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“So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks”: Marriage and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century England

Philippa Levine

Marriage, for the nineteenth-century woman, was perhaps the single most profound and far-reaching institution that would affect the course of her life. For the woman who did not marry, whether by choice or by chance, spinsterhood marked her as one of society's unfortunates, cast aside from the common lot of the sex. For the woman who did enter wedlock, marriage spelled, simultaneously, a loss of freedom in both political and financial matters, perhaps domestic drudgery and frequent pregnancy, but undoubtedly a clear elevation in social status. Class position aside, marriage had a far greater effect on the lives of women than of men, and the pressures for women to marry were correspondingly far greater than those brought to bear upon men.

The meaning and significance of marriage in Victorian England represented a central pressure point in the lives of all women. It was undoubtedly one of the major agencies of socialization to which women were exposed; the pressures it imposed were enormously persuasive and difficult to resist. Family expectation and even self-esteem competed with the public assessment of women on the basis of their marital status. For women, marriage and its effects permeated every aspect of their daily existence and shifted the focus of their emotional and social contacts—what Patricia Jalland has dubbed their “bed-room-bathroom intimacy”¹—from their own families to those of their husbands.

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¹ Patricia Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics, 1860–1914* (Oxford, 1986), p. 35.

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The growing demographic imbalance between the sexes during the course of the nineteenth century was viewed with alarm by contemporary commentators who feared that the changing ratio of men to women would increase the numbers of unmarried women. The belief in wifehood as women's "natural" occupation only served to intensify that concern. Women who did not marry—those whom the Victorians, with characteristic linguistic inelegance, dubbed "surplus women"—were seen as doomed to an unhappily penniless and lonely existence, unenriched by the social cachet and putative material comforts of the marital state.

The effects of marriage on women, reared in the expectation of a good match and spelling their social success or failure, came under fire in this period from the vigorous and growing women's movement, which recognized the extensive ramifications of marital status for women. At one level, that interest arose out of the implications of the demographic changes. Feminists and early feminist periodicals were concerned to ensure that employment opportunities expanded in tandem with the growing population of women for whom waged labor would become necessity rather than choice. Their understanding of the prominent role of marriage in women's lives and consequent effects did not stop, however, with the issue of employment.

At the organizational level, feminist activists initiated a host of campaigns, many aimed at securing legislative freedom for married women to own property as well as attempting to secure equal access to divorce and child custody. At the same time, though, feminist activists consistently stated their broader interests in the issues for women raised by marriage and reflected with such clarity in the legislature. Marriage, not only because it altered the specific legal status of women but because it raised central issues around sexuality and human connection and communication, was a concern fundamental to nineteenth-century English feminism. In effect, marriage, or the absence of it, represented the site where the personal lives of women interlocked with their public declarations of belief. For women crucially, the easy divorce of public and private had no real meaning.

The separation of politics from private existence has, in the case of nineteenth-century feminists, served to throw undue emphasis on institutional campaigns organized around legal incapacity, suffrage, and employment to the detriment of a more complete and complex picture of feminism. Women active in organizations devoted to the furtherance of women's causes were almost invariably the recipients of popular scorn and derision. In addition to the barbed humor or outright hostility that greeted their efforts at the time, feminist women have been

equally ill served by posterity. Our traditional view of political commitment reserves no space or importance for the private lives of activists, men or women; biographies of “great” men and women generally comment on their personal relationships only in passing, unless some salacious detail is to be revealed.² Historical interpretation has further distorted our view of the nineteenth-century women’s movement, in characterizing it as a movement dominated and led by single women, often actively hostile to all that marriage represented.

Writing at the close of the century and reviewing the achievements of the generation of women activists who preceded her, feminist socialist Enid Stacy declared that “the agitation was almost entirely carried out by unmarried women, and in much that was said and written by them or on their behalf, a strong ‘anti-man’ and ‘anti-marriage’ tone was observable.”³ A couple of decades later, the Fabian writer Mabel Atkinson similarly asserted that her feminist predecessors had “found themselves driven into hostility to normal family relations.”⁴

Modern writers, too, have echoed this assumption and noted a preponderance of single women among the activists of this period. Rosemary Auchmuty and, more recently, Sheila Jeffreys, have both maintained that “spinsters provided the backbone of the feminist movement in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.”⁵ In her study of the campaigns opposing the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1870s and 1880s, Judith Walkowitz found the executive committee of the major feminist repeal organization to consist largely of unmarried or widowed women.⁶ Ruth Freeman and Patricia Klaus, too, see single women “with more time and freedom to pursue their personal interests, form[ing] a majority of the active members in the English and American suffrage organisations.”⁷

² Gerda Lerner, “Where Biographers Fear to Tread,” *Women’s Review of Books* 4, no. 12 (September 1987): 11–12.

³ Enid Stacy, “A Century of Women’s Rights,” in *Forecasts of the Coming Century by a decade of Writers*, ed. Edward Carpenter (Manchester, 1897), pp. 86–101, esp. p. 89–90.

⁴ M. A. [Mabel Atkinson], *The Economic Foundations of the Women’s Movement* (London, 1914), pp. 13–14.

⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930* (London, 1985), p. 86; Rosemary Auchmuty, “Spinsters and Trade Unions in Victorian Britain,” in *Women at Work*, ed. Ann Curthoys, Susan Eade, and Peter Spearritt (Canberra, 1975), pp. 109–22.

⁶ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 118.

⁷ Ruth Freeman and Patricia Klaus, “Blessed or Not? The New Spinster in England and the United States in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 3 (1984): 394–414, esp. 402.

It can, of course, be difficult on occasion to disentangle historical evidence from age-old prejudice but in the face of the high-profile activity of many married women in this period, the constant assertion that leadership was captured by a spinsterhood has some alarming connotations. It is tempting—and perhaps not entirely unjust—to draw parallels between historical and contemporary mockery of feminist women sublimating their unmet sexual needs through feminist activity. The popular picture of feminism as an activity limited to miserable male-less women is not unique to the later years of the twentieth century. How far is the reluctance of historians to accept the substantial role of married women in organized feminism an unconscious manifestation of this need to ridicule women's politics? Even Olive Banks, in her careful quantitative study of "first wave" feminism, argues that marital status was a crucial factor in shaping a woman's ideology.⁸

One contemporary example of that caricature that highlights perfectly the prejudices to which feminist spinsters were constantly party was contained in a "letter" printed in that bastion of male conservatism, *Punch*. Deriding the work of Manchester-based suffrage and married women's property activist Lydia Becker, the writer assured Mr. Punch that "We are content to leave our rights to our Husbands and Brothers; and if you could find Miss BECKER and her compeers a husband Each, through your advertising columns, you would confer a benefit on Society."⁹ The message is all too obvious.

Broadening the scope of our examination to embrace women active across the complete range of feminist activities in this period, however, offers a startlingly different profile at odds with the traditional view. The women's movement of the second half of the nineteenth century was a broad-ranging movement that accorded sexuality as critical a role in its understanding of oppression as it did the host of traditional and legal disabilities that afflicted women. Women organized severally around their exclusion from educational facilities and from many areas of employment, took up the theme of their lack of political status and tackled as well a series of moral and ethical issues. Many such campaigns were fought simultaneously, and the significant concurrence of personalities across the separate areas of protest makes it possible to draw up a picture of at least some portion of the active membership of this outspoken sorority.

Tracing the marital histories of some two hundred women whose

⁸ Olive Banks, *Becoming a Feminist: The Social Origins of "First Wave" Feminism* (Sussex, 1986), p. 90.

⁹ "Letter from 'A Lancashire Witch,'" *Punch* 77 (February 7, 1880): 58.

names constantly occur in the periodicals and in the membership lists of a host of feminist organizations in this period has been a frustrating assignment, but sufficient evidence is available to show that feminist women in the nineteenth century divide remarkably evenly between the eighty-eight who, at some stage in their lives, did marry and the 106 who remained single, figures that hardly bear out the misrepresentation of many writers who portray feminism as an activity confined to unmarried women.¹⁰

This feminist sample, at least, exhibited somewhat unusual and less than traditional marriage patterns. While Susan Cotts Watkins has argued that late female marriage in this period can be defined as women marrying over the age of twenty-three, the picture that emerges from this sample shows around 58 percent marrying later in their lives.¹¹ The greater number of feminists entering wedlock young had done so in the period before 1850; only four such early marriages are recorded in the second half of the nineteenth century among this cross section of the feminist community, compared with twenty-four prior to 1850. These dates suggest that, with the greater and growing impact of feminist thought in the later years of the century and, indeed, the larger number of feminist mothers, women exposed to feminist thought were perhaps less inclined to rush into or be forced into premature or early marriage. Indeed, Jalland attributes the confidence of unmarried women after 1880 precisely to the growing strength of the women's movement.¹² A similar tendency to late marriage was apparent among the black clubwomen of nineteenth-century America, who postponed marriage in favor of the women's activities offered in their single-sex organizations, and who thus actively chose public over private commitment at a critical point in their lives.¹³ There is some correlation,

¹⁰ The figures are derived from a computerized prosopographical database of 194 women identified as active feminists in this period. This data base was established as part of my forthcoming study (Basil Blackwell, 1989) on the social location of and networks among Victorian feminists.

¹¹ Susan Cotts Watkins, "Spinsters," *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 4 (1984): 310–25, esp. 316. Her argument is upheld by the work of R. D. Lee and R. S. Schofield in their article, "British Population in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, vol. 1, 1700–1860, ed. Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 17–35. On the other hand, Patricia Jalland, in her *Women, Marriage and Politics* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 48–49, argues that by 1872 the mean age at marriage for women was 25.7 years and for men, 27.9 years. In either case, the point remains significant given the number of feminists marrying in their thirties and forties.

¹² Patricia Jalland, "Victorian Spinsters: Dutiful Daughters, Desperate Rebels and the Transition to the New Women," in *Exploring Women's Past*, ed. Patricia Crawford (Sydney, 1983), pp. 129–70.

¹³ Janice Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward A Philosophy of Female Affection* (London, 1986), p. 36.

too, in this sample, between early marriage and ultimately unsuccessful liaisons. Of the ten documented unhappy marriages from this feminist sample, seven were in cases where the wife had married before the age of twenty-two.

Overall, the figures suggest that feminist women were inclined increasingly to consider marriage prospects more critically, weighing their advantages and disadvantages and, in general, demanding a more active role than tradition and legislation assigned them. At the age of twenty, Langham Place activist Bessie Rayner Parkes rejected a proposal of marriage, after much consideration, fearing the dependence she felt it would imply for her. "To live with him and give up in *some* measure my beloved Emmie and Barbara, to be dependent on that quiet . . . [unreadable] face for my intellectual nutriment. . . . To give up as I then must very much; my dear cousin Sam and my dear brother Frank; oh never never. A single woman is so free, so powerful."¹⁴

When Parkes finally did choose to marry, she was thirty-eight. In her case, marriage spelled the end of her involvement in feminist activities, not least because she had married an invalid. More important, though, her decisions in both instances—in rejecting and ultimately in choosing marriage—were made consciously and actively.

Though Parkes abandoned an active role in organized feminism upon marrying, that route was by no means common among her peers. Other than Parkes, the only activist in this sample who disappeared from the feminist scene as a result of marriage was factory inspector May Abraham. Her marriage, to politician H. J. Tennant in 1896, and subsequent decision to commit herself full-time to the raising of her children led her to relinquish both her professional career and at least the more time-consuming of her women's activities.

A few women, such as Louisa Martindale and the writer Anna Jameson, came to feminism in the wake of their marriages. Jameson had found solace in the company of women as her marriage foundered almost before it began, while Martindale had been left widowed with two small daughters in 1874, when her husband William died only three years after they were married. In the years after his death, Martindale's reading of feminist periodicals and literature opened a new world to her and her two growing daughters.

Most activists, however, worked to combine feminism and marriage, and generally with considerable success. Some made compro-

¹⁴ Girton College, Cambridge University, Bessie Rayner Parkes Collection, BRP 1.4, MS diary for August to December 1849, 4/15. Barbara is, of course, Parkes's close companion and cofeminist, Barbara Leigh Smith.

mises that served to give both partners freedom within the arrangement. Barbara Bodichon spent six months of each year in her native England among her feminist and radical associates and the other half of the year in Algeria, where her French husband Eugene had lived for many years. In general, feminists took as husbands men who were themselves committed and sympathetic to the cause. Other than the most obvious of such liaisons, that of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill, there were a host of other lesser known but important and happy partnerships. Clementia Taylor's husband Peter was the Radical member of Parliament for Leicester and actively associated himself with a number of women's campaigns, as did fellow parliamentarian Russell Gurney, husband of Emilie Gurney. Gurney helped pilot a number of women's bills—notably on married women's property—through the stormy and inhospitable waters of the House of Commons. Henry Fawcett, husband of franchise activist Millicent Garrett Fawcett, was another vocal male advocate of the cause and perhaps on occasion a more radical one than his wife. Fawcett supported a women's franchise measure ceding the vote to qualified women regardless of their marital status, while Millicent, on the other hand, pinning her hopes on a widow's and spinster's bill, was of the opinion that “half a loaf is better than no bread.”¹⁵

Some historians have argued that Fawcett's activism dates largely from the period after the death of her husband. It is certainly true that, given his blindness, much of her time was devoted to his needs, but long before his death and in the earliest years of her marriage, Millicent had chosen to move in the feminist circles to which her older sisters had habituated her. Her relationship with her blind husband displayed admirable signs of mutuality and reciprocity; she may well have acted as his amanuensis, but at the same time they were collaborating on treatises on political economy in which women's questions were substantially represented.

Other husbands were less publicly prominent but instead offered emotional support to their actively involved wives. Benjamin Elmy had married Elizabeth Wolstenholme in 1874 when her increasingly visible pregnancy had caused upset within the movement. The couple had not been inclined to formalize their partnership and did so only at the desperate urgings of Elizabeth's feminist colleagues who feared the detrimental effect of an illegitimate birth on the movement's respecta-

¹⁵ Fawcett Library, London, Autograph Letter Collection I: Women's Suffrage, 1851–94, Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Edmund Garrett, February 21, 1885.

bility. Though Elmy took a back seat in practical campaigning, he wrote a number of feminist tracts on politics as well as some extolling the virtues of his activist wife, under the pseudonym Ellis Ethelmer.¹⁶ Sylvia Pankhurst took a dim view of this “stout fallow man,” telling her readers that “it was whispered that he was violently cruel and unfaithful” to his wife.¹⁷ There is little evidence, though, to uphold Pankhurst’s hearsay. The admiring tone in which Elmy always wrote of his wife hardly suggests such abusive disharmony. Certainly Elmy never interfered with his wife’s feminist commitments; she was as indefatigable after her marriage as before, and the birth of their son Frank did nothing to lessen her activities.

Feminist women, married and single, were sharply attuned to the problems in which marriage might entrap them. Many chose not to marry, but for those who did, it was important that they enter their marriage assured of the position they would hold. To this end, many refused to promise obedience to their husbands, and many retained their own surname in addition to assuming that of their husband. Florence Fenwick Miller chose to keep her given name: her marriage to Frederick Alford Ford in 1877 is the first recorded instance in England of a woman reserving the right not to change or amplify her name in acknowledgement of the change in her marital status. Among those whose marriage ceremonies deliberately omitted any mention of gendered obedience were Elizabeth Whitehead Malleon (née Whitehead) who had been, for a brief period, director of Barbara Bodichon’s experimental Portman Hall School, founded in 1852, and an early woman doctor, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (née Garrett).

Garrett was another active feminist who, early in adulthood, had actively opted to remain unmarried. Interestingly, her first and unsuccessful suitor was none other than Henry Fawcett, who went on, of course, to marry her sister Millicent prior to Elizabeth’s own betrothal and subsequent marriage. We do not know whether Millicent knew of her husband’s earlier proposal to her older sister, but though Elizabeth was openly skeptical of Millicent’s marriage when it was announced, earlier events did not sour relations between the two sisters. Garrett’s reckoning of her own late marriage—she was thirty-five when she married James Anderson—was an interesting one. Writing to Millicent at the time of her engagement, she was at pains to justify her decision.

¹⁶ Some writers have mistakenly ascribed the pseudonym of Ellis Ethelmer to Elizabeth Wolstenholme. She generally wrote under the name Ignota.

¹⁷ L. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London, 1931), pp. 31, 32.

On Friday night my horizon was suddenly changed by Mr Anderson asking me to marry him. I do hope, my dear, that you will not think that I have meanly deserted my post. I think it need not prove to be so, and I believe that he would regret it as much as you or I would. I am sure that the woman question will never be solved in any complete way as long as marriage is thought to be incompatible with freedom and with an independent career, and I think there is a very good chance that we may be able to do something to discourage this notion.¹⁸

The letter went on to reiterate the couple's determination not to marry within a tradition that insisted upon wifely obedience. Elizabeth's thoughts on the relationship between marriage and the women's question highlights some interesting points. As the letter assures her sister, she gave up neither her medical career nor her feminist activities after her marriage, not even after the birth of her children. Her sense that a feminist politics could not long proceed without a serious consideration of how marriage might be rendered compatible with women's independence was a crucial point and one to which women such as herself gave not just thought but practical endeavor.

It was an issue that many took very seriously indeed. Mary Paley, one of the early Newnham College students, married economist Arthur Marshall in 1877. Marshall's father, who presided over the ceremony, would not consent to the abandonment of the obedience clause; Paley and Marshall instead took the pragmatic and sensible step of privately contracting themselves out of it.¹⁹ Similar contractual arrangements were drawn up between Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and her husband to ensure that any children of their union would take the equitable name of Bodichon-Smith.²⁰ Charles Dilke recalled that his wife Emilia, who had earlier been married to the Reverend Mark Pattison had "for many years . . . signed 'E. F. S. Pattison', the 'S', which stood for her family name of Strong being introduced by her to mark her wish for some recognition of the independent existence of the woman, and in some resistance to the old English doctrine of complete merger in the husband."²¹

The refusal of feminist women to conform to traditional patterns of

¹⁸ The letter is dated December 25, 1870, and is quoted in Ray Strachey, *Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (London, 1931), p. 57.

¹⁹ Mary Paley Marshall, *What I Remember* (Cambridge, 1947), p. 23. Nonetheless, their marriage cannot be seen as an "ideal" feminist model in any sense.

²⁰ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *An American Diary, 1857-8*, edited from the manuscript by Joseph W. Reed, Jr. (London, 1972), p. 32.

²¹ British Library (BL), Additional (Add.) MS 43,946, Dilke Papers, vol. 73, Sir Charles Dilke's typescript memoir of Emilia, Lady Dilke, fol. 29.

submission within marriage led them on occasion into clashes with the forces of Victorian respectability, doubtless straining their own emotional capacities in the process. Alice Scatcherd, best known for her work in women's local government circles in Yorkshire, refused to wear the wedding ring she regarded as a "badge of slavery." It was not uncommon for her to cross swords with scandalized hotel proprietors who refused to assign her to the same room as her husband without this outward symbol of respectability to prove the legitimacy of their relationship.²²

The issue for these women, then, was essentially one of active choice. They were concerned not simply with obtaining or guaranteeing personal freedoms and rights within the institution of marriage but with ensuring that the choice between marriage or single life, choice of partner, and choice about the form of marriage were decisions made actively by women. In an age in which wealthy families virtually put their eligible young daughters on the market—and thereby securing, ironically, one of the few areas in which mothers could exercise authority—the feminist accent on participation and decision, in practice as well as in theory, was a significant challenge to existing mores. In essence, such women were enacting a formative and critical change in women's participation in marriage. They were in effect rewriting the boundaries and traditions of the institution in their refusal to conform to existing practices. Their experiences do not correspond with our knowledge of the general pattern of marriage in this period. Neither their social nor their political connections were radically changed by marriage, in marked contrast to the social reorientation experienced by most women in traditional marriages at this time.

Emilia Pattison assumed the name Lady Dilke in 1885 on marrying Liberal politician Charles Dilke. Her previous marriage in 1862 to Mark Pattison, the testy and elderly rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, had been a miserable experience, and she had escaped it by spending large parts of each year abroad on medical grounds while Pattison found solace in the company of the young and doting Meta Bradley.²³ Though the testimony of her second husband is perhaps not entirely objective, he does remark that "she kept . . . an imaginative side and part of her life, in which Mark Pattison was hardly allowed to share:—'Off hours of my own time.'"²⁴

²² Pankhurst, p. 97.

²³ See V. H. H. Green, *Love in a Cool Climate: The Letters of Mark Pattison and Meta Bradley, 1879–1884* (Oxford, 1985).

²⁴ BL, Add. MS 43,946, fol. 29.

Emilia maintained for many years an intimate correspondence with her niece, Gertrude Tuckwell, who later in life acted as her aunt's personal secretary and fellow office-holder in the Women's Trade Union League. The letters that passed between them during Tuckwell's adolescence touched frequently on the girl's attempts to make sense of her life as she approached adulthood. Inevitably the question of marriage was raised, and Emilia's lengthy and thoughtful reply shows a shrewd understanding of the gap between her ideal and the reality of most marriages, doubtless including her own, though she refrains from alluding to it.

You raise three points in your letter—First, whether marriage should be *the* object of a woman's life; whether it is in fact so much so as to render any other an "unavoidable mistake." . . . The woman's first object should be I think to make herself in mind & soul & body the best that she sees the possibility of becoming & if she can marry in such a way as to satisfy the requirements of her own nature, if she & the man whom she marries are drawn together not only by that strong physical attraction which is commonly called love & which is indispensable but can also strive together up to the same moral and intellectual ideal—*then* marriage is the greatest bliss that life can offer. Where there is the possibility of realising such a state I think *each* has a claim on the other to which all other claims ought to be postponed. In the ordinary marriage which is a matter of social convenience, I see no such exalted obligations; nor does it seem to me a state greatly to be preferred to that of single life, as a means of subsistence offered to a penniless woman I hold it to be utterly degrading and abhorrent.²⁵

Despite her own unsatisfactory union with Pattison, she reserved her specific hostility for marriages of convenience and never doubted the moral and spiritual worth of more equitable partnerships. Her comments echo, too, the actions of those feminists who tinkered with the marriage ceremony, insisting upon their husband's willingness to embrace a new and feminist ethic of marriage.

Anne Jemima Clough was a more conservative feminist than Emilia Pattison. Her work on the extension of women's educational opportunities led finally to the establishment, with Clough as its first principal, of Newnham College, Cambridge. Busy with her educational activities, Clough remained unmarried throughout her life. In a diary written when she was twenty, her private comments illustrate the so-

²⁵ Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Pattison Collection, Letters of Mrs. Pattison, MS Pattison 140, fols. 37–38, n.d.

cial and emotional pressures to which young women of her day were continually subject and which must often have overridden personal preference. She herself exhibited equivocal feelings about her own desire for marriage. "I sometimes think about marriage. I don't know how I should like it. I believe, in truth, I don't care about it, but I do think of it sometimes and there is a vast deal of nonsense in my heart too. I like to be admired and well thought of."²⁶

Fifty years on, when one of her early Newnham graduates sought Clough's advice on personal matters, as many of her protégées chose to do, her attitude remained similarly qualified, though she could afford a more relaxed view of her own fortunes than in her youth. The changes effected both institutionally and individually by the women's movement in those same fifty years is more than apparent in her wise and cautious comments that counseled active choice as a woman's right.

I think highly of the matrimonial estate, the happiness of having someone belonging to you, some one to do and care for and watch over, in fact, to love and be loved by. Two people together can help each other to seek for the highest. But the question is, do you know each other enough? When a woman has reached the age of forty, or nearly that, as I suppose you have, she has settled habits, and independent habits. Can you change them, or will you be able to continue a good deal of your independence and your general way of life? . . . I advise you to get to know the character of the gentleman; and, anyhow, might it not be well to have your own money secured on yourself? The Women's Property Act does that for you to a certain extent, but you must arrange it, I should think.²⁷

It is difficult, of course, to assess just how far the example of women of Clough's ilk affected the subsequent lives of early college women. Figures compiled by Alice Gordon in 1895 show that only 120 of the 720 women who passed through Newnham from its foundation in 1875 to 1893 had married during that time span. Forty-six of Girton College, Cambridge, graduates, out of a total of 335, married in that period. Of the 173 women who had graduated from Oxford's Somerville College, twenty-nine had done so. Gordon concludes, and not

²⁶ Diary entry dated June 1840, quoted in Blanche Athena Clough, *A Memoir of Anne Jemima Clough* (London, 1897), p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 283. Letter dated 1890. The two Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 had gradually worked to secure for married women control and possession of their own property. Before 1870, any properties owned by a woman and not secured in an equity trust automatically became the rightful possessions of her husband on marriage.

without reason, that “the statistics so far as we can judge at present, do not lead one to the conclusion that marriage is either desired or attained by the majority of very highly educated women.”²⁸

The attitude of Jane Ellen Harrison, a Hellenic scholar and fellow of Newnham College, bears out the nature of the choice with which such women were faced. Harrison was not antagonistic to marriage but was convinced, rather, of its incompatibility with her chosen life-style. “By what miracle I escaped marriage I do not know, for all my life long I fell in love. But, on the whole, I am glad. I do not doubt that I lost much, but I am quite sure that I gained more. Marriage, for a woman at least, hampers the two things that made life to me glorious—friendship and learning.”²⁹

Existing marital conditions throughout most of the century would have often made that choice an agonizing one. Before 1882, a woman’s earnings could be legally appropriated by her husband and in at least one of the principal careers to which educated women turned for employment—namely, teaching—a marriage bar operated in the state sector. For women economically and socially fortunate enough to have secured an education, marriage often spelled the end of any further aspirations in that and similar directions while for poorer women many, as Margaret Bondfield noted, “would look forward to marriage with hope and dread—hope of economic security, and dread of the unknown ordeal of childbirth.”³⁰

A glance at the roll call of influential feminist educationalists does show up areas where marriage proved incompatible not so much with feminist activity, per se, as with the pursuance of a career carved out of feminist effort. For the women who staffed the new feminist academies—schools and colleges—the overwhelming commitment they made in their own lives to securing the futures of their students and their institutions left no space in their lives for marriage. Women such as Jane Ellen Harrison, Emily Davies of Girton College, Dorothea Beale, headmistress of Cheltenham Ladies’ College, or Constance Maynard, first principal of Westfield College, were wholly immersed in their life’s work. Many of them formed close and often intimate relationships with other like-minded women. In response to the growth in feminist activity in the mid- to late Victorian age, friendships among women assumed an increasingly significant role and became singularly “more intense and all-encompassing; love absorbed the burdens of

²⁸ Alice M. Gordon, “The After-Careers of University Educated Women,” *Nineteenth Century* 37 (1895): 955–60.

²⁹ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student Life* (London, 1925), p. 88.

³⁰ Margaret Bondfield, *A Life’s Work* (London, 1949), p. 36.

pioneering work.”³¹ In the case of feminist women, the formation of female networks of support was clearly an option preferable to the religious sublimation stressed by many writers and frequently preferred to marriage as well.³²

The disadvantages of marriage were certainly well rehearsed in the feminist community, even though many individual marriages were recognized as successful. Millicent Garrett Fawcett spelled out some of the grimmer ramifications of marriage in a lecture she delivered in Bristol in 1871. “A man may prevent his wife from exercising any control over her own children; he may separate her entirely from them; he may rob her of her own property and lavish it upon his mistress; he may do all this with the comfortable assurance that his conduct is in strict accordance with the law of a civilised and Christian country.”³³

Fawcett’s own marriage was a contented one, and though as we have noted, her husband’s blindness constrained her as much by choice as by necessity, she nonetheless maintained a high profile in the women’s movement throughout the seventeen years of her marriage. Marriages such as those of Fawcett or of Kate Amberley and Emilie Gurney, whose husbands were constantly supportive of their wives’ activities, remind us that neither the abandonment of feminist principles nor a loss of rights was necessarily consonant with marriage, even given the legal minority of the married woman before the twentieth century.

Inevitably, of course, the picture was not always as optimistically powerful. In numerous instances, even the strongest of women found the pressures and conformities arising out of marriage an oppressive burden. Barbara Caine has shown how, after marrying Sidney Webb, Beatrice Potter found it impossible to maintain a wholly separate public profile. While Sidney continued to fulfill a whole range of public positions, her work was subsumed in joint research projects they undertook together.³⁴

³¹ Martha Vicinus, “‘One Life to Stand Beside Me’: Emotional Conflicts in First-Generation College Women in England,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (1982): 603–28.

³² Peter T. Cominos, “Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict,” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (London, 1972), pp. 155–72, esp. 163, and Jalland, “Victorian Spinsters” (n. 12 above), pp. 133–34, both stress the religious alternatives to which many women turned. Martha Vicinus’s book *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (London, 1985) also devotes attention to this theme.

³³ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “Why Women Require the Franchise,” in *Essays and Lectures on Social and Political Subjects*, by Henry Fawcett and Millicent Garrett Fawcett (London, 1872), pp. 262–91, p. 270.

³⁴ Barbara Caine, *Destined to Be Wives: The Sisters of Beatrice Webb* (Oxford, 1986), p. 161.

Caine's work accords with that of Patricia Jalland in seeing an almost invariable shift in women's social focus on marriage, moving into a new world bounded by the family and friends of their husbands far more than their own preexisting connections. For many, this certainly was the common pattern, but women with a stated commitment to feminism clearly demanded the negotiating of a separate social and political space. The feminist social calendar of teas, soirées, and meetings, many of them exclusive to women and many of which attest to this separate space, commonly embraced both married and single women. Married feminists like Kate Amberley, Clementia Taylor, and Emilie Gurney occupied central roles in the feminist social circles of mid- and late-nineteenth-century England, roles which appear never to have brought them into marital conflict with their partners.

There were specific, tactical ways in which the women's movement turned marriage to its own use. The tag of respectability accorded the married woman was manipulated to demonstrate the movement's unimpeachable moral qualities, though on occasion both strategy and results could be a trifle heavy-handed. When the radical Clementia Taylor resigned the secretaryship of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1868, she had assumed that the assistant secretary, Caroline Ashurst Biggs, would succeed her. Helen Taylor had hatched a scheme, however, whereby Clementia would retain the position nominally while Biggs did the work involved, on the grounds that "a *Mrs* is better than a *Miss*."³⁵ Clementia Taylor, to her credit, would have no truck with this plan which came—ironically—from a spinster, Helen Taylor!

Elizabeth Wolstenholme's premarital pregnancy, even after she and Benjamin Elmy finally agreed to marry, brought her into some conflict with the movement. Many women called for her resignation as secretary to the Manchester Married Women's Property Committee, fearful of the damage her reputation might now wreak upon the cause. Writing to Wolstenholme shortly after she and Elmy married, Millicent Garrett Fawcett chided her for her indiscretion. "By what you did you dealt a heavy blow at the very movement you had previously done so much for. At the present moment more than half the life and energy of the M[arried] W[omen's] P[roperty] com[mitt]ee is suspended, and a large section of the workers feel they must dissociate themselves from it as long as you are the secretary. By retiring you could in some

³⁵ Fawcett Library, Autograph Letter Collection I: Women's Suffrage, 1851–94, Helen Taylor to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, October 31, 1868.

measure repair the injury which the circumstances connected with your marriage have inflicted on the women's movement."³⁶

Despite these pragmatic—and on occasion, unsympathetic—nods in the direction of propriety, feminist campaigners nonetheless made the injustices enshrined within the marital system, and shored up by the legislature, one of their chief targets. Attempts to give women economic independence within marriage through laws guaranteeing the rights of married women to own property were among the earliest of the organized efforts of the women's movement. Committees on married women's property active in London and Manchester attracted a mix of married and single women. It was recognized as an issue of the utmost importance not merely, as later critics charged, for wealthier women anxious to retain a hold over inherited property, but crucially for working women.³⁷ Not only would such an act give women sovereignty over their own earnings for the first time, but it was hoped that the formal, if not always much more than nominal, independence it offered would undermine men's readiness to make decisions for their wives in other areas. It pointed up, too, the contradictions in status engendered by marriage. Respectability and social standing—the perceived advantages of marriage in England's rigidly structured social hierarchy—brought with them a complete loss of legal and political rights. Whereas single women had rights over property and, after 1869, a right to exercise at least a local franchise, marriage automatically denied women access to the rights ironically enjoyed by the social outcast, the spinster.

The question of property had other ramifications too. Feminists were keenly aware of the high and seemingly growing incidence of marital violence against women and understood, too, the factors that inhibited its victims from bringing charges against or leaving their spouses. Their analysis drew a direct analogy between the agitation around the issue of married women's property rights and their exposure to what Frances Power Cobbe called "wife-torture." As Cobbe noted in her influential piece on this most vicious aspect of marriage, "The notion that a man's wife is his PROPERTY, in the sense in which a

³⁶ Fawcett Library, Autograph Letter Collection: Women's Movement, 1865–71, December 10, [1871?]. David Rubinstein has suggested, in a personal communication dated January 24, 1988, that this letter may well have been written in 1875 despite its inclusion in a collection devoted to an earlier period.

³⁷ Indeed, women from wealthier backgrounds were generally the recipients on marriage of property settlements in trust and thus protected at least from dissolution by their husbands under the law of equity.

horse is his property . . . is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery.”³⁸

Cobbe's arguments highlighted the structural inequalities that underpinned marriage at this time, and indeed her analysis went a step further. In promoting means for the easier dissolution of violent marriages, Cobbe drew attention to the gendered inequalities of the divorce law. Women's access to divorce was significantly more constrained than that of men throughout the century. The Marriage and Divorce Act of 1857—passed hastily to head off the more threatening prospect of a married women's property bill then due to be debated in Parliament—had wrested divorce judgments from clerical hands and rendered them a secular issue. At the same time, though, the new law reinforced and institutionalized a double moral standard dividing the two sexes by distinguishing between the gravity of female and male adultery.

Harriet Grote's *Lines Suggested By More than One Recent Domestic History*, penned a couple of years before the passing of the act in November 1855, was still appropriate in the years following the act when husbands could continue to treat their wives with scant regard albeit legal rectitude.

Ask—may the victim of a hasty vow
Ne'er seek release nor remedy? Ah no!
A maiden once enclosed in nuptial ties
Must wear her fetters till she sins or
dies;
And suffer as she may, within these bounds,
No cure for sorrows and no balm for wounds.

Such finished torture England's code can boast;
A formal framework, which at woman's cost,
Flings a disguise o'er ruthless tyranny,
And drugs men's conscience with a special
tie.³⁹

One of the most dramatic of disastrous marriages came to an end early in 1873 when the historical novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton died, releasing his unhappy wife Rosina from tempestuous years of physical

³⁸ Frances Power Cobbe, “Wife-Torture in England,” *Contemporary Review* 32 (1878): 55–87, esp. 62.

³⁹ Harriet Grote, “Lines Suggested By More than One Recent Domestic History,” *Collected Papers (Original and Reprinted) in Prose and Verse, 1842–62* (London, 1862), p. 282.

and psychological abuse. She had described him in a letter to her friend Lydia Becker as possessing a temper compounded of “nettles verjuice, serpents fangs and tigers claws.”⁴⁰ In 1858, Lytton had organized the kidnap and subsequent incarceration of his wife in an asylum, securing their son’s support for his actions. Reporting his death to Becker, Rosina dramatically signed herself “Freed Woman Lytton.”⁴¹

Legal opinion as to the lawful status of such deeds was often somewhat confused and divided. When Emily Jackson refused to live with her husband after he returned from a lengthy stay in New Zealand in 1888, he too had her kidnapped and kept forcibly locked up in the home of one of his relatives while he pursued his marital rights before the courts. Only when the case finally reached the court of appeal did Emily Jackson regain her freedom, though there being insufficient grounds for a divorce, she remained legally married.⁴²

Small wonder, then, that the feminist periodical, *The Gatherer*, pondering the pros and cons of marriage for women, concluded in 1883, somewhat tongue in cheek, that the institution was surely little more than a “lottery” in which “there are so few prizes and so many blanks.”⁴³

Women who chose not to risk that lottery were subject, of course, to the social pressures of pity, condescension, and even hostility. Both married and single feminists worked strenuously in this period to improve the image of the unwed woman. Moral reformer Josephine Butler pointed out the absurdity of a doctrine that praised the virtues of women’s marital destiny in an age when, demographically, the numbers simply failed to fit. “Like Pharaoh, who commanded the Israelites to make bricks without the materials to make them of, these moralizers command this multitude of enquiring women back to homes which are not, and which they have not the material to create.”⁴⁴

Feminists were not concerned merely, however, with making good a situation in which hopeful women found themselves cast aside in the marital pickings but, more importantly and certainly more vocally, with emphasizing that husbandless women were neither inferior

⁴⁰ Fawcett Library, Autograph Letter Collection: Letters of Lydia E. Becker, Lytton to Becker, [1873?].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1873.

⁴² For a full account of the Jackson case, see David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women’s Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 54–58.

⁴³ H. R. W. L., “Has Matrimony Advantages? (Dialogue Between Brother and Sister),” *Gatherer* (January 1883), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Josephine E. Butler, *Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture: A Series of Essays* (London, 1869), p. xxix.

nor lacking. Frances Power Cobbe had noted the tendency prevalent in high society to treat the subject of marital assault as a joke, and Maria Grey—best known for her work with the Girls' Public Day School Company—noted the same tendency with regard to the single woman. "A reverend gentleman who took the chair at a meeting on behalf of the Higher Education of Women said . . . that they were not so much social failures as social superfluities."⁴⁵

It was to dispel this image of the "inutility" of the unmarried woman to which much feminist attention was directed in these years.⁴⁶ Many of those who remained single had clearly done so by choice, some through a recognition of the potential fetters that marriage imposed, some because their emotional attachments were far more strongly directed to women, some because they actively opposed the motives they felt were responsible for most marriages. Sophia Jex-Blake, who had led the fight against the Edinburgh medical establishment in the 1870s, was clear as to her woman-centered choices. "I believe I love women too much ever to love a man. Yet who can tell?"⁴⁷ Her instincts were correct, though; she never married, and, indeed, the intensity of her friendship with Octavia Hill led to the disapprobation of Octavia's parents and the breaking off of the relationship, leaving both women dejected.

A woman such as Frances Power Cobbe was, in some senses, more fortunate. After the death of her parents, she struck out on her own in creating a life peopled almost entirely by women, living many years in fruitful partnership with sculptress Mary Lloyd. Her legion feminist activities aside, Cobbe's principal occupation was writing. Alongside her varied journalism and theological-cum-philosophical tracts, she penned a good deal of feminist and antivivisectionist material, much of the former concerned precisely with the contentious issues of marriage and spinsterhood. In an essay on "Celibacy vs. Marriage," written in 1861, she offers an endearing portrait of the unmarried woman. "The 'old maid' of 1861 is an exceedingly cheery personage, roaming about untrammelled by husband or children; now visiting her relatives' countryhouses, now taking her month in town, now off to a favourite *pension* on Lake Geneva, now scaling Vesuvius or the Pyramids."⁴⁸

Cobbe's optimism was, in part, a product of her relatively secure financial status. For most spinsters, the issue of earning a livelihood

⁴⁵ Mrs. William [Maria] Grey, *Old Maids: A Lecture* (London, 1875), pp. 3–4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Margaret Todd, *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake* (London, 1918), p. 65.

⁴⁸ Frances Power Cobbe, "Celibacy vs. Marriage," *Essays on the Pursuits of Women* (London, 1863), pp. 38–57, esp. 52.

was more acute; Michael Anderson has shown that unmarried women were far likelier to end their lives reliant on poor relief than even their widowed peers, and that they were significantly overrepresented in institutions such as workhouses. Anderson rightly sees this fate as “a clear reflection of a lack of resources, financial and social, to maintain existence in the wider community.”⁴⁹ And, as Jane Austen so shrewdly observed at a rather earlier date, economic considerations were frequently, if not inevitably, a factor of considerable significance: “it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public.”⁵⁰

When Carlisle feminist and schoolmistress Mary Smith, the daughter of a poor and obscure country family (and in that respect markedly different from women such as Jex-Blake and Cobbe) received an offer of marriage, she refused it without hesitation. Not only was she, as she states in her autobiography, “determined to fight for my own living, and be a burden to no one,” but she was only too aware of the motives that lay behind the offer.⁵¹ “It was a pure business transaction that was proposed. It was known that I was poor. I never took any pains to conceal it, and a good business [her Carlisle school] was of itself thought a fair prize for an intellectual woman who was struggling with poverty. What an alliance! What presumption!”⁵²

It was this assumption that the husbandless adult woman was less than a complete person that most irked feminists and that spurred many to laud their unmarried state as a positive beneficence both personally and to society at large. Activist Louisa Hubbard described her own understanding of why she felt it so important to make a public declaration on the issue.

I do not think I was inclined for marriage myself, perhaps being too selfish or too independent to willingly and cordially face the prospect of merging my existence into that of another person. Influenced, therefore, half-unconsciously, it may be, by my own disinclination to “step down” merely because I might not feel disposed to marry and feeling too, some righteous indignation on behalf of others as well as myself, I gradually drifted into the position of wishing to champion the cause of the unmarried woman, and from the first I refused to apologise for her existence.⁵³

⁴⁹ Michael Anderson, “The Social Position of Spinsters in Mid-Victorian Britain,” *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 4 (1984): 390–91.

⁵⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816; reprint, London, 1957), p. 65.

⁵¹ Mary Smith, *The Autobiography of Mary Smith, Schoolmistress and Non-Conformist: A Fragment of Life* (London, 1892), p. 179.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵³ Quoted in Edwin A. Pratt, *A Woman's Work for Women, being the aims, efforts and aspiration of "L.M.H."* (*Miss Louisa M. Hubbard*) (London, 1898), p. 3.

This crusading element was important for many women. Henrietta Müller outraged her male colleagues on the London School Board during her tenure of the Lambeth seat there between 1879 and 1885 with her claim that the spinster was, in truth, an “object of envy.”⁵⁴ Müller’s attitude to marriage was a more antagonistic one than that earlier espoused by women of Cobbe or Hubbard’s generation, who sought more to reinforce a positive image of spinsterhood than to inflict damage on the institution of marriage. They were of the same opinion as Mary Cusack who pointed out that “while marriage is honourable in all, it is not the one end of female existence.”⁵⁵ Müller’s comments, however, foreshadow a more sustained attack on marriage that emerged in the late 1880s and 1890s, spilling over into the early years of the twentieth century. It was a stance that stressed the necessarily degrading effects of marriage on women sexually and economically; centrally they highlighted “the concurrence of strict marriage and systematic or legalised prostitution.”⁵⁶ The thoroughgoing hostility to marriage that surfaced in this interpretation saw little remedy for the legal, economic, and sexual subservience into which it was believed marriage inevitably led women. Instead, taking their cue from the vigorous proliferation of social purity organizations at the end of the nineteenth century, such women chose rather to reject marriage in favor of endorsing celibacy.

It was a stand more markedly militant than that of older generations of feminists for whom freedom of choice had been fundamental and for whom marriage was still a salvageable commodity. This new generation, spawned by the social purity crusades, was intent on full-dress battle, on exposing what it regarded as the definitively “despotic rule of man.”⁵⁷ Embedded in the stance of the proponents of celibacy was a far more explicit understanding of the connection between male power and male sexuality than had been made by earlier generations of women activists. The brutality of legitimate marital relations was echoed for them by the brutality of male sexuality. They looked back not only to the feminist assault on state-regulated prostitution and to the ensuing social purity crusades it had catalyzed but also to such campaigns as those around the scandal of marital violence. They took a

⁵⁴ Thomas Gautry, “*Lux Mihi Laus*”: *School Board Memories* (London, 1937), p. 73.

⁵⁵ M. F. Cusack, *Women’s Work in Modern Society* (London, 1874), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Mona Caird, “Marriage,” *Westminster Review* 130, no. 2 (August 1888): 186–201, esp. 193.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Rachel Chapman, “Marriage Rejection and Marriage Reform,” *Westminster Review* 130, no. 3 (August 1888): 358–77, esp. 372.

more radical stand in counseling women to abjure necessarily contaminating sexual relations with men and in elevating abstinence to the status of the new feminist morality. For such women, spinsterhood was an essential badge of their feminism—what Cicely Hamilton was to call “single blessedness” in the early years of the twentieth century. What they shared with earlier and less antagonistic generations was an understanding of the centrality of this issue to any thoroughgoing feminist analysis of their society.

This new and radical wing of the feminist movement, which was to feed into the militancy of much Edwardian feminism, was deliberately and self-consciously more inflammatory in its interpretation. Its understanding of the distorted dynamics of sexuality, imposed by a patriarchal system, dictated a far more direct equation of economic and sexual injustice than earlier feminists had chosen to pursue. Susan Kingsley Kent has pointed out that this new feminism was explicit in its harnessing of the language of political economy to its discussions and understanding of marriage.⁵⁸ Barbara Caine’s study of earlier feminist attitudes to marriage notes that prostitution was an issue “conspicuously absent from most discussions of marriage” in the mid-century period.⁵⁹ In the wake of the successful and vocal agitation for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the resultant new formulations characteristic of social purity campaigners, that reluctance was abandoned.

The critique, not just of marriage and its barely disguised legitimization of male carnality but also—if only implied—of the leniency of earlier generations of feminists toward it, was further amplified by the connections made between marriage and employment. Prostitution, in some ways, provided a midground for such an analysis, not only because feminists had been angered that the Contagious Diseases Acts chose to attack prostitutes rather than prostitution, but because its very existence spoke of women’s subordinate economic position. The circular link between poverty and prostitution was a symbol not just of women’s economic dependence on men but of the paucity of mitigating employment opportunities.

Marriage and paid work were widely regarded in the nineteenth century as mutually exclusive categories, despite the contradictory reality of lived experience. Even those feminist periodicals in which women’s employment was a commonly aired topic seldom chose to

⁵⁸ Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), p. 85.

⁵⁹ Caine (n. 34 above), p. 97.

debate the appropriateness of married women's work, seeing paid labor more as the necessitous province of single, unsupported women. Historiographically, Susan Kingsley Kent notes the trend among historians consonant on this emphasis. "Historians have usually argued that the feminist movement focused almost exclusively on the plight of single women and the needs of married women whose marriages had broken up through death or separation."⁶⁰

Though some feminists of the period were blessed with private incomes and the voluntary activities of many others rested on their husband's financial support, economic dependence was a theme on which earlier generations of women had not dwelt. The new wave of militant crusaders at the turn of the century, however, leaped on this opening as an index of the relationship between economic and sexual subservience; women's limited economic opportunities and the difficulties of postmarital employment led, for them, in a more or less straight line to prostitution, and whether it was negotiated on the streets or legitimated within marriage was not the most salient factor. It was a critique that brought together strands of subjugation not linked by earlier feminists.

Crucially, though, neither the new advocates of celibacy nor the older feminists who retained a belief in the potentialities of marriage saw the unmarried woman as "mute . . . unmated and workless," as Mabel Atkinson described her early in the twentieth century.⁶¹ The stereotype of the unattractive and increasingly embittered "old maid"—though rapidly transferred in the popular imagination to connote the quintessential feminist—was, throughout the nineteenth century, a target of feminist action. It was only in the closing years of the century, though, that a contingent of feminist women turned their backs on marriage wholesale and politicized their views on sexuality so explicitly. For the greater part of the nineteenth century, marriage was a central and pressing concern of the women's movement, but the common view within the movement had been to encourage choice among women and to free them from considering marriage as the only or highest aspiration of their lives rather than rejecting all and any union between men and women. Even with the turning of the tide to a more explicit condemnation of marriage as an institution that the last years of the century witnessed, many avowed feminists still continued to choose marriage over single life.

The large number of married women who, within the lifetime of

⁶⁰ Kent, p. 81.

⁶¹ M. A. [Mabel Atkinson] (n. 4 above), p. 11.

their marriages, were committed and active feminists, is an important indicator of the generous breadth of feminist thought and experience in this period. For such women, their own marriages became an intrinsic expression of their feminist principles. In most cases, of course, the freedom from domestic preoccupation that brought this about was bought at the expense of working-class women for whom the luxury of a marriage of equals was largely beyond reach. And Françoise Basch has observed correctly that, as with much of the feminist awareness of this period, “the discourse of protest against marriage originated in middle-class educational circles, among women unusually active in contemporary social movements, and in a context of unusual male comprehension and sympathy.”⁶² Nonetheless, given the relatively narrow class parameters in which feminism necessarily operated in this period, feminist marriages offer an interesting clue to the crucial connection between politics and lifestyle.

Among unmarried women, there is no evidence before the closing years of the century of any hostility to the chosen paths of their wedded friends, nor, importantly, do they exhibit any deference in that respect. Though feminist organizations, as we have seen, did not hesitate to seize upon the tactical advantages of marital status—just as they seated their prettier recruits prominently at public gatherings—their principal interest was in valuing women independently of the men in their lives, be they husbands, fathers, or brothers. As Kate Amberley wrote to a male friend: “To bring about the feeling that a woman is a human being, a soul, a mind, a rational, feeling, thinking animal, and not only a sensuous creature made for man, I want what are called for convenience sake, women’s rights.”⁶³

It was a succinct and impassioned statement of the values of the women’s movement. The need to create for women a space and an identity entirely separated from that constructed by and for men made marriage a crucial issue on the feminist agenda of the nineteenth century. It acted in many ways to distill the essence of gender contradiction in Victorian society, walking a curious and contradictory tightrope between the public and the private. While marriage redefined, but at the same time retrenched, the process of domestication in women’s lives, it also awarded women favorable status in the public eye. Single women were punished by *not* being recognized in terms of that status,

⁶² Françoise Basch, “Women’s Rights and the Wrongs of Marriage in Mid-Nineteenth Century America,” *History Workshop Journal* 22 (1986): 18–40, esp. 25.

⁶³ Kate Amberley to Henry Crompton, January 3, 1869, quoted in *The Amberley Papers: The Letters and Diaries of Lord and Lady Amberley*, 2 vols., ed. Bertrand Russell and Patricia Russell (London, 1937), 2:299.

but they could nonetheless enjoy the public privileges of ownership and of limited political participation. They were privileges hedged with difficulties and implied criticisms, however, for they connoted the spinster's failure to achieve full femininity. The relative public "freedom" accorded the unmarried woman was an index of her lack of femininity, and she remained in any case circumscribed by the many limitations to which all women were subject.

Marriage was a public statement of a commitment that see-sawed between the worlds of public and private, an ambivalence that feminists recognized and abhorred. Marriage, like sexuality, was a central site of feminist analysis in this period and as the radical voice grew stronger, the connections between the two were made ever more apparent. Both for the antagonists of all forms of marriage at the turn of the century, and for earlier generations reluctant to abandon the institution in its entirety, the bankruptcy of existing and historical marital arrangements was an issue of urgent and primary concern. It may be that historians have ignored all but those aspects that found an organizational voice: the message can only be, therefore, that we look beyond the merely institutional to the analytic concerns of an important political movement.