men" endeavor to appease, cajole, and defy equivocal public opinion. The harsh judgments pronounced on women, which abound in the literature of all ages, are equalled only by the evidences of ludicrous puerility which men display when confronted with their sexual "deeds done in the body." The tragic

anarchy which now distracts social life originates first in the legal denial of the right of people to manage their own sexual affairs; and secondly in the supposed exemption from moral responsibility of either man or woman in love.

The facts of married and single life, one would suppose, are sufficiently startling to convince all serious-minded people of the imperative need of investigation, especially of the duty of young men and women to give religiously serious attention to the momentous issues of sexual science. But, on the threshold of good intent, they are met by established ignorance forbidding them to inquire. It is even thought dangerous to discuss the subject at all. In our families, schools, sermons, lectures, and newspapers, its candid consideration is so studiously suppressed that children and adults know nothing of it, except what they learn from their own diseased lives and imaginations, and in the filthy by-ways of society. Many noble girls and boys, whom a little knowledge from their natural guardians, *parents, and teachers*, would have saved, are now, physically and morally, utter wrecks. Where saving truth should have been planted, error has found an unoccupied field, which it has busily sown, and gathers therefrom a prolific harvest. The alarming increase of obscene prints and pictures caused both Houses of the U. S. Congress, March 1, 1873, to pass a bill, (or, rather an amendment of the Post Office Act of June, 1872), which was immediately signed by the President, said to be "For the suppression of Obscene Literature," and from which I make the following extract:

§148.—That no obscene, lewd, or lascivious book, pamphlet, picture, paper, print, or other publication of an indecent character, nor any article or thing designed or intended for the prevention of conception or procuring of abortion, nor any article or thing intended or adapted for any indecent or immoral use or nature, nor any written or printed card, circular, book, pamphlet, advertisement, or notice of any kind giving information, directly, or indirectly, where, or how, or of whom, or by what means either of the things before mentioned may be obtained or made, nor any letter upon the envelope of which, or postal card upon which indecent or scurrilous epithets may be written or printed, shall be carried in the mail; and any person who shall knowingly deposit, or cause to be deposited, for mailing or delivery, any of the hereinbefore-mentioned articles or things, or any notice, or paper containing any advertisement relating to the aforesaid articles or things, and any person who, in pursuance of any plan or scheme for disposing of any of the hereinbefore-mentioned articles or things, shall take or cause to be taken, from the mail any such letter or package, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and, on conviction thereof, shall, for every offense, BE FINED NOT LESS THAN ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS NOR MORE THAN FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS, OR IMPRISONED AT HARD LABOR NOT LESS THAN ONE YEAR NOR MORE THAN TEN YEARS, OR BOTH, IN THE DISCRETION OF THE JUDGE.

I Credit Congress and President Grant with good intentions in framing this "law;" for, ignorant of the cause of the evils they proposed to correct, they were probably unaware of the unwarrantable stretch of despotism embodied in their measure, and of the use which would be made of it. . . . Appointed special supervisor of the U. S. Mails (by what authority I am unable to learn); and, by religious-intolerance, constituted censor of the opinions of the people in their most important channel of inter-communication, [Anthony Comstock] is chiefly known through his efforts to suppress newspapers and imprison editors disposed to discuss the social question. In November, 1872, he procured the arrest and imprisonment of Victoria C. Woodhull and her editorial associates for publishing a preliminary

ventilation of the "Brooklyn Scandal," which afterwards filled American newspapers. . . . John A. Lant, editor and publisher of the N. Y. Toledo Sun . . . says:—"Judge Benedict to-day sentenced me to imprisonment in Albany Penitentiary one year and six months." "J . . . Mr. Lant's crime is sending through the mails his newspaper, containing criticisms of the "scandal" and of the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher! Mr. Comstock's relation to Mr. Lant, as heretofore to Mrs. Woodhull . . . is that of a *religious monomaniac*, whom the mistaken will of Congress and the lascivious fanaticism of the Young Men's Christian Association have empowered to use the Federal Courts to suppress free inquiry. The better sense of the American people moves to repeal the National Gag-Law which he now administers, and every interest of public and private morality demands thorough discussion of the issue which sectarian pride and intolerance now endeavor to postpone.