TRUE LOVE
AND
PERFECT UNION

The Feminist Reform of
Sex and Society

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relationship between private health and public welfare, and, above all, both yielded to the logic of the symmetrical concept. Winslow wanted both sexes "emancipated from the thraldom of passion."

Nevertheless, she said: "I know that the legitimate use of all the functions of the body or endowments of the soul tend to promote happiness, secure sound health and prolong life."

Rationalization did mean the harnessing of passion and the "organization of feeling," but not the renunciation of physical pleasure. Even in our own time, when varieties of sexual experience increasingly find unstigmatized outlets, society still continues to deny sexuality genuine sensuous expression. Nineteenth-century feminists were determined to make men and women cooperative and harmonious human beings and to subordinate reproductivity in the private sphere to productivity in the public. They chose female self-ownership and the rationalization or sublimation of desire as the means of reaching these goals. Opposed to individualism and to its manifestation in competitive capitalism, they nevertheless brought to bear on the sexual relation the full weight of industrial technique.

These feminists longed to create a workable egalitarian marriage that would free both sexes for productive work—even to the point of rejecting the centrality of the family and of maternity for women. Physiological functions that women and men did not share were, correspondingly, inferior. The appeal of liberalism continually undercut arguments based on the differences between sexes. "Motherhood," two women doctors told the Sixth Woman's Congress, "is not central" to the lives of women. Eliza Duffey, in her Relations of the Sexes, seemed to capture best of all the underlying direction of the feminist ideology of marriage:

I utterly deny that marriage, in the present state of the world, is instituted solely for the perpetuation of the human race. . . . Nor is it the duty of married people to have children at all, if according to their own best judgment, they would do an injury to these children by bringing them into the world. . . . Men and women were made for themselves. . . . Though they will develop self, it will not be for selfish purposes, but because they can through their own individuality, best benefit mankind. In marriage they will see greater opportunities for self-development and harmonized action.

"WE SAY LOVE IS BLIND," wrote Emerson in 1860, "and the figure of Cupid is drawn with a bandage round his eyes. Blind: yes, because he does not see what he does not like: but, the sharpest-sighted hunter in the universe is Love . . . finding what he seeks, and only that." Ten years later Moncure Conway, who had devoured Emerson's writings in the 1840s, paraphrased a line from Pascal, "Love, from so long having bandaged eyes, will be all eye." One short but revolutionary decade separated these two opinions. Emerson spoke for the American romantic era then dying away; Conway spoke for the more realistic and more rationalist post–Civil War period.

Sentimental Love and Sexual Stereotypes

CONWAY'S WORDS also articulated the language of feminism. In the latter half of the nineteenth century love itself was transformed by feminist reform. Feminists had turned away from romantic love as blind, passionate, seductive, the bearer of conflict. In a sexually
unequal society, romantic love threatened the interests of women. So
did sentimental love that portrayed women as idealized objects and
the passive recipients of masculine affections. In their place feminists
put a rational, symmetrical, and egalitarian love based on a knowledge
that made no room for ideality, passion, or fantasy.

Sentimental love, with its exaltation of sexual differences, was the
consequence of two overlapping lines of development: the appear-
ance of an economic sexual division of labor, most blatant in the
antebellum period, and the transformation of American Protestantism
from a relatively grim, static, and authoritarian Calvinism to a more
gently remissive, fluent, feminized, and democratic evangelicalism.2
By the 1830s, especially in the settled urban regions, manhood had
come to signify selfish individualism and rational or functional be-
behavior; womanhood had come to mean stable domesticity, nurturant
piety, and infantile impulsiveness.8 After 1850, when womanhood
became clearly linked with the consumption of commodities and
manhood with production, domesticated religion rooted itself in the
world of fashion, selflessness in sentimental narcissism. The periodical
press, novels, and poetry popularized these norms, although sexual
behavior never neatly reproduced them.

Contemporary American attitudes toward the two most important
Christian holidays, Christmas and Easter, exemplified the romance
of religion with female fashion and commodity consumption. Many
Americans identified Christmas with maternal giving and Santa Claus
with the mother. In 1857 the spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis
described such maternal behavior in his autobiography, *The Magic
Staff*. In the Christmas holidays of his childhood, Davis’s stocking,
hung by the chimney, was stuffed with a perplexing combination of
objects—toys, fruits, candy, potatoes, and straps. Davis asked his
mother to explain what they meant, although the good things, he
knew, came from her and the bad from his father. “My dream was
realized at once. A benevolent smile pervaded her countenance, as she
answered. “Yes, Jackson, I put in everything but the potato and the
strap.” In the Easter holiday the giving mother was merged with
the narcissistic wife who spent her husband’s money on herself.
Woman converted fashion into a religious ritual. In 1872 the *New
York World*, one of the most powerful Democratic papers of the
time, lectured its readers: “Easter and new spring bonnets have long
competitive individualism and, like the traditional revival meeting, tended to remove the guilt and anxiety that accompanied the accumulation of wealth and material comfort.

Remarkably remissive, the ethos of sentimental love gave to conspicuous and ostentatious consumption its earliest and perhaps fullest justification as in the name of the spirit man struggled to get his fortune. "Among the appropriate uses of wealth," Henry Ward Beecher advised Herald of Health readers in 1867, "may be mentioned that of enobling and dignifying the household... I love to see a man who makes a paradise about his home... I am not a believer in poverty... It is right to indulge these things." Uncritical and reflexive, sentimental love attempted to make palatable and endurable the conflict that the extreme sexual division of labor engendered.

Feminists were drawn to sentimentalism even as they labored to create the conditions that would destroy it. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, for example, almost every meeting of the first woman's club in the United States, New York City Sorosis, began with a recitation from some sentimental verse or fiction, a form of prayer to open the proceedings. On May 16, 1870, Thomas Bailey Aldrich's maudlin poem, "Baby Bell," introduced a session devoted entirely to a discussion of equal rights within marriage. Feminists published sentimental fiction and poetry in their periodicals—in Una, Woman's Journal, Alpha, Revolution, Woodhull and Clifton's Weekly, and Golden Age—and themselves added to the surplus of sentimental literature. Caroline Dall, Abigail Scott Duniway, Phebe and Alice Cary, Thomas Higginson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Theodore Tilton, among others, wrote sentimental novels and short stories and almost everybody, male and female, wrote poetry. Although both sentimental love and what may be described as feminist-rational love characterized bourgeois experience in a new urban, individualistic society of wealth and abundance, sentimental love underlined the bourgeois commitment to personal well-being and comfort and continually intervened in the feminist effort to reform and rationalize social behavior.

Many feminists lived out their lives in a tangle of rational reform and sentimental impulses, as Theodore Tilton's career illustrates. A journalist at twenty for both the New York Tribune and the New York Observer, Tilton, through the direct intercession of Henry Ward Beecher, joined the staff of the most influential religious newspaper of the age, the New York Independent, as managing editor at twenty-one. As a youthful Garrisonian Tilton was strongly committed to the bourgeois reform principle of the common humanity of all men and women. After the Civil War he focused on the theme of the relationship of union with equal rights—union of the states, churches, and races. The union of the sexes he considered the most crucial question of the day; he insisted that men and women be equals in the family, the school, and the state. The plea for sexual "togetherness" indicated the new frame of mind in educated circles after the Civil War. Like other reform publications of the time, Tilton's Independent and, later, his journal Golden Age marked the emergence of the rationalist-scientific perspectives that looked forward in time to the Progressive era. "Write and let me print, the freest words you ever penned," Tilton implored the rationalist James Parton, husband of Fanny Fern. More pagan than Christian, the Golden Age leaned heavily toward rationalist religion.

Although the rationalist climate of opinion shaped Tilton's reformism, a materialistic and remissive sentimentalism characterized his thought on social questions and, above all, on love. Tilton lived in a city that by the time the Civil War had been transformed from a remote rural province with pigs running in the streets into the fourth-largest financial and commercial center in the country. By 1860 there were some twenty millionaires living in Brooklyn and many of them attended Beecher's Plymouth Church. Tilton knew fashionable society intimately; many of his friends, both feminists and nonfeminists, were wealthy; and no one enjoyed the emoluments of success and fame more than he. "I believe," he wrote in the Herald of Health, "in eating the fat of the land." Tilton owed much of his good fortune, as well as the moral justification for it, to Henry Ward Beecher. When Beecher went to England in 1863, Tilton sent him letters full of endearments and sentimental declarations of affection. "Your private letters," he wrote, "are like so many kisses... Send some more! My love multiplies for you everyday." "I toss you a bushel of flowers and a mouthful of kisses!" "I never knew how much I loved you till your absence. I am
hungry to look into your eyes." The two men kissed when they met and when they parted, and on one occasion Elizabeth Tilton discovered Beecher in her husband's lap discussing the Sermon on the Mount, "both apparently in the pleasanter of moods—Mr. Beecher rose as I entered—I met him with a kiss—he then sat down again on Theodore's knees."

Beecher exposed Tilton to the watered-down remnants of the evangelical Protestant world view and smothered him in the doctrine of Christ's eternal love for mankind. In E. L. Godkin's words, Beecher had freed religion of "anything in the smallest degree disciplinary, either in the shape of systematic theology, with its tests and standards, or of a social code, with its pains and penalties." Beecher and the Brooklynites he shepherded had replaced older forms of male authority and "self-control" with materialistic self-indulgence and sentimental remission. "A large body of persons has arisen," Godkin wrote perceptively, "under the influence of the common schools, magazines, newspapers, and rapid accumulation of wealth, who are not only engaged in enjoying themselves in this fashion, but who believe that they have reached all that is attainable or desirable by anybody, and who therefore tackle all the problems of the day." Such conditions prefigured American social life in the twentieth century. A new middle and upper-middle class of men and women in the major industrial cities sought to understand and order the opportunities that wealth, education, and the breakdown of older forms of political and religious authority had disclosed. "The result," Godkin averred, "is a mental and moral chaos."

Tilton's religious thought replicated Beecher's, and he also learned from Beecher all he would ever know about love. Beecher's novel Norwood described his ideas on love between the sexes. Five years after it was published Tilton wrote an island romance called Tempest Tossed, which virtually mirrors Norwood. For Tilton, modern society gave men and women only the certainty of a love that transcended both time and space. "I think," says a character in Tempest Tossed, "there must be a golden chain made of invisible links, hidden in the sunlight, reaching around the world to bind each soul to its mate." Tilton's novel also sets up sentimental sexual stereotypes. The men are "fierce and strong," rational, outwardly directed; the women are inwardly directed, passive, fashion-conscious, vain, and at the same time supremely maternal "nest-builders," furnishing men with an endless source of love.

Tilton tried to live the sentimental fiction he wrote. He considered his wife alternately a "Queen" and "a Birdie perched on a bough." The Civil War to him was a "romantic story." He himself was a heroic "knight errant of the downtrodden." All phenomena, living and dead, were joined in an organic network of affinities. He addressed other men as "father," "beloved father," "bishop," and "mentor"; endlessly vain himself, he appealed to the vanity in other men, and although many men and women perceived the manipulative twist behind the sentiment, most willingly succumbed.

Sentimentalism, however, could not protect Tilton from personal calamity. Its regressive character made him powerless to change the pitiful course of his life. It destroyed his marriage. His dependence on Beecher proved his nemesis; Beecher no less than Tilton was subject to the shifting, morally unreliable vagaries of sentimental narcissism. Beecher seduced Tilton's wife, Elizabeth, and in the uproar that followed, Tilton lost his position at the Independent and set up his own short-lived reform publication in New York, the Golden Age. When Tilton publicly and correctly charged Beecher with alienating his wife's affections, he, not Beecher, became humiliated. Protected by his rich and powerful congregation, Beecher escaped punishment, while Tilton exiled himself to Paris. Nevertheless, Tilton continued to believe for the rest of his life that love between human beings gave the only meaning to life. Even after years of personal humiliation and exile, he returned like an insatiable child to that central theme. He fled personal chaos into sentimental fiction and, after 1875, turned entirely to a timeless and decadent imaginary world of "golden-haired girls," and "downy-bearded youths." He populated his poems with mythological nymphs, penniless peasants, noble knights, Greek goddesses, and Viking kings, all of whom lived only for love, "Love, stronger than the triple Fates, Love, strongest of the strong." In an unpublished epic poem, his hero enters the tomb of an unnamed Egyptian Pharaoh whose voice he hears calling out for the love of his lost queen. After countless stanzas of uninspired couplets Tilton concludes, "Heaven both willed that love shall be fulfilled/Hence love—and love alone—this is the thing that makes a man king!"
Romantic Love and the Passionate Imagination

ROMANTIC LOVE differed radically from sentimental love. In Europe it emerged in full force as part of a wider romantic and radical individualist reaction to the failure of the Enlightenment and the collapse of the French Revolution. It rejected the stereotypes of the sentimental tradition and the rationalistic, symmetrical perspectives of the reformist bourgeoisie. In America, romantic love appeared (although less dramatically) with the emergence of economic individualism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The American romantic lover resembled his economic counterpart, the risk-taking entrepreneur who, though contemptuous of material wealth for its own sake, gloried in invention, achievement, and power. Such love became ever more possible as the social, economic, and religious patriarchal traditions of the early eighteenth century began to break down.

To a great extent the psychological consequence of unresolved Oedipal tensions, romantic love embodied a passionate longing to regain the sexual pleasure of the pregenital childhood years. It entailed the often painful and uncertain experience of possessing or being possessed, of losing the self or “falling in love.” Romantic love rested on fantasies of the Other (any sexual Other) that arose from needs within the self; it projected those needs on the Other. Sentimental love remained fixed in a static regression with the object of desire shrouded in a fetishistic aura; romantic love also cloaked the object of desire in a magical and bejeweled aura, but as a first stage before a new level of “crystallization” that would deepen the intensity of mutual possession. Unlike either rational or sentimental love, romantic love required conflict, tension, resistance, or, broadly speaking, “evil.” Without these “obstructions,” wrote Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World—though he warned against the dangers of romantic passion—“there is no romance.” Nor could the exponent of romantic love hope for the fulfillment of desire or for escape from the lonely frontiers of self. Presumably, romantic love could lead to extreme obsession with self and the passing of youth; bitter regret at failure to achieve satisfaction; self-destruction and renunciation of the world as meaningless; the rational repression of passionate desire; richly sublimated works of the private imagination; or moving out of the private sphere to transcendence and an active public engagement with the political, social, and economic realities of life. Romantic love might also combine all of these things in various ways.

In the second volume of Democracy in America, Tocqueville, like de Rougemont, admonished men and women to steer clear of romantic entanglements, but he also noted how social and psychological obstacles form romantic passion:

When a man and woman wish to come together in spite of the inequalities of an aristocratic social system, they have immense obstacles to overcome. After they have broken down and eloped from the ties of filial obedience, they must by a further effort escape the sway of custom and the tyranny of opinion; and then, when they have finally reached the end of this rough passage, they find themselves strangers among their natural friends and relations; the prejudice which they have defied separates them.

Tocqueville pointed to a greater danger to society in the political potential implicit in the consummation of such love:

One should also not forget that the same energy which makes a man break a common error almost always drives him beyond what is reasonable, that to enable him to dare to declare war, even legitimately, on the ideas of his country and age means that he must have something of violence and adventure in his character, and people of this type, whatever the direction they take, seldom achieve happiness or virtue. That . . . is the reason why, even in the case of the most necessary and hallowed revolutions, one seldom finds revolutionaries who are moderate and honest.

Tocqueville understood the potential relationship between romantic love and romantic revolution. He did not say, however, that Americans suffered, like Europeans, from class divisions and the need to transgress them. According to him, Americans enjoyed an incomparable freedom in courtship, although a stringent sexual division of labor dominated marriage. Tocqueville missed the real class divisions in America because they were obscured by a pervasively held egalitarian ideology and by greater social and economic mobility, but he did observe how public opinion placed constraints on individual
expression. Widely diffused in a democratic context, these constraints were more difficult to see and to resist than clear European class patterns. Sentimentalism was woven into these constraints and supported by a deeper rationalism hostile to romantic impulse and passion.

The author of The Sexes Throughout Nature, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, in her only work of fiction, an unsentimental, semi-autobiographical novel called The Island Neighbors, A Novel of American Life, projected her social vision upon an island, as Tilton had done. But unlike Tilton, she used the island symbol to illuminate social reality. Writing thirty years after Tocqueville, Blackwell was aware of American class divisions and exemplified a rationalist perspective that countered the sentimentalism Tocqueville thought unchallenged. As a feminist, Blackwell had basic sympathy with rational love, although in this novel she appeared to embrace romanticism.

Her book describes a long summer vacation taken by an affluent middle-class Boston family on a remote, idyllic, unidentified island, a “primitive niche” somewhere off the coast of Massachusetts. The vacationers include an invalid factory owner and his class-conscious wife, anxious to get her children married well; their four children; and an Irish maid and companion. They have come to the island to get the health and pleasure their Boston lives deny them. The island contrasts in every way with the world the family has left behind. In noisy, industrial Boston they lead a “tread-mill” existence and must contend with “invalidism” and nervous tension, the constant need to observe, for the sake of their children, the differences of “class and breeding,” the extremes of wealth and poverty, “fashionable ladies” and dirty street gamins. On their island they discover a rural enclave of self-reliant sailors and farmers untouched by industrialization. Everyone seems to share equally in the island’s bounty; time is measured not by the clock but by the seasons. A sensuous “gypsy” spirit takes full possession of their lives. “This island is a jewel in the rough,” declares the Irish maid, “and for one I hope they never will spoil it by any grinding-down, polishing process.” “I’m with you there, Margaret,” says the eldest son, “I never want to come here again, if this island becomes a fashionable watering-place. It would be like changing a nice little country girl into a fashion-plate.”

From the moment the Irish maid, the main character, steps upon the island shore, she is torn between her allegiance to her employer and the promise of island life. An ardent suitor appears, a sailor-farmer. She and her suitor are passionate, moody, sensuous, and self-reliant. Blackwell heightens the sense of burning passion by supplying him with an abundance of red hair and by dressing him in an “unusually flaming red shirt.”

Their love becomes disorienting and intense. In the words of Emerson, they “see reminders” of each other “in every beautiful object” and yield to the “maia [deception]” and “magnetic tenaciousness of an image... that mocks and instructs the soul.” The suitor struggles to protect his independence but cannot disable the power the woman’s image has over him. He dwells on the contradictions of her nature and appearance: her moody introversion and her “helpfulness for others”; her indifference to fashion, her courage and her independence, and her dependent status; her “pleasant and honest face” and the lingering signs on that face of childhood smallpox. (“The beloved,” wrote Stendhal in the most important book ever written on romantic love, “may have the marks of smallpox, but is no less beautiful to the lover.”) He fears yet “yearns utterly” to surrender himself to her compassionate love, and thus to make himself whole; he longs to save her from the unhappiness of her dependence, and thus to make her whole as well. The maid finds herself obsessed by the image of her lover and bewildered by its contradiction. Seeing him on the road by accident, she experiences an “undefined terror”; in her room alone she conjures an image that “flames into defiant red”; and observing him from afar in his red shirt, she feels his image “burn into her very soul and yet she could not turn away.” “She was,” Blackwell writes, “under the spell of fascination; but she could no more have told whether the sensation was most pleasure or pain, than the little bird could tell you what it feels when it is fluttering under the magnetism of the relentless serpent,” although “the young man certainly felt anything but serpent-like.” She has strength and resources of her own; in her excitement and despair of her love she contemplates leaving her employment for a more “independent, self-sustaining position” as a typesetter or as a clerk in a telegraph office in Boston, but her lover’s power over her casts her into a dependent position; she sees his power both as demonic and as salvation from her “parasitic” existence.
Blackwell throws up obstacles to the ultimate realization of their love, among them her employer's "benevolent despotism." In his attempt to keep her bound to his family the employer tells the suitor privately that his maid has no interest in him. "She was humbly born; but we have raised her in social standing, till we regard her as a friend—almost an equal; and we have far other plans for her than settling her permanently on this very retired, small island." The attempt to separate them by suggesting a class difference simply intensifies their passion. To use Stendhal's term, the separation nurtured by doubt furthers the "crystallization" of love. As she tumbles "headlong" into the "boiling depths" of the sea, the suitor declares his love by rushing to save her. In the end, the family returns to Boston and the couple remains behind to build a new home "high up on the hills," denying the world outside and completing the scenario of romantic passion.

Blackwell's The Island Neighbors can be interpreted as an indictment of social life in industrial America. Presumably, to Blackwell the island represents freedom, independence, health, and sensuous fulfillment; Boston is sickness, class stratification, and repression. The inchoateness of Blackwell's distinctions, however, blunts their critical power. She attaches no moral significance to her tale; it is simply the normal outgrowth of a restful mood," with "no more thought of a moral in it than there is in the play of children or the friskiness of all young animals." If we had to choose which of the two worlds meant more to her, Boston would probably be the choice. For a feminist, Boston, and not the island, would represent a new world of professional opportunity and marital equality. In the novel she rebukes the sailor-farmers for "leaving their wives year after year puttering in the kitchen and nursery" while they enjoy the experience of the world. In modern "civilization," she declares, "men and women will go hand in hand in all progress."

Blackwell's sympathetic rendering of romantic love contradicts the intellectual thrust of her other, more important feminist essays and books. The feminist works outline a rational and sexual egalitarian system of relations. Such a system would end class conflict; it would untangle the romantic and narcissistic entanglements that prevented women from enjoying equality with men. Blackwell attacked extreme forms of industrial specialization that fragmented human "wholeness" and converted men and women into "live machines," divorcing them from their "feelings." She proposed a "natural" (really a highly rational) solution. Her "highest hope for humanity, male and female," she wrote for the Woman's Journal, lay in the perfect "balance of thought and feeling and bodily action daily abreast." Blackwell had a romantic history herself, and her love for her husband is partly depicted in her tale of the two island lovers. Yet her romanticism did not end in self-doubt or social withdrawal; it gave her the imaginative energy to conceive of its political and social antithesis. The early romanticism of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, of Caroline Dall, and of Mary Putnam Jacobi, among others, may have carried them toward the same rationalist goal.

Blackwell's island easily melds with the memory of the old time, of pastoral America, as it does with the more bourgeois concepts of vacation, park, retreat, and water cure. It is a sensuously volatile world that cannot be integrated into an entire system of relations. Both the servant and the passion, two important sources for social conflict, remain on the island, separated from the life of industrial society. In this sense, rationalistic, industrial society cannot tolerate romantic passion. It must abolish it in order to exist; passion represents a threat to its survival. This interpretation, I think, does some justice to Blackwell's book, although it does not do equal justice to the complexity of Blackwell herself, a complexity displayed in part by her overwhelming enthusiasm for her Irish servant. Blackwell threw her own lot, perhaps unwillingly, with rational love: at heart she appreciated, and probably experienced, the joys of romantic passion, a fact that gives her book a special poignance.
both could coexist uncomfortably or even tragically in a single consciousness or at different points in the lifetime of a single person. Both could have appeared in the company of the other form of love, rational love, which feminists sought to isolate as the only love capable of advancing the interests of women. Middle-class feminists waged an ambivalent war on sentimental love, most feminists adhered to a high standard of female purity, and few denied or wanted to deny the importance of woman’s maternal nature. Indeed, mid-nineteenth-century feminism took much of its power from the tradition of female nurture. Many feminists wrote poetry, short stories, and novels (the literary embodiment of the sentimental legacy) for a living, but at the same time gained considerable satisfaction from the fact that they were competing successfully with men. “Among the most striking facts in the present condition of women,” Paulina Wright Davis wrote in 1853, “is her eminence as a novel writer. The novel writer of this day is to the public what the bard was of old; more than preachers, more than legislators, he moulds the thought, he sways the feelings of the common people. To this sphere, wide and free and influential as it is, woman is at the last freely admitted.”

Yet feminists struggled to repudiate the sentimentalization of love that justified the extreme segregation of the sexes and shackled women to the household. They considered the sexual spheres dysfunctional, harmonizing nothing in their existing forms. They believed that the outside world constantly intruded in the shape of male dominance, male needs, and male lust, making a mockery of woman’s salvational role and threatening her safety. “The Conflict of the Ages,” wrote Caroline Dall in 1867, “has penetrated to the heart of almost every household.”

Feminists used the novel to portray the inevitable miseries that resulted from the sentimentalization of the sexual relation. Lois Waisbrooker, Ella Giles Ruddy, Marie Howland, and Eliza Boynton Harbert wrote such novels, but Lillie Deveraux Blake’s Fettered for Life; or, Lord and Master (1874) exceeded them all in the sensational rendering of male brutality in marriage.

The novel depicts two kinds of marriage, reflecting ornamental and domestic-maternal sentimentalism, and may have been drawn from Blake’s own experience. She traces the psychological evolution of a fashionable, feminist-inclined woman from the time of an arranged marriage to the day of her suicide. Prevented from pursuing an independent career by a husband who wants only to adorn his household with her beauty as well as her money, she sinks into despair and leaps to her death in the sea. “In a moment,” writes Blake, “she stood swaying and trembling on the edge of an overhanging cliff; then she stretched her arms and with a strange wild cry, sprang into the clamorous sea.” The fashionable version of sentimental marriage was bad enough, but in Blake’s opinion the marriage that locked women in a submissive, spiritual maternalism was even worse. It made it possible for a man to vent savage rage against the world through his wife. In the most graphic terms Blake describes the marriage of a drunken man named Blodgett (bludgeon), steeped in the corruption of politics, and a gentle woman who consumes “sentimental novels” and pathetically mothers her husband even in the midst of her own degradation:

He raised one hand and seized her hair, then lifting the other hand, his face glowing red with passion, he dealt her a heavy blow across the face. . . . He struck her again and again . . . At first, the poor creature replied with wild appeals for mercy, but these died away presently, and there was no sound as he flung her from him to the floor . . . He kicked the prostate form more and more, his heavy boots making the strokes almost murderous.

Blake concludes this passage by denying its fictional character. “Day after day our police records are full of the accounts of the wounds, the hurts, the death-blowes, that women receive from brutal husbands.” Like so many other feminists, Blake took liberties of expression in a novel that she would have never taken in public affairs. The daughter of a wealthy North Carolina slaveowner, John Deveraux, and of Elizabeth Edwards, granddaughter of Jonathan Edwards, she was a beautiful woman with large dark eyes and a reputation as the local “ball-room queen”; but when her husband, a Philadelphia lawyer, suddenly committed suicide, she was left to support herself. She took up a career as a novelist and journalist, moved to New York, and married a man who shared her growing interest in feminism and in the ideas of Huxley, Spencer, and Darwin. She joined the suffrage movement and thereafter gave her life to that cause. A member of the National Woman’s Suffrage Association,
she edited a woman suffrage department of the New Era and, in the 1870s, served as president of both the New York City and New York State Suffrage Associations. By her own account, she had opposed the introduction of the “marriage and divorce question” into public feminist debate. Let the “friends of a change in the existing laws of marriage,” she said in 1871, organize their own society and cease “embarrassing” and “hampering” the suffrage movement with their fevered complaints. By 1874, however, she had apparently changed her mind. The heroine of her novel repudiates traditional versions of marriage. Moreover, she will marry no man unless he permits her “to follow out my own career in life.”

For many feminists the ideal woman was without sentiment—“tender” but “without weakness,” “trustworthy” and “modest” but without “credulity” and “prudery”; “good” and “self-respecting” but without “pietism” and “conceit.” We have women enough sacrificed to this sentimental hypocritical prating about purity,” wrote Stanton to Paulina Wright Davis in 1872. “This is one of man’s most effective engines for our subjection.” Elizabeth Goy, wife of the abolitionist Sidney Howard Gay, attacked the French historian Michelet for peddling the “sentimental pietistic stuff he calls religion” and tried to persuade Caroline Dall to “take up” Michelet’s book on love and “damn it as it deserves. It’s the greatest insult to human nature, to men as well as women, the greatest insult to God ever perpetrated by a man calling himself a moralist and benefactor of the race.” Dall herself thought the book “needs an answer—only a woman could answer it and no woman ever will.”

Feminists reproached female novelists for offering women false ideas of love as well as for broadcasting unrealistic conceptions of the outside world. Stanton, for example, searched for realistic fictional depictions of woman’s condition and thought she found one in Fanny Fern’s Ruth Hall, which went far “to prove,” she said, that the “common notion” dispensed in novels “that God made woman to depend on men” is “not a romance and not a fact of everyday life.” She exhorted other women to imitate Fern and “divest themselves of all false notions of justice and delicacy and give the world full revelations of their sufferings and miseries.”

Caroline Dall wrote that the novel “has lately passed into the hands of women,” and as such persists in doing “infinite harm, by drawing false distinctions between the masculine and feminine elements of human nature, and perpetuating, through the influence of genius often intensifying, the educational power of a false theory of love.” Eliza Duffey, a popular feminist author as well as a member of the NWSA, presented her own assessment of the modern novel at the Fourth Woman’s Congress in 1876:

Women who have had deep heart histories, but are totally ignorant of the life and the people around them, are capable of writing very tender and touching things; but their writings produce no effect, since they fail to comprehend the affairs of the world as they are, and consequently fail to know how to cope with evils, the very existence of which they are sometimes ignorant. There are floods of this class of literature deluging the world; doing its little good, perhaps, to other women, who live in the same isolated, ignorant world; but doing more harm, since it not only narrows the perception of those who are affected by it, but gives a character to the whole of “feminine” literature.

Duffey beseached women novelists to discard this “feminine” style and practice what she called true “womanly” mastery of their materials. She, and other feminists like her, did not wish to relinquish what control women had over the modern novel—a principal and powerful vehicle, after all, for the articulation of women’s domestic role—but they did wish to free it from an inwardly directed, sentimental vision. They wished, in fact, to use the novel against the novel itself.

If feminists showed some restraint in their attacks on sentimental love, or, more exactly, on women who wrote sentimental fiction, they showed less in their critique of romantic love. Romantic love, “love at first sight,” “falling in love,” “young love” blinded young men and women; it offered no content beyond a fleeting, unpredictable, perhaps pernicious sexual attraction. Constructed out of ignorance and appeals to vanity, and woven of infantile fantasies, romantic love ignited the immature mind with enflamed and unhealthy desires. “Falling in love,” wrote one reformer, “sees nothing but itself and its own desires... Where two young persons are thrown together, their passions are liable to burn themselves out and leave but cinders of their possessors.” “Falling in love,” wrote another, “is often degradation; as persons who meet in convulsive embraces may
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separate in deadly feuds." In contradistinction to such love, wrote George Stearns, the wealthy feminist free-thinker and former Garrisonian abolitionist, in his book Love and Mock Love; or How to Marry to the End of Conjugal Satisfaction, "true love inspires no jealousies, perpetrates no murders, suggests no suicides, induces no miscarriages, creates no family wars, and warrants no selfish lusts." Both the Revolution and the Woman’s Journal exhorted women and men to shun the deceptive dangers of romantic love. “Most of those who love,” according to the editor of the Revolution, Laura Curtis Bullard, “are, or fancy themselves to be, in love with each other. Each imagines the other to possess those qualities which would make a life spent together delightful to both; and this expectation makes the disappointment, when it comes, the harder to bear.” The love resulting from such a need is a “counterfeit passion” fed by “the stir of the senses, the novelty of the experience, by power over one another” and by susceptibility not to the love object so much as to love itself. “Young persons,” observed the Woman’s Journal, “who are so blinded by love that their judgement is rendered torpid . . . are soon and sadly undeceived by the experiences of married life; and such matches are most miserable.”

Feminists may have helped produce conditions hostile to the existence of romantic love. Julia Ward Howe could declare, in one of her many lectures before the Concord School of Philosophy, that “falling in love” had become an “obsolete deity.” It “has gone so entirely out of fashion,” she remarked to her audience, “that a woman my age may be excused from asking whether any one of these present has even a dim idea of what such an experience might be.”

In the late 1860s and early 1870s many feminists followed Stanton’s earlier imperative to “divest themselves of all false notions of justice and delicacy” and wrote books and novels laying bare the hazards of romantic love. Epes Sargent’s The Woman Who Dared (1869) was typical, though written in blank verse. The ever faithful male feminist from Maine, John Neal, called it “a conclusive answer to most of the pettifogging objections that are urged against woman being allowed to have dominion over herself.” Epes Sargent was the brother of the equally feminist freethinking Unitarian minister John Sargent, and they were descended from a venerable line of Massachusetts merchants. Epes made a respectable living for himself as a journalist and an editor of the Boston Transcript, and devoted the last years of his life to the study of scientific spiritualism. His career as a journalist and spiritualist has attracted little attention from historians, and his feminism and his curious little book have attracted none at all. The Woman Who Dared was one of the earliest and most elaborate defenses of female marriage proposals in nineteenth-century feminist literature. It deals with the feminist career of a professional artist who single-mindedly seeks “self-culture and self-advancement” and who scoffs at the sentimental convention that men, not women, should woo and propose marriage. “How bleak and void my Future,” the heroine declares, apropo of the prejudice against women proposing, “if I stand

Waiting beside a stream, until some Prince—
. . . Appears, and jumping from his gilded boat,
Lay heart and fortune at my idle feet!
Ye languid daydreams, vanish! Let me act!

And she does, securing for herself a husband, a baby, and her profession at the same time. She also packs a pistol to protect herself from male predators. Attacked in the woods by three men, she shoots and wounds all three. “She kissed the pistol,” Sargent writes without a trace of humor, “that had been her mother’s/Wiped it, and reverently put it by.” The Woman Who Dared, however, directs its principal fire against intense feeling and romantic passion. Linda’s parents warn her in a double homily on marriage:

Jealousy and love were never yet true mates; for Jealousy
Is born of selfish passion, lust or pride.
How men and women cozen themselves with words; and let
their passions
Fool them and blind, until they madly hug
Illusions.
Have you a loving heart, and would you feed it
On what the swine have left—mock it with lies?
—Passion may lead to Love, but it may lead
Away from Love, but Passion is not Love;
It may exist as Hate; too often leads
Its victims blindfold into hateful bonds,
Under the wild delusion that Love leads.
Love, even when abandoned,
FEMINISM AND PRIVATE LIVES

Feels pity and not anger for the heart,
(But Passion, selfish, proud or murderous,
Seizes the pistol or the knife, and kills.)

No feminist ever launched a more controversial, vindictive, or passionate broadside against romantic love than Harriet Beecher Stowe in Lady Byron Vindicated. At the time she wrote it, in 1869, she was fifty-eight years old. Like Julia Ward Howe, Clementine Lozier, Isabella Beecher Hooker, and to some degree Lydia Maria Child, Stowe was fully into an openly acknowledged feminist phase. She had just read Mill’s Subjection of Women and written her friend Sara Parton that “Mill’s book has wholly converted me—I was right in spots before. Now I am all clear.” Under its spell she began to introduce unmistakable feminist themes into her fiction (notably Old Town Folks and My Wife and I), and seriously mulled over a decision to assume the editorship of the Revolution after Stanton’s retirement.

Stowe wrote Lady Byron Vindicated ostensibly to clear the name of Lady Byron from the obloquies of her English critics. These critics had assailed Lady Byron for ruining her husband’s life with her puritanism, her heartlessness, and her hostility to him after the failure of their marriage. According to Stowe, a profound modesty prevented Lady Byron from defending herself against her enemies and it was not until the end of her life that she confessed privately to her friends the awful truth that had kept her silent: her husband, Lord Byron, had commited incest with his half-sister, Augusta. Thus Stowe took it upon herself to do for Lady Byron what Lady Byron had failed to do for herself—to vindicate her before the eyes of the world as a wronged, helpless woman trapped in a silence created by her husband’s unspeakable crime. She also attacked in her book the worst features of sentimental marriage: woman’s silent, passive dependence and man’s unquestioned authority and sexual license. She wanted not only to speak for the “child-like” and “artless” Lady Byron, but also for all “helpless” wives “cowering” before their “maddening” and “imbruted” husbands like “dogs ... beaten, kicked, starved, and cuffed,” whose “special grace and virtue” consists only in their “utter deadness to the sense of justice,” and who swallow whole “what John Stuart Mill calls the literature of slavery for women.” “I consider Lady Byron’s story,” Stowe wrote to Horace Greeley, “as a type of the old idea of womanhood, that is a creature to be crushed and trodden underfoot, when her fate and that of man comes into conflict.” What might Lady Byron have been, Stowe asked Greeley, “if she, and not some man,” had been given the opportunity to “control and guide the thought of England.”

In striking fiercely at Lord Byron, one of the great heroes of her youth, exposing and analyzing him as a tortured and twisted sexual fanatic, Stowe confronted, in a very different way from that of Antoinette Brown Blackwell, her own romantic desires. That fact gives Lady Byron Vindicated its special place in the history of feminism. It is one of the most disturbing indictments of romantic passion written in the nineteenth century. “He and he alone,” Stowe wrote toward the end of her book, “is the cause of this revelation.” Although she seeks to isolate the “real” Lord Byron, she is preoccupied with him as the mythological expression of the romantic impulse—a confusion that does not help Stowe as a biographer but frees her to display her own peculiar insights into the meaning of romantic love.

Stowe’s Byron exhibits all the characteristics of the romantic lover. He had the enormous power to project himself either directly or indirectly into the lives of other people and to stimulate in others the capacity for fantasy. “Beautiful, dazzling, and possessed of magnetic powers of fascination,” he transformed ordinary men and women into “blinded adorers who would swear that black was white; or white black,” persuading them to “smile away their senses, or weep away their reason.” He had a “most peculiar and fatal power over the moral sense of the women with whom he was brought into relation; and that love for him, in many women, became a sort of insanity by depriving them of the just use of their faculties.” An originator, in Stowe’s view, of the romantic literary tradition, Byron corrupted the literature of Europe and America, triggering, in dangerous ways, the fantasies of innocent men and women. Byron himself, as Stowe saw him, surrendered like a child to the attractions of fantasy by reproducing them in his poetry and by reconstructing the living objects of his desire into hateful demons or beautiful angels, or into both demons and angels at the same time.

The true romantic must also show a tormenting awareness of his own internal contradictions, of his capacity for both good and evil, of his worth and worthlessness. Finally, in order to exist at all, the romantic lover must have in his repertoire the passionate need for the
intensification of his love. Such intensification entails, in turn, the yearning for obstacles to overcome, for new taboos to break, and for dangerous and forbidden things—a yearning, of course, that Byron supposedly had beyond measure. In Byron's poetry, Stowe writes, "the stimulus of crime is represented as intensifying love. Medora Guinane, the Page in "Lara," Parina, and the lost sister of Manfred, love the more intensely because the object of love is a criminal, outlawed by God and man. The next step beyond is madness."

Only a genuine romantic could have so heatedly depicted the essence of romantic love. Unlike Blackwell, who apparently still clung to a tempered version of romantic passion, Stowe chose to expropriate such passion from her experience. She did not analyze Byron's romanticism on moral or religious grounds. Like so many ex-Calvinists of her generation, she no longer treated antinomian heresy or personal hubris as a symptom of human depravity. She relied almost entirely on a new, increasingly fashionable branch of physiological inquiry known as the "science of brain affections," which dealt with deviance from a physiological perspective. "By all accounts," wrote Stowe, "it is made apparent that ancestral causes had sent him into the world with a perilous and exceptional sensitiveness of brain and nervous system." Byron's passions arose not only from an inherited pathology, but also from his secret act of incest. To bolster her argument on this point, Stowe quoted profusely from an article by Dr. Forbes Winslow, called "Anomalous and Masked Affections of the Brain," an article that examined the effects that hidden criminal acts, whether actually committed or imagined in dreams, had on the mind.

Stowe thus reduced romantic passion to an anomalous disease subject to treatment. She denied Byron his human identity by figuratively splitting him in half: one half was his normal, healthy human self still present in his feelings of "remorse;" the other half was his abnormal or inhuman self, the self of passion and contradiction, the self that mingles the need to destroy with need to worship, murder with idolatry. Stowe employed this clinical approach because she considered it the most compassionate approach to mental illness, yet she ended only in unveiling its underlying gruesomeness. In The Island Neighbors, Antoinette Brown Blackwell preserved the memory of romantic passion by relegating its victims to an isolated niche in the world. In Lady Byron Vindicated, Harriet Beecher Stowe consigned these victims to the hospital and to the humiliation of recovery.

Many feminists praised Stowe for her dissection of Byron, but the established male press for the most part defended him against his enemies as it tried to absolve Henry Ward Beecher from the consequences of marital indiscretions. Elizabeth Cady Stanton compared Lady Byron Vindicated favorably to John Stuart Mill's Subjection of Women. Both books, she said, sought to free women from the scourge of old-fashioned marriage; she admonished women not to take part in the outcry against Stowe's attack. "Our present civilization," Stanton wrote for the Independent:

is marked with as hideous outrages on the mothers of the race, in marriage and out of it, as have ever blackened the pages of history at any period of the world. . . . The true relation of the sexes is the momentous question at this stage of our civilization, and Mrs. Stowe has galvanized the world to its consideration. . . . Our low ideas of marriage, as set forth in our creeds and codes, making man master, woman slave, one to command and one obey, are demoralizing all our most sacred sentiments and affections, and making the most holy relation in Nature one of antagonism and aversion. . . . Before women who wield strong pens join in this hounding of Mrs. Stowe . . . let them analyze the real position of women today."

In the Revolution the English corresponent Rebecca More concurred with Stowe's position on Byron, calling him a "malign antinomian," and Mary Livermore declared for the Woman's Journal that Stowe had fashioned her book from the "very noblest of motives" and had "placed Lady Byron forever in the innermost hearts of the good and noble, in small compensation for the awful injustice, and the desolate and bitter lot which closed so early and darkly around her."71

Influential male feminists, including George William Curtis, editor of Harper's New Monthly Magazine, and the progressive free-thinker Moncure Conway, also publicly joined hands with Stowe. Conway's thought graphically exemplifies the splitting off of reform thought from its romantic roots in the antebellum period. In Earthward Pilgrimage, a novel published in 1870, he wrote that "the ages of egotism reach their final flowering in Byron and perish."72 The son of Virginia slaveholders, Conway left the South and Methodism in the
late 1840s to become an abolitionist, radical Unitarian minister in the North. He owed much of his early intellectual development to the influence of Emersonian transcendentalism. By the 1870s, however, Conway had cast off his early romanticism and his Unitarian ministry for positivistic rationalism, and he had chosen new heroes: Ludwig Feuerbach, David Strauss, and Ernst Mach.79 Byron and the romanticism he represented became for Conway the incarnation of the irrational. The spirit of Byron hovers over Conway’s most important work, Demonology and Devil-Lore, a spirit that will find a grave in Conway’s rationalist, scientific analysis of dreams and fantasies. Conway sought to demystify the “hellfire” dogmas of the past and to render powerless through analysis the dreams that “still haunt all the regions of our intellectual twilight, the borderland of mystery, where rises the source of the occult and mystical which environs our lives. The daily terrors of barbarous life avail to haunt the nerves of civilized people, now many generations after they have passed away.”74 Like Stowe, Conway wanted to uncover the latent irrational content hidden in history, to strip away what he called the infantile “costumes... masks... and sentimental glamour” of the “discredited deities and demons of the past,” and to discover the “real,” rational, and unambiguously human core of human life.75 For the early Emerson, the existence of the imagination itself depended upon the antirational acceptance of reality as a veil and a deception that “mocks and instructs the soul.” Images, Emerson believed, mediated between the seen and unseen, and by so doing established a “real and passionate relation between the thought and some material fact.”76 Conway destroyed the mediator. “Taught by Science,” he wrote, “man may with a freedom the barbarian cannot feel exterminate the Serpent.”77

THE VINDICATION OF LOVE

Social and economic freedom for women and the solution to that problem. By the 1870s the gradual secularization and democratization of American social life, coupled with a rapid capitalist development that increasingly subverted the older sexual division of labor as well as the sentimentalism attached to it, created conditions favorable to the emergence of women into the public realm with men. After the Civil War thousands of women took part in social organizational work that impinged either directly or indirectly on the lives of men: in temperance, social science, and moral education; in the reform over a forty-year period 1840-80 of the marriage laws that feminists helped to institute and that legally permitted women to transact their own business, keep their own separate earnings, and retain ownership of their separate estates; in the reform of many state laws during the 1870s that sanctioned the right of women, whether married or single, to employment in the professions; and in the growing employment of large numbers of women in the industrial sector of the economy and, in fewer but no less significant numbers, in the professions, especially medicine, journalism, and education.78

These changes represented noteworthy advances for women yet forced feminists to attack the economic individualism that produced them. By depicting the dangers of unrestricted, formless freedom in her book, Stowe captured the fears of this generation of feminists, who thought that further unadministered growth would topple the social and economic system into a chaos whose symptoms they already perceived around them in the proliferation of hotels, boarding houses, and apartment buildings; in the glaring number of divorces, wife beatings, patriicides, and vagrant children; in the widespread occurrence of female diseases and nervous disorders common to both sexes—hysteria, depression, insomnia, headache, and epilepsy. Antoinette Brown Blackwell wrote in 1872, a year after she finished The Island Neighbors, “forces grope blindly and without aid in the shape of unregulated impulses” and “are devastating the world.”79 Feminists had no desire to endanger the sexual relation with further devastation, they were not anarchists nor radical individualists. They wanted, in fact, to reconstruct the sexual relation on a firmer, more “impregnable” basis by exchanging a sentimental system of sexual order for an egalitarian one.80 Stowe therefore spoke for this intention as well as

RATIONAL LOVE BASED ON KNOWLEDGE, NOT PASSION

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’s attack on romantic individualism and her exposure of its ultimate expression in incest, underlined for mid-nineteenth-century feminists both the problem implicit in greater