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UTOPIAN MARRIAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA:  
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCOURSE

by

Brenda Olsen Andrus

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

December 1998

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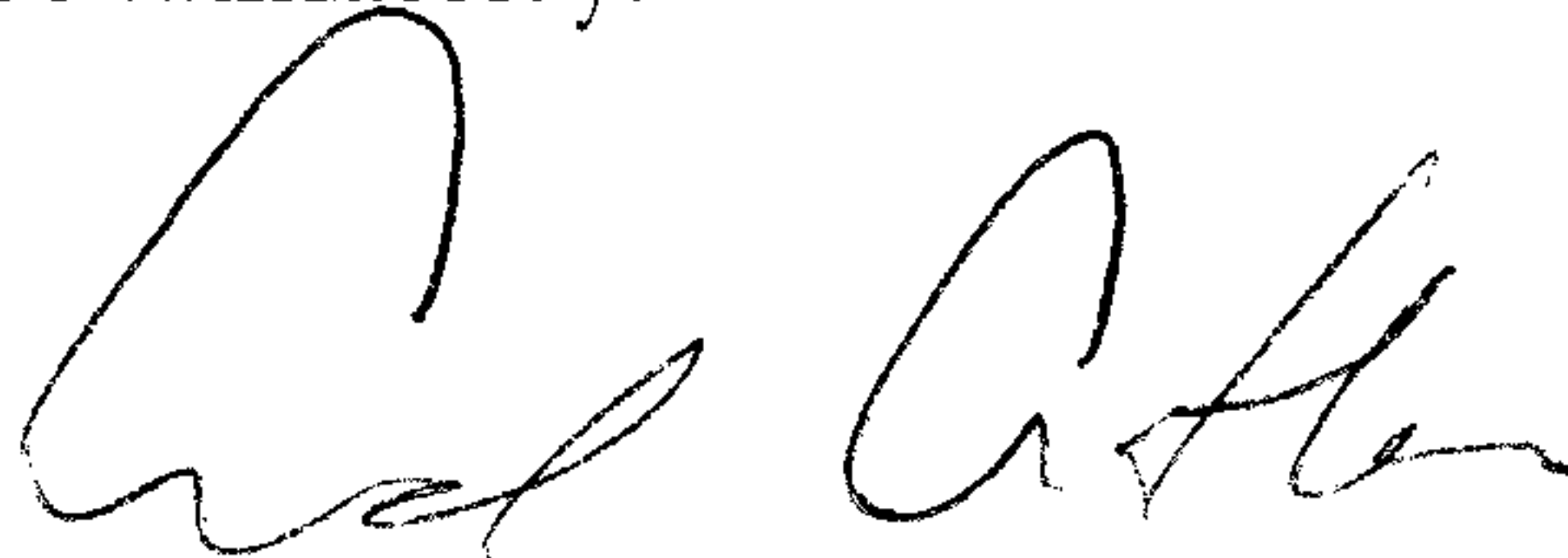
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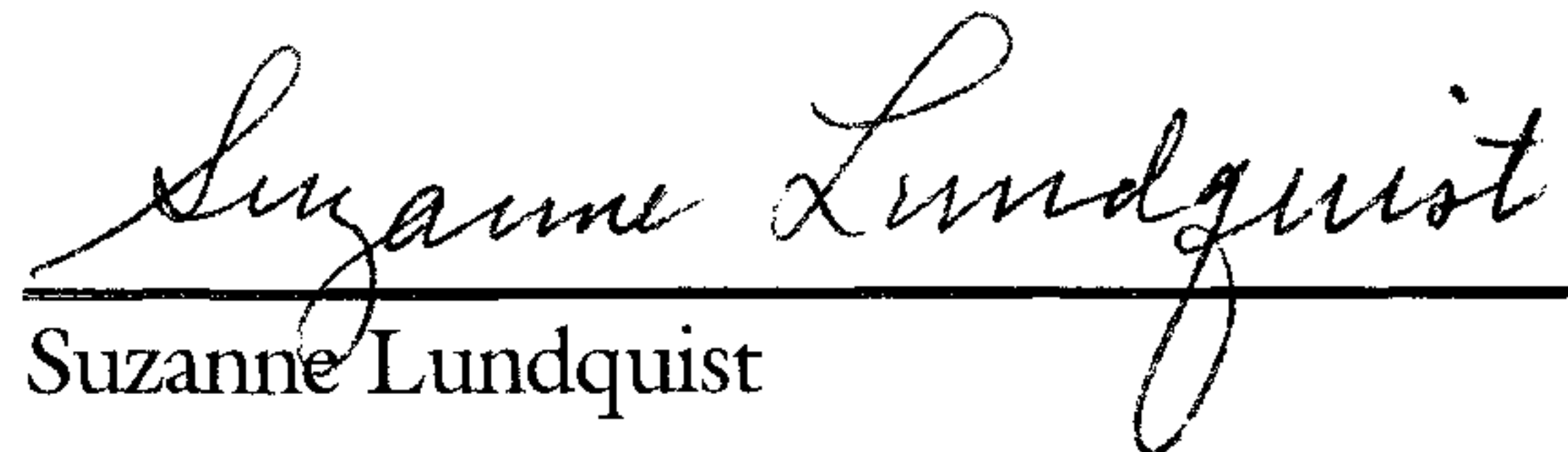
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## ABSTRACT

### UTOPIAN MARRIAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCOURSE

Brenda Olsen Andrus

Department of English

Master of Arts

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of utopian discourse about marriage in mid-nineteenth-century America. Although utopian communities are usually approached within the fields of history and sociology, a rhetorical analysis adds to the discussion by uncovering the discursive complexity of marriage beliefs within a rapidly changing culture. Discursive features of the Shaker, Oneida Community and Latter-day Saint texts are outlined and compared according to the following format:

*Chapter One* examines the textures of conflict within the dominant culture's views of marriage and gender roles in nineteenth-century America, with a brief overview of reform efforts of the day. This chapter provides a wide context of marriage discourse in this era, which situates emergent utopian discourse of alternative marriage constructs.

*Chapter Two* narrows the focus to utopian discourse, analyzing how utopian rhetoric responded to concerns of the dominant culture (outlined in Chapter One) and shaped their cultural identities. This chapter outlines several general features of utopian discourse about marriage and gender roles, with detailed analyses of the rhetoric of Shakers and the Oneida Community regarding their alternatives to traditional marriage constructs.

*Chapter Three* builds on the context of the first two chapters and further narrows the scope of analysis to Mormon Polygamy discourse. Public and private accounts are considered in a comparison of official church rhetoric with women's discourse about the principle. The last two chapters also show utopian departures from and similarities to mainstream discourse about marriage and gender roles.

Although the three groups examined responded to mainstream concerns with some discursive similarities, rhetorical analysis shows that differences also exist, such as their rhetoric of gender identity and church authority. The Latter-day Saints stand out against the wider context of utopian discourse for their patriarchal model, their tenets of both continuous and personal revelation, and their enduring success as a religion.



## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of discourse about marriage within the dominant culture of mid-nineteenth-century America. The context of marriage debate and layers of social conflict are established in Chapter One. Chapters Two and Three proceed with a close analysis of discourse about marriage within isolated utopian communities. The groups analyzed—the Shakers, Oneida Community, and Latter-day Saints—represent a wide discourse of alternatives to monogamous marriage which occurred during this period. These groups responded rhetorically to issues faced by the larger culture, but more importantly, they shaped their own cultural identities through discourse. They are perhaps the most notable utopian communities of this period because of their large populations and longevity. While all three thrived for most of the nineteenth century, the first two dwindled with their alternatives to monogamy; however, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints flourished, even after abandoning the practice of plural marriage which was once central to their cultural identity.

Although alternative marriage communities are typically studied in the fields of history, sociology and anthropology rather than English, a rhetorical analysis sheds light upon the discursive complexity of marriage beliefs within a rapidly changing culture. This rhetorical study not only allows the communities to speak for themselves with their own language, but it provides a contemporary perspective on



how that language shaped the values these groups held and how they, as sub-discourses, responded to and contributed to the larger discourse of marriage reform during this era. Rhetorical analysis shows, as Terry Eagleton proposes, “concern for the kinds of *effects* which discourses produce, and how they produce them” (508).

This type of analysis contributes nicely to the conversation of comparative study by identifying ways in which these communities fell in line with dominant beliefs and ways in which they departed, as well as ways in which their rhetorical responses were similar to and different from each other. This is a valuable method of inquiry into a time of significant ideological development in American history.

Nineteenth-century America, the time period of focus in this thesis, was a formative era for a young nation, forced to balance a multiplicity of world views and religions from the immigrant cultures that came together to form a new society. Marriage was but one of many issues of debate in this period. Sovereignty of the state versus federalism with all its attendant sub-issues—currency, economic development, slavery, religious freedom, and women’s suffrage—were hotly debated. Therefore, as this thesis will demonstrate, the nation’s initial ideal of mutual tolerance broke under the pressure to form a unified American identity, eventually resulting in the victory of federalism, but evidenced more fundamentally in a normative family paradigm.

Americans looked to the family as the basic and fundamental unit of society, and therefore the element most in need of stabilizing in order to ensure a secure

future for the nation. The struggle to normalize ideals of marriage, family, and gender role constructs is central to the struggle toward an American cultural identity. Americans debated whether marriage should be controlled by church or state—but they also challenged the very reasons for marriage, as well as constructs of how families should operate and how gender relates to identity.

As Chapter One sets forth the details of discourse about issues surrounding marriage and gender roles in mid-nineteenth-century America, the underlying premise is that disagreement and discourse are natural in the struggle for change. The variety of voices speaking on behalf of marriage reform or normalization of marriage constructs comprise a vital dialogue which, over time, moved toward unified cultural beliefs. Utopian communities fit into this dialogue as extreme reactions to the issues and strong voices speaking in behalf of alternatives to traditional marriage and family constructs.

The specific focus of this project is to situate Utopian discourse about marriage alternatives within the wider context of marriage reform in the dominant culture, and to compare ways in which these communities responded to issues faced by the rest of society. Theorists such as Lawrence Foster, Louis Kern, and Ira Mandelker have grouped the Shakers, Oneida Community and Mormons as part of a large utopian struggle to reform marriage in America; this rhetorical analysis adds to historical comparative study by identifying that while common discursive features unite these groups—important differences also distinguish them. The Shakers,

Oneida Community, and Mormon polygamists exhibit three notable discursive–theological differences regarding marriage, which account, in part, for their relative success or failure as religious communities: 1) the way each constructs gender identity, 2) the way each regards authority of leaders versus individual autonomy, and 3) how each formed eternal versus temporal world views. LDS rhetoric, initially as well as through time, stands out from the other two groups, yet falls more closely in line with the beliefs of the dominant culture on all three counts. Furthermore, Mormon marriage has retained early theological features, even though polygamy is no longer a part of Mormon cultural practice. Therefore, the question of Mormonism’s endurance beyond the utopian moment in which it emerged is illuminated by analysis of nineteenth-century American utopian marriage discourse.



## *Chapter One*

### **Social Conflict and Marriage Discourse in Nineteenth-Century America**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the context of marriage in nineteenth-century America and the growing tensions underlying sexual relationships felt by the dominant culture, especially the new middle class. Many were experiencing a sort of collective anxiety about accepted gender roles which peaked in the United States around 1850, instigating widespread debate about the marriage question. Amid this debate, many individuals and groups left mainstream society to participate in movements that radically restructured gender relationships. Chapters Two and Three will look at utopian discourse of marriage alternatives, with specific consideration of the Shakers, Oneida Community, and the Mormons. After providing the context of general marriage and gender conflict suffered by the dominant culture, the remainder of this thesis explores utopian rhetoric of alternatives to conventional marriage.

In order to locate and understand the departure point of utopian discourse, the larger context must be understood. Marriage was but one of many institutions called into question in nineteenth-century America; but as marriage is seen as the foundation of society, its instability can be interpreted as an indicator of social distress. The interrelated ideals of capitalism, democracy, and religion were also under scrutiny (though the focus of this thesis is marriage). In the early 1840s, the

United States was in what economists call a “take-off stage,” the

brief period of decisive and radical structural change in which the economy and the society themselves became transformed into a sort of machine which produced continued growth as well as goods. Barriers to modernization were eradicated, and steady development became the normal condition. (Sears 10)

This was occurring at the same time as Marx’s publication of the *Philosophico-economic Manuscripts*, in which Hegel’s concept of ‘alienation’ was expounded; in the United States, technology was developing the human character as much as humans were developing technology (Ibid.). Society masked its misgivings about such change with exultation of progress—but progress took its toll.

While the nation industrialized and the population was forced into close-quarters, the private sphere was essentially stripped of its privacy as it seeped into public streets. The increase and prevalence of print similarly spurred the collision of private and public spheres. Therefore, debates over issues surrounding marriage, though long overlooked, were quickly assumed by public discourse. Even sexuality found a dialogue, though it was generally spoken of with “maddening delicacy and romantic vagueness” (Walters 2). Other issues surrounding marriage, notably issues of gender roles, sexuality, fashion, and birth control, were laid out for discussion, as were legal issues for women such as divorce laws.

Within each issue public consensus was not easily reached, and what was preached was not necessarily practiced, especially among the rising middle class. This is why many critics refer to the nineteenth-century as a period of great hypocrisy, as there was clearly the coexistence of both prudery and vice. As standards were so high, or rather Victorian, reality could not help but fall short. Although contradictions in what was expected and what was practiced are common in this era, I would argue that rather than hypocrisy, this was actually a natural stage in a culture's struggle for stasis. America sought to establish new constructs in the face of changing external forces in the many forms of 'progress,' and the consequent changing demands of the people. This chapter outlines the contradictions as they underlie gender relationships and marriage constructs of the nineteenth-century middle class in America with the goal of understanding the texture of conflicts that served as impetus for marriage reform, or, as will be discussed in the following chapters, radical departure from the accepted model.

In this chapter, most of the support used to examine nineteenth-century culture in the United States comes from the popular genre of advice literature, as well as some from sermons, diaries, newspapers, and court cases. Advice literature is admittedly problematic, as it does not indicate the reality of behavior—it cannot possibly capture the meaningful gestures of private life. However, it is extremely useful in measuring *expectations* of behavior, especially considering how widely advice literature was read in this era. In the nineteenth century, unlike the eighteenth, most



advice literature targeted women (Griswold 147). This suggests that the burden of maintaining appropriate behavior was placed mainly on women, an idea congruent with the nineteenth-century image of women as the moral center of society.

## SEPARATE SPHERES

### “The Cult of Domesticity”

The separate spheres of home and work developed in the wake of the American Revolution, and with this paradigm a new ideal of womanhood emerged. Although her sphere did not actually change, woman’s role in the home became more important to society. The success of the new Republic depended on the virtue of its citizens, and as the outside world was increasingly seen as depraved, the people looked to home as a haven from worldly influence. “Linked to women’s rising domestic status was the infusion of women’s household duties and the home itself with high moral and even political purpose. . . . [women] were responsible for the well-being of the family and, through that influence, the destiny of the country as well” (Griswold 13).

While the “cult of domesticity” carried over into the nineteenth century, the motivation was not to strengthen the Republic anymore, but to preserve the country’s moral foundation against economic and social changes such as industrialization, economic growth, and the separation of home and work. Mainstream cultural ideology demanded that women mitigate the impact of these



changes, supposedly because their 'nature' dictated that it should be so. One physician writes that "women find the domestic sphere highly congenial to their nature and aspirations" (Delemont 47), woman's nature being moral and her aspirations never extending beyond family.

Advice literature by clergy, physicians, and women themselves proposed a "cult of domesticity" as the normative behavioral paradigm for true womanhood. The effects of the "cult of domesticity" were various. It brought social recognition to woman's traditional domain, and therefore a sense of purpose to women's lives; however, it also brought to light the inconsistencies in the current view of women. Women were seen as morally superior to men, yet they had far fewer rights than men. While seen as the moral center of society, women also occupied a conflicting image of passivity, physical frailty, and intellectual inferiority.

### **Sickly Women**

During the twenties and thirties "passivity and suffering became central to the definition of 'feminine' in women's writing" (Theriot 61). The frail and mentally ill woman not only showed the signs of domestic dedication, she was the ideal of beauty. Middle- and upper-class women were sedentary and starving, becoming just as helpless as they were believed to be. "The boredom and confinement of their lives fostered the sense of invalidism and hypochondria which was in turn validated by the medical profession" (Delemont 30). Even the most normal processes of a woman's life such as menstruation and pregnancy were seen as abnormal and disabling

illnesses. In 1869 the *Anthropological Review* reflected common attitudes toward menstruation:

At such times, women are unfit for any great mental or physical labour. They suffer under a languor and depression which disqualify them for thought or action, and render it extremely doubtful how far they can be considered responsible beings while the crisis lasts.

(quoted in Delemont 32)

Such 'crises' were so little talked about, and never in positive terms, that their presence caused severe anxiety, particularly in young women first experiencing menses.

Mental illnesses such as 'hysteria' reflected the same attitude from the medical community—that women were inherently sick. Diagnoses of such illnesses were common among women and thought to be related to their reproductive system, which was itself seen as a flaw in the woman's body (Ibid. 31-2). In these culturally constructed illnesses it can be seen how science and medicine were invoked to support shaky theories about women's inferiority.

The 'green sickness,' or 'chlorosis' (commonly known today as anorexia nervosa), was shockingly common, especially among young women (Theriot 105). A cursory analysis would reveal its cause to be a young woman's desire to live up to the standards of frailty; however, it could be that these young women wanted to put off womanhood, as through starvation a woman can prevent or discontinue

menstruation and other physical signs of female development (Delamont 38). In light of current psychological theory—which says that the usual motivation for starvation among anorexia victims is not to be thin, but to control some aspect of their lives—the latter explanation seems entirely valid. Nineteenth-century chlorosis could have been a symptom of a deeply psychological desperation to control what was to come. In any case, society valued the thin and decaying woman. It was not until the last third of the nineteenth-century that society began to define women's beauty in terms of health and strength (Cogan 9), and such diseases as chlorosis began to disappear from the records (Delamont 40).

### **The Ideal of Manhood**

Converse to the ideal of frailty in women, as Thorstein Veblen describes, the ideal man was predatory, acting his part in the clear definition of gender roles (28). Although he wrote in the latter part of the century, Veblen's observations reflect the ideal of manhood found earlier in the century. Man was cut out for competition in the outside economic world and domination in the home. Along with being physically brutish, man was not allowed any show of sensitivity. Women wrote caustic complaints in advice literature about the distant, unemotional nature of man; yet at the same time this nature was within society's expectation of him. If he were to act otherwise he would be 'unmanly.' In many cases of physical and mental illness in women, their husbands' distance and insensitivity were chronicled along with other potential causes, yet families laid no blame on them, for they merely acted within



sexual 'natures.' . . . The consensus among nineteenth-century writers was that men were emotionally distant and self-centered and that women were more moral, sensitive, and other-directed. (Theriot 66)

Such acceptance of barriers in "nature" escalated into the general attitude that marriage was torture for both parties, which was illustrated in the discourse of the day. Women in particular saw marriage as their lot in life—something to be endured. However, "an early nineteenth century mother could recommend such a life to her daughter, without insensitivity, because she expected her to find solace and 'place' in a female community that defined suffering as virtue" (Ibid. 70). This is how, while women saw themselves subject to their husbands, they felt at the same time morally superior. Women believed themselves to be refined by the misery that is marriage, a requisite martyrdom. It seems, then, that women themselves reinforced the consequent sexual double-standard, by assuming the role of moral superiority as well as owning the imposed role of physical and intellectual inferiority.

Such perceptions of the physical differences between men and women were at the heart of many social problems of the day—abortion, prostitution, divorce, and violence against women, but also the way that women's bodies and minds were understood as inferior and abnormal, which led to mistreatment of physical and mental illness. What would be seen as cruel and barbaric treatment of women today was perfectly in line with the accepted masculine role; conversely, men were limited in their behavior as roles were imposed on them. It can be easily seen now as it was

their 'nature' and expected role (Theriot 67).

However, the evangelical emphasis on domesticity elevated motherhood and moral superiority of women to a point that made male dominance in society inconsistent, and consequently fueled the questioning of male authority (Hammerton 71). Around 1850, a new ideal of manliness emerged, that of the "Christian gentleman," whose sensibilities were slightly more delicate. He would not, for example, force sex on his wife. This ideal was widely preached in sermons and advice literature, but it was not widely practiced until the last third of the century (Theriot 43). Women believed wholeheartedly that men were incapable of restraint, therefore they did not expect it. Even as the advice literature prescribed abstinence, women in fact viewed sex as man's 'right': "The experience of abstinence validated and encouraged the ideology of separate spheres by exaggerating sexual difference. Women believed male bodies required sexual intercourse while female bodies did not" (Ibid. 44).

### **A Blissful Union?**

Because both sexes treated the other as foreign, with impenetrable codes of thought and behavior, there resulted a stark division which generally prevented happiness in marriage. The sexual ideology of the day dichotomized the roles and the very 'nature' of male and female.

Proponents of separate spheres, from outright misogynists to domestic feminists, agreed that differing sexual roles were the result of differing

by many at the time, that even as the extreme sexual dichotomy was vehemently preached, its practice resulted in unfulfilling marriages.

## THE SEXUAL DOUBLE-STANDARD

### Female Chastity

From the latter part of the eighteenth century, evangelists had effectively disseminated the belief that women were basically disinterested in sex, which facilitated the belief that they were also highly moral creatures. Women became the main propagators of these beliefs in nineteenth-century advice literature.

“Passionlessness” actually served several functions for women: 1) they were able to “retrieve their identities from a trough of sexual vulnerability and dependence;” 2) as moral leaders, they worked successfully for several social changes; 3) their status and therefore collective self-esteem was elevated; and 4) they were better able to control the sexual arena, therefore reducing pregnancy (Griswold 70-1).

Nineteenth-century America, then, was not entirely repressive for women. Despite all of the evidence of subjugation of women in this era, the nineteenth century also marks many positive changes in both the public and the private realms. It was, in fact, the juxtaposition of positive, empowering experiences with more negative, subjugating realities that caused the level of social unrest which, as a rule, must precede change. As the moral centers, however, the responsibility to enforce sexual standards did fall to women, which is inconsistent with the fact that they had



little recourse for sexual violations, especially in marriage.

### **Male Excess**

As discussed earlier, the male body was seen as incapable of restraint.

However, men received their share of mixed messages from society. On the one hand, men were supposedly immoral by nature, or at the very least less moral than women; yet, physicians and clergy alike argued the cause of restraint in advice literature for men, again invoking complex moral and scientific theories to validate such positions. Dr. Benjamin Rush represents popular belief in his early nineteenth-century advice literature:

This [sexual] appetite, which was implanted in our natures for the purpose of propagating our species, when excessive, becomes a disease both of the body and mind. When restrained, it produces tremors, a flushing of the face, sighing, nocturnal pollutions, hysteria, [and] hypochondriasis. . . . When indulged. . . it produces seminal weakness, impotence, . . . dimness of sight, vertigo, epilepsy, . . . loss of memory. . . fatuity, and death. (quoted in Walters 33)

This passage essentially warns men that both restraint and indulgence are potentially hazardous to their health. Sylvester Graham depicted similar results from sexual excess:

These excesses, too frequently repeated, cannot fail to produce the most terrible effects. The nervous system, even to its most minute



filamentary extremities, is tortured into a state of debility, and excessive irritability, and uncontrollable mobility, and aching sensibility. . . . and consequently, all the organs and vessels of the body, even to the smallest capillaries, become extremely debilitated, and their functional powers exceedingly feeble. (Ibid.34)

While such short-term effects are perhaps not so far-fetched, the concept of lasting effects such as premature aging are. Dr. William Andrus Alcott, a popular advice-writer/physician offers the following case study:

There is a man now in Pennsylvania. . . thirty-five years old, with all the infirmities of 'three score and ten.' Yet his premature old age, his bending and tottering form, wrinkled face, and hoary head, might be traced to *solitary* and *social* licentiousness . . . . Thousands of youth on whom high expectations have been placed, are already on the highway that will probably lead down to disease and premature death. (Ibid. 35, emphasis added)

Such subtle warnings about masturbation and prostitution ('solitary' and 'social' licentiousness) were probably in part efforts at social control on the part of moralists like Alcott. He proceeds to delineate some of the inevitable side-effects of masturbation as insanity, epilepsy, blindness, and paralysis (Ibid. 36). Such themes ran contrary to the ideal of man as sexually potent and physically dominating. Other literature, although less in vogue, encouraged sex as natural and healthy. Dr.

Frederick Hollick is one example; he suggests the use of marijuana to increase virility in both men and women (Ibid. 118-9).

Again, men received conflicting messages from popular discourse about sex, but the prevailing prescription was continence, even though it went against their manly 'nature.' Sylvester Graham was one of many who laid down specific guidelines for frequency that could be considered 'continence.'

As a general rule, it may be said to the healthy and robust, it were better for you not to exceed, in the frequency of your indulgences, the number of months in the year; and you cannot habitually exceed the number of weeks in the year, without in some degree impairing your constitutional powers, shortening your lives, and increasing your liability to disease and suffering. (Ibid. 87)

Dr. Russell Trall adds his testimony, "I have had patients who had for years indulged in sexual intercourse as often as once in twenty-four hours, and some who have indulged still oftener. Of course the result was premature decay, and often permanent invalidism" (Ibid. 82). Such accounts are not difficult to believe if one supposes that many of the victims consorted with prostitutes, or are themselves prostitutes, as it is well-documented that prostitutes had extremely low life expectancy due to sexually transmitted diseases. Whatever fact initially underlay the suppositions, they transferred to monogamous sex as well. Dr. John Cowan, a notably conservative yet popular writer, said

It is a common belief that a man and woman, because they are legally united in marriage, are privileged to the unbridled exercise of amateness. This is wrong. Nature, in the exercise of her just laws. . . is as prompt to punish any infringement of her laws in those who are legally married as in those out of the bonds. Excessive indulgence between the married produces as great and lasting evil effects as in the single man or woman, and is nothing more or less than legalized prostitution. (Ibid.)

Perhaps such restrictive ideology was merely an attempt at social control, because nineteenth-century moralists clearly wanted to control both licentiousness and population. In any case, it is not difficult to imagine the difficulties such conflicting sexual ideals created in marriages, especially considering that the ideology of gender difference placed men and women against each other in this conflict.

## BIRTH CONTROL

### Contraception

Birth control is another point of contradiction found in nineteenth-century discourse about marriage, sex, and gender roles. Contraception and abortion are methods thought to have been widely used in nineteenth-century America, yet they were also frequently proclaimed immoral in advice manuals and sermons. Thomas Malthus himself (today's favorite zero-population spokesperson) said,

I should be extremely sorry to say anything which could be either directly or remotely construed unfavourably to the cause of virtue. . . .

I should always particularly reprobate any artificial and unnatural modes of checking population . . . on account of their immorality.

(quoted in Pearsoll 144)

Theorists like Malthus preached the virtues of small families because urbanization made more children more expensive and burdensome. Large families also inhibited upward mobility, which was itself a new ideal for most families. Dr. E. B. Foote, a famous Malthusian and birth control advocate said,

overpopulation, or. . . excessive childbearing, operates to the detriment of comfort, the sacrifice of health, over-work, overcrowding, puny off-spring, squalor and pauperism with their attendant vices, crimes and miseries, and necessarily results in a great waste of health and wealth. (quoted in Walters 28)

Although such an attitude conflicted with the newly popular expression of adoration of children, family size *was* decreasing in the nineteenth-century. This was partly due to the ideal of male continence, as explained above, but it was also due to contraception, abortion, and abstinence.

Contraception was not new, but the availability of information about it was, as was its general effectiveness due to newer technology, such as the vulcanization of rubber in 1843 (Pearsoll 144). Charles Knowlton's popular early nineteenth-century



book *Fruits of Philosophy: or The Private Companion of Young Married People* outlines four birth control methods—coitus interruptus, condoms, vaginal sponges, and douching with a sulfate solution. Cervical caps were also sold in the United States before the Civil War, but the modern diaphragm was not invented until 1880 (Theriot 41).

During the mid-century, along the same vein of the Comstockian campaign against obscenity, came campaigns to outlaw birth control and abortion based on the premise of immorality. It became illegal to disseminate information about either, let alone to participate.

### **Abortion**

Similarly, there was a moralist movement started by physicians to outlaw abortion, which was widely practiced in the nineteenth-century. On the one hand, abortion was extremely dangerous whether self-imposed or performed by a physician, but on the other hand, pregnancy was often life-threatening as well. The basis of abortion laws was concern for the health and life of the mother. Fetal life was legally considered to begin at “quickening,” at about four months when the mother first feels the baby move. There is no way to determine the prevalence of abortion in the nineteenth-century, but the modern consensus is that it was rampant and increasing, indicated by the increasing discourse and concern about it in nineteenth-century literature and law. A main source of concern seemed to be that it was beginning to occur more frequently within wed-lock, whereas it had

traditionally been just a desperate measure for unmarried women.

### **Abstinence**

The drop in fertility is most commonly ascribed to abstinence, which seemed to be the main method of birth control used by nineteenth-century couples, with abortion as a back-up (Theriot 42). Abstinence was fervently advocated in advice literature targeting both women and men. Although the main burden of enforcing abstinence fell to women, as the moral centers, it required cooperation. Advice literature perpetuated various beliefs advocating abstinence as both a moral and physical imperative. The most common belief was that sex should only be for propagative purposes, not amative; this theory underlay the guideline that couples should not have sex during pregnancy or lactation, “when the limited bodily vitality should be focussed on the infant” (Ibid.).

Also reinforcing the ideal of abstinence was the advice that if a husband and wife could not manage to keep separate bedrooms, they should at least separate their beds with a divider. Again, while it is impossible to know even the norms of actual sexual behavior, one can suppose that this advice merely served a social-reformative agenda and was not as widely practiced as prescribed.

## CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

### **Affording a wife**

Just as the rising middle class women and their homes symbolized the American ideals of morality, they also represented and vicariously embodied the leisure that men worked toward. According to Thorstein Veblen, having a wife who does not need to work became a modern standard in the nineteenth-century—the wife herself serving as a man's gesture of conspicuous consumption (68-9). Veblen points to the impractical housework and decorative measures women were involved in, as they merely show they had free time and means for uselessness.

This was not only carried out in the fact of women's idleness and frivolous occupations, but their ability to display the latest fashions. Veblen saw changing fashions as honorific in wastefulness, but also symbolic of perpetual dissatisfaction and a frivolous search for aesthetic ideals (122). Affording dresses that were in accordance to changing fashion, then, was one way to utilize a wife as a symbol of status—but the fashionable dresses were in and of themselves symbolic.

### **Fashion**

Fashion for the nineteenth-century middle-class woman emphasized uselessness. Dresses and hairstyles made the statement that not only is the wearer not expected to work, but she couldn't possibly work. It was typical for young women to lament their passage into womanly status. Frances Willard records in her diary:



This is my seventeenth birthday and the date of my martyrdom. Mother insists that at last I must have my hair 'done up woman fashion.' She says she can hardly forgive herself for letting me 'run wild' so long. We had a great time over it all, and here I sit. . . . My 'back hair' is twisted up like a corkscrew; I carry eighteen hair-pins; my head aches, my feet are entangled in the skirt of my new gown. I can never jump over a fence again so long as I live. As for chasing the sheep down in the shady pasture, it's out of the question, and to climb down to my 'Eagle's Nest' seat in the big burr oak would ruin this new frock beyond repair. Altogether, I recognize the fact that 'my occupation's gone.' (quoted in Theriot 108)

It seems that a systematic subjugation of the nineteenth-century woman through style actually did render her useless as supposed. The image of a perfect invalid led to fashions such as the constricting skirt described above. The styles of skirts and dresses ranged from dome and pyramid hoops to long draping fabric in the early and mid-nineteenth century, to the bulky bustle in the latter part of the century (Pearsoll 62-3). The main purpose of each was to be expensive and disabling. Women were burdened under the weight and entangled in the construction; "with about 15 to 20 pounds of material hanging from a constricted 15-inch waist, a sort of portable prison of tight corsets and long skirts—[such clothing] prevented activity any more rigorous than the occasional Sunday stroll and were not entirely conducive to good

health” (Delamont 30). Nineteenth-century women’s fashion was both the definition and enforcement of passivity.

Wives of the rising middle class then, functioned both as conspicuous consumers, donning the latest fashion and constantly engaging in up-to-date frivolity, as well as the conspicuous consumptive, the product men consume (Ibid. 27). As an extension of a man’s status, the nineteenth-century woman was seen as something to be afforded, a frill in and of herself.

## PATRIARCHAL AND COMPANIONATE MODELS OF MARRIAGE

### **Shifting Ideals**

Beginning as early as the eighteenth century, marriage underwent a dramatic ideological transformation from the patriarchal to companionate model, in which marriage is expected to be more egalitarian and emotionally fulfilling. This coincides with the theory of separate spheres, where marriage partners had a certain level of autonomy over their respective domains. A family historian, Daniel Blake Smith, characterizes the ideological shift as

a movement away from the well-ordered, father-dominated family of the colonial era—with its emphasis on parental control, obedience, and restraint of emotions—toward a strikingly affectionate, self-consciously private family environment in which children became the center of indulgent attention and were expected to marry for reasons of

romance and companionship rather than parental design and economic interest. (quoted in Lystra 227)

Courtship took on a new importance as parental involvement in marriage choice waned, and it became popular to test a potential mate in an attempt to ensure that romance would outlast the honeymoon; such tests took the form of dramatic crises or obstacles suitors were to overcome to prove the depth of their devotion. Women devised more dramatic and difficult courtship tests than did men, suggesting perhaps that they had greater anxiety about emotional fulfillment after marriage (Ibid. 157-9).

This emphasis on romance as basis for marriage-choice prompted discourse about prudence in advice literature. In 1853 Dr. L. N. Fowler, a well-known prescriptive author, advises against hasty marriage and marriage for inappropriate motives.

Marriage is too often made a matter of *feeling*, and not enough of *reflection* and *judgement*. Many are influenced by no other motive when they marry than that of being *in love*, and are thus led by the blind impulses of their nature to form a union for life without any regard for consequences. It being the duty of every healthy and well organized person to form these matrimonial relations, in order to secure the greatest amount of happiness, not only to ourselves, but to our posterity. (quoted in Walters 93)

The fact that there was a call for more intellect in the decision to marry, rather than just feeling, shows that partners had a choice in marriage and an ideal of romantic love. No longer were arrangements between fathers common, except among the highest echelons of society (Lystra 159).

In line with Dr. Fowler's prescription of prudence and assertion that social ills result from poor matrimonial matches comes similar advice targeting women. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell cautioned women in 1859 to marry later, for the preservation of their health and the benefit of society:

A young lady is thought to be getting rather old at 20, but at 25 she is already an old maid; and yet, as a general rule, before the age of 25, she is not prepared to enter on the marriage relation; it is only from 20 to 25 that the body attains its full vigor—that every part having acquired its due solidity, becomes capable of employing all its functions without injury to the individual, and with full benefit to society. (quoted in Walters 94)

Again, we see how vague, unsubstantiated theory takes on a scientific appearance to suit any agenda—even the more progressive agendas. This rhetoric of logos is particularly effective in a culture recently embracing science and technology; therefore, women who abide this prescription can see themselves as understanding and utilizing their bodies scientifically, thereby taking their part in progress.



While courtship and reasons for marriage were changing, marriage was still seen as the only alternative for women. An inconsistency arises in the suggestion that women should put off marriage as long as possible, yet they still must marry. Even though companionate marriage seemed, perhaps, tolerable for women, there was still a tension. It was precisely because the newer, companionate model of marriage brought higher emotional expectations that women were destined to be disappointed. This is because as the expectations changed, the ideology of domestic roles did not; therefore, a conflict arose between volition to marry and obligation to gender-related-duties after marriage. Karen Lystra explains:

the challenge of nineteenth-century marital relationships was to adjust an essentially voluntary and volatile romantic bond to the involuntary obligations and duty-bound roles of husband and wife. Victorians conceived of marriage in terms of love and personal choice. Yet spousal roles were largely defined as compulsory social obligations. An act of self-determined choice, Victorian marriage nonetheless imposed a set of mandatory sex-role specific duties upon husband and wife.

(192)

While this tension played out most vividly in women's lives, it frustrated men as well, as is evidenced in the increased instance and awareness of marital violence.

## Marital Violence

As marriage ideals shifted from patriarchal to companionate, an intolerance for marital violence grew, and discourse about this issue emerged in newspapers, lectures, sermons, and law—but it is difficult to say whether there was actually an increase in violent acts, whether society was becoming more sensitive to it, or whether they were merely more aware of it because of the press. In any case, the discourse about marital violence indicates the growing tension and concern over gender roles and marriage models.

Violence is a manifestation of frustration. John Stewart Mill writes about marital rape in *The Subjection of Women*, defining the wife as “the personal body-servant of a despot” (quoted in Hammerton 156). He asserts that men cannot tolerate the idea of living with an equal, so they assert physical power in an effort to retain authority. As the public became less tolerant of such behavior, men became wary of the public eye and moved violence further into private settings where neighbors were less likely to observe. Most reported cases of marital violence occurred in the bedroom and on the bed (Ibid. 52). As shocking as it sounds today, such behavior was certainly not beyond the ideal of manliness, as discussed earlier; therefore, criticism of such behavior was at odds with an old, steadfast ideal of patriarchal dominance and female submissiveness.

But criticism persisted, focusing on the respectable ethic of self-improvement, which was expected to flourish in a domestic setting. Advice literature began to

prescribe “Christian Gentlemenliness” around mid-century, but court records show that even if this ideal was attempted, relapses into barbarism were numerous.

Although behavioral trends were slow to catch up with ideological trends, the latter clearly shifted toward companionate marriage with humane treatment (Ibid. 33); and by the end of the nineteenth-century, criticism turned into legal reform, as supporters rallied from many camps for women’s rights in marriage—and divorce (Ibid. 14).

### **Increased Divorce Rates**

The dramatic increase in divorce is yet another manifestation of an unstable society. Public awareness and concern with marital misconduct brought demands for legislative intervention. This concern grew out of the sensibility that marriage was inconsistent with the middle-class domestic ideal as well as heightened emotional expectations (Hammerton 2); “Heightened expectations and rising responsibilities, while increasing women’s self-esteem and autonomy, also brought increased marital instability” (Griswold 69). Women brought forth the majority of divorce cases to the court (Ibid. 166), but it was difficult for men and women alike to live up to expectations. However, and perhaps more importantly, they also finally had clear expectations they could reference in validating their dissatisfaction. “By 1850 the modern family had emerged: men and women who came into divorce court alleging that their spouse failed to meet certain standards were, in essence, complaining that their mates failed to meet the demands of modernism” (Ibid. 4).



Middle-class disputes varied in a range of conflicts over power and authority. While criticism of women's failures to live up to ideals persisted, most attention was given to reformation of husband roles within the companionate structure; therefore, legal and religious factors upholding the patriarchal model eroded, yet elements remained (and remain) as strong factors in the more egalitarian model we see today (Hammerton 6-7).

### **The Marriage Debate**

The polarization of sex-role ideals and the inconsistencies within these ideals seem to be the foundation of debate over marriage in Victorian America. Toward the end of his compilation of advice literature, Ronald G. Walters articulates this problem with regard to nineteenth-century discourse about marriage and gender roles:

Authors frequently idealized woman, partly because of her supposedly unascivious nature, and yet feared female seductiveness; they fretted about the dreadful effects of sexual expressiveness and yet glorified marriage, the institution giving legitimacy to sexual expressiveness; they delight in children and yet advocated behavior that would produce fewer children. . . . [It is] not surprising that nineteenth-century advice literature had its tensions and ironies; these may well be inherent in moral pronouncements of any sort. Codes of conduct, after all, function in part to mediate conflicts within individual consciences

and conflicts between individuals and society, a thankless process of reconciling opposing forces. (156-7)

This tension of attitudes, again, was part of a natural process of finding a balance between a culture's changing needs and the effects of industrialization. Marriage may have suffered the greatest pains in this transitional time, as issues of sex-roles, infidelity, birth control, violence, and divorce took their toll on this shaky, yet fundamental institution; however, it could be argued, it was a necessary struggle—a struggle, at any rate, which is key to understanding reform efforts.

## REFORMERS

### Range of Supporters

Reformers came from every camp—from radical feminists to conservative moralists. But few aimed beyond the compromise of “companionate harmony within a framework of patriarchal dominance and separate spheres” (Hammerton 2). Some more radical reformers, such as free-thinkers, thought that marriage should be more a function of the state; this would release wives, particularly, from the psychologically oppressive duties to marriage that religion imposed. Free thinkers were also key players in pushing sexual discourse into the open. The idea that “sex underlay the life of the mind, the spirit, and the body was part of a new element in the nineteenth-century climate of opinion, which stretched from Freud to Walt Whitman to Moses Harman [(a free love reformer)], but which generated hostility

in the traditionalists” (Sears 241).

However, talking freely about sex and *living* freely are vastly different, so a distinction should be made between the prevailing (as well as emerging) ideologies and actual familial situations. For example, political campaigns of feminists and other reform groups often differ distinctly from the common reality for most women, and even from the reality of those reformers (Hammerton 6). Even the free love radicals did not necessarily live the ideals they preached.

### **Free Love Radicals**

The free love movement, a sort of extreme branch of free thought, is one example of a largely theoretical, yet progressive movement that eagerly took its place in public discourse through periodicals and pamphlets. It was a mainstream effort in that it sought to change society from within; however, it challenged the very foundation of society. It is problematic to define a commonly accepted set of free love beliefs because of the wide range of thought within the movement. In its most radical form, free-love taught that the practice of marriage should be abandoned and replaced with “free unions.”

Free lovers saw themselves as morally transcendent, and saw the upholders of marriage (such as religion and to some extent the state) as inherently evil and oppressive. Employing the current figurative rhetoric of abolitionists, free lovers compared marriage to slavery (Sears 5). They also favored the well-known J. S. Mill simile of wife as chattel, passed down from father to husband. A main tenet was that



the institution of marriage undermined romantic love because of its adherence to religious and social authorities (Ibid. 20). Therefore, the free love movement was not an orgiastic frenzy as the name came to connote; rather it was a romantic and moralistic mission to release woman from her matrimonial shackles. As Ezra Heywood, a main free love leader, states: “It means the expulsion of animalism, and the entrance of reason, knowledge, and continence. . .The sexual instinct shall no longer be a savage, uncontrollable usurper, but be subject to thought and civilization” (Ibid. 160).

For an anti-marriage and pro-woman movement, free love was surprisingly conservative in its anti-divorce and anti-prostitution stances, as well as its skepticism of suffrage. The movement saw divorce and prostitution as safety-valves that ensured the perpetuation of conventional marriage and its oppression (Sears 23); they also argued that laws against the natural rights of the sexual relationship were the cause of prostitution and masturbation (Ibid. 158); and their concern with women voting was that most women were traditional *wives*, upholding patriarchal dominance through their subservience. The majority of American women would surely vote in support of such ideals.

In their concern for women’s rights, there was a debate among free thinkers about whether the ideology of separate spheres should be reinforced or debunked. Many thought that women should endeavor to make themselves happy first, and that happy families would follow, but the general feeling was that a search for happiness



within a system of “enforced suffering, legal subjugation, and the tradition of submissiveness” was fruitless (Sears 246-7). Most free love advocates argued that the push to keep women in a separate sphere insinuated, essentially, that they could not interact with men without having sex with them, and that such an attitude was a product of “the lewdness inherent in ‘conventional’ morality” (Ibid. 158).

From within its ranks, free love was believed to be a highly moral movement, with martyrs (such as the writers and publishers who went to jail repeatedly) and all of the other obligatory features. It was not until after the Civil War, when all such movements of sexual alternatives were abandoned and “Victorian culture decreed a consensus of prudery,” that ‘free love’ “increasingly became only an epithet used to discredit anything that smacked of social aberration” (Sears 23). In its prime, the 1850s, free love was far from an attempt to destroy the family; rather, it was a romantic critique of marriage, amid a much larger consensus of dissatisfaction. Therefore, efforts to fiercely combat free love’s appeals for freedom and equality among the sexes did not necessarily prevail, as the discourse of marriage reform included supporters from even the most conservative factions of society.

## **Conclusion**

The marriage question in nineteenth-century American culture resonates with dissonance. Beyond the reform movements acting from within society, the next step is to examine what types of movements *circumvented* the mainstream in an attempt to settle the collective anxiety experienced by an evolving culture described above.

Chapter Two examines rhetoric of marriage reform and alternatives presented by utopian groups, with specific analyses of the Shakers and the Oneida Community.

Chapter Three focuses entirely on Mormon polygamy and its place in discourse about marriage and alternatives to monogamy. Each of these groups had unique and regimented alternatives to monogamous marriage built into their theologies.

Religious movements are of particular interest not only because of their creative and innovative theologies, but because of their attempts to reclaim marriage and sexual behavior. The fact of marriage becoming increasingly a subject of the state rather than church may have increased society's anxiety over control of it. Reducing the sacredness of marriage reduced its value, as well as that of the family, which constituting the fundamental unit of society, in turn reduces the value of society. This would naturally add to feelings of societal instability and prompt radical religious movements (which simultaneously dealt with general religious instability) to reclaim marriage and sexuality in isolated communities, with seeming disregard for the state.

These three movements attempted to answer the concerns regarding marriage and sexuality outlined in this chapter. Although they each practiced alternatives to monogamous marriage for several generations, they were misunderstood and even despised by mainstream society. I will examine the rhetoric of these radical religious groups in their attempts to solve society's issues for their members through alternatives to monogamy.



## *Chapter Two*

### **Utopian Marriage Discourse: Attempts at Sexual Transcendence**

#### **Introduction**

As Chapter One establishes, a great discrepancy lies between public ideals and private reality in nineteenth-century America's dominant culture, particularly regarding gender roles and relationships. Widespread concern and anxiety over social expectations resulted from this discrepancy, thus a variety of reform movements emerged with these issues at the foundation of their beliefs. Both secular and non-secular utopian groups of the day strove to reform marriage among other institutions. This chapter traces how religious utopian discourse responded to the marriage question, as well as the related issues of religion and economics.

Ira Mandelker argues that the Nineteenth-century rise in Victorian ideals was propelled to some degree by a desire for stability in a rapidly changing social and economic environment; Victorianism tried to set both society and private life in order through exaggerated worship of domesticity and romance (61). Ironically, radical splinter groups were motivated by the same lack of stability *coupled* with the inconsistencies resulting from Victorian ideals. Louis Kern explains, "however widespread the acceptance of these social norms [Victorian gender roles] may have been, there were those of both sexes who found them inadequate, degrading, and psychologically destructive" (19). Reform groups, including free love, feminism, and



utopians, responded directly to such disillusionment, challenging and restructuring the place of sex and marriage in individual and community life.

The peak time of discourse about the marriage question was in the 1850s—which was also the time that approximately one hundred groups were attempting to transcend debate about marriage and other socioeconomic issues through formation of utopian communities. These communities generally exhibited a “millennial fervor,” including secular groups (Kern 3), but they represented varying degrees of anti-government, anti-religious, and anti-capitalist sentiment. This chapter gives some background of religious and economic utopian discourse, though the main features of interest in this thesis are marriage and gender relationships.

Kern says

the problems faced by these communities were identical with those faced by the broader society from which they were drawn. As a response to those problems, utopian communities made certain changes, primarily in the simple dyadic form of monogamous marriage and in the nature of the role of woman and the family. (13)

This is not to say that larger society was satisfied with nor upheld monogamy in practice either—“alternatives” were prevalent—but promiscuity, prostitution, and fornication should not be considered as real alternatives to the institution of monogamy. In reality they function in perpetuating the monogamy ideal. They are in fact safety valves or outlets for the traditional structure, “contributing to the

stability of the cultural system” (Kern14). These social ills were actually targets of reform among utopian groups with alternative constructs. Ironically, the mainstream lumped utopian constructs in with other social ills. The dominant culture did not consider these groups’ radical suggestions for gender relationships as alternatives to social problems; rather, they saw them as part of the problems themselves (Ibid.).

From a contemporary perspective, however, much can be said in behalf of these radical approaches. Nineteenth-century utopian discourse openly addressed the issues of sexuality which mainstream society struggled with in repressed silence, offering frank, definite guidelines regarding gender roles, abortion, prostitution, marriage, and divorce. In the meantime, the dominant culture suffered disillusionment if not anxiety about these issues; yet the “progressiveness” of utopians varies. As Marylyn Klee-Hartzell explains,

Many communal societies have not been interested in progressive social change, particularly regarding gender relations, but instead were *retreats* from ‘the world.’ In other words, some (especially religious) communards felt that entirely too much change had already occurred. Some communities have tried to restore a lost earlier era, for example, by restoring patriarchal norms or preindustrial work patterns. In other words, we cannot assume that all communal societies are progressive.

(“Introduction” 4)

Whatever their measure of progressiveness by current standards, they offered specific moral codes, either by eschewing marriage completely, or by strictly regimenting sexuality—in either case attempting to relieve the ambiguity of Victorian sexuality.

### **Secular and Religious Communes**

As mentioned above, there were over one hundred utopian communities established in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and of these, nearly seventy were communal, in that members donated some or all of their assets upon entering and shared all things in common within (Kern 3). Such response to disillusionment with the capitalist ideals of Jacksonian Democracy is considered here as it relates closely to radical changes in conjugal constructs. Frequently those who actively dealt with the marriage question were the same reformers who also took these economic issues to heart. Communal aspects of marriage alternatives will be discussed further in the sections on Shakers, the Oneida Community and Mormon polygamy.

Between 1790 and 1860 the east was “discovering its Utopia in an industrial capitalist order”—the factory had virtually replaced household manufacturing of products by 1860, and small-scale, personal business relationships gave way to trends of administration and management (Mandelker 30). The government supported industry and fostered the economy by permitting easy incorporation and expansion of banking. With industrialization came urbanization, and a host of new problems—decline of local economies and markets, depersonalization, and



institutional credit (Ibid. 31). While some of the promised prosperity existed, it was elusive, and in reality it was a difficult time for most. People felt displaced in the big cities and disillusioned with the propagandistic ideal of progress. Horace Greeley made the following attack: “This is predominantly an age of Individualism, (it would hardly be polite to say Egotism), wherein ‘the Sovereignty of the Individual’—that is the right of every one to do pretty nearly as he pleases—is already generally popular, and visibly gaining ground daily” (quoted in Kern 25).

Prescriptive literature reveals perhaps a more subtle sense of ambivalence underlying its attempts to spell out means of ethical success. Individuals were encouraged to pursue economic success, but they were not supposed to want to be rich. Evading such a conflict in forces, it is no wonder that the majority of both secular and religious utopian communities held among their ideals that of communal living.

### **Religious Heavens-on-Earth**

Just as capitalism and industrialism posed serious economic questions for most utopians, the institution of religion as found in the dominant culture represented interrelated concerns. Individuals found themselves confused in the throes of the Second Great Awakening, trying to establish both the place of spirituality in daily life as well as weighing the veracity of theologies each church had to offer. Secular utopians can, in a sense, be understood as responses to these concerns in their avoidance or even condemnation of organized religion. But there



were other groups, three of which are the primary focus in the remainder of this Chapter and the entirety of Chapter Three, who radically restructured religion, picking up, in a sense, where the Second Great Awakening sects left off in reconciling gender and socioeconomic issues for their members. Mandelker argues that it was the failure of the Second Great Awakening leaders to reconcile or balance religion with the economic world that prompted radical and idiosyncratic attempts by utopians (16), which is supported by the fact that many utopian followers had been involved with revivals in the “Burned-over District” of New York.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, disillusionment with organized religion is closely tied with disillusionment with industrialism.

Most clergy of this time period (1830-50) supported all the instruments of capitalist industrial society *along with* the immutable laws of God and his inviolate will. Poverty was attributed to the moral qualities of the individual rather than to the system, and some believed that any relief providing physical sustenance alone further ruined the moral character of the poor (Mandelker 32). These religious attitudes did little more than provide a religious legitimation of economic individualism, laissez-faire, and the single-minded pursuit of wealth.

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<sup>1</sup> The “burned-over district” refers to western New York following the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. It was thus named because of “the frequency with which the fires of the revival spirit swept through the region. . . . [This area] was a spawning ground for new religious and social movements. Every conceivable mainstream or unorthodox group seemed to be able to find a following in the Burned-over District” (Foster 4-5).

The ‘hidden hand’ of the market was none other than God’s. Poverty and the wretchedness born of the factory system were not abominations in God’s eyes but elements in his economic system.

(Ibid. 33)

Consequently, socialism was condemned as atheistic—its supporters “alien and infidel” (Ibid. 34). The Second Great Awakening leaders were divided by contrary sets of ideas—first the need to subordinate things of the world to things of the spirit, and second the need to protect property, defend capitalism, and to appease the monied class (to gain their own economic support). And again, many thought economic laws were just as immutable as God’s laws, while others thought materialism was evil (Ibid. 35). Revivals, supported by the monied class, were used as propaganda to assuage the working class—preaching the work ethic, honesty, and loyalty to employers (Ibid. 36). Furthermore, Protestantism maintained sex and religion in a chronic state of tension—the temptations of the flesh were constantly fought, but romance was increasingly becoming a social ideal (Ibid. 61). Such deep-rooted ambivalence regarding both economics and sexuality bred the urgency of utopian religious groups to isolate themselves and attempt to establish heaven on earth.

Some fascinating ironies stand out in the emergence of the utopian heaven-on-earth concept; first, the industrial enemy these groups were turning away from actually inspired the possibility of attaining of heaven on earth. Kern explains that a

growing economy, the progress mentality, and the general fever of modernity led to the confidence in the power of the individual to establish values and make judgments predicated on the pure force of his own personality, often in defiance of established authority and convention. . . . This self-centered optimism was reflected in nineteenth-century religious life in the emotional revivalism centered on individual salvation, which provided the basis for the romantic belief in the perfectibility of the self—for ultimate sanctification in *this* life. Transcendentalism, with its belief in the spark of divinity in every man that must be nourished and liberated, was a secular expression of this belief in the ultimate perfectibility of man. (Kern 29)

Here we see an odd pair of reciprocities between modernism and religion: first, the attitude that a haven must be created against increasing worldly forces; second, a positive response to the modernist feeling that *this is the time* and *we have the ability*—attitudes which increased the desire among religious utopians to establish a link with God, and to transcend the “monster” of progress.

### **Rhetoric of Isolation**

Rhetoric of isolation is commonly found in the discourse of both secular and religious utopian groups. For communal groups, isolation was essential to creation of a self-sufficient mini-economy. For religious groups attempting to establish heaven on earth, solitude was equally necessary—but their rhetoric of isolation is



even more complex.

Religious utopian communities generally found themselves at odds with the dominant society, so rhetoric of alienation and persecution were often worked into their theology. They saw their separateness as an essential aspect in their relationship with the rest of the world, as they generally believed they were called to be examples to the world acting (though passively) as part of the reform of the nation (Kern 4).

Such rhetoric functions to reinforce devotion; as Kern explains, the doctrine of a kingdom of God on earth “was central to the social cohesion of the religiously based communities because it served to enhance the isolation and sense of separateness and specialness of their members. Heightened alienation from accepted social norms and mores intensified communal commitment” (4). Thus in philosophy, utopians create an inviolable boundary between religion (the utopia) and the rest of the world, which includes other religions, popular ideologies, and most commonly, government.

John Humphrey Noyes, leader of the Oneida Community, justifies isolation by explaining that secular law violates God’s law and inhibits spiritual development of humanity. The following 1837 editorial explains:

When I wish to form a true conception of the government of the United States, (using a personified representation) I picture to myself a bloated, swaggering libertine, trampling on the Bible—its own Constitution—its treaties with the Indians—the petitions of its



citizens; with one hand whipping a Negro, tied to a liberty-pole, and with the other dashing an emaciated Indian to the ground. . . . But every other country is under the same reprobate authority. I must, then, either go out of the world, or find some way to live where I am, without being a hypocrite, or a partaker in the sins of the nation.

(quoted in Whitworth 94-5)

Utopian communities found solidarity in isolation, as well as a forum for experimentation with alternative social constructs. The Oneida Community is an example of a group who were not distant geographically, yet they managed for some time to maintain an unadulterated society with radically alternative codes of moral and ethical living.

### **Stringency**

Similar to isolation, stringency is a common discursive attribute of utopian rhetoric and practice. The strictness of the rules and beliefs of utopian groups also had a similar appeal to isolation. Just as there is comfort in turning completely away from a confusing world, there is comfort in having all of the world's questions answered by a new authority. As Kern explains, motivations of member's voluntary communal association are complex, but the level of commitment and sacrifice required shows the seriousness of their concern with society. "Utopian societies offered the promise of a resolution of psychological and social tensions and alternative modes of ordering experience that many of their adherents hoped would

provide more cooperation and less conflict and antagonism in interpersonal relations” (16). And this resolution took the form of strict regimen in nearly every aspect of life. Thus distinctions between religious and secular were abandoned—all aspects of life were seen through a utopian lens.

### **Utopian Marriage**

Many utopian groups were particularly concerned with the marriage question, and some of those actually practiced *alternatives* to traditional, monogamous marriage. Such groups were commonly confused with the ‘free love’ movement, discussed in Chapter One. The most famous and interesting of radical religious movements of the time are the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormon polygamists, because of their regimented alternatives to the conjugal family which were tightly woven into their theologies. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the first two, and the third chapter solely on the latter. Each had a different approach, but all offered in some form *relief* from the collective anxiety faced by American society through strict ethical codes of sexuality and marriage.

## **SHAKERS, THE MILLENIAL CHURCH**

### **Origin and Beliefs**

The Shakers, or the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Coming, actually began in England, but had little success there. They came to America in 1774 and were thriving by the Second Great Awakening. Lawrence Foster says the

type of members the Shakers attracted were those disillusioned with the “almost manic-depressive mood swings they experienced as a result of revivals.” Shaker success, then, was in providing secure salvation and stable communal environment (57-8). Foster goes on to explain,

All aspects of life would ultimately come to form a unified spiritual and temporal whole within a distinctive community devoting itself, like a monastery, to the service of God. The Shakers’ success in linking spiritual and temporal life would ultimately prove a key factor to their appeal to dissatisfied individuals seeking a secure spiritual home that would free them from the emotional rollercoaster of revivalistic religion. (62-3)

Even among utopian societies, the Shakers offered relative stability in their singularity of purpose. The popular issues of equality and communism were not really on the agenda—their main purpose was always to serve God, which was facilitated through communal living. They believed salvation would be achieved this way—giving up selfish attachments to family and material possessions (Ibid. 20). Thus Shaker communism was highly religious rather than political.

The second and most famous Shaker leader, Ann Lee, had typical revivalist traits: charisma, profound love for her followers, the ability to receive revelation, and all the signs of what would be called manic-depression today. She was marked though for the ability to speak in tongues and receive revelation publicly while

entranced, also for the high level of aerobic activity in her services—and of course, as a female leader. She was well loved by her followers; most thought she represented the female incarnation of God, just as Christ had been the male incarnation—and she often referred to herself (while speaking from a trance) as the bride of Christ or as walking along side Christ. Although the Shakers espouse a maternal deity, she does not hold equal status. A doctrinal book *Testimony* (published in 1808) explains that in the Godhead, “the Father is first. . . , and the Mother is the second” (quoted in Nickless 123). Whatever their individual concepts of Ann Lee, followers were *devoted*, as devotion was demanded in her strict code of celibacy.

Ann Lee had suffered four difficult deliveries and subsequent deaths of her babies. Her anguish was ceaseless until she received closure, in a sense, from a vision that revealed to her the truth about sex. She had a graphic vision of Adam and Eve committing the original sin in the Garden of Eden, and it was revealed to her that this was the transgression for which mankind was cursed. In a subsequent vision she was commanded to teach the principle of celibacy as the singular path to salvation.

In its beginning the Shaker movement emphasized the eminence of the millennium, the necessity of repentance, and the value of free workings of the spirit. Female deification and celibacy played primary roles in the early church, but neither were part of the group’s fundamental beliefs (Foster 22). It was when Ann Lee became the key leader that carnal sin gained new emphasis for followers. In 1774, after the Shakers had come to New York, Lee broke with her husband over the issue



of sex and the group then officially required celibacy (Ibid. 22-3). After Ann Lee's tenure, the group instituted and maintained an egalitarian leadership structure, generally including two women and two men. Although the group did not become notably nor visibly involved with women's rights until later in the century, some member accounts express the feeling that Shakerism's structural equality was a favorable alternative to the gender constructs of the dominant culture.

### **Rhetoric of Celibacy**

The Shakers offered security and shelter from the collective cultural anxiety with a religion that encompassed all areas of life. Sexual issues, particularly, were solved in one fell swoop—it was strictly forbidden. As many groups of this era, Shakers believed sexual relations to be incompatible with true Christian ideals (Mandelker 62). Gender-role issues were answered in turn, then, as women, unfettered with childbirth and free from sexual dependence on men, stepped up to roles equal in the eyes of their community to those of men, including those within the church hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> Foster explains that celibacy not only facilitated changes in the theological order of the church, it also inspired a form of communism in which

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<sup>2</sup> Most movements encouraging celibacy throughout history contained misogynist elements, with a woman-as-temptress view. However, Shakers believed that through celibacy, women were no longer part of that patriarchal order (which they believed in, in a sense) (Foster *Women* 21). They justified equality of women through Paul, actually, arguing that his admonitions of women's subservience applied only to married women. Freed from duties of marriage as well as sin of carnality, women were equal servants to God. As Paul has also said, there is "neither male nor female in the Lord" (Ibid. 31-2)

individuals were equally subordinated to the good of the collective; labor was not Adam's curse, rather a harmonious whole. As the group removed private property and the competitive demands inherent in separate nuclear families, individuals devoted their entire lives to the kingdom of heaven on earth (31-2). Furthermore, women were empowered with autonomy when freed from the role of sexual slave. They did not, as many women in their day, have to barter with sexual favors for their necessities and comforts—nor for those of their children, for that matter. Child-rearing and household responsibilities were shared in a communal setting.

Shakers justify celibacy through the rhetoric (not uniquely theirs) that marriage is akin to prostitution and rape. The *Summary View of the Millennial Church* is a seminal Shaker tract which explains this view:

Is there any real difference between the married and the unmarried, either as to the nature of that propensity, the sensations excited by it, the effect it produces, or the gratification experienced in it? Does the marriage ceremony alter the nature of either? . . . Doubtless the sanction of a legal ceremony gives a licence which, assisted by the shades of darkness, removes all restraint from the feeling of those who do not look beyond it . . . so that they can now indulge their concupiscence in the dark without shame or remorse. (150)

The text proceeds to decry marriage as a legal institution for several pages; yet despite these attitudes toward marriage, Shakers did not sanction divorce liberally.

They believed a couple should part mutually, and that a believing spouse should continue to care for and support the non-believing spouse unless or until both desired separation. The Shakers would not accept members without such consent unless they could prove moral and legal premises for divorce (Ibid. 60).

Celibacy in or out of marriage is the only course to perfection. For a woman particularly, ridding herself of sexuality redeems her from her natural curse:

Tho all woman kind have inherited their portion of the curse denounced upon the first woman; yet there has always been an exception in favor of those virgin daughters who have wisely kept themselves from the contamination corruptions of lust. They have been thereby, not only exempted from the pains and sorrows of childbirth, and preserved from those debasing pollutions, and that servile wretchedness, so common to those who subject themselves to the inordinate passions of man; but they have often been distinguished as peculiar objects of Divine favor.” (Ibid. 132, 3<sup>rd</sup> footnote)

A uniformity of such beliefs is found throughout the Shakers’ standard works.

### **Gender Roles and Separation of the Sexes**

Shaker women and men worked in separate spheres, despite the apparent ideal of sexual equality and communal responsibility. The objective of this separation was to alleviate sexual tension, which they were quite successful at doing. The *Compendium*, a standard Shaker work, enumerates specific rules for living and



working, which are designed to keep the sexes separate, and therefore, by their account, happier and more spiritual. Some outsiders observed that men were allowed more variety in jobs, and thus seemed healthier and more fulfilled (they rotated jobs within the spheres). Foster says a woman could, theoretically, perform male jobs, but not without dangerous intermixing, and so the structure was maintained to prevent it (19). Others contradict this idea, saying that Shakers believed in women's inherent domesticity and men's inherent physical and intellectual superiority (Nickless 126-7), which mirrors mainstream cultural concepts. However, such a construct does not necessarily preclude equality; perhaps equality of sexes could be reinterpreted to mean *equal status* given to separate roles, which is how some Shakers chose to conceptualize role polarization. The *Compendium* states that "the male and female elements are equally balanced in the leaders. The *former* has reference to, and operates more specifically upon, the *rational* faculty of human nature; the *latter*, to the *affectional*" (54), in which male and female are equally juxtaposed, though their primary roles and attributes are clearly different.

Within the religious hierarchy there were orders of eldresses and deaconesses to correspond with male positions of authority—which was in part an approach toward equality, but in part a necessity in keeping the sexes separated. This basic order has continued throughout the history of the church. Foster says such gender-progressiveness held a provocative relationship to feminists in the dominant culture. He explains, however, that the Shakers differed from their contemporary women's



rights advocates on the means and end to equality; they opposed the self-interested approach of feminists and stressed equality as cooperation for the good of the community (40-1). Their primary emphasis is always service to God through the community.

### Women and Equality

Despite female leadership and deification, it is difficult to make a case for gender-progressiveness in the Shaker order during the early and mid-nineteenth-century, as the discourse simply does not support it. This is partly because Ann Lee, the female incarnation, was illiterate—and all of Shaker discourse, both public and private, is limited to male-authored texts until 1849, when Paulina Bates wrote *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom, Revealing the Word of God, out of Whose Mouth Goeth a Sharp Sword*. Relatively few other female-authored Shaker texts exist. There are, however, two records which claim to speak on Mother Ann's behalf: Bishop and Well's *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Mother Ann Lee and the Elders with Her* (1816), and Green and Well's *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee and the First Witnesses of the Gospel of Christ's Second Appearing; Given by Some of the Aged Brethren and Sisters of the United Society, Including a Few Sketches of Their Own Religious Experience* (1827). Even with these accounts, Ann Lee's teachings about sexuality and gender relationships do not seem as enlightened as commonly supposed; "Although Ann Lee was the undisputed leader of the Shakers, it is clear she considered herself an

exception to the rule of female subjugation” (Nickless 120). Mother Ann said of her leadership as a woman, “Where they . . . stand in their proper order, the man is first, an the woman second in government of the family . . . but when the man is gone, the right of government belongs to the woman” (Bishop and Wells 17), which can be interpreted as Ann Lee’s replacement of Christ in ruling his church. Clearly the status of women was elevated in the church in many ways, but Shaker discourse of the day still portrays women as subordinate to men both in theology and practice.

Lee’s comparison of Shaker leadership to a conjugal family seems incongruent with Shaker beliefs; it shows that they actually did believe in the patriarchal family, in a sense. They considered themselves transcendent of the true (though inferior) family order with their commitment to communism and celibacy, yet elements of patriarchy remained even within a theology of dual-gendered deity. Other Shaker texts echo this belief. Paulina Bates, for example, representing Shaker women’s voices of her time, describes the proper order, “woman in subjection to the man, as her head and her Lord” (67-8). She offers the following advice to women outside the community: “Honor thy husband that he may honor thee; yield and subject unto him” (516-7). Such advice is clearly in line with mainstream ideology regarding gender relations; therefore, only in their alternate form did Shakers begin to transcend the dominant culture’s dyadic and hierarchical gender relations—though they did, in instances, also advocate marriage reform.

## THE ONEIDA COMMUNITY PERFECTIONISTS

### Origin and Beliefs

John Humphrey Noyes was converted at a revival during the Second Great Awakening. Convinced of his calling as a leader, he attended theological schools to find out his specific purpose. After years of searching the scriptures, he received revelation in 1834 of a progressive notion of perfection<sup>3</sup> and of his own power to reinterpret the Bible for others. Two key parts of his interpretation stand out:

1. Based on his understanding of Christ's predictions of events to precede the second coming, Noyes asserted that the prophecy had already been fulfilled with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70. The second coming was an event in the spiritual world, witnessed by a few select disciples. Furthermore, the barriers between heaven and earth had been broken by Christ's return; therefore, God's promise of heaven was to be obtained on earth through mystical and ascetic endeavor—transcending the dialectical relationship between religion and world in a “higher synthesis.”
2. Based on his understanding of the New Testament words “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage,” Noyes asserted

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<sup>3</sup> Noyes' progressive notion of perfection is based on his own transformation—as Christ entered his soul, he was made perfect in faith (he did not believe it necessary to be perfect in acts). Noyes believed in inner perfection and dualism of soul and body: Christ dwells in the inner self, and the inner self tries to subdue the outer self.

that part of establishing a true order of heaven on earth precluded the selfishness of exclusivity in monogamous unions and nuclear families. Along this line, he developed a system of “complex marriage,” as part of the social ideology underlying all aspects of the perfect community: all things are shared. He introduced this principle to a few followers in 1846, and to the Oneida Community, who invited him to be their leader in 1847.

Regarding Noyes’ view of the second coming Mandelker says, “Noyes had broken the historical and spiritual continuity of Christianity and thereby invalidated all claims to ecclesiastical authority based on historic continuity with the apostles” (11-2). These radical new beliefs were part of Noyes’ “Dialectic of intentions,” a method whereby a problem solver attacks current conceptions by radically subverting and recreating them (Ibid. 12-13). In an era of turmoil and uncertainty, members were anxious for such radical change and the definitiveness of Noyes’ rhetorical ethos. Isolation in his utopian community provided the perfect forum for change.

As both prophet of God and educated reformer, Noyes had a keen sense of his own purpose in its broader context. Mandelker explains that Noyes saw himself as charting new paths in his socio-religious experiment (14). He wrote extensively on similar experiments and socialism in general. In reference to Noyes’ seminal text *History of American Socialisms*, Kern mentions that it is still customary to follow Noyes’ methodology in studying utopian communities (3).



### **All Things in Common**

Noyes believed that the kingdom of heaven would be a transcendent political order—both communist and prosperous (Mandelker 16). In enforcing a strong work ethic, he taught that economic salvation and communal luxury would liberate them from material want (Ibid. 37); therefore, economic progress was a spiritual mission, tempered by commonality of possessions. Noyes defined this belief as “Bible Communism,” which attacked the mainstream ideal of economic individualism.

Abolishing conventional marriage was an extension of Noyes’ communist ideal, as it was an attempt at godly unselfishness. Foster claims that Noyes had three basic objectives underlying his main purpose to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. They were to achieve:

1. “Right relations with God,” a common set of religious values for his followers
  2. “Right relations between the sexes,” that would allow harmonious living
  3. “Right economic relations” that would overcome “dog-eat-dog” capitalism
- (106)

Therefore, Noyes’ rhetoric of communal living goes beyond economics—it relates also to his progressive views of heaven-on-earth and egalitarian gender relationships.

### **Gender Roles**

Though viewed in their day as regressive, the Oneida Community had several features that were perhaps more in step with modern ideals and enlightenment than

mainstream society. For example, child-rearing and household responsibilities were diffused as the nuclear family had been broken down and re-linked to encompass an extended spiritual family (as with the Shakers), and men took an active part in both. This aspect served to empower women in enabling them to take part in various areas of labor as well as church callings. Noyes also established some corresponding priesthood roles for women to those he had initially established for men.

Furthermore, he disagreed with the current ideology of separate spheres, which meant a significant rise in the status of women in his community. They were not burdened with the role of angel-of-the-home, nor were they subject to the traditional Christian misogyny which viewed woman-as-temptress (Mandelker 104). However, such progressiveness was not a focus of his theology, nor of community discourse—the primary rhetorical emphasis was on *perfection* through self-sacrifice in every area, which was achieved partially through these restructured gender roles.

Although the community helped elevate the status of its women in many ways, Noyes was not a feminist. He expressed views that men are superior to women—that just as the Son stands in cooperative subordination to the Father, women should be subordinate to men. This belief carries out in his radical uniforms for women. They wore standardized bloomer outfits to “crucify the dress spirit” of the dominant culture, that woman would become “what she ought to be, a *female man*” (original emphasis, quoted in Foster 92). So the idea of Noyes as a liberator is problematic—especially within a contemporary feminist schema. Klee-Hartzell

represents this attitude: “While it was perhaps a relief to some women to get out from under the rule of a particularly tyrannical individual husband, community women simply exchanged one smaller, patriarchal family structure for a larger, collective one” (“Family” 184).

## NOYES’ RHETORIC OF COMPLEX MARRIAGE

### **Tensions Inspiring the Alternative**

As stated earlier, the concept of complex marriage is based on Noyes’ interpretation of the New Testament words, “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage.” However, it is also clearly based on disillusionment with marriage in the dominant culture. In 1842 Noyes said regarding the institution of marriage, “we find many objections to it, and pronounce it imperfect and adapted only to a state of trial and discipline” (quoted in Whitworth 113). The first case of Noyes’ alternative took place in Putney, Vermont in May of 1846. Initiated by John Humphrey Noyes, this new marriage was intended to encourage heavenly amative and sexual relations. The same year Noyes was charged with adultery and run out of town, so to speak. He and his 31 followers were invited to Oneida, New York, where he was accepted as Christ’s representative (Mandelker 14). The Oneida Community had a strong start, fed by carefully selected converts who genuinely wished to evade social tensions in mainstream America with this radical alternative.



Mandelker names three main tensions which provided the basis for Noyes' rhetoric of sex and familial structure: sexual ambivalence, inherently conflicted Victorian-evangelical sex roles, and family authority versus individual autonomy (69-70). Noyes blamed the commonly identified plight-of-woman on monogamy within the current socioeconomic system. He thought that women were reduced to the status of property within current marriage—so he claimed spiritual and social equality for women. Mandelker explains the theology supporting this concept: “Noyes believed that God and the individual personality were composed of both masculine and feminine traits. Social convention prevented men and women from developing the balance of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ by depreciating the characteristic of the opposite gender in one’s own sex” (71). Aside from totally recreating gender constructs within his community, Noyes taught the evil of oppressing women in his literature targeting the dominant culture, comparing the standard model of marriage to slavery for the woman (as many feminists did). He preached that women should stand up as individuals, and that such an oppressive society cannot last for long (Foster 99-101). In Noyes' reform rhetoric, he totally recreated rules for gender roles and sexual relations, which resolved ambivalence for Oneida Community members. Morally, sex was no longer both good and evil—it was good.



### Sacrifice and Selfishness

Similar to the Shakers, the defining feature of the Oneida Community involved an alternative to monogamy, which consequently demanded great sacrifice and dedication. Klee-Hartzell explains, “central to an acceptance of Noyes’ vision of the biblical, communist family was his insistence that all true communists love each other equally. They were exhorted to enlarge their feelings of love and loyalty from a small family unit to include several hundred family members” (“Family” 183). As discussed earlier, the ascetic nature of that sacrifice held great appeal to confused souls amid the turmoil of the Second Great Awakening. Members were required to subjugate their lives absolutely—their time, their possessions, their skills, their labor, their families, their spouses, their very *will*—to the good of the community. For most, this absolving of autonomy offered relief to moral questions they grappled with as individuals.

The main purpose of sacrifice was to achieve godly unselfishness. Mandelker explains that Noyes saw the current practice of marriage as an obstacle to the true Christian life, because within the conjugal unit, love of Christ and one’s neighbor took a back seat to what he saw as familial selfishness (116). Through complex marriage members were to transcend such selfishness and attain “true communion.”

Noyes describes this process:

The melting of egotism in sexual intercourse is the ecstasy of true communion, for selfhood is dissolved in love. The transcendental

experience of sexual ecstasy merges 'I' with 'thou' and both with God, the ultimate source of pleasure and spiritual growth. As God's gift, sex is natural and should be shameless and guiltless. As a sacrament and source of spiritual growth, sex must be bound by good faith. Its danger lies in selfishness, lovelessness, exclusiveness, and repression.

(quoted in Mandelker 117)

Noyes' conception of sex within a large spiritual family, then, was intended to deliver members from the selfishness of the world, as well as from feelings of shame and guilt; however, at times Noyes' rhetoric problematizes the doctrine it tries to support, as the following passage illustrates:

When the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven, there will be no marriage. The marriage-supper of the Lamb, is a feast at which every dish is free to every guest. Exclusiveness, jealousy, quarreling, have no place there, for the same reason as that which forbids the guests at a thanksgiving dinner to claim each his separate dish, and quarrel with the rest for his rights. In a holy community there is no more reason why sexual intercourse should be restrained by law, than why eating and drinking should be; and there is as little occasion for shame in the one case as in the other. (quoted in Whitworth 95-6)

The metaphor of a feast contradicts Noyes' general conception of communal love because it connotes gluttony, rather than sacrifice. Thus complex marriage becomes

problematic as it functions to alleviate guilt in one aspect of life, while selfishness is condemned in all others.

### **Love, Anything but “Free”**

Because complex marriage was intended to promote selflessness, it was a gross (though common) misjudgement to call it “free love.” Although Noyes taught that complex marriage was the true order, he did not prescribe this for the rest of the world; he wrote that outsiders were spiritually immature and unprepared; furthermore, he said that “free love” movements were licentious and immoral, even if their attempts were similar (Mandelker 102-3).

Furthermore, complex marriage was a demanding principle, requiring self-sacrifice. It was also entrenched in a myriad of rules and procedures, giving additional meaning to the term “complex marriage.” For example, men were to approach women through a third party, to save women from embarrassment should they decline.<sup>4</sup> Because complex marriage was both forward and regimented, it alleviated the ambivalence members had faced as part of dominant culture. Kern asserts that such regimented sexual practice “serves to assuage the guilts, anxieties, and ambiguities that individuals feel about sexual intercourse and changing sexual mores, as well as to stabilize the social position and routinize the roles of the respective sexes” (8). Along with the network of rules surrounding sex, there existed

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<sup>4</sup> This was also an effort on the part of the community to regulate and record matches. The section below on “Stirpiculture” further explains this concept.



a complex theology supporting the rules.

### **“Ascending Fellowship”**

Sex in the Oneida Community was a sacrament equivalent to the mystic experience, and in partaking they were to follow, generally, “ascending fellowships”—intercourse with spiritual superiors—with the idea that they were edified by such encounters (increasing spiritual ‘capital’). In line with this belief, superiors were to be careful not to descend too frequently, as their spirituality would be depleted, so they were to ascend periodically and recharge. These unions were generally regulated and recorded (Mandelker 117). The result of this principle, essentially, was that young women slept with older men, and young men slept with older women. Klee-Hartzell reports that this was generally true for young initiates, ages twelve to twenty-five (“Family” 196). After this period, lateral unions were allowed, though they were restricted by a committee. The rigidity of these rules served to alleviate the sense of licentiousness in the practice.

Another benefit to the community as a whole, Foster points out, was the high sexual tension (because of the ongoing sense of possibilities). He says “a quality of restrained romantic excitement pervaded and invigorated community life”—they experienced a “continuous courtship” (83). Noyes also spoke of this effect and how it satisfies the needs of both sexes, in a sense reconciling them: “Love between the sexes has two stages; the courting stage and the wedded stage. Women are fond of the first stage. Men are fond of the second. Women like to talk about love; but men



want the love itself” (as quoted by Klee-Hartzell, “Introduction” 10). Complex marriage was intended to meet the needs of both sexes.

### **Sexual Roles and Male Continence**

Noyes’ rhetoric of male continence shows that it was a mixture of birth-control, pseudo-scientific belief, and socialism. In the sex act itself, Noyes taught that a proper balance between the two intents (amative and propagative) must be maintained. As many scientists of his time, he believed sex to be draining; however, as Mandelker explains, he believed specifically *propagative* sex to be draining, and even more specifically, ejaculation for any reason. Therefore, masturbation and *coitus interruptus* were discouraged as forms of birth control, and “male continence” was offered as the proper solution (sex without ejaculation) (118). In Noyes principle tract, *Bible Communism*, he argues that ejaculation is a function separate from intercourse, necessary only in propagative sex:

The discharge of semen, instead of being the main act of sexual intercourse, properly so called, is really the sequel and termination of it. Sexual intercourse, pure and simple, is the conjunction of the organs of union, and the interchange of magnetic influences, or conversation of spirits, through the medium of that conjunction. (48)

Therefore, because ejaculation was both draining and unnecessary in the spiritual function of sex, *coitus reservatus* became a logical and legitimate form of birth control.

Beyond its function as birth control, male continence was also in accordance with the socialist spirit in the belief that all shall have pleasure. Foster explains that the group placed great emphasis on sexual satisfaction of the woman, understandably achieved though male continence. Apparently women experienced orgasm for the first time through this practice (Foster 84), which mainstream society would not have discussed, let alone condoned. Also, the forward attitude toward sex and the rules surrounding it settled for members the ambivalence society felt in general toward sexual roles. Women were said to have greater autonomy in choice of partners, as well as varied choice in reproductive partners from within Noyes' master-plan of eugenics, "stirpiculture."

### **"Stirpiculture"**

Stirpiculture is Noyes' vision of genetic planning for his community, the rhetoric of which was in line with the scientific allegiance of mainstream America at the time. In his *Essay on Scientific Propagation*, Noyes borrowed from Darwin's findings on animal breeding: "The art of the animal-breeder, so far as mere propagation is concerned, is all contained in two precepts, viz.: Breed from the best, and breed in and in" (quoted in Whitworth 128). Noyes appointed and presided over a committee which studied the genetic backgrounds of individuals at Oneida to determine whom should procreate. Couples could apply together, though they ran the risk of appearing to have an idolatrous attachment to one another, which could actually severely restrict any future contact. Women were required to sign an

agreement which read

we have no rights or personal feelings in regard to child-bearing which shall in the least degree oppose or embarrass [Noyes] in his choice of scientific combinations. . . . we will put aside all envy, childishness and self-seeking, and rejoice with those who are chosen candidates; that we will, if necessary, become martyrs to science, and cheerfully resign all desire to become mothers, if for any reason Mr Noyes deem us unfit material for propagation. Above all we offer ourselves 'living sacrifices' to God and true Communism. (quoted in Whitworth 129)

The requirements for men were just as demanding; they agreed to "claim no rights" and "ask no privileges" (Ibid. 130). Noyes' objective with stirpiculture was to control and ensure the spiritual and intellectual integrity of the community; however, his cold scientific dogma became, for many members, too inconsistent with the emotional nature of the experiment.

As couples applied together and tried to conceive, some formed romantic attachments. The diary of Victor Hawley, a rare Oneida Community record, tells of his love affair with Mary Jones, which began as a stirpiculture match. Victor Hawley was a member of the Oneida community from September 29, 1854 to July 2, 1877; Mary Jones was a member from when she joined April 27, 1858 to October 25, 1877. The diary spans from January 1, 1876 to December 19, 1877. The couple finally left Oneida and married because of their intense desire to have children



*together*, which the stirpiculture committee sanctioned at times, and then periodically forbade as a punishment for their exclusivity.

Stirpiculture seems to have both given couples hope, bringing them together in exclusive commitments, and broken their hearts, by stepping in and regulating the resulting attachment. Robert Fogarty, who edited and published Hawley's diary, comments on the failure of the stirpiculture experiment:

This shifting of community love to private love took place, ironically enough, within the context of an experiment that was intended to insure that Oneida would continue as a community and that it would produce a perfect race and serve as a beacon to the world. The experiment had the very opposite effect. (128-9).

It inspired the type of selfish, individualistic feelings the community had so long suppressed with supposed efficacy.

## **Conclusion**

Hawley and Jones' dissensions closely precede the date that the entire religious entity folded in 1880. Having entered a community to seek the solace its beliefs provided, members eventually agreed that the need was no longer met at Oneida. Fundamental to the group's beliefs were subjugation of individual will and sovereignty of the church, beliefs which Hawley, at some point, no longer held. Assuming he was one of many dissatisfied near the end—was this, then, a failing of the community? Probably, as stirpiculture encouraged commitment between couples



for the first time, thus allowing exclusivity contrary to the communal order to develop. They *did* soon dissolve, suggesting that the Hawley/Jones affair was not an isolated case of malcontent, but a symptom (if not in part a cause) of a much larger ideological trend within the group.

It should not be said that the Oneida Community failed entirely merely because it dissolved; it was a well-sustained effort that surely met the needs of members for several years. It seems, however, that the initial disillusionment with the larger society that caused Noyes to attempt an isolated heaven-on-earth was only felt strongly by the first generation of Oneidans. Generations to come did not sense their own difference from the outside culture. They received only private education about sex, so they did not fully understand the ways in which complex marriage was different from, let alone an improvement on, conventional marriage. Outside forces sensed this difference acutely, however, and just before crusaders came to put John Humphrey Noyes in jail, he fled the community, later sending word that they should dissolve the religion and chose a partner to marry. Most members were relieved, as the practice had long since ceased to fulfill its task of alleviating greater cultural conflict.

## *Chapter Three*

### **Mormon Plural Marriage: A Modern Response to the Marriage Question?**

#### **Introduction**

Similar to the nineteenth-century utopian groups discussed in Chapter Two, Mormons defined themselves against the grain of current cultural ideology, as they were dissatisfied not only with the present tensions surrounding religion, the economy and marriage, but also with any proposed solutions. They likewise presented a radical alternative to the conjugal family in the form of plural marriage. In analyzing the alternatives posed in the discourse of these three groups, however, it is not clear how conscious leaders or members were of their part in the larger movement of marriage reform, though their concurrence in the mid-nineteenth-century clearly marks them as such.

It is difficult to understand from a contemporary perspective how polygamy could have relieved anxiety over gender and sex roles, because this alternative does not at first seem progressive or transcendent to contemporary critics. It is important to analyze the movement *on its own terms* and *in its own context* (as much as that is possible), rather than imposing current expectations and attitudes on it. Study of marriage discourse in America during the nineteenth century (as presented in Chapter One), as well as the specific features of Utopian marriage discourse (as presented in Chapter Two), provides a context of conflict and experimentation,

which in part legitimizes the Mormon alternative. This chapter slices deeper into a specific example of alternative discourse about the marriage question, by analyzing the discourse of proponents of plural marriage within the Mormon community. Looking at the lives of the people themselves through their language provides far more satisfactory insights into the validity and effectiveness of the alternative than holding the practice up to contemporary standards.

Joseph Smith was not the first to consider plural marriage in his day—it was actually discussed by many transcendentalists and reformers as a possibly superior model of marriage.<sup>5</sup> Also, many of the negative accounts which upset both modern and contemporary critics are to some degree the fault of the discrepancy between doctrine and practice, which can be accounted for both in the fact of the early experimentation, when there was a difference between what leaders said about plural marriage privately and publicly, as well as the many instances of deviant (or unrighteous) application of the practice. Putting such obstacles aside, the main points of interest in this chapter are indications within the discourse of an underlying purpose of reconciling dissatisfaction with conventional marriage through the alternative of polygamy. Both public and private discourse within the church are considered and compared, with an analysis of the diary of Ellis Reynolds Shipp, a plural wife.

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<sup>5</sup> As was “free-love,” the free union of men and women unmitigated by corrupt powers such as religion and government. Plural marriage was in some ways within the same spirit.

## ORIGIN AND BELIEFS

### **Restoration of All Things**

Joseph Smith was the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as the first proponent of polygamy within the church. After praying for guidance about which church to join during the revivals in the “burned-over district,” Smith received revelation directing him to restore the true Church of Jesus Christ on the earth. He received the priesthood authority from God to do so, which had been lost after the apostasy. He was directed to ancient sacred records of Christ’s visit to the American continent, inscribed on gold plates, which he translated and published as *The Book of Mormon*. Persecution relating largely to rumors of Smith’s “gold book,” his claims of revelation, and the practice of plural marriage kept Smith and his followers in a constant search for peace. The group finally settled after Smith’s martyrdom and the arduous trek across the great plains to the Salt Lake valley under the direction of their new leader, Brigham Young.

A distinction must be made between the administrations of Smith and his successor, Brigham Young regarding the practice of plural marriage. In 1841, when Smith first introduced polygamy to a select few, membership was thriving in Nauvoo, Illinois. Just over a decade had passed since Smith had been guided to establish the one true church on the earth, and to restore the Biblical model of priesthood. His followers, like Ann Lee’s and John Humprey Noyes’s, were devoted to his charisma and magnetic personality, as well as to the new gospel. Smith was



guided by revelation to reestablish polygamy as part of the restoration of the early model illustrated in the Old Testament; however, he kept the confidence of only the few who were involved, as the church was already under severe scrutiny. He publicly denied polygamy in newspapers and in front of his congregation, though many members were privy to the fact of the practice, or participants themselves (Newell 113, 128). This secrecy, coupled with devotion to the charismatic leader (that in some cases went beyond devotion to the gospel he preached), resulted in a loss of trust among members when polygamy was exposed. Smith's wife, Emma Hale, was among the shocked and confused—for at the time that Smith finally included her in the secret doctrine, about which she had questioned him and he had denied, he had already married several of her friends and daughters of her friends. Leaders of the church had to ride out the controversy by keeping it as quiet as possible, and not until members achieved relative privacy and autonomy in their frontier community did leaders publicly announce the doctrine of plural marriage in 1852.

The early accounts describing Mormon polygamy seem largely negative—possibly because the practice was veiled in secrecy and carried out despite the protest of many of those most intimately involved. Smith's attempt to establish polygamy seems a failure by these measures—however, church members came to embrace polygamy when it was introduced *publicly* in 1852. The era of Brigham Young's administration is the scope of this chapter because it corresponds with the period analyzed in Chapter Two.

### The Frontier—Isolation and Autonomy

One condition that facilitated the discourse about and practice of plural marriage was the isolation of the new Mormon kingdom. On the frontier, the Church assumed the role of government more clearly than it could before, and each commandment the leaders issued was believed to be (and rhetorically presented as) for the good of the order. Furthermore, the sovereignty of leaders was reinforced by the isolation from the laws of the land. “God’s law” reigned supreme for some time.

Many contemporary scholars feel that the practice of plural marriage by early saints helped unify and shape the Mormon church. Mormon History scholar Jan Shipps says of the early church,

they were living through the biblical story again in order to make it their own . . . They might not have known exactly how their marriage relationships were significant to Mormonism’s success, but husbands and plural wives alike were convinced that they were actively engaged in ‘building up the kingdom,’ [in part] by keeping secular society at arm’s length long enough for Mormonism to establish itself. (67)

Lawrence Foster claims that polygamy on the frontier was the largest, best organized, and most controversial venture in radical alternatives to monogamous marriage in nineteenth-century America (*Women* 182). He says the chief factors inspiring polygamy “grew out of their combination of intense biblicism and their millennial commitment to establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth” (“Between”

10), which were motivations similar to those of other utopians of the day. Plural marriage lasted (officially) from 1852 until the *Manifesto*, issued by the fourth LDS prophet, Wilford Woodruff, in 1890, which curtailed the practice. This was a formative stage in the life of the church. Aside from defining a theology, the church was also defining a culture, distinctly separate from the culture they left. Isolation and polygamy aided in drawing this distinction, marking the Mormons as a peculiar “Zion people.”

## RHETORIC OF PLURAL MARRIAGE

### Appeal to Authority

Many members who were approached had to be persuaded of the *correctness* of the principle, but there was little effort from leaders to persuade members of any *benefits* of the principle. Leaders rested mainly on the appeal of their priesthood authority and the immutability of revelation, as well as the general spirit of the authentic need to restore all things. Foster explains:

Though giving few details of exactly how polygamy was to be practiced, the revelation on plural and celestial marriage repeatedly stressed that any unauthorized liaisons established outside the bonds of Church supervised law were heinously sinful. . . . Once again, loyalty to the Church was put forward as the supreme principle. (“Between”  
10)



Leaders assured members that the law of the church transcended the law of society, and that by the authority of their approval, members need not feel guilt in polygamous unions. Leaders relied on members' strong faith in revelation and impulse toward obedience. Furthermore, saints were promised increased exaltation, which worked within the general attitude of Mormons at the time, that the primary purpose of this life is to achieve glory in the hereafter—that all of the suffering and sacrifice involved in the establishment of Zion would be rewarded. As polygamy became more widespread, a sort of spiritual and social status was attached to it: men were believed to increase their glory with their increase in wives and posterity, and women were guaranteed salvation-by-association in marriages to men with a high priesthood. Before long, polygamy became a somewhat-unspoken requirement for church leadership (Tanner 62).

Church leaders kept control of polygamy initially by either calling members to enter into plural marriages or approving proposed partnerships. There were, however, many instances of plural marriage that occurred either without said approval, or after the church officially discontinued the practice in 1890. Often these latter aberrations resulted in disfellowship (temporary discipline) or excommunication.



## Communal Order

Foster says that early Mormons were

attacking and attempting to overcome the rampant, exploitative individualism which surrounded them. They were seeking a total solution more akin to medieval ideals in which religious and social life were inextricably intertwined and the good of the community took precedence over individual self interest. (“Between” 10)

Although the church did not live communally as a whole to the degree that Shakers and Oneidans did, Brigham Young clearly held this as an ideal, as is evidenced in the following passage from the *Journal of Discourses*:

I have looked upon the community of Latter-day Saints in a vision and beheld them organized as one great family of heaven, each person performing his several duties in his line of industry, working for the good of the whole more than for individual aggrandizement; and in this I have beheld the most beautiful order that the mind of man can contemplate, and the grandest results for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God and the spread of righteousness upon the earth . . .

Why can we not so live in this world? (*JD* 12:153).

Young did attempt to carry out small communal experiments, but they eventually led to disharmony rather than transcendence so they were abandoned; however, most polygamous families (and nuclear families, to some degree) operated as small

communal orders in line with the vision described above. The sharing of a spouse in and of itself is within the communal spirit, similar to the communal undertones of complex marriage in the Oneida Community. Many polygamous families were also set up as financial communes, though this was not always the case as wives often had financial autonomy from husbands. In any case, Mormon family life “provided experience in cooperative action and subordination of individual desires to larger group goals which could carry over into the cooperative Mormon effort to achieve rapid settlement” and establishment of a Zion community (Foster “Between” 11).

### **Eternal Divorce**

Despite their heavenly model of marriage, divorce was common in the early Mormon church. Utah’s divorce laws were among the most liberal in the United States (Foster *Women* 196), which may have been true partially because church leadership had to deal with families divided over conversion, just as the Shakers did. However, Utah’s high divorce rate seems to be closely linked to the practice of polygamy as well. Family group sheets in the Genealogical Society Library reveal a nine percent divorce rate among polygamist marriages, versus a one percent rate among monogamist marriages (Mehr 95). Because plural marriage was a function of God’s law, legal divorce was not always sought before the formation of new, polygamous unions. On the other hand, when a polygamous union dissolved, members felt it more important (if not singularly important) to seek a church divorce rather than a civil divorce (if there was even a civil marriage). One study uses

this fact to gain insight to the frequency of polygamous divorce, because divorces officiated by church leaders would have been largely polygamous—and such divorces were frequent. During his tenure, Brigham Young granted approximately 1,645 divorces, suggesting both that many polygamous marriages were unstable, and official attitudes lenient (Campbell 5).

The Church's stance was that divorce was wrong, and leaders were especially hesitant to grant divorces to men. Women, on the other hand, could get divorces for almost any reason. Brigham Young said the following at a church meeting:

when a woman becomes alienated in her feelings and affections from her husband, it is his duty to give her a bill and set her free—it would be fornication for a man to cohabit with his wife after she had thus become alienated from him. (quoted in Campbell 19).

Furthermore, it was commonly felt justifiable for a woman to leave her husband for a man with higher priesthood. As Young's above passage goes on to say, "if the woman preferred a man *higher in authority* and he is willing to take her and her husband gives her up, there is no bill of divorce required, in [this] case it is right in the sight of God" (Ibid. 19-20).

At one time sensing a pervasive disillusionment with polygamy, Brigham Young publicly offered to grant divorce to any of his wives who did not want to live with him any longer, urging other wives to also reconsider their commitment and happiness. As much as this was a rhetorical appeal to dedicate members to the

principle, it illustrates Young's lenience toward the women involved. His advice to one unhappy woman was to "stay with her husband as long as she could bear with him, but if life became too burdensome, then leave and get a divorce" (quoted in Campbell 12). On the other hand, Young made clear that divorce should not be considered by polygamous men as it would be breaking God's law (Campbell 11). Despite Young's opposition to divorce, there was very high instance of divorce within upper echelons of the church (Foster 198).

#### WOMEN'S DISCOURSE—BEYOND OFFICIAL DOCTRINE

Aside from the official stances on polygamy discussed above, a more interpersonal and subtle rhetoric exists within women's discourse. Polygamist wives were often seen as the greatest proponents of the practice, which vexed outside opposition who argued that the polygamy was particularly oppressive to women, one of the "twin relics of barbarism."<sup>6</sup> Women often introduced the principle to other women, and even chose subsequent wives for their husbands. Women's private writings, editorials, and the minutes of public women's meetings express numerous advantages that polygamy held for wives, despite the initial hardship of adjustment invariably experienced.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1856 the Republican party promised to stamp out "those twin relics of barbarism—polygamy and slavery." After slavery was eradicated, Mormonism, southern ignorance, and alcohol became known as "the Devil's Trinity" (Hardy 40-1).



### Private Witness and Obedience

Many women report similar experiences in their reconciliation to the principle of plural marriage. After initial rebellion and eventual submission in prayer, many women resigned to the principle because they received private confirmation of its truth. Helen Mar Whitney wrote, “Had it not been for the powerful testimony from the Lord, I do not believe that I could have submitted to it for a moment” (quoted in Mehr 86). Another woman became ill after rebelling against her husband’s desire to remarry; then a being from beyond reproached her, saying

Sarah, you’re awful sick. . . Your husband wants to take a second wife and you’re opposing him, bitterly opposing him and that is a true principle. . . . He should stand at the head of the home and you should go with him and your children should go with him. If you don’t when you pass out of this life you’ll be just canceled out (Ibid. 88).

The reason women sought such private witness was their strong intent to obey God’s commands. Eliza Partridge Lyman, a plural wife of Joseph Smith, says

nothing but a firm desire to keep the commandments of the Lord could have induced a girl to marry in that way. I thought my trial was very severe in that line and I am often led to wonder how it was that a person of my temperament could get along with it and not rebel, but I know it was the Lord who kept me from opposing his plans. (Ibid. 85)

Perhaps the most stunning account is of Vilate Kimball's revelation about polygamy, because the principle had not previously been introduced to her. Her son writes her story:

Her mind was opened, and she saw the principle of Celestial marriage illustrated in all its beauty and glory, together with the great exaltation and honor it would confer upon her in that immortal and celestial sphere if she would but accept it and stand in her place by her husband's side. (Ibid. 89).

These represent typical accounts of initial rebellion overridden by a desire to be obedient—then a spiritual manifestation which led women to hold strong testimonies of polygamy as God's will.

### **Autonomy and Expanded Roles**

Aside from spiritual manifestations, women's rhetoric about polygamy is also sustained by several pragmatic supports. In many situations polygamy eased household and child-rearing responsibilities. Women worked together with their children to provide for themselves, often dependent on one another, yet totally independent of their husbands. One plural wife talks about polygamy increasing her independence and thus her happiness, giving her more autonomy in choices and activities. Polygamy stopped her from being "so bound and so united to her husband that she could do nothing without him." She said the practice helps a woman become free and to "do [for] herself individually things she never could have

attempted before; and work out her individual character as separate from her husband” (Foster *Women* 193). Consequent to this growing independence, a relatively large class of female professionals emerged in Utah during Brigham Young’s leadership. Women actually led the field of medicine, and worked in several other professions as well. In addition to the economic self-sufficiency women achieved through polygamy, they also expressed the feeling of increased sexual autonomy. Unwanted sexual advances were deflected somewhat—and consequently each wife generally had fewer children than non-polygamist women, (though some population analysts argue that there was not a significant reduction).<sup>7</sup> In any case, this argument exists as part of the rhetoric of private persuasion among women. Mary J. Tanner called polygamy “a physical blessing to weakly women,” as it greatly decreased sexual demands (quoted by Foster *Women* 193). Theoretically this decrease in demand on “weakly women” would increase health and longevity, making the practice a strong benefit. But it was arguably beneficial for healthy women as well. Martha Hughes Cannon, the first female U.S. senator and a plural wife, argued that a woman in polygamy was more free: “If her husband has four

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<sup>7</sup> Dean May, who studied and compiled Utah population surveys, says that studies reporting a lower fertility rate among polygamous women “tend to have been derived from low fertility elite segments of the population and have not considered the effects of polygamy on fertility rates in the aggregate. My guess is that as more sophisticated studies take these factors into consideration we will find that polygamy enhanced rather than depressed aggregate fertility rates” (128). This guess seems viable because people involved in polygamy were often those concerned with increasing their posterity.



wives, she had three weeks of freedom every single month” (quoted by Foster *Women* 193)

### **Kinship**

Many plural wives record feelings about an abiding companionship and sisterhood, which was often more intimate than their individual relationships to their common husband. Especially considering the frequency of extended missions and demanding church positions for men, sister-wives were forced to cope *together*, which often led to great kinships.

Strong kinship ties among families extended to children as well, who benefitted from large networks of half-siblings. This was a natural result of the prevalence of shared child-care within shared households. Just as wives developed a great love for one another, they did so for the children as well, which was a particular comfort to childless wives.

### **Marriage Status and Choice**

Many plural wives speak of how the practice allowed them a greater selection of righteous husbands, which in turn gave them greater insurance of salvation and glory in the hereafter. Not only as wives of leaders, but leaders themselves, plural wives were seen as examples to others and considered more spiritual than monogamous women. Furthermore, increased mate selection provided increased opportunity for social status, which resulted in the most affluent church leaders having the most wives. Annie Clark Tanner says many young women felt a Mormon



leader, already married, was a better choice than most men. She recalls it was often said of a leader, “I’d rather have his little finger than the whole of [another] man” (Tanner 23). This increased autonomy in mate selection is also considered rhetorically as a eugenic opportunity to raise up more righteous seed with a man of high priesthood, and in the positive influence of a complex network of plural families, which is similar to the rhetoric underlying John Humphrey Noyes’ “stirpiculture.”

Helen Marr Kimball’s seminal tract, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*, explains the importance of having numerous righteous posterity, (which echoes the increasing importance of children in the dominant society):

Our children are considered stars in a mother’s crown, and the more there are, if righteous, the more glory they will add to her and their father’s eternal kingdom, for their parents . . . will eventually become as Gods to reign in glory. Nothing but this, and a desire to please our Father in heaven, could tempt the majority of Mormon men or women either, to take upon themselves the burdens and responsibilities of plural marriage. (53)

This sentiment is enforced in Brigham Young’s teachings. Jill Mulvay Derr says “Young’s emphasis on woman’s child-bearing/child-rearing role received as much criticism as anything he taught, and yet in no other area were Young’s teachings so nearly identical with the ideals of the larger society” (“Woman’s” 385). Mormon

women's writings about their role as care-giver suggests they took the teaching to heart as much as they did the church's less orthodox teachings.

### **Romantic Love and the Companionate Ideal**

Despite the numerous advantages to plural marriage found in women's rhetoric about the principle, certainly the practice was difficult for most at times. Polygamy defies contemporary expectations of marriage—but did it defy nineteenth-century ideals? Romantic love *in marriage* was a recently emergent concept, though it was increasingly becoming a social ideal. The polarity between the patriarchal and companionate ideals is evenly expressed in first-hand accounts, suggesting that the struggle between the two was not easily remedied in polygamy. One of Young's contemporaries and severest critics, Fanny Stenhouse, claims that it was the emphasis on propagation and child-rearing that curtailed companionship in the marital relationship: “the great object of marriage . . . was the increase of children,” and other factors such as “the companionship of soul; the indissoluble union of two existences—were never presented” (quoted in Derr “Woman's” 386). Rather than progressing toward the new companionate ideal, many members found it less painful to emotionally detach and focus on polygamy's practicality.

Foster asserts that polygamy was often most difficult for the first wife because it “sharply undercut romantic love” (*Women* 187). Clearly, if a wife harbored romantic expectations, they would be swiftly dashed in polygamy—whereas subsequent wives would not likely have such expectations, though some did marry

for love. Perhaps this subversion of romance was in part an ascetic goal of the practice, as Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young, who was married to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, suggests: “a successful polygamous wife must regard her husband with indifference, and with no other feeling than that of reverence, for love we regard as a false sentiment: a feeling which should have no existence in polygamy” (quoted in Van Wagoner 102). A prospective second wife expresses a similar feeling:

Yes, religion that was what it meant to me. I wouldn't have no courtin'. Before we was married he used to want me to go out walkin', but I wouldn't have it. 'No courtin',' I says to him. 'If you've got anything to say to me, you know how to say it and where. Come to the house and say it out straight, no strollin' around like young lovers. I don't go walkin' with any woman's husband.' (as quoted by Mehr 92)

One of Brigham Young's wives wrote him the following plea, “I feel more lonely and more unreconciled to my lot than ever, and as I am not essential to your comfort or your convenience I desire you will give me to some other good man who has less cares.” She did not leave Young, though four of his wives eventually did leave or divorce him (Derr “Woman's” 384-5).

The manner in which polygamy undercut the companionate ideal actually functioned to focus members to the building up of Zion, urging communal sacrifice



and demanding dedication. Foster explains:

By partially breaking down exclusive bonds between a husband and wife and by undercutting direct emotional involvement in family affairs in favor of church business, polygamy may well have contributed significantly to the long-range demands of centralized planning and the rapid establishment of a new religious and communal order. (*Women* 189)

Whether this was the motive of polygamy, the practice posed both challenges and opportunities as women were forced into a sort of autonomy by default. As Derr says, “Ironically, perhaps, independence for women was a common by-product of the marital system that left them so often on their own to manage family, farms, and businesses,” without the intimacy of the companionate ideal (“Woman’s” 387).

### **Oppressed Women?**

At a meeting of women protesting anti-polygamy legislation, Eliza R. Snow asked “Do you know of any place on the face of the earth, where woman has more liberty, and where she enjoys such high and glorious privileges as she does here, as a Latter-day Saint?” (quoted in Derr “Eliza” 251). Despite mainstream-public opinion of the subjugation of polygamous wives, the wives themselves declared that they were empowered rather than oppressed. In fact, it was arguably *through* polygamy that women were enabled to pursue and develop roles outside the home, thereby expanding the acceptance of such roles for women in Mormon society. Mormon



women were not encouraged to fight for the causes of mainstream feminists, rather to pursue reform within polygamy. Eliza R. Snow writes:

Here in Utah, through his servants and handmaidens [God] is establishing a nucleus of domestic and social purity, confidence and happiness, which will, so far as its influence extends, eradicate and prevent, in future, all those blighting evils . . . . God loves purity, and he has introduced the principle of plurality of wives to restore and preserve the chastity of woman . . . . It is truly woman's cause—a cause which deeply involves, not only her present but her eternal interests. (Ibid. 260-1)

This passage suggests two important points: women in polygamy did, to some degree, see themselves as an alternate method of marriage and larger social reform. Also, Mormon women's view of their personal responsibility to mitigate and overcome ills of society fell closely in line with the dominant culture's views of women's roles, as described under "Cult of Domesticity" in Chapter One. However, early Mormons balanced such traditional ideas with a more modern vision for women.

Both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young supported the expansion of women's roles within the church, as well as in society. In the early days of the church, women secured the rights to participate in church meetings, vote on proposals, conduct their own organization, receive spiritual gifts, and be 'ordained' to administer to the sick

(Foster *Women* 206). Brigham Young encouraged women, along with men, to “obtain that spirit” of healing and speaking in and interpreting tongues (Derr “Woman’s” 379).

While early Mormon discourse mirrored the common religious belief that women were subject to Eve’s curse, and therefore subject to man, Mormon women still felt empowered within that patriarchal paradigm. Zina Young told Annie Clark Tanner, “I am proud to follow an Adam into the Celestial Kingdom” (Tanner 62). Eliza R. Snow explored this hierarchy in her speeches, editorials and poetry. One of her poems says that Eve “led in the transgression, and was plac’d/by Eloheim’s unchangeable decree,/ In a subservient and dependent sphere” (quoted in Derr “Eliza” 259); however, Snow explains how womankind may eventually move beyond this curse:

The Lord has placed the means in our hands, in the Gospel, whereby we can regain our lost position. But how? Can it be done by rising, as women are doing in the world, to clamor for our rights? No. It was through disobedience that woman come into her present position, and it is only by obedience, honoring God in all the institutions he has revealed to us, that we can come out from under that curse, regain the position originally occupied by Eve, and attain to a fulness of exaltation in the presence of God. (Ibid. 261)

Also, in the following lines, both obedience and reward in the hereafter are stressed:

“What we experience here, is but a school/ Wherein the ruled will be prepared to rule./ And thro’ obedience, Woman will obtain/ The *power of reigning, and the right to reign.*” (Ibid. 264). This unofficial sentiment is probably based on Brigham Young’s own (more official) lament: “I do not know what the Lord could have put upon women worse than he did upon Mother Eve, where he told her: ‘Thy desire shall be to thy husband.’ . . . I would be glad if it were otherwise” (*JD* 16:167). These attitudes about woman’s place were progressive for their time without leaving the church’s traditional reliance on the Bible; however, such progressiveness is perhaps even better illustrated in the social strides early Mormon women made, though the two realms can hardly be separated within such a society.

Perhaps the most notable social feat was also the easiest—women’s suffrage. Utah women won the right to vote nearly fifty years before any other state or territory in the United States (Foster *Women* 208). With this battle behind them, Mormon women were able to concentrate on expanding their rights and roles in other areas. They published their own periodical called *The Woman’s Exponent*, which though endorsed by leaders, remained outside the control of the church. Women also managed a hospital with a female resident surgeon; they owned and managed money and property; and they occupied top positions in several fields, including medicine, business, politics, retail and manufacture (Derr “Eliza” 252)—relatively quietly achieving the status mainstream feminists struggled for.



## PRIVATE DISCOURSE—A THEORY IN PRACTICE

It would be easy to look from today's standards of women's rights at how successful these groups were in empowering women and overcoming the sexual tensions of their day, but it is insufficient to impose prevailing attitudes of today on those a century in the past. Whether their methods were successful should be measured only on the scale of individual happiness and fulfillment—as is evidenced in autobiographies and journals, such as Ellis Reynolds Shipp's.

*The Early Autobiography and Diary of Ellis Reynolds Shipp*

Ellis Reynolds Shipp was born in Iowa in 1847 and moved to Pleasant Grove, Utah after her family converted to Mormonism in 1852. Historian Gail Casterline says Shipp's account tells of "her moving struggle to live a life equal to her abilities" (366). Though her story as a plural wife has many typical characteristics, it is unique in that she left her family to study in the medicine in the East and became a successful doctor of obstetrics—the second female doctor in Utah. She also established her own school of obstetrics and midwifery. By her own account, all this was possible because Brigham Young took a particular interest in her and treated her as his own daughter, offering the encouragement that facilitated her achievements.

Young did encourage women to study medicine, at the urging of Eliza Snow, who often said that women should occupy a larger sphere of duties (Casterline 369). However, another strain of discourse supports this trend on the basis of Victorian prudery. This is subtly evidenced in the following passage from the *Deseret News*,



shortly after Ellis set up her practice: “We are pleased to see ladies belonging to the community of Latter-day Saints adopting the medical profession . . . [for] they are better adapted for several branches of it than the sterner sex” (quoted in Casterline 372). These branches were gynecology and obstetrics, which had been dominated by mid-wives who were trained in *folk* rather than scientific medicine. Hence, editorials applauding female doctors, and encouraging that doctors in general “be patronized when necessary, by those of their own sex and faith” (Ibid. 372), actually represent a prude acquiescence to this form of female advancement.

Long before medical school, Ellis married Milford Shipp, a man eleven years her senior who had been married twice. One wife had died and the other divorced him. Ellis had been in love with Milford from an early age and through the duration of his two unsuccessful marriages, after which he finally noticed her, so to speak. She was under Brigham Young’s stewardship at the time of Shipp’s proposal, and Young tried to dissuade her from marrying him, saying he was abusive. She asked for Young’s blessing anyway and he said she “should ever have it” (36), though he wanted her to pursue her educational plans. Ellis held the companionate ideal from the beginning of her marriage: “our hearts were united in an indissoluble tie that all the vicissitudes of time or sorrow could not sever or unlink. Methinks there are few such unions” (39).

Ellis always portrays Milford Shipp as a kind, honorable and exemplary husband, although she clearly suffered all the imaginable trials of polygamy,

especially initially. However, she blamed herself solely for any unhappiness she felt, and rarely brought problems to her husband. She hints at neglect from Milford, but then writes of severe regret for doubting him. Such self-effacement is typical of the period, yet it seems extreme in this case. However, this trait may have helped Ellis develop the autonomy from her husband which would eventually enable her to accomplish her personal goals in the practice of medicine.

During the first half of the account Ellis is consumed with her desire for self improvement, and seems profoundly dissatisfied with domestic life. She says

I am tired of this uselessness and unaccomplished desires, only as far as cooking, washing dishes and doing general housework goes. I believe that woman's life should not consist wholly and solely of these routine duties. I think she should have ample time and opportunity to study and improve her mind, to add polish and grace to her manners, to cultivate those finer tastes and refined and delicate feelings that are so beautiful in women and that are so truly requisite in a mother. (110)

Though her goals clearly extend beyond the home, Ellis seems to temper such aspiration by associating it with womanhood and motherhood. In order to find balance in this conflict, she rises daily at 4:00 am before her children to get three hours study time before the tedium of child-rearing and housekeeping ensue.

Nevertheless, she seems chronically dissatisfied with her achievements (until she leaves for medical school) and constantly recommits to goals of self-improvement in

each of her roles and relationships. Perhaps she forces upon herself the goal of being a good wife and mother to mask her dissatisfaction with those chosen tasks. It is difficult to analyze true meaning behind her self-effacing style, but there seem to be suppressed attitudes and disappointments. She is severely depressed much of the time (and plagued with constant illness, from pregnancies and also probably from heart disease). At one point her husband makes an interesting entry after reading parts of her diary—he urges her not to be so hard on herself, and to focus on the positive aspects of her life, which suggests that they had a companionate, nurturing relationship, and that he did not expect her to carry so many burdens.

In March of 1868, after two years of marriage and on Milford's birthday, Ellis reflects on her ideals and expectations (of herself) in marriage. On this day Milford tells her he would "soon bring to our home a sister and companion for you." She explains that she knew the day would come, but was disappointed that it was so soon. Her expectation of it must have made the over-all situation more bearable, though it is clear from her early entries that she is in love with her husband. She refers to the great trial she suffered at the very idea of it at that time, but also bears testimony of its correctness. "Twas only this solemn assurance that enabled me to feel the holiness of peace that came to my surprised soul! Yes, surprised, for I had not dreamed this test of faith was so near, although I knew it would in time be mine" (51). She claims to be aware of the world's opinions of plural marriage, and notes, ironically, that society's repugnance at the idea had caused her to resolve



herself to its correctness prior to Milford's announcement. This reinforces the idea that polygamy helped strengthen the early Mormons by defining them against the larger culture, which was for the most part hostile to the early church.

The next reference to the principle of plural marriage occurs more than two years later, when Milford returns from a mission. Ellis writes of how indebted she feels to those who cared for him and accompanied him safely home, which indicates her anxiety over the fulfillment of his needs. Then she learns that one of those people has been his wife for the last year-and-a-half, so she is determined to be even more charitable toward her because of the above resolve (78). This situation defies a common belief (now as well as then) that a first wife gave specific approval to subsequent marriages, though Ellis did, from the initial conversation, give tacit and general approval to plural marriage. Surely there is an absent litany of anguish beneath this entry, perhaps too painful to record. Instead, Ellis illustrates the irony of her situation, that she felt so indebted, only to find out something that should have been her right to know much sooner. Perhaps she punishes herself, in a way, with such resolve to be charitable. It is not an uncommon idea of the time that to deny oneself can bring perfection, and even happiness. Therefore, it seems possible that Ellis performs such ascetic exercises in these recurrent gestures of resolution and resignation.

Ellis Shipp experienced severe depression, but there is ample evidence that it both existed before Milford's additional marriages and lessened considerably after she



went to school and started a fulfilling career, and so it does not seem that her unhappiness was necessarily a result of polygamy as much as lack of stimulation. She seems to have great satisfaction in motherhood as well, but expresses this most when her children are grown, and little when they are young.

### **Sisterhood**

Ellis is the first of the four plural wives. They all live together, which outsiders comment is an achievement in itself, but Shipp expresses that in many ways it is not as difficult as it would seem. When they (the sister-wives) are apart they miss each other and offer kind expressions through letters and gifts. From the way she portrays this kinship, *their union* is genuine and even transcends their individual unions to Milford—in that they share so much more with each other than with him. Shipp never even hints at the presence of jealousy between them, although she does concede the hardships when he is gone so often on missions and with church duties. Considering his frequent absence, it seems all the better to the wives that they have each other.

When Shipp finally realizes her goal of medical school, she leaves her small children (the youngest of whom was two) in the care of her sister-wives. Her “sisters” write her frequently with reports of her children’s welfare, expressing a moving connection to Ellis and a desire to support her emotionally by providing this practical care as well as the reassurance that all is well. Shipp reciprocates with heartfelt sentiments. For example, she is pleased that her youngest is a comfort to her

childless sister, Mary: “She says my sweet baby is such a comfort to her. I am so glad, poor girl. I feel so sorry that she has no children of her own. How rejoiced I should be if I could gain knowledge sufficient to restore her to a normal state that she might be blessed with offspring” (187). Rather than exhibiting jealousy that her child has become as another’s, she is gratified that the other has a surrogate opportunity for motherhood. This is an example of a situation typically commended in women’s rhetoric about the benefits of polygamy.

Ellis also writes about the sisters’ mutual goals of self-sufficiency through their careers, and their commitment to support each other (195). Although she is the one benefitting the most at this time, she acknowledges their aspirations, admires their talents, and commits personally to aid and support them in the future. She writes,

How pure and heavenly is the relationship of sisters in the holy order of Polygamy. Even the kindred ties of blood could not be more pure and sacred, nor more unselfish and enduring. How beautiful to contemplate the picture of a family where each one works for the interest, advancement and well being of all. *Unity is strength.* (253)

Perhaps the most intimate kinship exists between Ellis and her sister-wife Maggie. Maggie seems to sense most acutely Ellis’ depression and therefore extends the most comfort and encouragement. At one point Maggie writes of Milford’s expression of fond sentiment about Ellis, which Ellis says “is very gratifying” (203).

This illustrates well the absence of jealousy between these wives and their desire to nurture each others' individual relationships to their communal husband.

Maggie also sends money to Ellis frequently (she must have had a job, for it is clearly her personal money), and often at times when Ellis is nearly destitute. At this time, the young family was poor and struggling, and Maggie was herself saving for medical school (263). She surprises Ellis by deciding to postpone her own education to ensure Ellis's comfort during her remaining semesters. Ellis writes, "how much of noble self-sacrifice is evinced in these few lines and what feelings of love are inspired for this kind generous sister." Ellis then intimates that the main obstacle at this time is a new baby she was nursing (shedding light on the year of sickness she had suffered, for she never mentioned pregnancy) (243-53). Maggie is so concerned for Ellis' health and the baby's that she surprises Ellis by showing up to help out, and again at a time when Ellis was near despair. She writes,

As I lay in bed contemplating the embarrassing circumstances of my present situation and what it was possible for me to do, as I prayed to the Lord to overrule all for the best, [a lady entered]. I thought who can it be, a second look convinced me. *It was Maggie.* We sprang into each other's arms while tears of joy fell thick and fast. What a joyous surprise. (275).

The bond between these sister-wives is far more impressive than anything one could expect to find in private accounts of polygamy. Though Ellis writes throughout of



fond feelings and admiration for Milford, he is virtually absent in her final triumphs, for it is really through the support of her sisters-wives that she was able to achieve all she did. Her children also surround her in the end. Some obtain their own degrees and are helpful in her practice and medical-welfare efforts. She writes of great satisfaction in working together with them—in other words, for the good of the family, the community, the church and the poor.

Ellis concludes by describing how the four sister-wives eventually needed and wanted their own homes, as their families were so large and they could then afford to support themselves individually according to their own means. Despite this physical separation, she stresses the sacred bond between them which remained, and that she considers them all one family. Her account is a strong tribute to the sisterhood that could occur within polygamy.

## **Conclusion**

Plural marriage answered many of the issues surrounding marriage and gender roles struggled with by the dominant culture. It provided a definitive marital structure by which members were ensured exaltation, and in its practice it generally produced devoted, selfless members. It answered the struggle between the traditional patriarchal model of marriage and the emergent companionate ideal by reverting nearly completely to the former. That is not to say that the practice was regressive, however, as women in polygamy were, in general, phenomenally empowered—their opportunities and roles expanded far beyond that of mainstream women. Even as

polygamy dealt effectively with many aspects of the marriage question and gender role issues, it opened a host of additional concerns for members (as well as the dominant culture) that were not addressed in this chapter. Therefore, a more complete measure of polygamy's success might take these resultant conflicts into account against the practice's many benefits. The practice was, eventually, abandoned by the church, suggesting in and of itself that it, at some point, ceased to meet the needs of the community.

Mormon Polygamy is unique in that it did not eventually ruin the religion. This was partially because the religion did not begin with it, thus it was easily conceived as a temporary necessity, or even a test. It was also never the norm in practice, though it was the social and religious ideal. Also, compared to the Shakers and Oneida Community, the Mormon alternative was not far from the mainstream conception of family. In fact, Mormons held family ideals nearly identical to those of the dominant culture. However, the struggle in outliving polygamy should not be minimized. As the doctrine was never nullified, there was a long, hazy period after the first manifesto in which members did not know what to believe about the validity of their plural unions. Perhaps the absence of official definitiveness actually served to make a smoother (though prolonged) break from the alternative. Though it cannot be said that church leaders capitulated directly to outside forces, it can be argued that (for whatever reason) the young church capitulated to a larger norm of monogamous marriage—and it was able to do so for the reasons mentioned above,

as well as because, unlike the Shakers and Oneida Community, the alternative never defined the church absolutely. Continuous revelation has always been a stronger defining feature of Mormon doctrine; therefore, leaders were able to guide members both in and out of the practice of plural marriage.



## CONCLUSION

Through examination of the discourse about marriage and gender roles in nineteenth-century America, it is evident that the rhetoric of Utopian marriage alternatives emerged from within a larger discourse of conflict expressed by the dominant culture. Whether in direct, conscious response to the modern marriage question, the discourse of alternative constructs fits tightly within the larger context of marriage reform. Other discursive features of utopian groups (such as religious and economic rhetoric) also bear dialectical relationships with mainstream conflicts. These may be considered even larger aspects of community identity than marriage discourse, though one can hardly separate these forces (within the groups or within the dominant culture).

The three groups analyzed held several beliefs, goals and characteristics in common—though their methods were as radically different from each other (and the norm) as can be. They were each isolated and each had a millennial focus—a belief in the second coming of Christ and that they, as a group, were to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth. They were each subject to a great deal of criticism and even persecution, which further ensured their group solidarity through alienation. They sought to overcome the tensions of religion and world by synthesizing the two in their isolated experiments. To some degree they each dealt with disillusionment with Jacksonian economics felt by the dominant culture. They also each sought to reform

marriage and sexual relations for the outside culture (from a protected distance). The question driving this thesis remains, how successful were they in satisfying the conflicts surrounding marriage and gender roles outlined in Chapter One?

Utopian discourse did attempt to answer these conflicts; however, it is not clear whether leaders or members intended to respond directly to mainstream concerns, nor how conscious they were of their role within the larger movement of marriage reform taking place in the larger society. As argued earlier, their very existence at this time places them in this context. Also, there is evidence within the discourse of each group that they were aware of, if not concerned with, larger cultural questions and saw themselves as reformers-by-example. To some degree, each rhetoric of alternative to traditional marriage answered the concerns exhibited by mainstream discourse about marriage question and gender roles.

The Shakers did so perhaps most overtly by avoiding marriage all together and separating the sexes as much as possible. The order thrived for quite some time, which is one measure of their success. They did not, however, attempt to reconcile members with marriage and sexuality; thus, they did not speak a strong message of reform to mainstream culture. They offered condemnation instead. The Oneida Community, however, was in more direct contrast with the larger society as they sought vocally for reformation of marriage itself. Whereas celibacy was somewhat of a reverent attempt at perfection—in the eyes of society, complex marriage was blasphemous.

Members who initially joined the Oneida Community did so in search of a true doctrine, a heaven-on-earth, and a transcendent form of love; ironically, it was the product of this love that eventually turned the experiment on its head. The new generations of Oneidans, growing up without volition in a community that encompassed all areas of life and settled all issues from within, could not see the beacon the community had been for their forefathers. They had not experienced the turmoil of a conflicted larger culture; therefore, they did not seek nor appreciate the solace of a totally controlling community. This alternative to the traditional monogamous construct could not last without its feature of being defined against a larger culture. Those brought up in the commune did not experience the larger culture until they were sent to college, at which point, the rhetoric of complex marriage failed to define itself strongly enough. It was not marked as a difference or transcendence for the new generation—it was the only construct they knew, and it was far too confining as the stirpiculture experiment proved.

Mormon plural marriage, however, had a strong dialogue with the norm of monogamy, as both were practiced within the community. The former was a religious (and social) ideal, while the latter was probably the more common reality. Mormon polygamy answered the struggle between the traditional patriarchal ideal and the newer companionate models of marriage, just as it did in its leadership structure, by reinforcing the traditional, biblical model of gender hierarchy. However, in doing so, plural marriage answered the woman question in a more



modern, progressive way. Through the strictly patriarchal model and polarized gender roles, women were empowered with all the rights contemporary mainstream feminists fought for. Therefore, from a contemporary perspective, the lives plural wives led were much more in line with ideals of gender-progressiveness than women of either of the other utopian groups analyzed, let alone women in the dominant culture.

The Mormons also differed from the other two groups in their approach of authority versus personal revelation. All three groups stressed leaders' authority to receive revelation; however, Shakers and Oneidans did so to the point of absorbing individual autonomy into a communal whole. Early Mormons, on the other hand, exhibit a strong discourse of personal revelation about plural marriage, especially within women's accounts. This personal test of faith in the principle may have contributed to plural marriage's success, as well as the endurance of the church after polygamy was no longer practiced. Furthermore, the principle of marriage retained its eternal nature after the manifesto; whereas, Shakers and Oneidans sought a temporal heaven rather than relationships in the hereafter. These two aspects explain, in part, why LDS marriage constructs have outlasted those of other utopian groups. The rhetoric of personal revelation, continuous revelation, and eternal marriage successfully negotiated the changes the dominant culture struggled with in the nineteenth century.



## Implications

As argued in Chapter One, conflict is a necessary stage in a culture's struggle for stasis. If the emergence of utopian alternatives to monogamy can be ascribed to a larger movement of response to a widely-felt texture of conflicts surrounding marriage, the demise of these alternatives suggests the end of the larger struggle. In other words, if these groups were a small part of a larger struggle, surely they would eventually yield to the norm, having made their ripple on the waters of marriage reform. However, another project could research whether this yielding was to a more compliant norm than before, or whether the consensus eventually reached reflected general resignation to Victorian ideals. Did the larger cultural norm capitulate and successfully blend and balance old constructs with new, or did one form overpower the other—and what are the implications in present paradigms of marriage and family?

As the primary focus of this thesis was *marriage and gender role* rhetoric in Utopian discourse, a lateral study could further develop the parallel issues of *religious* and *economic* rhetoric in the same communities. In fact, a complete study of these three forces could better explore the relationship between them, as they are hardly separable, yet too large a scope for this project.

Moving in another direction, yet staying within the scope of marriage and gender roles, another valuable project would be to compare this first American wave of utopian marriage discourse to the utopian movement of the nineteen-sixties, in

which over six hundred communes emerged with similar concerns about marriage and gender. The study could compare main motivating factors (religious versus government and economic disillusionment) and, of course, the resulting rhetoric of alternatives to traditional marriage. Though the more recent wave of utopians was larger in number, it was, in general, both shorter lived and less intense than the first wave. This is probably because the latter movement lacked the religious foundation and millennial fervor of early nineteenth-century America. Religious concerns, then all-encompassing, have since been overtaken by the skepticism of scientific thought. Without the force of religious conviction, a society could never again attempt to restructure marriage constructs, because while nothing else is sacred anymore—the ideal of the Victorian conjugal family is.

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