THE SPINSTER
AND HER ENEMIES
FEMINISM AND SEXUALITY 1880–1930

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This book looks at a watershed period in the history of sexuality. The traditional historical interpretation of the years 1880–1930 is that the sexual puritanism of Victorian England gave way to the first sexual revolution of the twentieth century. From a feminist perspective the picture is different. This period witnessed a massive campaign by women to transform male sexual behaviour and protect women from the effects of the exercise of a form of male sexuality damaging to their interests. There is little or no reference to this campaign in the histories of the women’s movement in Britain. Other aspects of the feminist struggle such as the suffrage campaign, the movement to improve women’s education and work opportunities and to gain changes in the marriage law, have all received attention. When historians have mentioned the work of the same feminist campaigners in the area of sexuality they have represented them as prudes and puritans, criticising them for not embracing the goal of sexual freedom or women’s sexual pleasure and finding in their writings a source of useful humorous material. While their activities and demands have been seen as challenging and progressive in other areas, the activities of the very same women in the area of sexuality have been seen as backward and retrogressive.

The first five chapters look at the ideas and activities of feminist campaigners around sexuality. The first chapter deals with the involvement of feminists in those organisations usually seen as purely conservative and anti-sex, for example, the National Vigilance Association, the Moral Reform Union. It examines the way feminist concerns shaped social purity in the 1880s and 1890s. It ends with a comparison of these earlier organisations with the clearly non-feminist Alliance of Honour, whose membership was exclusively male, in the period before the First World War. The
chapter entitled 'Continence and Psychic Love' examines the theories and strategies of those feminists who were involved in relationships with men. It looks in particular at the philosophy of sex developed by Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy and Francis Swiney. The next two chapters are devoted to the women's campaign against the sexual abuse of girls. This campaign has been chosen as an example of practical feminist activity where feminist theory was put into effect, because it was so extensive and wide-ranging and has been substantially ignored by historians. The other major sexual issue on which feminists campaigned, prostitution, has received some attention. The chapter on spinsterhood encompasses the ideas and motivations of those feminists who were choosing to reject sexual relationships with men.

There are certain basic assumptions underlying the work of historians on the history of sexuality which must be overthrown if the significance of the women's campaigns is to be understood. The most pervasive is the assumption that the last 100 years represent a story of progress from the darkness of Victorian prudery towards the light of sexual freedom. Implicit in this view is the idea that there is an essence of sexuality which, though repressed at times in the past, is gradually fighting its way free of the restrictions placed upon it. On examination this 'essence' turns out to be heterosexual and the primary unquestined heterosexual practice to be that of sexual intercourse. Despite the wealth of work by sociologists and feminists on the social construction of sexuality, the idea remains that a natural essence of sexuality exists. Another assumption is that there is a unity of interests between men and women in the area of sexuality, despite the fact that sexuality represents above all a primary area of interaction between two groups of people, men and women, who have very different access to social, economic and political power. Thus historians who concern themselves with writing the history of the 'regulation of sexuality', that is the way in which people's sexual behaviour has been restricted by repressive ideology and the state, without paying serious attention to the way in which the power relationship between the sexes is played out on the field of sexuality, can be seen to be subsuming the interests of women within those of men. A most fundamental assumption is that sexuality is private and personal. It may be understood that social and political pressures influence what happens in the bedroom, but sexual behaviour is not recognised as having a dynamic effect in its own right on the structuring of the power relationships in the world which surrounds the bedroom. When sexuality is understood to be the most personal area of private life, it is not surprising that the women's campaigns to set limits to the exercise of male sexuality should be regarded with incomprehension or totally misunderstood. Ideas and campaigns which are developing within the current wave of feminism give us a very different basis for looking at the work of our foremothers.

Contemporary feminists have detailed the effects upon women of both the fear and the reality of rape, showing that the exercise of male sexuality in the form of rape, functions as a form of social control on women's lives. Rape as social control has the effect of restricting where women may go, what women may do, and serves to 'keep us in our place' which is subordinate to men, thereby helping to maintain male domination over women. Work is now being done by feminists on the damaging effects upon women caused by the exercise of other aspects of male sexuality. The sexual abuse of children, prostitution, pornography and sexual harassment at work are all now being documented and examined. Feminists are showing that these sexual practices by men are crimes against women though they have consistently been represented as victimless forms of male behaviour. Considering that contemporary feminists are having to wage a difficult struggle to get forms of male behaviour which are essentially crimes against women taken seriously, it is not at all surprising that women's campaigns around precisely the same issues in the last wave of feminism are all but invisible to contemporary historians. Much of the feminist theoretical work on male sexual behaviour and its effects on women has been designed to show the ways in which sexual harassment in childhood and in adulthood, at work, on the street and in the home, restricts the lives and opportunities of women and generally undermines our confidence and self-respect. As the impact of men's sexual violence on all the different areas of women's lives is documented, it becomes clear that male sexual control is of enormous importance in maintaining women's subordination. It is clear that we must look at the area of sexuality, not as merely a sphere of personal fulfilment, but as a battleground; an arena of struggle and power relationships between the sexes.

Current feminist debate on sexuality has gone further than an examination of the effects of male sexuality on women outside the home to a critique of the institution of heterosexuality and its role
in the control and exploitation of women. Questions are now being raised about the effects on women of the experience of sexual activity within all heterosexual relationships in terms of the maintenance of male dominance and female submission. Feminists are exploring ways of making it possible for more women to have real choices around sexuality, so that more than a brave and embattled minority may have the right of loving other women. Such questioning allows us to see the feminists engaged in struggles around sexuality in previous generations not simply as the victims of a reactionary ideology, but as women manoeuvring, both to gain more power and control within their own lives, and to remove the restrictions placed upon them by the exercise of male sexuality inside and outside the home.

On the basis of this reassessment of what pre-First World War feminist theorists and campaigners around sexuality were doing, it is necessary also to reassess the significance of the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1920s. The propagandists of sex reform in the 1920s and 1930s attacked the earlier feminists for being prudes and puritans. Contemporary historians, for whom the new ideology of the 1920s has become the conventional wisdom, have replicated this attack. When looking at the 1920s they have been unable to be objective or critical. The last five chapters of this book examine the values and assumptions, and provide a new interpretation of this ‘sexual revolution’.

Chapter 6 looks at the way in which ideas about the acceptable form of women’s friendships was changed through sexological prescriptions in the late nineteenth century, as the stereotype of the ‘real’ lesbian was created. The chapter on the sex reform movement before the First World War critically examines the work of Havelock Ellis and other sexologists of the period. It shows how the feminist theory was undermined by the creation of a new prescription of correct female and male sexual behaviour with all the authority of science. Male sexuality was characterised as active and aggressive and female sexuality as passive and submissive. A substitute form of feminism was promoted which consisted of the glorification of motherhood combined with a vigorous attack on spinsters. The chapter on the ‘new feminism’ shows how the new form of feminism, promoted by the sexologists, was adopted in the 1920s, as the older form of feminism, which included a critique of male sexual behaviour and the promotion of spinsterhood, declined. As part of the enforcement of heterosexuality and the attack on women’s resistance to sexual intercourse, women’s frigidity was invented. It was a potent weapon to worry women into enthusiastic participation in the sexological prescription. This development is described in Chapter 9. The concluding section shows how, by the end of the 1920s, a sexual ideology was in wide currency which was in total contradiction to the feminist theory of the pre-war period. It examines the concept of the prude which was used to undermine the feminist critique.

The effect of the ‘sexual revolution’ was to cripple the feminist campaign to assert woman’s right to control her own body, and to exist, as Wolstenholme Elmy put it, ‘Free from all uninvited touch of man’. This aim has never been given its deserved significance by historians as part of the range of political objectives of the nineteenth-century women’s movement. This may be because the right to bodily integrity has not been included in the political platform of any male political struggle, and only those objectives which men have seen to be important for themselves have been given serious attention. Men are not subject to physical invasion by a powerful ruling class and can take possession of their own physical space for granted. Woman’s right to escape from being the involuntary object of men’s sexual desires has not earned itself a place in the pantheon of human rights. Woman’s ‘frigidity’ became an issue in the 1920s as attempts were made to construct a female sexuality which would complement that of men. The struggle of women to assert their right to say no gradually faded into insignificance whilst male sex theorists debated astride the conquered territories of women’s bodies.
Spinsters provided the backbone of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rosemary Auchmuty, in her unpublished doctoral thesis 'Victorian Spinsters', points out that most of the Victorian feminists we read about in modern history books, were married women, such as Mrs Elizabeth Garratt Anderson, Mrs Josephine Butler, and Mrs Millicent Farran. She argues that in our own time, feminist movements have tended to address themselves chiefly to the middle-class wife and mother, so that feminist historians searching for their Victorian antecedents have naturally picked out what they see as 'oppressed' married women for the modern liberated lady to identify with.1

Appended to her thesis is a short ‘Who’s Who’ of about 200 Victorian spinsters notable for their achievements in various fields. Auchmuty suggests that it would be hard to find a similar number of married feminists or married women with similar achievements in that age. She attributes the nature and content of Victorian feminism to the fact that it was ‘led by Victorian spinsters on behalf of Victorian spinsters’.2

The importance of Victorian spinsters has been neglected by contemporary commentators, living in a society in which nearly all women marry. In the late Victorian period almost one in three of all adult women were single and one in four would never marry.3

The 1851 census revealed that there were 405,000 more women than men in the population.4 They were described in the press as ‘excess’ or ‘surplus’ women and in the 1860s to 1880s the ‘problem’ of ‘surplus’ women caused great alarm amongst male commentators. Those men who saw women as being superfluous if they were not servicing men, suggested emigration as a solution:

We must restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and in the new ones, which was disturbed by an emigration of men, and the disturbance of which has wrought so much mischief in both lands. . . . The first difficulty is chiefly mechanical. It is not easy to convey a multitude of women across the Atlantic, or to the Antipodes by any ordinary means or transit. To transport the half million from where they are redundant to where they are wanted, at an average of fifty passengers to each ship, would require 10,000 vessels, or at least 10,000 voyages.5

This quotation from W.R. Gregg gives an idea of the total contempt for women who failed to perform their life’s work of servicing men, which the Victorian spinster had to confront. Women who fail to relate to men are still socially disapproved of today. If anti-spinster feeling is declining a little at present this could be because there are so few spinsters today that they are not seen to constitute so serious a threat. The Victorian feminists fought the idea that woman was simply man’s appendage and the very notion that women could be surplus; surplus to the needs of men.

The demands of feminists in the 1850s and 1860s were aimed at dealing with the problem of ‘surplus’ women in ways which served women’s interests. They were mainly concerned with the plight of the middle-class spinster who was restrained by Victorian notions of respectability from leaving home, or engaging in the trades open to working-class women. She was left dependent and without vocation. The campaign for women’s employment and education stemmed largely from such concern. Most of the commentary of the time, including that of feminists, saw ‘surplus’ women as a problem of the middle classes. We have no good reason to suppose that there were vastly more unmarried women amongst the middle class, though it is suggested that the reluctance of middle-class men to undertake the expense of marriage when they could gain the services much more easily through the use of mistresses or servants, may have exacerbated the plight of the middle-class spinster. Unmarried women from the working classes did have access to work and the vast majority of them were absorbed in the domestic servant industry which relied almost entirely on unmarried women.
When the plight of the middle-class spinster is written about in the history books, it is generally posed as the excruciating difficulty felt by women who were desperate for husbands. This is not an accurate picture. Numbers of spinsters, at least until after the First World War, made a positive choice not to marry. They made such a choice, either because they regarded marriage as a form of humiliating slavery and dependence upon men, or because they wanted to pursue a career and fulfill their potential in a way which would not have been allowed to them by husbands. Maria Grey and Emily Shirreff wrote in 1871:

A woman should be reminded... that in marrying she gives up many advantages. Her independence is, of course, renounced by the very act that makes her another's. Her habits, pursuits, society, sometimes even friendships, must give way to his.  

Florence Nightingale is one of these women who refused to marry. She comments that there were women who sacrificed marriage, "because they must sacrifice all their life if they accepted that... behind his destiny woman must annihilate herself."  

Judging by their own statements and the fuss made about them in the press and by anti-feminists, some feminists were choosing before the First World War not to have any sexual relations with men. They were taking this decision in protest against the form taken by male sexuality, the way that women were oppressed in their relationships with men, and because some of them believed that the position of all women could only be improved in a society where there was a large class of celibate women. It would be very difficult to judge the size of this revolt or precisely what it meant to all the women involved. However the fact that feminists and others considered the phenomenon to exist and were either very enthusiastic or hysterically alarmed about it, is interesting and demands examination even if the number of women involved was fairly small.

There is no doubt that the proportion of women relative to men in the population was increasing in every census or estimate from 1821, when there were 1,036 women to every 1,000 men, to 1901 when there were 1,068. In 1911 the proportion remained at the 1901 figure. The year 1911 also represents a peak for the number of women in each age group from 25 upwards who remained single. After the First World War, the proportion of women to men rose to 1,096 to 1,000 in the 1921 census. It was still 1,088 to 1,000 in 1931. However the rate of marriage rose in every age group after the war. So though 1911 did not represent the all-time high in the proportion of women to men in the population it does seem to have represented the time at which marriage was least popular between 1801 and 1931. The 'fuss' about spinsters continued in the press and other publications through the 1920s and into the 1930s.

Developments which gave women slightly more choice about marrying before the First World War were the expansion of higher education for women combined with the beginning of the opening up of the professions to women, and the massive expansion in white-collar employment in the period after 1880, into which women could be drawn. Much of the impetus of the early women's movement had come from or been directed towards helping spinsters, against the double disadvantages of their position. In the period immediately before the First World War spinsters were fighting back against the prejudices which created difficulties for them in finding a livelihood, social life and relationships outside marriage. Undoubtedly some women were deliberately choosing to remain single and were articulating their decision in political terms.

Christabel Pankhurst stated categorically that spinsterhood was a political decision, a deliberate choice made in response to the conditions of sex-slavery: "There can be no mating between the spiritually developed women of this new day and men who in thought and conduct with regard to sex matters are their inferiors." Christabel Pankhurst's stand represents a significant new strand in the reasons women were giving for remaining unmarried. She asserted that it was men's sexual behaviour which made them unsuitable for intimacy with women. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the period 1906–14 was one of increased intensity in the campaign by feminists to control male sexual behaviour and protect women from abuse. It should not surprise us that some of these women involved in the campaign should live out in their private lives, their total rejection of the form taken by male sexuality. It can be reasonably assumed that Christabel Pankhurst was not alone in her views in the Women's Social and Political Union, since 63 per cent of members in 1913, when her statement was made, were spinsters, and many of the rest were widowed.

Lucy Re-Bartlett saw the Women's Social and Political Union as the harbinger of a desirable new social order, and was, unlike
many social commentators of the time, entirely enthusiastic about it. She saw the phenomenon of celibacy amongst feminists and other women as a positive decision to refuse to enter into relationships with men until the animal nature of men was transformed and a new spiritual form of relationship between the sexes was possible. In Sex and Sacriety, after speaking of the 'horrors of the White Slave Traffic' and 'the ruin of little children', she describes the 'new social conscience' arising in militant and non-militant women alike, in Britain and in other countries. These women, she declared:

feel linked by their womanhood to every suffering woman, and every injured child, and as they look around upon the great mass of men who seem to them indifferent, there is growing up in the hearts of some of these women a great sense of distance... In the hearts of many women today is rising a cry somewhat like this... I will know no man, and bear no child until this apathy is broken through - these wrongs be righted.9

She wrote that both married and single women were feeling and acting thus, "it is the "silent strike" and it is going on all over the world."10 She refers to press articles which talk of celibacy increasing among women and attribute it to degeneracy and dislike of motherhood. In fact, she said, it represented a 'newly awakened conscience' and a 'far deeper motherhood' lay behind it. The strike was only a 'temporary protest' - an appeal' and not a revolt against men but against 'certain false social conditions'.

In a chapter entitled 'Feminine Celibacy: its Meaning Today' Re-Bartlett seeks to explain how the phenomenon arose. She writes that it was 'engaging the attention of a considerable number of people today' but its deepest causes were undefined. Women were definitely positively refusing marriage, she asserts, since if it was husbands they wanted, they could emigrate and there was little interest in that. She saw education as an important factor since it was 'training girls to think with a clearness' which had never been approached in the past. As a result women were becoming critical. The 'modern' schoolgirl imbibed the ideal of 'women's independence, women's dignity, women's value'. Meanwhile there was no corresponding change in the education of boys so that the men produced by it were just not 'good enough' and the girls turned to face college and freedom. The new independent women's struggle was described as a battle against succumbing to sexual relationships with men!

When because of those beating wings in her soul (beating free from the lower level where the dominion of sense brings bondage), woman fights desperately with herself and with men: fights her own vanity and man's appeal to it - fights smallness and domination, and all passion which is just the blood, because so soon as any of those things touch her, she feels the new wings within her droop and cease to beat. And their beating has become as very life - life which must be defended even at the cost of human life, if need be. And she stands away from man until he understands.11

This new 'warrior maid' according to Re-Bartlett, was now all over the world.

Whilst writing about the celibate militant suffragettes Re-Bartlett defends them against the accusation of their critics that they showed 'great bitterness towards men'. She explains that such a period of withdraw from men was necessary and the women's anger was necessary also. She writes that a period of this kind must needs be passed through before the old relations between men and women be set aside and the new and nobler ones established. Woman cannot truly struggle for the new order, until she hates the old.12

In contrast with the suffragettes' attitude towards men, she praises at length the wonderful 'solidarity' which she saw spring up between women of the new type. She criticises the tendency of pre-suffragette women to seek approval from men by denigrating other women. Re-Bartlett states that the 'new' woman 'loves instinctively her sister woman' and that this phenomenon was to be seen most frequently among the suffragettes.

Some spinsters in the period proclaimed the necessity of creating a large class of spinsters who were making a positive choice to be so, as a political tactic to improve the general lot of women. Cicely Hamilton is one of these. Her book Marriage as a Trade is a lengthy exposition of why women wished to be spinsters, the ploys used against them and her belief in the political necessity of spinsters to the women's revolution. She sought to explain the 'uncompromising and brutal attitudes' which men had always adopted towards spinsters. She considered the attitude of married women merely 'servile and imitative' of that of men. It was
adopted partly to force women into marriage and prevent economic competition. The attitude was not merely contempt for a ‘creature [who] was chaste and therefore inhuman’ but active dislike which she felt could only arise from ‘consciousness that the perpetual virgin was a witness, however reluctantly, to the unpalatable fact that sexual intercourse was not for every woman an absolute necessity’. The spinster was by her very existence a living reproach to men as to the form of their sexuality. Hamilton’s reason for being a spinster was specifically a rejection of the conditions of marriage. Since she saw marriage as a trade she saw the conditions of marriage as a wife’s conditions of work and considered them insupportable. They included total lack of payment, sexual subjection and occupational hazards for which no warning or compensation was given. She likened venereal disease to the risk of lead poisoning in a pottery or the danger of combustion in a dynamite factory.

Hamilton considered that in recent history nothing was more striking than the improvement in the position of the spinster. She said that the lack of a husband was no longer a reproach and ‘some of us’ were proud to be fighting their way in the world without aid from any man’s arm even though they were often assured that they had lost the best that life had to offer. Man’s dream was still of ‘someone smaller than him who asks him questions while he strokes her hair’ and the average wife was still a person ‘who is willing to submit to be patronised’.

The importance of spinsters was that only they could help advance the cause of women as ‘any improvement as has already been affected in the status of the wife and mother has originated outside herself, and, to a great extent, the work of the formerly contented spinster’. As the spinster improved her position so she steadily destroyed the prestige of marriage and the conditions of marriage would only be improved if there was a viable alternative to marriage open to women. She attributed the institution of chivalry to the fact that there had been a socially approved alternative lifestyle open to women in the middle ages which offered a choice instead of compulsory marriage. This was the conventual life. She connected the end of chivalry at the reformation with the downfall of the conventual life. She attributed the witch-burnings unequivocally to the masculine policy of repressing deviations from the type of wife and mother. If marriage was voluntary and not enforced, she thought, men would have to pay for the work they got for nothing and men would have to exercise self-control instead of seeing ‘one half of the race as sent into the world to excite desire in the other half’.

A contributor to the Freewoman magazine, E. Noel Morgan, also argued that a celibate class of women was necessary for the ‘task of raising the fair sex out of its subjection’. She saw the existence of such a class as a deliberate strategy on the part of ‘nature’ which intended to emancipate women rather than as the result of a positive choice by women not to marry:

Now the existence of this unhusbanded class of women seems to me to be deliberately planned by nature for a specific purpose. We find that wherever women are admitted to sex intercourse to such a degree that the celibate class is practically non-existent, there the position of women socially, economically, and intellectually is of a low order.

She believed that women needed the passion they would otherwise use in sex to fight for the emancipation of women.

Opposition to the spinsters
The development of a class of spinsters proud to proclaim that they were happy, fulfilled, had made a deliberate choice and were vital to the political struggle of women met with serious opposition. It was not just men who wanted to deride and undermine the position of these women. Some feminists also went into the attack. The Freewoman magazine gave the opposition its platform. Its founder and editor was Dora Marsden who had been in the Woman’s Social and Political Union and broke away to found the Freewoman because she considered the Pankhursts too autocratic. She had been imprisoned for her work in the suffrage struggle. She had also tried the Women’s Freedom League after leaving the WSPU, but resigned from that too. The ‘Notes of the Week’ in the first issue demonstrate Marsden’s political philosophy:

Our journal will differ from all existing weekly journals devoted to the freedom of women, in as much as the latter find their starting-point and interest in the externals of freedom. They deal with something which women may acquire. We find our chief concern in what they may become. Our interest is in the Freewomen herself, her psychology, philosophy, morality, and achievements, and only in a secondary way with her politics and economics.
She said that women had to be spiritually free and stressed that she did not see the vote as even a symbol of freedom. She was most critical of the reasons that suffrage fighters gave for wanting the vote:

These reasons have been culled out of an unthought-out and nebulous feminism, and at most have amounted to nothing more than half-hearted and sentimental allusions, to prostitution, sweating, child-assault, race-deterioration, and what not. But all real understanding of what these things mean, and discussion as to how they are to be remedied have been systematically discouraged.\textsuperscript{19}

There are in fact no further references to the above topics in the \textit{Freeswoman}. Marsden showed no understanding of the effect that what she called 'externals', which could also be called material realities, had on the practical ability of women to achieve their freedom. She believed that women could be free inside their heads no matter what was happening in the outside world:

There comes a cry that woman is an individual and that because she is an individual she must be set free. It would be nearer the truth to say that if she is an individual she is free, and will act like those who are free.\textsuperscript{20}

The direction in which her politics were leading can be seen from the contents and history of the journal. The content from the beginning was very much concerned with freedom of speech and thought and many, if not the majority, of contributors were men. The overall impression is of a literary magazine with a strongly Bohemian tone. There were articles on removing restrictions on women's freedom to relate sexually to men, through marriage law reform, the promotion of unmarried love and criticisms of monogamy. There were also articles on uranism (male homosexuality). Not surprisingly the subtitle \textit{A Feminist Review} changed in May 1912 to \textit{A Weekly Humanist Review}, and the editorial policy was described as being to 'show that the two causes, man's and woman's are one'.\textsuperscript{21}

The spinster-baiting in the \textit{Freeswoman} was conducted alongside a protracted propaganda campaign against the WSPU. The assault on spinsters started in the very first issue. In an article entitled 'The Spinster' written 'By One', a sketch is drawn giving a destructive twisted character to the class of women depicted in the title. The opening lines are particularly insulting:

I write of the High Priestess of Society. Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vestal under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write. Because of her power and dominion. She, unobtrusive, meek, soft-footed, silent, shamefaced, bloodless and boneless, thinned to spirit, enters the secret recesses of the mind, sits at the secret springs of action, and moulds and fashions our emasculate society. She is our social nemesis.\textsuperscript{22}

The writer attributed great power and influence to the spinster and scapegoated her for all the ills of society. She is seen as converting her desperate disappointment and frustration at being cheated of a man and motherhood after being reared to expect such things, into a cold-blooded puritanism with which she squashed out the life-impulse in literature and the theatre and in the children she taught. Examples of the busy spinster's activities are as follows:

In the auditorium of every theatre she sits, the pale guardian... She haunts every library... In our schools she takes the little children, and day by day they breathe in the atmosphere of her violated spirit.\textsuperscript{23}

The conclusion of the article requests compassion for the dreadful plight of the spinster and calls for the removal of the savage restrictions which condemn unmarried women to celibacy. The article is in fact far from sympathetic in tone. It is a vicious indictment of the spinster along lines which were to become more familiar after the First World War, when the appellation 'prude' was directed at all feminists, spinsters and women who offered any critique of men's sexual behaviour. In subsequent issues of the \textit{Freeswoman} articles appeared purporting to describe how different varieties of spinsters emerged. One, on the college-educated woman, spoke in disapproving tones of her growing lack of interest in clothes, lack of 'sex attraction' and indifference to men. The \textit{Freeswoman} writers were united in alarm at the spinster, even when they were spinsters themselves.

Central to the first article was the argument that sexual activity with men was vital to the health of women and that without it she became either bitter and twisted or gushingly sentimental. The invention of an imperative sexual instinct which once thwarted led to nameless, but serious ills, and some nameable ones such as haunting libraries, was an argument from the sexological
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ideology of compulsive heterosexuality. Some spinsters resisted this enforcement of sexual intercourse. A debate began in the letters page on the subject of the harmfulness of abstinence (from sexual intercourse) for women. A feminist spinster, Margaret Hill, fired the first salvo on behalf of the spinster:

But it is Society that has wronged women and not Nature. She, indeed, has well fitted the female for the part she was intended to take, for woman is physically complete. Though she is a necessity to man, he is not necessary to her. In single life she retains health, strength, and vitality, and her functions are unimpaired. It is inconceivable that the female could hold her position if she were craving for motherhood. Maternal love comes like her milk when the babe needs it.24

Kathryn Oliver wrote to the Freewoman attacking the ‘new morality which would permit for women the same degrading laxity in sex matters which is indulged in by most of the lower animals, including men’, saying that she was neither a prude nor a puritan but an ‘apostle of the practice of self-restraint in sex matters’.25 She denied absolutely that celibacy was dangerous to the health of women:

I am an unmarried woman, nearly 30 years of age, and have always practised abstinence, and although not a powerful person, I enjoy the best of health, and have never troubled a doctor since I was six years old. My married women friends, on the contrary, have always some complaint or something wrong. Who has not seen the girl married at twenty almost immediately degenerate into a nervous wreck? I deny absolutely that abstinence has any bad effect on my health.26

‘New Subscriber’ who later revealed herself to be Stella Browne, entered into an individual debate with Kathryn Oliver in which we see her taking up the cudgels against spinsters as she did against lesbians (see chapter 6). Browne replied in the next issue that Oliver must belong to the class of women who are ‘sexually anaesthetic’ and ‘cold-blooded’, but there were other varieties of women. She assured readers that many women’s health, happiness, social usefulness and mental capacity were ‘seriously impaired and sometimes totally ruined by the unnatural conditions of their lives’ if they were celibate.

Oliver replied by accusing ‘New Subscriber’ of being of the ‘male persuasion’ and stated that from her observation of unmar-

ried girls and women whom she had known intimately there were no grounds to suppose they were adversely affected by complete chastity. She suggested that the idea of a sex relationship seldom entered the thoughts of most women until they loved and if it did it appeared ‘repulsive’ rather than attractive. She protested that she was in fact ‘normal’ and had experienced sexual desire occasionally after she ‘fell in love’ at about twenty. She again proclaimed the desirability of self-control and the ruling of instincts and desires by intellect and reason, capacities which, in her opinion, raised women ‘miles above and beyond men’. ‘New Subscriber’ wrote again accusing Oliver of being ‘of cold temperament sexually’ and bewailing the effects of such women as she on the women’s movement in much the same vein as the original spinster article:

It will be an unspeakable catastrophe if our richly complex Feminist movement with its possibilities of power and joy, falls under the domination of sexually deficient and disappointed women, impervious to facts and logic and deeply ignorant about life.27

These comments fit into Browne’s campaigns to get women to participate enthusiastically in sexual intercourse. Those women showing the greatest resistance meet with her strongest disapproval.

Christabel Pankhurst also addressed the attacks on spinsters’ thwarted instincts. In reply to ‘some men’ who said that women not mated with men suffered and became a problem because of their ‘unsatisfied desires’, she stated that unmarried women had lives of joy and interest. In reply to those who apparently said that ‘women’s ideas of chastity are the result of past subjection’, she said that the subjection of women had therefore brought women one great gain which was ‘the mastery of self and sex’ and women had no intention of giving that up.

There were two fronts to the battle against the spinsters. One was to declare against all evidence to the contrary that spinsters suffered from thwarted desire which turned them into vicious and destruc
tive creatures. This was a good way to discredit and undermine the vast quantity of work which celibate women were then doing in the women’s movement, much of it directly opposed to male sexual behaviour. Another was to promote sex freedom. If sexual intercourse with men was vital and there was a surplus of women, then marriage would be no solution to the spinsters’

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problems. 'Sexual freedom' was another possibility, and was being promoted by some feminists in the Freewoman magazine. Christabel Pankhurst was very suspicious and hostile to the 'new morality' proponents. 'Sex freedom' was being heralded as the way to eliminate prostitution, an idea which is still popular today. The argument is that men's use of women in prostitution is the result of women's sexuality being repressed so that men have difficulty finding partners. 'Sex freedom' and prostitution in fact manage to coexist very happily side by side. The argument transfers responsibility for men's use of women in prostitution from men to women. Christabel summed up the argument thus:

It would seem that certain men are alarmed by the dangers of prostitution, and, of course, they find it expensive. At any rate, we detect a tendency in some quarters to preach to women the observance of a looser code of morals than they have observed hitherto. 'You are asking for political freedom,' women are told. 'More important to you is sex freedom.' Votes for women should be accompanied, if not preceded, by wild oats for women. The thing to be done is not to raise the moral standard of men, but to lower the moral standard of women.  

Women, she said, replied with a firm negative to this suggestion: 'When women have the vote, they will be more and not less opposed than now to making a plaything of sex and of entering casually into the sex relationship.'

A woman writing to the Freewoman spoke of her worry over the paper's tendency to glorify 'freedom in all that concerns sex impulses', and expressed fear of the anti-social effect of allowing 'sex impulses' to run riot. There were many aspects of the new morality of which she approved, such as changing women's position in marriage so that she could 'unite herself with the man she loved', and so that her children might be hers in the eyes of the law, and divorce was facilitated, but she had grave reservations. She warned that people should not be encouraged to think that a 'satisfactory' society could be built on the basis of a complete freedom in sex matters, because the 'sex instinct' was unstable and unreasonable when separated from 'any idea of duty, honour, or spiritual-mindedness'. Several correspondents took the line that sex should be connected to emotion, attachment and responsibility and saw 'sex freedom' as threatening this. The model they had before them of male sexual behaviour, based heavily on the use of prostitutes and therefore divorcing sex entirely from the context of loving relationships, did not look at all suited to what they saw as the interests of women:

I do not think that to make our morality on a plane with men's would improve our position, or that anything but a lasting tie would satisfy a woman. When she marries she gives so much more than a man that she must have a hold on him... As for being merely the instrument of pleasure, a woman's desire is, in general, no mean second to a man's.

'Calin Dhu', the writer of the above letter, in fact believed that women were naturally monogamous whilst men were polygamous. The very practical reasons lying behind women's need for lasting ties, such as the fact that they bore children and were not in a position to earn a reasonable living, would suggest that women's 'monogamy' was socially rather than naturally constructed.

One correspondent, with great foresight, attributed the propounding of a 'new morality' to the fact that men feared that when women got the vote, their sex freedom under the double standard might come to an end. The solution was to encourage women to something called sex freedom, however illusory, so that the single standard that came into being would be that which men wanted and not the alarming vision being propounded by most feminists:

It is noteworthy how anxious men are to safeguard their incontinence in the coming age of the Freewoman. They are expecting trouble, as your columns show, and by paying heed to them, Freewoman will be leaving the frying-pan for the fire.

She was quite right. There was no question of an equal standard of sexual morality in a society in which the sexes were not equal. When it looked as if the feminists might carry out their threat to enforce chastity on men, a new code of sexual morality developed which ensured that men retained the advantage. Some feminists suggested that 'sex freedom' gave man more advantages even than they had enjoyed under the double standard. There is no doubt that in any system of free enterprise, including a sexual one, those with the greatest material advantages benefit most from the system and often at the expense of those who are not so advantaged. But in 1911, though they did not know it, the celibates were swimming against the tide.

It cannot be assumed that those spinsters who were defending
their right not to engage in sexual intercourse with men, were sexually inactive. The attack on the spinster was integral to the attack on the lesbian. Whilst the ‘spinster’ and ‘women’s friendships’ were respectable, then love between women could flourish in a variety of different forms. A new ‘respectibility’ was being created by the sex reformers, based upon a woman’s enthusiastic participation in sexual intercourse in or out of marriage. New categories were being created based upon sexual contact. Instead of the married woman and the spinster, there were now the actively heterosexual woman and the lesbian.

In the period immediately before the First World War, the women’s movement was deeply divided over the issue of sexuality. There can have been no other issue which so clearly separated feminists into two opposite camps whose ideas and practice were at total variance. Feminists were divided about the correct tactics for the suffrage struggle — some espoused and some eschewed violence against property. But at least there were degrees of militancy and the goal was the same. Between Kathryn Oliver and Stella Browne, over sexuality, there was not merely a difference of tactics but a difference of aim. One camp advocated the joys and necessity of heterosexual intercourse in or out of marriage without any serious attempt to criticise the form of male sexuality and its effects on women, presumably because such criticism would have detracted from the strength of their campaign. The other camp pointed out that many women received no joy from sexual intercourse, suggested that there were large differences of interest between men and women over the issue of sexuality, launched a major critique of the form of male sexuality, and advocated non-cooperation with the sexual desires of men.

It is important to remember here that many women in the latter group loved women and were involved in passionate relationships with their own sex. They did not identify themselves as lesbian either because this would have been seen as invalidating their ideas — lesbians within feminism today remain silent for like reasons — or because they did not see themselves as ‘lesbians’. The sexological category of ‘lesbian’ was not yet accepted. Any attack on the spinster is inevitably an attack on the lesbian. Women’s right to be lesbian depends upon our right to exist outside sexual relationships with men. When lesbians are stigmatised and reviled, so, also, are all women who live independently of men. In the following chapter we will look at how the anathematising of

the lesbian developed from the work of the sexologists in the 1890s on to the 1920s.