

---

## Victoria Woodhull: Sex, Spirits, and Socialism

*Brandi Lee Heacock*

“Yes, I am a Free Lover! I have an *inalienable, constitutional, and natural* right to love whom I may, to love for as *long or short* a period as I can, to *change* that love *every day* if I please! And with *that* right neither *you* nor any *law* you can frame have *any* right to interfere.”<sup>1</sup> While many of us today may take such a view of sexuality for granted, when these words were uttered by presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull in 1872, they were met with shock and outrage. Statements such as these were used in a smear campaign against her as proof of her immorality and promiscuity. But there was much more to Woodhull than the so-called “radical” views of sexuality and gender relations for which she became infamous. As well as being the first woman to run for president—at a time when women had not yet been granted suffrage—she was the first woman to testify before Congress. She and her sister, Tennessee Claflin, were the first women to own a stock brokerage firm, the first to own a newspaper. Woodhull publicly advocated women’s suffrage, social freedom (a polite term for what was more popularly known as “free love”) and socialism; in fact, her newspaper was the first to publish an English translation of *The Communist Manifesto* in the United States. Furthermore, she was a Spiritualist.

Considering the scope of her social and political accomplishments—and her notoriety—her role as a Spiritualist can easily be overlooked. Today, and even in the height of its popularity, Spiritualism has often been denigrated as a foolish and fraudulent pursuit, relegated to darkened rooms, where gullible women await spirit rappings and flying tables. Yet there has been a growing recognition of the deep connections between Spiritualism and nineteenth-century radical social and political movements, as both Spiritualism and these movements advocated a new focus on the freedom of the individual. In many ways, Woodhull’s role as a Spiritualist is inextricably connected to her religious and political ideas and her career as a public spokeswoman for the reform of gender roles.

In dismissing Woodhull’s claims of spirit contact as insignificant, one would lose valuable insights into her life. Whether or not one chooses to believe her claims, it is important to understand that she saw herself as someone sent forth on a mission by the spirit world. Her utopian goal of a classless and completely free society was one that was simultaneously political, economic, and spiritual, and was profoundly influenced by the Spiritualists and free lovers that preceded her. Not only did Spiritualism

give her a sense of purpose, but her early career as a traveling medium and magnetic healer was instrumental in making her the public advocate of social equality she later became. As a medium and healer, she counseled many women who were suffering in bad marriages, and it was these stories of misery—as well as the one she herself experienced in her first marriage—that convinced her that marriage as it stood was the root of all society’s ills. Furthermore, the nomadic lifestyle she lived as a young medium prepared her for her later career as a traveling public lecturer. Both callings required skills such as advance advertising, self-promotion, and a general knowledge of how to live “on the road.” As a medium, she also became accustomed to public scrutiny. This resilience proved useful when she became a figure of notoriety, as it enabled her to brave attacks on her character that likely would have made most “dignified women” retreat from the spotlight.

Even while considering herself a political figure, Woodhull never ceased thinking of herself as a Spiritualist medium. Many of her public lectures bear a striking resemblance to those given by trance speakers, as she often abandoned her notes to launch into a spontaneous and fiery tirade. Her speeches were often called “magnetic” or “enchanted” by those who attended them, and some (including her) believed that the spirits would come upon her during her speeches. She and her sister became personal mediums for Cornelius Vanderbilt, who provided them the funding to open their brokerage firm—the event that launched the two into the public arena. The existence of a brokerage firm owned and run by females was Woodhull’s first step in making public her message about gender equality, and the business provided the financial backing needed to further publicize her cause.

The Spiritualist movement provided her not only with a mission and the tools needed to realize it, but also with supporters. As a result of her fame as a public figure, she became the head of the American Association of Spiritualists (AAS) and a leader in the women’s suffrage and labor movements almost overnight. The membership of all three movements tended to overlap, and she tried to combine the ideals of each into an over-arching vision of radical freedom and universal equality. Ironically, however, her inclusiveness turned out to be divisive. As a public leader, her visibility was viewed as both a blessing and a curse. Her notoriety and extreme views brought her a questionable reputation in the press, which caused less radical members in the movements to seek to distance themselves from her, while simultaneously filling her lecture halls and keeping her ideas within the realm of public debate. For the AAS in particular, her influence polarized the Spiritualists between those who sought to maintain the movement’s historical connection with controversial social reform and a conservative branch that sought to shy away from politics and gain acceptance from the general public. Whether loved or hated, Woodhull was never ignored.

### **Spiritualists, Free Lovers, and Socialists**

As a countercultural religious movement, Spiritualism has only recently been getting the serious scholarly attention it deserves. Beginning in the small town of Hydeville, New York, with the two young Fox sisters, who believed they had discovered a way to communicate through rapping sounds with a spirit haunting their home, the movement blossomed as the girls found a lucrative market in which to display their talents. Other mediums soon appeared, and Spiritualism was born as a national phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> It reached its zenith of popularity from the 1850s to the end of the century,<sup>3</sup> but the number of its adherents is difficult to determine—estimates range from hundreds of thousands<sup>4</sup> to two million<sup>5</sup>—due to its weak institutional basis.

Although it was known as a popular form of entertainment, believers flocked to Spiritualism for a variety of personal reasons. Most went to contact their dead relatives in order to be consoled—dead children were the most common spirits called upon.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteenth century, the infant mortality

rate was very high; in 1853, nearly half of reported deaths were of children under five. Furthermore, urbanization and industrialization made death more of a personal tragedy than a matter of communal concern, intensifying the experience of grief over the loss of a loved one.

Spiritualism helped families and individuals cope with death by denying its finality. Death was merely a transition to another place, and those who had made that transition retained their individual personalities and their relationship to their living family. The accounts given by mediums of children still growing and maturing in the world beyond concretized this idea and gave great comfort to bereaved parents.<sup>7</sup> The high casualties in the Civil War also contributed to the attractiveness of the idea that the dead had simply “crossed over” and still maintained contact with their loved ones.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Spiritualism appealed to those who rejected literal heavens and hells but still craved eternal life, as no dogmatic theology was necessary to believe that the dead make contact with and provide help to the living. In fact, a major attraction of Spiritualism was the claim that the practice was based not on faith but rather on science, thus providing “empirical proof” of the existence of spirits. The recent invention of the telegraph seemed to support this assertion since the mysterious and invisible force of electricity made the postulation of other natural but unknown forces seem credible. Mediums claimed that spirit communication was electrical in nature, and believers often termed the new invention the “Spiritual Telegraph.”<sup>9</sup>

Virtually from its inception, Spiritualism was connected to new and radical political ideas. Many scholars have recognized that new spiritual visions are often accompanied by new ideas about how society should be ordered.<sup>10</sup> Far from merely being a form of entertainment or consolation, Spiritualism dealt simultaneous blows to religious orthodoxy and to social conventions. It challenged the authority and the truths of Christianity, openly questioned Victorian gender roles, and became a magnet for social radicals of all types. Most importantly for our purposes, it became intricately tied to the most extreme manifestation of the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement, the “sex radicals” or “free lovers.” The spiritual and philosophical ideas of Spiritualism provided a foundation upon which radical social and political ideas were based.

It must be noted that there were no formal “beliefs” in Spiritualism, as its emphasis was on individuals seeking truth for themselves.<sup>11</sup> Its relationship to Christianity was ambiguous, as some adherents rejected the Christian faith outright, while others (like Woodhull) saw the two faiths as compatible and dubbed themselves “Christian Spiritualists.” Both groups, however, showed a distinct aversion to dogmatism of any sort, and Spiritualists who identified themselves with Christianity often held views in conflict with orthodox belief. For instance, Spiritualists of all types were biased against formal churches and rejected the role of the clergy. They saw revelation not as a one-time event but as a continuously unfolding process, and they dismissed evil as a “cosmic category”: in their pantheistic worldview, all that exists is God and is therefore good, and things that were labeled “evil” in fact served a higher good. They saw Christ as a skilled medium who emphasized the divinity within each human being, a model to be followed rather than a bringer of salvation. In fact, they regarded the doctrines of salvation and hell as cruel concepts, which they replaced with the idea of a spiritual evolution toward perfection that extended from this world to the next.

Although Spiritualism’s anti-clericalism and focus on human perfectionism, fresh revelation, and physical manifestations may seem alien to Christianity, these ideas were derived in fact from the revivalism taking place in the “burned-over” district, of which Hydesville was a part. This district in western New York got its name from the waves of Protestant revivals that swept through the area in the early nineteenth century, and aspects of its theological liberalism also influenced the Quakers, Unitarians, and Universalists. Yet the way these ideas were picked up and reinterpreted by Spiritualism moved it further away from the Christian mainstream, inasmuch as Spiritualism lacked the focus on conversion

so prevalent in revivalism and saw God as too abstract to be useful for morality. Thus, revelations, communicated by spirits to individuals, became the central focus. In contrast to the authority given to scripture in more mainstream forms of Christianity, these spirit messages were recognized as being imperfect; indeed, the spirits often seemed to disagree with one another.<sup>12</sup> More conventional Christian denominations recognized Spiritualism as a rival force that dealt their doctrines a significant blow, and they sought to regain their eroding social influence by denouncing Spiritualism as fakery, the work of the devil, and a threat to social order.<sup>13</sup>

Spiritualism further challenged orthodox Christianity and its influence on public morality by questioning traditional Victorian gender roles and relations. The “separate spheres” ideology retained a strong grip on the public, and women remained strictly barred from crossing the boundary from the private into the public domain. Mediumship, as a profession and as a form of religious leadership, posed a direct challenge to this ideology and blurred the once-neat gender boundaries. For one thing, the public performances of trance mediums—the majority of whom were women—were in direct defiance of St. Paul’s injunction against women speaking in public.<sup>14</sup> Spiritualism gave women a public voice for the first time—because the voice was not hers, but that of the spirit she was channeling.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the first women permitted to speak in public in America were trance mediums.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the behavior of these women under trance posed an additional challenge to Victorian morality and notions of sexual propriety. Female mediums often channeled male spirits, usurping the male social role and speaking in a gruff and “unladylike” manner.<sup>17</sup> The spirit messages themselves urged women to claim public space and leadership roles, emphasized the extension of women’s rights, and criticized the role of the Christian Church in denying those rights.<sup>18</sup> As medium Lizzie Doten said while in trance: “It is indeed a shame for women to speak in Church, and women ought to be ashamed...of the Church. Let woman come out from the Church; and when she does the minister and all the congregation will go out with her.”<sup>19</sup> As a career, mediumship offered social reward and opportunities that were not normally available to nineteenth-century women.<sup>20</sup> The image of a financially independent female medium also called into question the idea that a woman must be economically dependent on a man.<sup>21</sup>

It must also be recognized, however, that although spirit mediums questioned Victorian gender roles in many ways, they simultaneously reinforced them. Instead of rejecting the “Angel in the House” ideology, they usurped it and used it for their own ends. Victorian women were expected to be responsible for the religious purity of their family, and were considered to be so “pure” that it was dangerous for them to be “contaminated” by contact with the public sphere. Yet Spiritualist mediums reinterpreted this idea of the “moral superiority” of women, arguing that it made it incumbent on women to enter into the public to purify society and justifying their appropriation of religious leadership roles. The qualities of a good medium were based upon Victorian ideas of femininity—passivity, sensitivity, nervousness, intuition, weakness of will, and frailty—and the rare male medium was considered to be “feminized.” For many critics, trance mediumship represented the “corruption of femininity,” as these women were using their “feminine qualities” not in the private sphere but in the public. Their apparent public vulnerability while under spirit control helped link mediumship in the public mindset to the only other profession allowed to an independent woman: prostitution. Their constant assertion that they were merely channels for spirit voices allowed them to shirk any personal responsibility for what they said and did and to portray themselves as being as passive, docile, and unassertive as possible. While trance mediumship was beneficial to women by allowing them a sort of “side access” into the public sphere, their explicit emphasis on mediumship as “feminine” became a liability later in the nineteenth century, as these feminine qualities became devalued and Spiritualism shifted focus from trance speaking to more sensationalized physical manifestations. Success in this new form of mediumship was based upon the dumb passivity and invisibility of the medium, and such mediums were often subjected to humiliating

test conditions, such as being locked in a cabinet or stuffed in a bag that was nailed to the floor. Fewer mediums spoke in public or advocated reform, and the movement itself ceased to be a challenge to traditional gender roles.<sup>22</sup>

Yet in its height, before it degenerated into sensationalized entertainment, Spiritualism was deeply connected with many reform movements. Although sensationalism was admittedly an aspect of the movement from its inception, since many people went to séances simply to be entertained, there were a significant number of Spiritualists who saw within the movement a vision of a new way of ordering society, a means of building a secular utopia.<sup>23</sup> The movement became a magnet for social and political radicals of all types; abolitionists, woman's suffragists, dress reformers, labor reformers, anarchists, communists, socialists and free lovers flocked to Spiritualist camp meetings.<sup>24</sup> The same people tended to be attracted to both radical religion and radical politics, and Spiritualism's central goal of human progress made it amenable to the reform of society on all levels. The open platform was a central feature of camp meetings, and all were allowed to speak freely, whether or not they identified themselves as Spiritualists. Its anti-authoritarianism allowed a variety of ideas to be expressed, and these meetings became crucial to the dissemination of radical ideas in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Since it was not uncommon for mediums to address a wide array of social, political, and environmental causes while in trance, the spirits themselves seemed to be advocating reform.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most controversial doctrines that became linked to Spiritualism was that of "social freedom," better known as "free love." As a critique of Victorian marriage, "free love" had varying meanings, even among its advocates: demands ranged from easing divorce laws to abolishing marriage altogether.<sup>27</sup> Free lovers aimed to bring sexual relations into a higher, more spiritual state, and saw the current marriage practices imposed by the church and state as the main impediment to achieving that goal.<sup>28</sup> John Humphrey Noyes was the first to coin the term "free love,"<sup>29</sup> but he traces the development of the idea to the "burned over" district revivals—thus, it shares regional roots with Spiritualism. The line between religious and sexual love often became blurred during the frenzy of the revivals, and new ways of ordering sexual relations were common in the groups that evolved from the social and religious ferment of the times, such as the Shakers, who advocated strict celibacy, or the Mormons, who practiced polygamy. Noyes himself established the Oneida community in New York in 1848. Adhering to the revivalist ideals of Christian perfectionism, Noyes attacked marriage and private property, arguing that in the coming millennium God would introduce a new ordering of society, including new sexual standards. As marriage was considered to be too selfish to be godly, sexual restraints were discarded in the Oneida community in favor of a system of "complex marriages." Noyes explicitly connected his ideas to those of Charles Fourier, a socialist who argued that in the coming "New Amorous World" society would be reorganized according to the "law of passional attractions," which would do away with the disharmony caused by marriage and the repression of the passions, as well as usher in a more equitable situation for women.<sup>30</sup>

While socialist Fourierism provided the material basis for free love's new vision of society, it was Harmonialism that provided the spiritual one. Harmonialism developed from the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, and stressed harmony between all people as well as between the spiritual and sexual aspects of human life. Swedenborg's *Conjugal Love* became significant for free lovers, who appropriated his idea that it was love that made sexual relations moral, and that sex without a loving spiritual union of souls constituted "fornication." The worldview embodied in Harmonialism was absorbed by Spiritualism, which had largely displaced the earlier movement by the 1850s. Andrew Jackson Davis, a former revivalist, mesmerist "sensitive," and Swedenborgian prophet who later became a medium, combined the ideas of Swedenborg and Fourier and laid out some of the foundational ideas of free love. He modified Swedenborg's concept of "conjugal love" to allow for temporary "minor marriages" and argued

that marriages should be based solely on “elective affinities”—an attraction which superseded legal bonds and was based upon complementary spiritual auras which indicated that the two people involved were “natural mates.” He argued that only love creates a true marriage and that women should be in control of reproduction. Although he tried to separate his Harmonial philosophy from Spiritualism, his ideas, which he claims were dictated by spirit messengers, heavily influenced what became “Spiritualist philosophy.”<sup>31</sup>

Spiritualism was associated with free love almost from its inception. One newspaper correspondent noted with disgust that “prurient” spirits “were not in the field five years till they sought a ‘fusion’ with the Free-Lovers [and] began to assail the marriage relation.”<sup>32</sup> Both movements have roots within Christian perfectionist revivalism and Harmonialism. Later utopian socialist communities, which promoted freedom in sexual relations, such as the Kiantone community founded by John Murray Spear and the Modern Times community founded in 1851 by Stephen Pearl Andrews, explicitly identified themselves with Spiritualism. Andrews introduced two concepts that would become central in Spiritualist circles: the idea of “spiritual affinity,” which is basically a recasting of Davis’s “elective affinity,” and the concept of “individual sovereignty,” developed by Josiah Warren, a co-founder of the free-love community Modern Times.<sup>33</sup> While Warren himself did not advocate free love, the idea that the individual alone is sovereign over his or her person was easily applied to the affections by Modern Times members such as Andrews and Thomas Nichols, and its individualistic rhetoric was used by many free lovers to call for the abolition of marriages or to justify unconventional sexual practices.<sup>34</sup> The doctrine of free love seemed to have found a natural match in Spiritualism, and while not all Spiritualists advocated free love, by the 1850s virtually all free lovers were Spiritualists.<sup>35</sup>

With the movement’s numerous female leaders, it is not surprising that in their own self interest mediums began to combat the idea that women must be under constant male control, and women’s rights was one of the foundational planks of Spiritualism’s broad reform platform.<sup>36</sup> Speakers and trance mediums advocated women’s rights from the podium, and spirits often sanctioned divorces. The antiauthoritarian and individualistic impulses of Spiritualism easily absorbed the doctrine of individual sovereignty, and free lovers argued that all reform sought to remove people from the dominion of others. They linked what they termed the “sexual slavery” of women in marriage to their lack of economic and political rights, and called for their emancipation on all levels. Many made free love an explicitly religious doctrine, elevating conjugal love to a divine ideal, viewing sexuality as sacred, and arguing that only God-given natural impulses sanction sexual unions. Despite the charges of critics and the unusually high divorce rate among Spiritualist free-lovers, many free lovers insisted that the doctrine did not advocate promiscuity. It demanded that women have the right to refuse as well as accept sexual embraces—motherhood was a sacred right, and should not take place under coercion—and applied a strict morality, based upon mutual love and spirit revelation, to all sexual relationships.<sup>37</sup> As individual sovereignty came to be widely accepted among Spiritualists as necessary for the spiritual advancement of society, and as more and more Spiritualists pointed out that the current marriage system was the biggest hindrance to the sovereignty of women, it became hard to dispute Nichols’ claim that free love was *the* doctrine of Spiritualism. Many, however, did try to remove the “taint” of free love from Spiritualism, but with little success; by the late nineteenth century, the two were too deeply connected in the public mind to be easily separated.<sup>38</sup>

Free love was also connected to socialism. Like Spiritualists, the adherents of this movement advocated a variety of radical issues, which meant that overlapping membership among different reform groups was far from uncommon. Some of the ideas that later became common in free love were developed from the socialist Fourier’s critique of marriage. Many free love communities, such as Oneida and Modern Times, were communistic, resembling the Fourierist “phalanxes” that had spread

throughout the Midwest and New England between 1840 and 1850. The Kiantone community raised children in common, and the system developed by Modern Times member Josiah Warren included an economic concept known as the “cost principle,” in which the price of goods was based solely upon the cost of materials and labor.<sup>39</sup> The vision of a new society held by free lovers tended to be utopian, and for an equitable arrangement of sexual relations it was deemed necessary to have a similarly equitable economic system. Thus, by the time Victoria Woodhull appeared on the public scene, the connections among free love, Spiritualism, and socialism that became central to her political platform had already been well established for over two decades.

### Woodhull the Clairvoyant

In order to understand Victoria Woodhull, it is necessary to understand that from a very young age she believed herself to be living a life surrounded by spirits. According to her own account, her mother was a Spiritualist before such a movement existed. Roxanne (or Roxy) Claflin, a Methodist zealot who had been reborn during the 1830s revivals, was given to spiritual visions and ecstasies, and often practiced mesmeric healing—laying on of hands—on her children. Victoria Claflin, born in 1838 in the small town of Homer, Ohio, quickly learned from her mother how to communicate with spirits. As children, she and her younger sister, Tennessee (or Tennie C.), believed themselves to possess clairvoyant powers such as healing, talking to the dead, and predicting the future, all before the Fox sisters had heard their first rappings. Their father was the type of thief, cheat, and general scoundrel not welcome in most towns, and the many children of this poor family were routinely abused by both parents. Little Victoria saw herself as a “child without a childhood.”<sup>40</sup>

The spirit visions which began in her early years shaped her entire life. She dates the first of these to her third year, after the sudden death of Rachel Schribner, a neighbor who was almost a surrogate mother to her. The spirit of Schribner carried the girl into the spirit world. She then experienced a sensation of flying and being encased in white light while her body lay unconscious for three hours. There she first encountered some of the spirits who would remain with her during her entire life, such as the Greek orator Demosthenes, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Josephine. She saw the heavenly world as similar to earth, yet more orderly, and experienced an apocalyptic vision in which the world was nearly destroyed before becoming a paradise. This prophecy, the spirits told her, would be fulfilled during her lifetime, and she would play a prominent part in bringing it about.<sup>41</sup> She later recounted that these spirits informed her that “I was to be in their charge, and they were to constantly guard, guide, instruct, and care for me so that I should be, when grown, fitted to do their work on earth.”<sup>42</sup>

The spirits again demonstrated their care when she was ten years old, as she once again fell into an unconscious trance during which two angels healed a sick baby she was caring for.<sup>43</sup> In another experience, she beheld her spirit guardian—later identified as Demosthenes—at a stream behind her house, where he told her that “she would rise to great distinction” and that one day “she would become the ruler of her people.”<sup>44</sup> Named after Queen Victoria of England, who was crowned the year of her birth, she believed that “the fatality of triumph” was inherent in her name, as a prediction that the two of them would one day rule as sisters in sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> As we shall see, throughout her entire life she clung to the belief that every step she made was under the guidance of spirits and that, by fulfilling the charge they had given her, she would rise above her humble roots.<sup>46</sup>

Buck Claflin, always eager for easy money, was quick to capitalize on the strange abilities exhibited by Victoria and her younger sister Tennie. He had put their mother to work telling fortunes years before, but the legacy of the Fox sisters had left an appetite for child mediums, and the two girls were soon successfully supporting the entire family. Of the two sisters, the seven-year-old Tennie seemed to be

blessed with the greater share of spiritual gifts and was more consistent than the erratic fourteen-year-old, who tended to fall into trances rather than simply perform. The two sisters communicated with the spirits of the dead, found lost items, identified thieves, performed magnetic healings, and revealed events of the past, present and future. Yet this lifestyle was far from idyllic for the two girls. Rather than being grateful for their support, their siblings were resentful and jealous, especially their younger sister Utica, who evinced no spiritual gifts. Buck would regularly beat the girls and would often starve them for days at a time.<sup>47</sup>

At fourteen years of age, the woman who would later be known for her critique of marriage made the first of her three forays into matrimony. Although the naïve little girl tried to live the role of the dutiful wife, she admitted later that her marriage to Canning Woodhull was a means to escape her miserable family situation.<sup>48</sup> In the early years of her marriage, Victoria learned what would become public knowledge only after the marriage had ended: Canning Woodhull's claims to be an eminent doctor, whose father was a judge and uncle the mayor of New York, turned out to be lies. To her chagrin, the young Victoria discovered that not only were his distinguished family connections false, but he was an alcoholic as well, and frequented houses of ill-repute—in fact, that was where he spent their wedding night.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the disillusioned girl sought vainly to win her husband's love and gave birth to their first child in the winter of 1854. Her “half-drunken” husband promptly left after the delivery, and to his mother's dismay the boy Byron turned out to be “half imbecile”: he never developed teeth or spoke in more than grunts.<sup>50</sup> Struggling to come to terms with her son's incapacity, she eventually blamed it on her own lack of knowledge and her husband's alcoholism, and this experience became the basis for her focus on eugenics when she later gave speeches promoting free love.<sup>51</sup>

At this time, however, the young mother was still struggling to make her marriage work, and she moved the family to San Francisco to try to start a new life. There, she supported her child and husband, first as a seamstress and then as an actress and possibly as a prostitute.<sup>52</sup> She came to despise what she called “the stage,” and when other performers commented on her remarkable acting skills, she replied that she would leave her position “at the first opportunity” and that she was “meant for some other fate.”<sup>53</sup> Her opportunity, as she later claimed, came while she was on the stage in 1865. She suddenly saw a vision of her sister Tennie dressed in a “striped French calico frock” and urging her, “Victoria, come home!” Still in costume, Woodhull abruptly fled the stage, packed up her husband and child, and caught the next train to Ohio. Upon reaching her family, which was then residing in Columbus, she saw Tennie wearing the same dress she beheld in her vision, and her mother confessed that she had told Tennie to “send the spirits after Victoria and bring her home.”<sup>54</sup>

Woodhull then returned to the business she knew best: she again took up work as a medium. During her absence, the family had been living a nomadic lifestyle, promoting Tennie as the “Wonderful Child,” and although Woodhull chastised her father for adding chicanery to what she viewed as her sister's genuine gifts, she wasted no time in joining the family business. With a new sense of self-respect, Woodhull became as successful a medium as her sister, despite the fact that the family was often run out of towns under charges of fraud, blackmail, or prostitution.<sup>55</sup> Woodhull proved herself to be a credible healer, guiding patients through crises by empathetic listening and the help of her spirit guides. The “tales of domestic horror” she heard during her sessions haunted her throughout her life and were vital in forming her later critiques of marriage.<sup>56</sup> Her own married life remained miserable, and she was so dismayed by her son's condition that she prayed fervently for another child. Her prayers were answered in 1861, and Zulu Maud was later to recount that her mother had “brought all her faculties to bear” that the girl “should not be like Byron.” The birth of her daughter, who did indeed prove to be of normal intellect, was also a catalyst for Woodhull's first divorce. The drunken father cut the umbilical cord too close, and like the delivery of her first child, abandoned the mother soon after it was over. She awoke in

agony in a pool of blood and had to be rescued hours later by a neighbor who heard her pounding on the wall. It was then that she discarded “the superstitious idea of the devotion with which a wife should cling to her husband,” as she asked herself, “Why should I live any longer with this man?” She quickly sought and obtained her first divorce.<sup>57</sup>

Although the foundations of her critique of the marriage institution had already been laid, the young Woodhull had not given up on the idea of marriage itself. In 1864, while working as a “spiritualist physician” in St. Louis, she was consulted by Colonel James Harvey Blood, a veteran of the Civil War and President of the St. Louis Society of Spiritualists. To the surprise of both, Woodhull promptly fell into a trance and announced that “his future destiny was to be linked with hers in marriage,” and they were “betrothed on the spot by the powers of air.”<sup>58</sup> That summer, Blood left his wife and children behind as he toured with Woodhull through Missouri and the Ozarks as “Dr. and Mrs. James Harvey.” In a flamboyantly decorated wagon much like that of Buck Claflin’s, they settled into what would eventually become a familiar routine: Blood worked as the advance manager, while Woodhull contacted the dead, healed the sick, and predicted the future.<sup>59</sup> There are conflicting accounts concerning their marriage: although Blood claims to have divorced his previous wife, no record of such a divorce exists, and his marriage application to Woodhull (who continued to identify herself by the name she took in her first marriage) remained forever incomplete. Later they claimed to have had their marriage annulled to “protest the confinement of marriage laws,” but they later remarried one another.<sup>60</sup> Blood, an “enthusiastic student of the higher lore of spiritualism,”<sup>61</sup> introduced the doctrine of free love, as espoused by Spiritualism, to Woodhull, a doctrine which would in all likelihood have been consistent with views that she had already developed through her personal experiences.<sup>62</sup>

In 1868, while living in Pittsburg, Woodhull and Blood were visited by Woodhull’s main spirit guide, who told her that the work the spirits had been grooming her for was about to begin. By this time, Tennie was living with them as well, having fled the miserable life imposed by her father. The spirit guide commanded them to move to New York, where a house at No. 17 Jones Street would be waiting for them. Obeying the spirit’s command, they found the house as had been described and promptly moved in. Taking up a book at random in the library, Woodhull was astonished to see that she held in her hand a copy of *The Orations of Demosthenes*, and realized that her familiar guide had at long last revealed himself.<sup>63</sup> Woodhull the clairvoyant was finally on the verge of becoming Woodhull the political activist.

### Woodhull the Activist

Upon their arrival in New York, one of the first things Woodhull and Tennie did was to cultivate the acquaintance of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. It is unclear whether the sisters approached him directly or the meeting was arranged by Buck Claflin; the extended family, not wanting their golden geese to get away, had followed the sisters and Blood to New York and took up residence with them in the large house on Jones Street.<sup>64</sup> Either way, Commodore Vanderbilt was widely known to have a soft spot for women with spiritual powers and beauty, and the two sisters were known for having both in abundance. He often sought mediums to contact his dead parents, and trusted his health to magnetic healers rather than doctors.<sup>65</sup> The charming sisters quickly became close with Vanderbilt. Woodhull would hold private séances in his drawing room, and predicted stock market trends while in trance.<sup>66</sup> When asked about his financial success, Vanderbilt at one time replied: “Do as I do, consult the spirits.”<sup>67</sup> Tennie treated his aging body with magnetic healing, and many speculated that her “laying on of hands” became quite intimate. It does appear that the two became very close, as he would often bounce her on his lap, calling her his “little sparrow” while she pulled his whiskers or boxed his ears. Some servants

later recounted that they often found her occupying his bed in the morning. He even proposed marriage to her after his wife died, but his son William Henry, who was concerned about his father's reputation if he married a "fortune-teller," manipulated him into marrying another young woman. Rumors persisted, however, that Tennie remained as close to the Commodore during this marriage as she had during his previous one.<sup>68</sup> The Commodore paid the pretty young mediums generously and gave them stock tips, providing the financial backing they needed to begin their crusade for women's rights.<sup>69</sup>

Woodhull's next step was the one that launched her onto the public scene. With Vanderbilt's backing, Woodhull, Tennie, and Blood opened Woodhull, Claflin, & Co., a brokerage firm on Wall Street, in early 1870. Woodhull later candidly admitted that the goal of the firm was to gain publicity as she sought to "secure the most general and at the same time prominent introduction to the world that was possible."<sup>70</sup> This daring move set the stage for her career as a political activist and became characteristic of her unique style: instead of merely arguing her case, she made her life a public spectacle to vividly demonstrate it. In contrast to the "hen conventions" that characterized the women's suffrage movement at the time,<sup>71</sup> Woodhull asserted that "while others sought to show that there was no valid reason why women should be treated, socially and politically, as being inferior to man, I boldly entered the arena...of business and exercised the rights I already possessed."<sup>72</sup> The "Bewitching Brokers," as they were called, were indeed a public spectacle. Their arrival on Wall Street was met largely with amusement and delight by their male counterparts, who did not take the women seriously enough to consider them a threat. The popular press likewise diminished the political significance of the opening. The sisters were often depicted with sexually suggestive imagery, to remind readers of the common usage of the term "public woman," which referred to a street prostitute.<sup>73</sup>

Once she had made her entrance onto the public stage, Woodhull moved quickly. Only two months after opening the brokerage firm, she announced herself as a presidential candidate for the 1872 election. As with the public reaction to her as a female stockbroker, this announcement was treated with amusement, as something merely titillating and entertaining. Frustrated that her nomination and message were not being taken seriously, Woodhull, along with Blood and Tennie, began publishing a newspaper a month later with the financial backing of Vanderbilt.<sup>74</sup> *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* hit the newsstands on May 14, 1870, and under the banner of "Onward and Upward" it promised to support Woodhull's presidential bid and women's rights as well as to "treat all manners freely and without reservation."<sup>75</sup>

Within weeks of the paper's opening, its offices were approached by Stephen Pearl Andrews, already well-known for his insistence on individual sovereignty and free love and his involvement in the 1850s Modern Times community. Andrews would prove to be an immense influence on the *Weekly* and on Woodhull herself. She and Blood opened up space both in the *Weekly* and in their large drawing room for Andrews and the loose network of Spiritualist free lovers he identified as the "Pantarchy."<sup>76</sup> Under his influence, the paper became so radical and daring concerning the rights of women and the "social question" that the paper often ran a disclaimer informing the reader that the purpose of the paper was for the exchange of ideas to be "free and untrammelled" and that its publishers "frequently differ widely from the ideas which appear thus; but...do not assume to be infallible judges of right and wrong."<sup>77</sup> The paper also frequently carried articles about Spiritualism, which remained a major force in Woodhull's life.<sup>78</sup>

She later claimed that the opening of the brokerage firm and publication of the journal were "fulfilling a previous prophecy" and "following a celestial mandate"; furthermore, she said that the paper was molded by heavenly spirits—"edited in one world, and published in another."<sup>79</sup> By October the paper's banner had changed to "Progress! Free Thought! Untrammelled Lives! Breaking the Way for Future Generations!" and included muckraking articles about local businesses and government agencies.<sup>80</sup> With the introduction and moderate success of the *Weekly*, people were finally beginning to take Woodhull seriously.

Woodhull was about to become an even more formidable political figure. She asserted that she and Blood were not previously interested in women's suffrage, but entered the fight under the urging of her spirit guide Demosthenes. One night while she lay sleeping, her spirit guardian possessed her to write "The Memorial of Victoria C. Woodhull," a petition that argued that no constitutional amendment was needed for women to be granted suffrage.<sup>81</sup> Women already possessed a constitutional right to suffrage, because the Fourteenth Amendment states that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States...are citizens" and the Fifteenth states that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged." Furthermore, the petition requested that the federal government override the laws of states which denied this constitutional right.<sup>82</sup> This "discovery" was a view also held by Massachusetts Senator Benjamin Butler, who some believe aided Woodhull in drafting the memorial. Butler ordered the memorial sent to the Senate and House Judiciary Committees and opened the latter so that Woodhull could read it in person. Thus, she was able to add another "first" to her list, becoming the first woman to address a congressional committee.<sup>83</sup>

In January 1871 The National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA) was holding a convention in Washington in an attempt to gain the attention of Congress, only to find that they had been upstaged. Susan B. Anthony and Isabella Beecher Hooker hastened to meet this independent and still virtually unknown woman and attended the January 11 hearing before the House Judiciary Committee, which would be the first of Woodhull's many public speeches. Woodhull was invited to repeat her speech at the NWSA convention that evening, and her "New Departure" seemed to provide the stagnating cause with a fresh vitality.<sup>84</sup>

Although her petition to Congress was denied, Woodhull was seen to be the new heroine of women's rights.<sup>85</sup> She became a regular at NWSA conventions, and at a New York convention in May of that year they adopted all of the twenty-five resolutions (believed to be written by Andrews) that she presented to them. These utopian resolutions dealt not only with women's rights, but also with sweeping reform intended to encourage public rather than private ownership of land and public enterprises, and an insistence that the government not interfere with contracts between individuals or their right to "pursue happiness as they choose." Although the wording here made the last proposition seem similar to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's prior assertion that marriage should be a contract that could be dissolved as easily as any other, Woodhull's free love views in the eyes of many would soon make her a liability to the movement.<sup>86</sup>

By this time, the personal attacks that would typify Woodhull's career had already begun. By allying herself with the suffragists, she became less of an amusing novelty and more of a threat to the status quo. Instead of answering her arguments, the popular press attacked her character, stigmatizing her as an ambitious opportunist, a blackmailer, and an improper and disreputable Jezebel who dared to rise above her place.<sup>87</sup> The vehemence of the attacks stung her. In a private letter to Isabella Beecher Hooker she confided, "I thought this was a question of Rights under the Constitution. I did not know it was a question of Antecedents."<sup>88</sup> Yet instead of publicly denying these accusations, she used them to illustrate the double standard that demonized women for behavior that was acceptable for men.<sup>89</sup> Being unable, as Tennie said, to "make 'rake' as disgraceful as 'whore,'" the sisters turned to trying to "take the disgrace out of whore."<sup>90</sup> She knew she was no purer than any number of male politicians, but insisted that her personal life was nobody else's concern, and fought in vain to prevent the debate from focusing solely on her reputation.<sup>91</sup> Her years working as a medium had accustomed her to public scrutiny, and this enabled her, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed in an 1876 interview, to face names that "make women shudder" and would have "paralyzed any of us who have longer been called strong-minded."<sup>92</sup> Yet her refusal to shrink from the barrage of attacks, as befitted a "proper" woman, only confirmed her critics' claims that she was "disreputable."<sup>93</sup> Opponents of women's suffrage used Woodhull to discredit the

movement, drawing on the old rhetoric of the Wild Woman whose selfish sexual independence would draw her out of her biblically ordained domestic role. For many, she confirmed the long-held assumption that women's suffrage was a socialist, free love plot to induce social anarchy by destroying Christian marriage and disrupting the traditional patriarchal family structure.<sup>94</sup> She came to be used as a "folk demon" representing perceived threats to the established social order."<sup>95</sup>

Undeterred, Woodhull forged ahead with her presidential campaign. With Andrews, she helped found Section 12 of the communist International Workingman's Association (IWA), and she and Tennie were acknowledged as its leaders. Under the influence of Woodhull and Andrews, this section, as the first English-speaking section of the IWA, promoted not only labor causes but also Spiritualism, women's rights, and free love. In an effort to win labor support for Woodhull's presidential bid, the *Weekly* began to endorse the IWA platform and advertise its meetings, and later that year it published the first English translation of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* in America.<sup>96</sup> Woodhull also gained support from an independent group calling itself the Victoria League, which may have been funded and controlled behind the scenes by Vanderbilt. As the Equal Rights Party (ERP), this group nominated Woodhull in 1872 as their presidential candidate, with Frederick Douglass as her running mate. Douglass, incidentally, never publicly acknowledged the nomination.<sup>97</sup>

Her third and most important political constituency was the Spiritualists. Full of reformers who promoted an idealistic form of women's rights consistent with her own, the Spiritualist movement seemed a natural fit for Woodhull, especially in light of her history as a medium.<sup>98</sup> Having become a close friend of Theodore Tilton during the summer of 1871, she commissioned him to write her biography based upon notes compiled by Blood.<sup>99</sup> It is from this flowery and hyperbolic account that scholars draw most of Woodhull's reports of spirit contact and direction, yet the first draft contained no mention of spirits at all. "You have left out the most important parts!" she told him. To tell her story without spirits, she insisted, would be "as if you were writing Hamlet and decided to leave out his father's ghost."<sup>100</sup> That the rewritten biography was composed expressly to gain the support of Spiritualists seems likely. A ranking member of the American Association of Spiritualists (AAS) was sent an advance copy, and he invited her to speak at the Association's September convention in Vinland, New Jersey. At the convention, delegates found copies of the biography on their seats.<sup>101</sup> The popular press, as one could have expected, used the biography as yet another source of amusement and as a means to further ridicule Woodhull.<sup>102</sup>

Woodhull earned the allegiance of the AAS with surprising ease. As we have seen, free love was a doctrine that was already intimately connected with Spiritualism. Contemporary scholars such as Anne Braude have noted that within Spiritualism there was a "second women's moment" that was separate from the more widely recognized suffrage movement. The suffrage movement had begun as an auxiliary to the abolition movement, and during the Civil War women reformers had put aside their own rights to focus on the eradication of slavery. After the war, abolitionists turned to gaining Negro suffrage, insisting that women should wait their turn, as they knew that the granting of suffrage to former slaves would come more readily if not linked to the suffrage of women. After the successful passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, the women reformers, who felt themselves abandoned by their fellow abolitionists, became convinced that suffrage was the most important medium through which women could obtain equal rights.<sup>103</sup>

The reformers who were associated with Spiritualism, however, had long advocated universal rights for all, a position too broad for them to abandon the rights of women while promoting abolition or to focus on only one aspect of women's emancipation. During the Civil War, they promoted the rights of women simultaneously with abolition, and they did not cease promoting the sexual freedom of women just as vociferously as their political and economic freedom.<sup>104</sup>

Although many Spiritualists disagreed with the historical role of free love within the movement, the majority of the AAS delegates were amenable to Woodhull's views. During the convention, her

biography was read twice, her women's rights memorial was adopted, and the organization aligned itself with the Equal Rights Party. Two weeks later, at a convention in Troy, NY, Woodhull was elected president of the AAS.<sup>105</sup> Woodhull described her election as "the chief honor of her life," which confirmed for her that heavenly powers were indeed behind her political platform and intimated to her that "the great and influential body of spiritualists has arrived at a state of readiness to intervene actively in the political affairs of the country."<sup>106</sup> Although she claimed all Spiritualists as her personal supporters, the AAS was nevertheless hardly representative of the movement at large, as most Spiritualists preferred the more informally organized camp meetings to the conventions of the national organization. It is hard to consider her a "leader" of Spiritualism in light of the fact she was elected president with only forty-three votes. Her reputation among Spiritualists was ambiguous: some members criticized her for opportunism, yet others deemed her a heroine, a brave martyr on a "holy mission."<sup>107</sup>

The mid-century Spiritualists had mainly preached their free love views to others who shared those views at small camp meetings; Woodhull, however, brought her message to the public at large. On the rainy evening of November 20, 1871, thousands gathered at Steinway Hall in New York to hear Woodhull give "A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom." Amanda Frisken has noted that this speech "was probably the most frank defense of social freedom before a public audience in American history."<sup>108</sup> In her speech, Woodhull restated many of the arguments that she had been making at suffrage and Spiritualist conventions, as well as in the pages of the *Weekly*. These views, basically reiterations of the arguments made by previous Spiritualists and free lovers, shocked Victorian decorum when Woodhull brought them into the realm of public scrutiny. In the legacy of "Christian Spiritualists," she used the terms "God" and "Nature" synonymously, equating the "law of Nature" with "the law of God." Similarly, she called her higher form of love the love of the "true Christian," and accused the "false" Church with colluding with the state in perpetrating marriage as an institution of female sexual slavery. She insisted that these "false" Christians, instead of following the forgiving example set by Christ, take a "holier-than-thou" attitude and "ostracise *everybody* who will not bow to their mandates."<sup>109</sup>

Women, Woodhull insisted, must be "companions of men from *choice*, never from necessity;" and it is a crime against Nature, which is both male and female, to deny the sovereignty of women or the free expression of the affections. Sexual desire and sexual fulfillment are natural, healthy, and sacred for both men and women. Motherhood is the most sacred duty of women, and procreation should be under their control, so that they do not perform that duty "against their will, under improper conditions or by disgusting means." She mentioned the tales of domestic horror she became privy to while working as a clairvoyant and healer, and denounced "the false and perverse modesty that shuts off discussion, and consequently knowledge, upon *these* subjects." Although she asserted that monogamist unions are "the very highest sexual unions" and condemned lust as the antithesis of spiritual love, she left it to the conscience of the individual to make decisions concerning her or his private life, seemingly defending the "varietist" free love position.<sup>110</sup>

After being badgered by the audience, including her resentful sister Utica, she was asked frankly by one audience member whether she was a free lover. Woodhull flung her speech to the floor and forcefully uttered what was to become her most famous line: "Yes, I am a Free Lover! I have an *inalienable*, *constitutional*, and *natural* right to love whom I may, to love for as *long* or *short* a period as I can, to *change* that love *every day* if I please! And with *that* right neither *you* nor any *law* you can frame have *any* right to interfere."<sup>111</sup> The popular press ignored her eloquent and well-reasoned arguments for the sensation of a scandal: for many, Woodhull had in essence admitted to promiscuity and adultery and was encouraging other women to do the same.<sup>112</sup>

As Woodhull's free love views became more widely known, many of her former supporters began distancing themselves from her. Newspapers ignored her arguments on political and economic issues and

her critiques of capitalism and focused on disparaging, ridiculing, and demonizing her more titillating free love views. In early 1872 when she gave a “Speech on the Impending Revolution,” which defended communism and personally attacked the leading capitalists of the country (including Vanderbilt), the press was silent. If anything, it assaulted her free love views and her reputation even more vehemently after her speech on communism: the infamous Thomas Nast cartoon caricaturing her as “Mrs. Satan” was printed only weeks after this speech.<sup>113</sup> Socialism was in fact central to Woodhull’s utopian vision of a perfect society, in which both children and property were managed in common, much like the early free love communities.<sup>114</sup> The economic system she presented, which insisted that the price for goods be determined solely by the cost of materials and labor required to produce it, was based on that of Warren and Andrews, who had founded the Modern Times community.<sup>115</sup>

Yet her interpretation—or misinterpretation—of socialism put her ideologically at odds with the “true communists” of the IWA. This “Christian communism,” as she called it, was for her the “idealized political expression of spiritualism” and simply represented a system of fair play in economics. However, her emphasis on complete individual freedom was not consistent with the Marxist outlook of the IWA, which rejected individualism and private property and advocated a state-controlled communist society.<sup>116</sup> Fearing Woodhull’s potential to discredit the movement, Section 12 was expelled from the IWA, its members and the sisters being personally denounced by Marx as “pseudo-communists” and “sensation-loving spirits.”<sup>117</sup>

The suffragists were similarly troubled with Woodhull’s notoriety. Many believed a more moderate stance than that represented by Woodhull was needed if women were to gain the vote. After she made clear in her speech on the “Principles of Social Freedom” that free love was central to her political campaign, it became harder for the NWSA to justify her presence in the organization. In public appearances the suffragists were forced to take a stand for or against Woodhull’s position on free love, and many found it politically expedient to distance their cause from hers. Some, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Isabella Beecher Hooker, continued to support her, but Susan B. Anthony rejected her completely. When Woodhull attempted to use the 1872 NWSA convention in New York to support her presidential nomination, Anthony ordered the hall closed and Woodhull expelled. Undaunted, Woodhull encouraged those who still supported her to come to the ERP convention the following night, and formally severed her link with the NWSA.<sup>118</sup> By the time the ERP officially nominated Woodhull as a presidential candidate in 1872, her constituency had significantly dwindled.

By the time of the AAS annual convention in late 1872, Woodhull was beginning to get discouraged. Not only was she straining under the constant barrage of personal attacks, but she was virtually broke, her family had been evicted from their home, and she was suffering from frequent bouts of ill health as well.<sup>119</sup> Her role in the Spiritualist movement proved as divisive as it was in the socialist and suffrage movements: she exacerbated the already expanding rift between free lovers and conservatives by reopening the long-standing debate about the role of radical politics in the movement.<sup>120</sup> According to her own account, the discouraged Woodhull went to the AAS convention with the intention of resigning as president of the association. Yet suddenly “standing before that audience, I was seized by one of those overwhelming gusts of inspiration which sometimes come upon me, from I know not where...and made, by some power stronger than I, to pour out onto the ears of the assembly...the whole history of the Beecher and Tilton scandal in Plymouth Church...They tell me I used some naughty words upon that occasion. All that I know is, that if I swore, *I did not swear profanely.*”<sup>121</sup> The most beloved Christian preacher in America and prominent former abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, she told the convention, had had an adulterous affair with one of his parishioners, Elizabeth Tilton. He practiced in private what Woodhull preached in public, and remained protected while she faced scathing criticism.<sup>122</sup>

The stunned audience re-elected Woodhull as AAS president over her declination. However,

the revelation further reduced her small base among the Spiritualists.<sup>123</sup> Many Spiritualists admired Beecher's liberal version of Christianity, which bore a close resemblance to the Spiritualist worldview, and he remained one of the nation's leading heroes in the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements. Woodhull's attack on this well-respected man was viewed as simply obnoxious at best, and libelous and malicious at worst.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, conservatives resented her identifying the movement with her views. A correspondent of the conservative Spiritualist paper the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* wrote that "*not one Spiritualist in one hundred recognizes the sentiments of this vile woman as in the least degree appertaining to modern Spiritualism,*" and the readers of the journal were advised by its editor, S. S. Jones (whose adultery was also exposed by Woodhull), to sever all ties to Woodhull and the AAS.<sup>125</sup> The more radical Spiritualists stood by her and criticized Spiritualism's growing conservatism. As one supporter argued with keen insight into Spiritualism's radical roots, "I do not understand that kind of Spiritualism that ignores women suffrage, social reform, labor reform, and kindred topics; and I should be ashamed to be identified with a cause that did not mean to work for suffering humanity through these channels."<sup>126</sup>

The "Beecher-Tilton Affair" quickly became the scandal of the decade. Finding herself in "a situation that I must either endure unjustly the imputation of being a slanderer, or I must resume my previously formed purpose," Woodhull decided to "relate, in formal terms, for the whole public, the simple facts of the case as they have come to my knowledge, and so justify...the words I uttered, almost unintentionally, and by sudden impulse."<sup>127</sup> The *Weekly*, which had closed in 1872 under financial strain, was revived in October 1872 to publish Woodhull's account of the Beecher case. It had come to her knowledge that the revered preacher of Boston's Plymouth Church, Henry Ward Beecher, had had an affair with Elizabeth Tilton, a parishioner who was married to Theodore Tilton.<sup>128</sup> Beecher had been denouncing Spiritualism from the pulpit, and two of his sisters, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, had been publicly attacking Woodhull for the past year. (Their sister, Isabella Beecher Hooker, however, never stopped supporting Woodhull.) Harriet Beecher Stowe had satirized Woodhull in a serial in *The Christian Union* entitled "My Wife and I," which featured a promiscuous female political candidate and publisher known as Audacia Dangereyes. When the serial was published as a book, a disclaimer noted that "it has been repeatedly taken for granted by the public press that certain of the characters are designed as portraits of really existing individuals. They are not." Nobody, however, was fooled.<sup>129</sup> The reaction was instantaneous: the issue of the *Weekly* detailing the affair flew off the newsstands and by nightfall was selling for forty dollars apiece.<sup>130</sup>

In her account Woodhull did not criticize Beecher for his adultery, claiming instead that he and Elizabeth Tilton had in fact done nothing wrong; what she condemned Beecher for was his cowardice and hypocrisy in denouncing in public the views he held in private. She claimed that he had read a draft of her infamous "Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom," and although he admitted he agreed with every word of it, he backed out of introducing her when she presented it publicly in 1871. Theodore Tilton, the wronged husband and close friend of Beecher, introduced Woodhull on that day.<sup>131</sup> During her speech, she seemed to criticize Beecher directly: "If a person believes a certain theory is truth...but from its being unpopular or against established public opinion does not have the moral courage to advocate it or practice it, *that person is a moral coward and a traitor to his own conscience.*"<sup>132</sup> In her exposé of the scandal, she recounted that when Tilton confirmed to her what she had received from other sources, she "ridiculed the *maudlin sentiments* and *mock heroics*...he [Tilton] was exhibiting over an event most natural in the world." She "told him that the fault and the wrong were neither in Mr. Beecher nor Mrs. Tilton, nor in himself; but that it was in the false social institutions under which we still live."<sup>133</sup> She used the scandal to dramatize her demand for a single sexual standard, daring the American public to judge a public man on the same terms it would judge a public woman. In the end, however, the American public showed that it "would rather live with hypocrisy than live without Henry

Ward Beecher,<sup>134</sup> and he retained a loyal congregation for the remainder of his career.<sup>135</sup>

The scandal once again brought Woodhull and her controversial views into the public spotlight. It also brought her jail time. On November 2, 1872, Anthony Comstock arrested Woodhull and others associated with the paper—including Tennie, Blood, and Andrews—on charges of obscenity under a federal statute against sending obscene material through the mail. The article containing the objectionable material was not, in fact, the Beecher-Tilton account, but another article in the same issue written by Tennie about Wall Street trader Luther Challis, detailing how he had seduced two young girls at a party and bore on his finger the bloody token of one of the girl's virginity. Challis also sued the *Weekly* for libel. The sisters and Blood spent the next year in and out of jail, having been released on bail and re-arrested on different charges on more than one occasion.<sup>136</sup>

The public sentiment at first favored Comstock as people smugly asserted that Woodhull was finally getting what she deserved. The repeated arrests, however, turned the tide of public favor, and Woodhull began to be seen as a victim of excessive federal persecution.<sup>137</sup> Once again she used the events of her personal life as a stage on which to dramatize her views, and she welcomed every display of governmental heavy-handedness, as it gave proof to her assertion that the state was instrumental in the subordination of women.<sup>138</sup> In a January 1873 speech she counts her enemies as her allies, "without whom and their recent active and self-calculated interference, no such vantage as the present revolution has attained could possibly have been gained."<sup>139</sup>

Nevertheless, presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull spent the day of the 1872 election in jail. She and her co-defendants were eventually deemed not guilty in the Challis suit, and the obscenity case was thrown out because the 1872 statute under which they were arrested did not include newspapers. The court costs left them financially crippled, however, and Comstock, in direct response to Woodhull having escaped his grasp, drafted a new, stricter version of the obscenity statute which would bear his name.<sup>140</sup>

The Beecher-Tilton scandal had made Woodhull a celebrity, and far from ending her political career, as some have claimed,<sup>141</sup> it gave it a new impetus. The controversy brought her ideas to many who had previously been unfamiliar with them, and encouraged what was to become a lucrative career in public lecturing.<sup>142</sup> Traveling across the country from 1873-1876, her notoriety brought her huge audiences who "wanted to hear for themselves how bad Victoria Woodhull was."<sup>143</sup> Upon attending her lectures, her audiences were surprised to discover an intelligent and eloquent speaker and not "a cross between the devil and an orang-outang."<sup>144</sup> Advance opposition, such as local conservative groups that encouraged people not to attend or tried to bar her from appearing altogether, usually had the opposite effect.<sup>145</sup> Woodhull used this to her advantage, challenging her detractors, "You may say that all this is vulgarity. If it is, it is not the less fact. . . . If you want to put me down you must prove that I have not told the truth, otherwise *you will only fill my houses*."<sup>146</sup> Under the influence of Woodhull's speeches, the "vexed social problem" continued to be openly discussed.<sup>147</sup>

The "Woodhull Lecturing Machine" was certainly well-oiled. In many ways her lecture tours resembled her earlier tours with her family as a clairvoyant and healer. The family's experience in self-promotion and knowledge of the byways gave them a competitive advantage. Woodhull's entourage included Blood, Tennie, her daughter Zulu Maude and her mother Roxy, and all played a role in the traveling show. Blood and Tennie served as advance managers, and Tennie and Zulu Maude were often "warm-up acts" before Woodhull's appearance. Blood's younger brother cared for Byron and the paper in their absence. Her arrival created a "circus-like" atmosphere in the towns she visited, and the family encouraged such sensationalism, as they had when they toured the country promoting their child mediums.<sup>148</sup>

Woodhull drew advantages from her roots as a medium in other ways as well. Her public speeches bear striking similarities to the performance of a trance lecturer. Although many (eventually including

herself) claimed that many of her speeches were written by Blood or Andrews, at the time she credited her ideas to spirit guides speaking through her, especially Demosthenes. In a scenario resembling that of Andrew Jackson Davis and his wife,<sup>149</sup> Woodhull claimed that “every characteristic utterance which she gives the world is dictated under spirit influence, and most often in a totally unconscious state. The words that fall from her lips are gathered by the swift pen of her husband, and published almost verbatim as she gets and gives them.”<sup>150</sup> In a private conversation with Isabella Beecher Hooker, she said, “As I am about to speak, I call upon the spirits. They surround me and protect me. I sense them hovering about me in the air . . . I am doing their bidding.”<sup>151</sup> Even if significant portions of her speeches were not, in fact, written by her, she was well known for setting aside her written speech altogether and speaking extemporaneously for an hour or more.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, both her supporters and detractors recognized her incredible stage presence, and her passionate delivery was often described as having a “magnetic,” “electrifying,” “mesmerizing,” or “enchancing” effect on her audience. Her ability to create a rapport with her audiences turned skeptics into converts, and drew tears to the eyes of many.<sup>153</sup> Whatever the case, enough people seemed to believe that she was in fact under spirit control during her speeches that one critic was prompted to mock it in the following commentary: “Demosthenes used to speak with a pebble in his mouth on the shore of the many-sounding sea; but, if we may believe all we hear, he is practicing now with a mouthful of dirt.”<sup>154</sup>

During this time the radicals of the AAS continued to support her. The 1873 convention became a face-off between the radicals and the conservatives over Woodhull, but the radicals once again prevailed and reelected Woodhull. The movement split, and the radicals renamed themselves the Universal Association of Spiritualists (UAS), decrying the need for orthodoxy and respectability sought by the conservatives.<sup>155</sup> “We could work with Catholics, Methodists, Universalists just as well, our freedom and efforts would be no less restricted,” one radical insisted. Another UAS member asserted that “When Spiritualism was more an object of persecution than it is now, and less ‘respectable,’ it was braver than it is now.”<sup>156</sup> Yet the organization continued to crumble, and by the time Woodhull resigned from her last term as president in 1876, no one bothered to attempt to sustain it. Spiritualism proved to be a movement too varied to be represented by a single national organization,<sup>157</sup> and ultimately the conservatives got what they wanted when Spiritualists “returned to their haunted furniture and séances.”<sup>158</sup>

### **The End of the Mission?**

Eventually, Woodhull began to retreat from her more radical views. During her 1874 tour of the Southern states she cleaned up her image to present herself as a devout Christian woman, lecturing with a Bible in her hand and peppering her speeches with biblical quotes. By 1875, the *Weekly* began to carry articles defending Catholicism, claiming that although it did not represent the true doctrines of Christ, it was much closer than materialistic Protestantism. The articles on Catholicism edged out those covering Spiritualism, and other articles exposed Spiritualist frauds.<sup>159</sup> As for social freedom, it was deemed “not possible at the present order of society.”<sup>160</sup> Some articles offered negative comments about Woodhull’s former mentor Andrews, who had left the paper soon after he was arrested with Blood.<sup>161</sup> Although many of her followers denounced her for abandoning Spiritualism and free love, her “New Departure” may not have been as drastic as it seemed on the surface. First of all, her version of Christianity resembled the faith of “Christian Spiritualists” more than it did any conventional Christian sect: it criticized orthodoxy, used triangle symbols and interpreted the Garden of Eden as an elaborate metaphor for the female reproductive system.<sup>162</sup> Even in her most radical speeches she had considered her free love and socialistic doctrines to represent the “true Christianity” and used biblical rhetoric to back up her claims.<sup>163</sup> Her new emphasis on sexual education and purity of the body in order to

create better children was really not so new; from the very beginning Woodhull's ultimate goal of social freedom was a sort of "spiritual eugenics" to better the human race.<sup>164</sup> In her 1874 "Tried as By Fire" speech, for example, she used her son Byron as an example of how not to bear children, promoting a pseudoscientific idea that impregnation "under the perfect conditions of love" would alter heredity.<sup>165</sup> Yet her speeches appeared to many to be less radical and controversial, and the tamer her speeches seemed to become, the more her audiences dwindled.<sup>166</sup>

At the same time, Woodhull was becoming increasingly despondent. It seemed as though many of her spiritual prophecies had not been fulfilled, and her health continued to fail. One evening she confessed to Tennie that the spirits who had been with her for her entire life had deserted her; no longer did heavenly voices sustain her. Like her mother Roxy, she seemed to have lost her ability to contact spirits as she grew older. For her part, Roxy sought to wrest influence over her daughter from Blood and to convince her in her weakened state that Blood was possessed by the devil and was blocking her spirit guides. She took Woodhull to a group of Catholic monks to be "exorcized" and persuaded her to divorce Blood in September of 1876. In 1877 the sisters departed for England, leaving the struggle for social freedom in the hands of successors such as Ezra Heywood and Lois Waisbrooker.<sup>167</sup>

Once in England, however, Woodhull's vibrant energy was far from diminished. She continued to lecture on women's rights and eugenics, and captured the heart of the eminent and affluent John Biddulph Martin. In the six years it took her to convince his family that she was respectable, she completely reinvented her past to create the antecedents she lacked. She claimed to have never supported free love and blamed Blood and Andrews for writing articles under her name and without her consent. She married Martin in 1883, made two mock runs for the presidency of the United States in 1879 and 1892, and with Zulu Maud published *The Humanitarian*, a conservative publication with a focus on eugenics, from 1892 to 1901. Tennie met and married a wealthy widower and became the Lady Cook. She entertained guests lavishly at her husband's mansion until her death in 1923. Martin died in 1897, and Woodhull remained socially active until her death in 1927.<sup>168</sup> She wanted to be simply remembered with a line from Kant: "You cannot understand a man's work by what he has accomplished but by what he has overcome in accomplishing it."<sup>169</sup>

### The Legacy of Woodhull

The effect Woodhull had on her time is ambiguous. Certainly she was a major player in the complex dialogue regarding sexuality in nineteenth-century Victorian America. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz has pointed out, during this time different frameworks with different assumptions regarding the role and function of sexuality vied for prominence. As sex became increasingly disassociated from reproduction, a conservative backlash, embodied by Comstock, tried to reconnect the two. Comstock and Woodhull represented the extreme ends of the opposing frameworks, a spectrum which ranged from those seeking the preservation of "traditional" family values to those who saw "sexual expression in heterosexual intercourse as the most vital facet of life." Woodhull did not, like others, reject the Victorian notion that sex must serve a purpose other than mere pleasure; she simply reinterpreted the purpose to be spiritual love.<sup>170</sup>

Although she certainly served to keep the debate open and public, it became more muted after she departed for England. Later proponents of free love such as Heywood and Waisbrooker were constantly arrested and re-arrested by Comstock, and the debate shifted from clamoring for a woman's right to her body and for marriage reform to free speech—a struggle for the right to discuss sexual matters openly in the first place.<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, just as Woodhull was rising to prominence, free love was becoming more marginal to society's values than it had previously been. Before the Civil War, free love was in fact deeply rooted in middle-class values, pushing the ideas of individualism, the sanctity of marriage,

and the elevated spiritual roles of women to their logical extremes.<sup>172</sup> The war, however, bound people together under a stronger federal government, creating less distrust for institutions, and the doctrine of individual sovereignty became less palatable. In addition, between the 1860s and early 1900s divorce was becoming easier and more prevalent, and the indulgence of the Gilded Age made personal enjoyment, including sexual enjoyment, more acceptable. The arguments of the free lovers were undercut, and their central fear of artificiality in relationships was not a concern that was important to the average late-nineteenth-century person.<sup>173</sup> Woodhull essentially entered the debate just as it was coming to an end.

Even given her short period of activity, however, she was inspiring to many. She was not only a political activist but also a spiritual leader. For many, she was a martyr or a prophetess on a holy mission to emancipate women on all levels. She was a “divine instrument” totally under the control of the spirits.<sup>174</sup> Woodhull encouraged such ideas, presenting her every step, word, and idea as obeying the dictates of the spirit world to incite a revolution mandated by heaven.<sup>175</sup> “I am a prophetess—I am an evangel—I am a Savior if you would but see it; but I too, come not to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>176</sup>

Although she claimed she did “not wish to shoulder any of the responsibility on the spirit world for what I have done,”<sup>177</sup> she often appeared to do just that. Like the trance speakers who preceded her, she entered the public sphere, but avoided personal responsibility by using the spirits to justify her actions, especially those actions that she perhaps later regretted.<sup>178</sup> Many have argued that she used her Spiritualism simply to further her ambition,<sup>179</sup> and although there is some truth to that claim, it is difficult to believe that she would have been able to fight for such an unpopular cause and against the obstacles she faced for as long as she did without real faith in her cause. Many people have claimed to have overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles because they believed firmly that some sort of higher power backed them. Indeed, Woodhull seemed to have this “faith that can move mountains,” and many saw this clearly upon meeting her. As one journalist described her, “she is ‘crazy’—a little so, but in the same sense that Joan of Arc and Swedenborg were ‘out of their heads’....She is simply an enthusiast—the most rapt idealist I have ever met...[S]he is entirely lost, heart and soul, in the ideas she advocates...that she believes implicitly in her destiny, feels that she was born for a great work, is evident at the glance of an eye.”<sup>180</sup> Woodhull would never have been a force to be reckoned with had she not truly believed that her spirits were backing her every step of the way.

---

#### Notes

1. Victoria Woodhull, “A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom,” *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, ed. Madeline B. Stern (Weston: M & S Press, 1974), 23. Most of the quotations of Woodhull’s speeches and articles used in this paper come from *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*. The page numbers in this volume, when present, are for the individual speeches/articles alone.
2. Dan Burton and David Grandy, *Magic, Mystery and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 12-13.
3. R. Lawrence Moore, “Spiritualism,” in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustand (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), ch. 6, 80.
4. Molly McGarry “Spectral Sexualities: Nineteenth Century Spiritualism, Moral Panics, and the Making of US Obscenity Law, Part 2 of 3,” *Journal of Women’s History* 12:2 (2000): 2.
5. Hal D. Sears, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 8.
6. Allison P. Coudert “Angel in the House or Idol of Perversity: Women in 19th Century Esotericism,” unpublished paper, 7.
7. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 40-55.
8. Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 139.

9. Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 7-15.
10. For an interesting example of this see J. Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," in J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press), ch. 7.
11. R. Lawrence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly* 27.2 (1975): 5. See also Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 57.
12. Moore, "Spiritualism," 80-96.y
13. Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 8, 15.
14. Coudert, "Angel in the House," 3.
15. Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998), 18.
16. Lois Beachy Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull* (Bridgehampton: Bridgeworks, 1995), 33. See also Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 22.
17. Moore, "Female Professionalism," 207-208; Burton, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*, 23-24.
18. Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 26.
19. Cited in Coudert, "Angel in the House," 3.
20. Burton, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*, 18; Moore, "Female Professionalism," 210-211.
21. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 118.
22. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 123-125, 162, 176-177, 190; Moore, "Female Professionalism," 202-204, 214-215.
23. Moore, "Spiritualism," 91, 99.
24. Molly McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities: Nineteenth Century Spiritualism, Moral Panics, and the Making of US Obscenity Law, Part 1 of 3," *Journal of Women's History* 12:2 (2000): 2. See also Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 172.
25. Moore, "Spiritualism," 81; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 57, 60-73.
26. Burton, *Magic, Mystery, and Science*, 14.
27. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 8.
28. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 131.
29. John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University, 1988), 82-83.
30. Lisa Cochran Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writings," *Legacy-A Journal of American Women Writers* 21.2 (2004): 7. See also Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 3-4, 79-83.
31. Spurlock, *Free Love*, 14, 83-98; Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 4, 9-10; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 181.
32. Cited in Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 10.
33. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 53.
34. Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism," 9.
35. Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 21; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 129.
36. Moore, "Female Professionalism," 211; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 29.
37. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 57-59, 71, 79, 119-122, 125; Moore, "Spiritualism," 91; Moore, "Female Professionalism," 208; Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 22-23, 26.
38. Braude, *Radical Spirits* 81; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1" 3; Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 21.
39. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 53; Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism," 8.
40. Theodore Tilton, "Victoria C. Woodhull, A Biographical Sketch," *The Golden Age* (1871). <<http://www.victoria-woodhull.com/tiltonbio.htm>>. This is a biography that was commissioned by Woodhull herself. Since this is from an online source, no page numbers are available. See also Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 7-8; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 19-21.
41. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 17-18; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 24-25.
42. Cited in Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 24-25.
43. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
44. Cited in Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 52.
45. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
46. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 7; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 52; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 8-9; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 173, 254.
47. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 15, 51; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 11, 20; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 30-33.
48. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 52.
49. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
50. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 64; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 14. Although Byron appeared

- normal physically, he was retarded mentally, his intellect never surpassing that of an infant. Nevertheless, he lived well into adulthood, and in fact outlived his mother (Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 300).
51. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 295-260; Goldsmith, *Other Powers* 64; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 14.
  52. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 65-66.
  53. Cited in Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  54. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 7.
  55. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 21.
  56. Joanne E. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1977) 96. See also Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria* 19-22; Goldsmith, *Other Powers* 69, 302.
  57. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  58. Tilton "Biographical Sketch."
  59. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 107; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 22-25.
  60. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 36-38; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 139.
  61. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  62. Spurlock, *Free Love*, 210.
  63. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Spurlock, *Free Love*, 210; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 8; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 32-33; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 140-141; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 41.
  64. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 156-157; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 40.
  65. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 33-36; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 156-157; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 40-42.
  66. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 33-36; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 8; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 42-44.
  67. Cited in Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 42.
  68. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 33-36; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 43, 46-47; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 158, 192-196.
  69. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* 97; Tilton, "Biographical Sketch;" Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 35; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 33-36.
  70. Cited in Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 2.
  71. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 61.
  72. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 54-55.
  73. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 49; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 1-5, 18.
  74. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 97; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 54,59; Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  75. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 59.
  76. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 25-26; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 210-211.
  77. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 64.
  78. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 215.
  79. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  80. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 64-65.
  81. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
  82. "Congressional Reports on Woman Suffrage. The Majority and Minority Reports of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives on the Woodhull Memorial," *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 40B-40F.
  83. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 68-70.
  84. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 73-82; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1," 2, Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 28; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 97.
  85. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 73-82; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1," 2, Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 28; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 97.
  86. Spurlock, *Free Love*, 211; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 94-96; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 272.
  87. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 88-89.
  88. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 90-91.
  89. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 25, Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 88-89.
  90. Cited in McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 2," 1.
  91. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 25.
  92. Cited in Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 427.
  93. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 25.
  94. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 97-98; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 29; Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism," 1-3, 6-7, 9.

95. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 9.
96. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 123-125; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1," 3; Spurlock, *Free Love*, 12; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 263-265; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 196-197; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 35.
97. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 125-126; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 55-56.
98. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 130-131.
99. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 288-289.
100. Cited in Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 289.
101. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 130; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 35.
102. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 36.
103. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 76-81.
104. Ibid.
105. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 130-131; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 35.
106. Cited in Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 174-175.
107. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 170-171; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1," 2-3; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 103.
108. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 37.
109. Woodhull, "A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom."
110. Ibid.
111. Woodhull, "Social Freedom," 23.
112. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 303-304; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 40-41; Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism," 9-10.
113. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 194-201.
114. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 102.
115. Victoria Woodhull "Reformation or Revolution, Which? Or, Behind the Political Scenes," *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 11.
116. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 194-198.
117. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 37; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 332; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 197.
118. Higgins, "Adulterous Individualism," 10; Spurlock, *Free Love*, 212-214; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 97-99; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 164-168.
119. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 175-178.
120. Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 21-22; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 37.
121. Victoria Woodhull, "Victoria C. Woodhull's Complete and Detailed Version of the Beecher-Tilton Affair," *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 8.
122. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 85-91.
123. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 171-172; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 85.
124. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 90-91.
125. Cited in Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 91.
126. Cited in Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 172.
127. Victoria Woodhull, "Beecher-Tilton Affair," 8.
128. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 183-184.
129. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 105.
130. Ibid., 184-185.
131. Woodhull, "Beecher-Tilton," 9-10; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 90.
132. Woodhull, "Social Freedom," 11.
133. Woodhull, "Beecher-Tilton," 14.
134. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 172.
135. Theodore Tilton was excommunicated from Plymouth Church in 1873, and Beecher called for a church investigation into the allegations the following year. Although during the trial Tilton claimed that Beecher had indeed seduced his wife, the panel, who had been personally selected by Beecher, found him innocent and chastised Elizabeth Tilton for making unsolicited advances upon her minister. Tilton retaliated in a civil suit, charging him with "alienating his wife's affections, which resulted in a hung jury" (Gabriel, *Other Powers*, 230-233). While Beecher's popularity remained undiminished, Elizabeth Tilton was ostracized from society and lived in solitude the remainder of her life, and Theodore Tilton died overseas as a "broken man" (Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 114).

136. McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 2," 1.
137. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 9, 87, 155.
138. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 87.
139. Victoria Woodhull "Naked Truth, or the Situation Reviewed!" *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*. The pages in this speech are not numbered.
140. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 9, 112, 155; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 210-211, 225.
141. Spurlock, *Free Love*, 10; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 172.
142. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 104.
143. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 151.
144. Cited in Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 101.
145. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 101, Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 117-126.
146. Cited in Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 126.
147. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 137-140.
148. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 120-121; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 252.
149. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 170.
150. Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
151. Cited in Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 254.
152. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 141-143; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 300-301.
153. Madeleine B. Stern, "Biographical Introduction," *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 5. See also Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 102-103; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 124, 136.
154. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 150.
155. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 172; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 214-215; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 113-114.
156. Cited in Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 113-114.
157. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 173; Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 425.
158. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 241.
159. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 103; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 236, 241.
160. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 236.
161. Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 251.
162. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 240.
163. For example, see Victoria Woodhull, "Tried as By Fire; or The True and the False Socially," *Free Love in America: A Documentary History* (New York: AMS, 1997), 352-373, and Woodhull, "Social Freedom."
164. Madeleine B. Stern, "Sociology," *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*, 3. See also Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 174, 259-260; Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 136.
165. Woodhull, "Tried as By Fire," 362; Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran For President*, 259-260.
166. Gabriel; *Notorious Victoria*, 240.
167. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 424; Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 245; Sears *The Sex Radicals*, 23; Stern, "Sociology," 8; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 11; Spurlock, *Free Love*, 227-228.
168. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 440-442, 445; Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 111; Stern, "Sociology," 10.
169. Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 300.
170. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 404-408.
171. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 114-115, 155; Spurlock, *Free Love*, 227-229; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 139.
172. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 136; Sears, *The Sex Radicals*, 20.
173. Spurlock, *Free Love*, 207, 229-230.
174. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, 96-97, 103.
175. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 51; Tilton, "Biographical Sketch."
176. Woodhull, "Beecher-Tilton Affair," 13.
177. Woodhull, "Beecher-Tilton Affair," 21.
178. Goldsmith, *Other Powers*, 305-306.
179. Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 37, 64; McGarry, "Spectral Sexualities, Part 1," 2-3.
180. Cited in Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria*, 132.

**Bibliography**

- Braude, Ann. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Burton, Dan and David Grandy. *Magic, Mystery and Science: The Occult in Western Civilization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- "Congressional Reports on Woman Suffrage. The Majority and Minority Reports of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives on the Woodhull Memorial." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.
- Coudert, Allison P. "Angel in the House or Idol of Perversity: Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Esotericism." Unpublished paper.
- Friskin, Amanda. *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Gabriel, Mary. *Notorious Victoria: The Life of Victoria Woodhull, Uncensored*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998.
- Goldsmith, Barbara. *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998.
- Higgins, Lisa Cochran. "Adulterous Individualism, Socialism, and Free Love in Nineteenth-Century Anti-Suffrage Writings." *Legacy-A Journal of American Women Writers* 21.2 (2004).
- Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2002.
- McGarry, Molly. "Spectral Sexualities: Nineteenth Century Spiritualism, Moral Panics, and the Making of US Obscenity Law, Part 1 of 3." *Journal of Women's History* 12.2: (2000).
- McGarry, Molly. "Spectral Sexualities: Nineteenth Century Spiritualism, Moral Panics, and the Making of US Obscenity Law, Part 2 of 3." *Journal of Women's History* 12.2: (2000).
- Moore, R. Laurence. "Spiritualism." *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*. Ed. Edwin S. Gaustand. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. 79-103.
- Moore, R. Laurence. "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America." *American Quarterly* 27.2 (1975): 200-221
- Passet, Joanne E. *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Sears, Hal. D. *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America*. Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1977.
- Spurlock, John C. *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860*. New York: New York University Press, 1988.
- Stern, Madeline B. "Biographical Introduction." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.
- Stern, Madeline B. "Sociology." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.
- Tilton, Theodore. "Victoria C. Woodhull, A Biographical Sketch." New York: *The Golden Age*, 1871. <<http://www.victoria-woodhull.com/tiltonbio.htm>>.
- Underhill, Lois Beachy. *The Woman Who Ran For President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull*. Bridgehampton, NY: Bridge Works Publishing Co., 1995.

Woodhull, Victoria. "The Naked Truth; or the Situation Reviewed!" *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.

Woodhull, Victoria. "Reformation or Revolution, Which? Or, Behind the Political Scenes." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.

Woodhull, Victoria. "A Speech on the Principles of Social Freedom." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.

Woodhull, Victoria. "Tried as by Fire." *Free Love in America: A Documentary History*. Ed. Taylor Stoehr. New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1997. 352-373.

Woodhull, Victoria. "Victoria C. Woodhull's Complete and Detailed Version of the Beecher-Tilton Affair." *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*.

Woodhull, Victoria. *The Victoria Woodhull Reader*. Ed. Madeleine B. Stern. Weston, MS: M&S Press, 1974.

