

THE NATIONAL WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION AND FRINGE MARRIAGE IDEOLOGY SUFFRAGISTS:

Navigating Public Relationships

with Victoria Woodhull and Mormon Women, 1869-1890

Between 1869 and 1890, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) acted independently as a nationally prominent suffrage advocacy organization, often defining itself in relation to the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA), from which it had split in 1869. While the rival AWSA emphasized respectability, the NWSA accepted and worked with all women who demanded suffrage. This philosophy put the NWSA, led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in the unique position of navigating relationships with women's suffrage groups on entirely opposite sides of the marriage ideology spectrum. Victoria Woodhull and other free-lovers held that all marriage was oppressive, while on the other hand, Mormon women in Utah practiced and stridently defended plural marriage. Neither fringe marriage group was considered acceptable for mainstream public association, but both worked towards suffrage with the NWSA in the 1870s and 1880s.

In a cultural climate that emphasized respectability, the NWSA's public associations with both of these groups reveal the NWSA's strategy of balancing acceptability with activism. Accordingly, NWSA leaders worked to justify their associations with Woodhull and the Mormons by claiming they were uplifting and rescuing these fringe groups, and by attempting to distinguish their suffrage positions from their radical marriage ideologies. However, both Victoria Woodhull and Utah's Mormon women complicated these attempts by insisting on the full integration of their opposing marriage ideologies with their suffrage support. Forced to respond, the NWSA called attention to the legal injustices and moral double standards inherent in mainstream arrangements of monogamy and marriage.

NWSA leaders were already courting controversy through their split with the American Woman Suffrage Association, exacerbating their need to uphold standards of acceptability. The roots of this 1869 split were internal disagreements within the suffrage movement over whether to support the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted African American men the right to vote.¹ The women's suffrage movement had been closely tied to the struggle for African American rights up to this point, but the Republican Party's refusal to support women's franchise along with African American suffrage in the Fifteenth Amendment created factions within the women's movement. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton denounced the Republican Party for excluding women and fought for women to be included in the suffrage amendment, while suffragists such as Lucy Stone and her husband Henry Blackwell supported the Fifteenth Amendment in exchange for future Republican support for women.²

The formation of the NWSA and the AWSA institutionalized this rivalry. Over the next twenty-one years, until the groups united to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890, the AWSA continued to work towards a moderate reform agenda, in contrast to the NWSA's radical bent. Their degrees of cultural acceptability paralleled their differing agendas, as the moderate and respectable AWSA rejected those whom it considered socially undesirable. In response to the NWSA's platform of welcoming any

1 DuBois, Ellen Carol, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848-1869* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), 163.

2 Ibid.

woman who supported suffrage, the AWSA condemned the NWSA's work with controversial suffragists such as Victoria Woodhull.³ Woodhull, born in 1838 to a Midwestern mill owner, swiftly became a fascinating and controversial figure as well as a popular topic of condemnation in New York's newspapers.⁴ She opened the first female brokerage firm on Wall Street in 1870 and was the first female presidential candidate, on the Equal Rights ticket in the 1872 election. Along with women's political rights, Woodhull spoke publicly in support of "free love," or the theory that monogamous marriage was a form of sexual slavery for women. Free lovers such as Woodhull believed that people should be empowered to have sexual relations freely outside of the social constraints of monogamy, and condemned marriage for forcing women to exchange sexual and maternal labor in exchange for economic security.⁵ Perhaps even more widely denounced than Woodhull's view of free love was the practice of Mormon plural marriage. Anti-Mormon and anti-polygamy sentiment reached its heyday in the 1870s and '80s, coinciding with the rise of social purity reformers and the emergence of the religious home mission movement in the late 1800s.⁶ The Women's National Anti-Polygamy Society, founded in 1880, helped push multiple pieces of legislation aimed at criminalizing polygamy passing through the U.S. Senate in the 1870s. These culminated in the 1887 disenfranchisement of Utah's women after they had been granted suffrage by Utah's territorial legislature in 1870.⁷ The challenge for the NWSA during this period revolved around how to support suffrage for the polygamist suffragists without condoning plural marriage--the same challenge they faced with Victoria Woodhull's free love platform.

Scholars have given much attention to the relationships between Anthony, Stanton, and the Mormons, on the one hand, and to the figure of Victoria Woodhull on the other. Notably, biographers Kathleen Barry and Alma Lutz have reported on the life and work of Anthony and Stanton, respectively. Amanda Frisken's work has opened the life of Victoria Woodhull, and scholars such as Joan Iversen, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Christine Talbot have contributed to a rich body of literature on the history of Mormon women. But there has been little scholarly effort to put these works in conversation with one another. Other works, including Peggy Pascoe's *Relations of Rescue*, have examined the growth of a 19th-century female moral authority that upheld the idea that women straying from respectable Victorian values could be "saved" if only lifted into favorable circumstances.⁸ The NWSA's struggle for suffrage should be understood in this cultural context, as they adopted and then adapted strategies to preserve their own moral authority while simultaneously working with both fringe groups of women with the same suffrage goals but opposite marital ideologies.

The savior narrative, or rescue trope, that the NWSA attempted to impose upon the Mormon and free love groups drew upon an established strategy among "respectable" female reformers of casting "disrespectable" women as oppressed, helpless, and defenseless. This allowed middle-class feminists to publicly advocate for them by positioning themselves as elevated moral custodians. These middle-class feminists adopted a rhetoric of "poor sis-

3 Andrea B Radke-Moss, *The Persistence of Polygamy: From Joseph Smith's Martyrdom to the First Manifesto, 1844-1890* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2013), 276.

4 Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20.

5 Ibid.

6 Joan Smyth Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women's Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xxi.

ters” to refer to prostitutes and working-class women. The *National Citizen and Ballot Box*, a newspaper published by the NWSA, declared that all women “will find this paper their friend, it matters not how wretched, degraded, fallen they may be.”⁹ At the cost of patronizing the “degraded” women, the NWSA offered the belief that “there is hope and a future for the most abandoned, if only the kindly hand of love and sympathy is extended to raise them out of the mire into which they have been dragged, or may have fallen.”¹⁰ At the crux of this relationship was the role of the NWSA women as rescuers who raised helpless women out of forced immorality, therefore mitigating the threat of women who *deliberately* acted outside of mainstream respectability. This language reveals the type of unacceptable women that the NWSA had a model for navigating public relations with--those who were considered disrespected because they were “dragged” or had “fallen” into a place of helplessness. It was in this image that the NWSA attempted to portray the Mormons and Victoria Woodhull.

Moreover, the NWSA was already actively promoting these tropes for prominent “disrespectable” women. This was evident in the NWSA’s portrayal of murderer Laura Fair, whom Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton visited in jail in San Francisco. Fair was a prostitute who had been sentenced for killing her married lover, a dramatic story that attracted huge press attention and turned her into a pariah. Although the press berated Stanton and Anthony for dignifying a prostitute with a visit, Anthony responded to critics by condemning the type of society that left Laura Fair and other women abandoned and defenseless.¹¹ For Hester Vaughan, too, the NWSA relied on this characterization to justify their advocacy; after Vaughan was sentenced to death for infanticide in 1868, Stanton defended her in *The Revolution*, the NWSA newspaper published by Stanton and Anthony between 1868 and 1872. Appealing to sympathy, Stanton “implore[d] the mothers of that state to rescue that defenseless girl from her impending state.”¹² Stanton’s descriptions of Vaughan’s “open, benevolent” demeanor, her “innocent face,” and her “quiet, self-possessed manner” exemplified the qualities of victimized femininity required to justify relationships between the NWSA and disrespected women in the 1870s.¹³

When pressed, then, to justify alliances with suffragists holding marriage ideologies far outside the acceptable mainstream, the NWSA attempted to fall back on this defining trope between moral and immoral women. In the case of Woodhull, Stanton tried to represent the NWSA as generously welcoming her to an elevated plane of respectability after forsaking a past life of immorality. In 1871, Stanton asked that, even if “all men say of her is true,” when a woman “with new faith and hope struggles to redeem the errors of the past by a grand life in the future, shall we not welcome her to the better place she desires to hold?”¹⁴ Woodhull, however, resisted this comfortable characterization. Rather than “redeem the errors of the past,” she continued, long after 1871, to advocate for both suffrage and her right to have sex with whomever she wished outside of the legal bounds of marriage. In the face of ongoing worries about their own public respectability, though, Stanton and Anthony asserted in *The Revolution* that women’s suffrage and free love are “as distinct as freedom and

9 Jane Scoular, *The Subject of Prostitution: Sex Work, Law and Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016); “The Brand of the Slave,” *National Citizen and Ballot Box* 4 (May 1879): 2.

10 Ibid.

11 Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1988), 239.

12 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Hester Vaughn,” *The Revolution*, 19 November 1868, 312.

13 Stanton, in Lisa Shawn Hogan, “Sexual Exploitation in the Rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.” *Con Law Now*: 45.

14 Stanton, in Amanda Frisken, “Sex in Politics: Victoria Woodhull as an American Public Woman, 1870-1876.” *Journal of Women’s History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 97.

slavery; the one is destined to end the other.” The franchise, according to Stanton and Anthony, would “elevate” Woodhull into monogamy.¹⁵ The NWSA thus cast Woodhull’s free love philosophy as the symptom of a degraded state that suffrage could save her from, rather than as a declaration of liberation. When, as an act in support of free love, Woodhull broke the bombshell news of the affair between famed minister Henry Ward Beecher and his friend’s wife Elizabeth Tilton, Anthony remarked about Woodhull that “the more does she need the saving grace of absolute freedom from dependence on men for the control of her circumstances.”¹⁶ Through interpreting Woodhull’s free love platform as a result of her patriarchal oppression, Anthony excused her public ties with such a controversial figure by imposing a narrative of oppression on the parts of Woodhull’s behavior that fell outside the accepted norm.¹⁷

To publicly navigate their relationship with the Mormon suffragists on the other end of the marriage spectrum, the NWSA exhibited this same tactic, this time in the belief that Mormon women would cast off polygamy when granted suffrage. When Stanton and Anthony visited Salt Lake City in 1871, they engaged in a five-hour long discussion with Mormon women who explained their defense of polygamy. Despite this exchange, Anthony reported that she “met many refined, lovely women, and all, without exception, abhor the social servitude to which they are damned.”¹⁸ The idea that Mormon women in plural marriages, if granted suffrage, would vote to outlaw polygamy was so powerful that almost a decade after gaining suffrage, when Mormon suffragist Zina Young Williams visited Washington D.C., she recorded in her diary that everyone asked her if she expected that polygamy would die out.¹⁹ The NWSA propagated and directly leveraged this narrative to advocate for women’s suffrage. In response to Republican Senate campaigns to disenfranchise the women of Utah, the NWSA and the New York Woman Suffrage Society protested in 1870 that disenfranchisement would be “in aid of polygamy,” and in 1873 that “the vote of the women will be found a powerful aid in doing away with the horrible institution of polygamy.”²⁰ Stanton and Anthony depended on casting the Mormon women as victims and “slavish women” to publicly justify a controversial relationship at a time of aggressive national anti-polygamist sentiment.²¹

Like Victoria Woodhull, however, Mormon women firmly rejected these imposed “oppressed” and “enslaved” characterizations by continuing to overwhelmingly support plural marriage after gaining suffrage. After the Utah territorial legislature first granted the vote to women in 1870, voting results of Mormon women followed the standard Mormon pattern. This caused political panic when the effect of women’s suffrage ended up increasing the Mormon majority to more than 95 percent in territorial elections, rather than outlawing plural marriage and diluting Mormon political power as proponents of suffrage had hoped.²² As a result, stereotypes sprung up to capitalize on images of degraded female voters being

15 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Does the Revolution Believe in Marriage?”, *The Revolution* (Apr. 8, 1869): 212.

16 Anthony, in Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*, 237.

17 Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*, 237.

18 Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women’s Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home*, 25; Susan B. Anthony, “The Liberal Party at Salt Lake,” *The Revolution* 8 (20 July 1871).

19 Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women’s Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home*, 25.

20 Sarah Barringer Gordon, “The Liberty of Self-Degradation: Polygamy, Woman Suffrage, and Consent in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (1996): 815-47.

21 “The Brand of the Slave,” *National Citizen and Ballot Box* 4 (May 1879): 2.

22 Gordon, “The Liberty of Self-Degradation: Polygamy, Woman Suffrage, and Consent in Nineteenth-Century America.”

dragged to the polls to obediently vote as the Mormon men ordered them.²³ Emmeline B. Wells, a prominent Mormon suffragist, responded to these charges by insisting upon the agency of Mormon women voters: "It is currently reported that Mormon women vote as they are told by their husbands. I most emphatically deny the assertion....Our women vote with the same freedom that characterizes any class of people in the most conscientious acts of their lives."²⁴ Although the NWSA had established a pattern for associating with disrespectable women, both Woodhull and the Mormon women explicitly resisted this trope, complicating public relationships with the NWSA by collaboratively working towards suffrage but refusing to compromise on the agency of their marriage ideologies.

In addition to the rescue trope, Stanton and Anthony also tried another strategy to navigate the precarious public relationship between the NWSA and the fringe marriage groups: separating suffrage from the socially problematic marriage ideologies. However, both Victoria Woodhull and the Mormon women asserted that their marriage ideologies, opposite though they were, deeply informed their conceptions of and work towards women's suffrage. In trying to separate Victoria Woodhull's suffrage work from the rest of her radical free love and socialist agendas, much of the problem for the NWSA came in the form of Woodhull's fusion of her political party, the Equal Rights Party, with the NWSA's May Convention. Refusing any sort of compartmentalizing within her political work, in 1872 Woodhull announced the NWSA May Convention side-by-side with her own Equal Rights Party convention in her newspaper, *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, and listed Susan B. Anthony as one of her prominent supporters without Anthony's consent.²⁵ Even more dramatically, when Woodhull began to speak at the convention about her Equal Rights Party, Anthony doused the gas lights at Steinway Hall, leaving the convention in darkness and effectively cutting off Woodhull's speech.²⁶ Still, the next day Woodhull and her followers reconvened directly across the street at Apollo Hall to officially form the ERP.

Anthony's actions in this bizarre battle over the isolation of suffrage as a separate political goal were consistent with her overall sentiment towards Woodhull's advocacy work. Anthony and Stanton had their own issues with monogamous marriage, but Woodhull's free love ideas went significantly farther by calling for the repeal of all marriage laws. As Stanton and Anthony tried to separate fringe marriage ideologies from suffrage, though, these actual ideological differences became less significant than the institutional and rhetoric ways in which Woodhull connected the suffrage to the rest of her free love advocacy.²⁷ One of the worst areas of tension between Woodhull and the NWSA, then, derived from Anthony's attempts to compartmentalize suffrage advocacy in the face of Woodhull's integrated political and sexual campaigns.

For the Mormons, one way the NWSA worked to separate suffrage from plural marriage was by officially associating instead with the Godbeites, a reform group known as the New Movement that split from the Mormon Church in 1869. Although Anthony and Stanton tended to overrepresent the reform element of the Godbeites, establishing a relationship with the Godbeites allowed the NWSA to support territorial suffrage while distancing themselves from the practice of polygamy. An important part of this distancing was deliberately leaning into the ways in which the Godbeites were *not* Mormons and *not* polygamous. In 1870, *The*

23 Ibid.

24 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815 - 1897* (New York: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 287.

25 Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America*, 66.

26 Ibid.

27 Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*, 230.

Revolution described a newspaper run by Godbeite women as a “radical journal”; the next year, Stanton described the Godbeites as “a liberal movement among the Mormons which is doing much for the emancipation of women” and has “repudiated the whole system” of the Church.²⁸ Divorcing the Godbeites, and thus the NWSA’s own suffrage work, from plural marriage was of tantamount importance to Anthony and Stanton, who went so far as to claim that the entire Godbeite split from the church was rooted in “several hundred Mormon [who] abjured that portion of the faith of their fathers which authorized polygamy.”²⁹ It was this narrative of separation from polygamy that made the NWSA comfortable endorsing an official relationship with the Godbeites, including staying at their homes during the Salt Lake City visit, listing William Godbeite’s wife Charlotte Godbe as a member of the NWSA Executive Committee in 1871, and publishing her articles in *The Revolution*.³⁰

In reality, the Godbeites complicated this attempt to divorce polygamy from suffrage, revealing the extent to which the NWSA may have exaggerated or overestimated the Godbeites’ relationship to plural marriage in order to serve their own public strategy. The movement’s leader, William S. Godbe, was conflicted about polygamy, but he did have four wives. He eventually abandoned the practice and lived with his first wife, but not all Godbeites were monogamists.³¹ Moreover, the Godbeites split from the Church in 1869 as a result of dissatisfaction with Brigham’s Young’s isolationist economic policies, rather than because of any initial disagreement with plural marriage.³² Young’s economic plan for the territory was rooted in the fear of destroying or diluting the ideal Zion, and involved the subjugation of public and private resources to the Mormon commonwealth and countermeasures against the coming transcontinental railroad. These policies included trade prohibitions with non-Mormon merchants, sanctions against metal mining, and wage deflation to preserve home industries.³³ Although social reform and plural marriage were not motivating factors in the Godbeites’ economic protest against the Church, the NWSA used the split to cast the Godbeites as primarily anti-polygamists, a role they did not quite play.

When Godbeite influence faded and the NWSA began to work directly with Mormon women within the main church, Stanton and Anthony were forced to adjust the ways they tried to separate polygamy from suffrage. Rather than depending on the Godbeites as a vehicle to distance themselves from traditional Mormonism, they turned to simply arguing for its irrelevance to suffrage. In 1879, several years after the height of their work with the Godbeites, Stanton defended the NWSA against criticisms of their work with Mormon women by declaring that “If [Mormon] George Q. Cannon can sit in the Congress of the United States without compromising that body on the question of Polygamy, I should think Mormon women might sit on our platform without making us responsible for their religious faith.”³⁴ Anthony went even further at the 1884 Washington Convention after NWSA member Belva A. Lockwood delivered a speech that moved into a defense of Mormonism under statutes of religious freedom.³⁵ Anthony responded that she “thought that Mrs. Lockwood had gone into

28 Charlotte Godbe, “A Mormon lady on the Mormon Leader,” *The Revolution* 6 (15 December 1870); Susan B. Anthony, “The Liberal Party at Salt Lake,” *The Revolution* 8 (20 July 1871)

29 Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences 1815 - 1897*, 283.

30 Godbe, “A Mormon lady on the Mormon Leader”; Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women’s Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home*.

31 Ibid.

32 Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852-1890* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2013), 67.

33 Ronald Walker, “Godbeites,” *Utah History Encyclopedia*.

34 “The Brand of the Slave,” *National Citizen and Ballot Box* 4 (May 1879): 2.

35 Emmeline B. Wells. “Washington Convention,” *Women’s Exponent* 13 (15 March 1884): 156

a religious and industrial subject which the association had nothing to do with.”³⁶ Those with marriage ideologies outside the norm continually reckoned with a NWSA determined to separate their marriage ideologies from their suffrage work.

The difficulty in that separation for both fringe ideology groups and for Stanton and Anthony themselves spoke to the inextricable ways in which ideas of marriage were tied with ideas of suffrage. Separating marriage philosophies or claiming their irrelevance to suffrage was incompatible with how both Mormon women and the NWSA conceptualized suffrage in the 1870s and 1880s. Historian Christine Talbot has argued that, to Mormon women, plural marriage and women’s suffrage naturally went hand in hand.³⁷ The tension perceived by non-Mormons between polygamy and women’s rights was entirely reversed for many Mormon women, many of whom even centered plural marriage in their claims to suffrage. Mormon suffrage advocacy and marriage ideology informed and supported each other: both political franchise and plural marriage purified the community and redeemed women from social disease and poverty. Talbot contends that suffrage and polygamy were thus not only compatible, but actively “justified and reinforce one another to facilitate the higher development of woman and to extend her sphere of influence.”³⁸ The intensely intertwined philosophies of plural marriage and suffrage reveal both why the NWSA felt so pressured to draw lines between marriage and suffrage during a period of intense anti-Mormon sentiment and the struggles it encountered when it tried to do so.

Stanton, although neither polygamous nor a free lover, nonetheless also grounded her calls for suffrage in her views on marriage, underscoring the connected nature--despite the variation in the views themselves between the suffrage groups--of marriage and suffrage in the late 19th century. Criticizing the legal system of coverture that absorbed a woman’s legal identity into her husband’s, Stanton declared, “Woman has nothing to ask of our legislators but the right of suffrage. It is only in marriage, that she must demand her rights to person, children, property, wages, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”³⁹ The set of existing American coverture laws designated a married woman a “feme covert,” erasing her legal identity by denying separate rights such as the rights to sue, to execute a will without her husband’s permission, or to own property.⁴⁰ Legally, a husband and wife were treated as a single legal entity under the sole responsibility of the husband. The goal of women’s suffrage was not merely a principled stance for equality; rather, it was rooted in concrete work against marriage-based legal oppression. In other articles in *The Revolution*, Stanton emphasized the effects of the franchise on marriage, noting, “Woman asks nothing today but the elective franchise...when a wife has a civil and political existence, we may talk of a dignified legal marriage relation.”⁴¹ Stanton framed suffrage as a means to the end--the end, in the 1870s, revolving around coverture. The franchise would allow women to solve crucial issues of marital oppression, because “the only escape from such abominations is to give woman a voice in these laws.”⁴² As the NWSA tried to separate suffrage from the marriage ideologies of others outside the acceptable norm, the difficulties it faced reflected the extent to which women’s franchise was universally connected to marriage for all groups in the late 19th century.

36 “The Brand of the Slave,” *National Citizen and Ballot Box* 4 (May 1879): 2.

37 Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom; Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852-1890*, 69.

38 Ibid.

39 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Marriage and Mistresses,” *The Revolution*, (15 Oct 1868): 233.

40 Claudia Zaher, “When a Woman’s Marital Status Determined Her Legal Status: A Research Guide on the Common Law Doctrine of Coverture,” *Law Library Journal* 94, no. 3 (2002): 460.

41 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Man Marriage,” *The Revolution* (8 April 1869): 217-18.

42 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Does the Revolution Believe in Marriage?,” *The Revolution* (Apr. 8, 1869): 212.

The NWSA's struggle to distance itself from polygamous and free love ideologies forced it to turn outward in its public responses, attacking the hypocrisy of critics and the moral double standards that condemned these women as disrespectable. To defend the NWSA's association with Woodhull, Stanton and Anthony began to ignore the charges about Woodhull herself and called out the immorality of prominent men instead. For example, Stanton asserted that "when the men who make laws for us in Washington can stand forth and declare themselves pure and unspotted from all the sins mentioned in the Decalogue, then we will demand that every woman who makes a constitutional argument on our platform shall be."⁴³ Charges against Woodhull were thus not twisted nor denied, but rather mitigated through comparison--Anthony noted that Woodhull's "antecedents will compare favorably with any member of Congress."⁴⁴ Anthony objected to the idea that women should be held to a higher moral standard than men, accepting Woodhull's association on the grounds that any valid criticism against her must include "the closest investigation into all the scandals afloat" about the men who lobbed the critique.⁴⁵

The NWSA applied a similar strategy to justify its relationship with Mormon women, shifting attention away from polygamy by calling attention to the immorality outside of plural marriage. Editor of the *National Citizen and Ballot Box* Matilda Joslyn Gage wrote an editorial chiding the "sham morality" of the Eastern leaders who condemned plural marriage while ignoring moral evils at home. She declared that "plural marriages stand white beside the common abominations of cities," and pivoted the criticism to immorality found in accepted society, where "moral hells tenfold worse than Mormon marriages" are supported by "married Christian men of wealth and position."⁴⁶ Rather than addressing the NWSA's position on plural marriage, Gage urged critics of the NWSA's relationship with Mormons to "Let Utah alone and begin with the male sinners of the Empire State."⁴⁷ This use of exposing hypocrisy and double standards as a justification for work with disrespectable women was perhaps best encapsulated in Gage's pointed retort that "It ill becomes those living in the Glass House...to throw stones at Mormon women."⁴⁸

More specifically for charges against polygamy, Stanton and Anthony increasingly merged the problems of plural marriage with problems of monogamy, alleviating the severity of plural marriage by contextualizing it in a larger critique of the entire institution of marriage. Although they continued to publicly recognize the faults of polygamy, their criticisms began to target polygamy and monogamy in the same breath. Stanton believed that all marriages were oppressive, a philosophy that made Mormon women just as--but no more--deluded than other women who accepted the "biblical concept" of unequal patriarchal marriage.⁴⁹ This "biblical concept" was key for Stanton, who considered the crux of women's subordination in general to be religion. This made the plight of Mormon women essentially the same as monogamous women: All women needed to rise out of spiritual bondage.⁵⁰ According to

43 Stanton, in Alma Lutz, *Created Equal: A Biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1815-1902* (New York: John Day, 1940), 211.

44 Anthony, in Frisken, "Sex in Politics: Victoria Woodhull as an American Public Woman, 1870-1876," 97.

45 Anthony, in Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist*, 235.

46 Matilda Joslyn Gage, "The Utah Question Once More," *National Citizen and Ballot Box* 3 (December 1878): 2.

47 Gage, in Joan Iversen, "The Mormon-Suffrage Relationship: Personal and Political Quandaries." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 11, no. 2/3 (1990):10.

48 Ibid.

49 Radke-Moss, *The Persistence of Polygamy: From Joseph Smith's Martyrdom to the First Manifesto, 1844-1890*, 277.

50 Stanton, in Iversen, *The Antipolygamy Controversy in U.S. Women's Movements, 1880-1925: A Debate on the American Home*, 32.

Stanton, “when women understand that...bibles, prayer books, catechisms, and encyclical letters are all emanations from the brain of man, they will no longer be oppressed.”⁵¹ Until that radical religious reform took place, even so-called respectable monogamous marriage would remain imperfect, patriarchal, and oppressive.⁵²

Anthony echoed this sentiment, but focused on the universal problem of women’s economic dependence in marriage. Like Stanton, she contextualized her criticisms of plural marriage within a larger critique, declaring that “woman’s work in monogamy and polygamy is essentially one and the same--that of planting her feed on the solid ground of self-support.”⁵³ The shared problem of economic dependence transcended the boundaries between plural and monogamous marriage, justifying the NWSA’s relationship with plural marriage by underscoring the patriarchal oppression inherent within *all* marriages. Anthony’s expansive goal was not a targeted critique of any “disrespectable” group, but rather “to abolish the whole system of woman’s subjection to man in both polygamy and monogamy.”⁵⁴

The NWSA was able to absorb the negative impact of its associations with Victoria Woodhull and the Mormon women in this way because of its history integrating criticisms of monogamous marriage into the NWSA suffrage platform. Throughout the 1860s, marriage and divorce emerged as increasingly central themes in Stanton’s speeches and public writings.⁵⁵ This work culminated in Stanton’s theory of the “man marriage,” which was published in 1869 just as the NWSA was splitting from the AWSA and beginning to define itself partially in terms of its (qualified) willingness to work with women outside of the accepted marital norm. In “The Man Marriage,” Stanton clarified her objection “to the present system, which I call the ‘man marriage,’ because to the creeds and codes and customs which govern the present institution woman has never given her consent.”⁵⁶ She wrote that the very “laws on marriage and divorce” reveal that “the wife is fully as degraded in our codes as in our creeds,” a theme that Stanton used to challenge prevailing beliefs in the sacredness and protective nature of marriage.⁵⁷ The NWSA had thus already developed rhetorical and legal arguments around the idea that ideal marriage could only be realized under conditions of “moral health,” or the achievement of “equality, self-respect [and] independence” for women.⁵⁸ The root of this inequality originated in coverture laws, which required the franchise to challenge: Around the same time as “The Man Marriage,” Stanton wrote that “in entering this compact, the *man* gives up nothing that he before possessed; he is a *man* still: while the legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, and is known but in and through the husband.”⁵⁹ These arguments were in place to reconcile challenges to polygamy and free love-ism with the oppression and immorality of mainstream sexual culture when the NWSA struggled to impose rescue tropes on Woodhull or the Mormons and to separate their marriage ideologies from their suffrage advocacy.

In the late 1870s, AWSA founder Lucy Stone declined to contribute an entry to the history of woman suffrage that Stanton and Anthony were writing because she would be “content to be left entirely out of any suffrage history” that would group her with those such

51 Stanton, in Iversen, “The Mormon-Suffrage Relationship: Personal and Political Quandaries,” 10.

52 Ibid.

53 Susan B. Anthony, “The Liberal Party at Salt Lake,” *The Revolution* 8 (20 July 1871)

54 Ibid.

55 Hogan, “Sexual Exploitation in the Rhetoric of Elizabeth Cady Stanton,” 45.

56 Stanton, “The Man Marriage,” 217-18.

57 Ibid.

58 Iversen, “The Mormon-Suffrage Relationship: Personal and Political Quandaries.”

59 Stanton, “Marriage and Mistresses,” 233.

as “Mrs. Woodhull, Laura D. Fair and the Mormons.”⁶⁰ Although Woodhull rejected all marriage and the Mormons practiced multiple marriages, Stone’s condemnation of both side by side speaks to the climate of sexual censoriousness that contextualized the NWSA’s work in the 1870s and 1880s. The early strategies that Anthony and Stanton applied to navigate their public associations with Woodhull and the Mormon women undermined the women’s agency in their marriage choices and ignored the way those ideologies informed their conceptions of suffrage. But the ongoing conversations between the NWSA and the judgmental public reflected an internal struggle between the NWSA and the women’s groups themselves during this period--Woodhull and the Mormons actively resisted being characterized as defenseless and demonstrated the same commitment to the interlocking qualities of suffrage and marriage as the NWSA and Stanton herself. The NWSA’s attacks on the hypocrisy of mainstream critics and monogamous marriage doubled down on this marriage connection by framing free love and plural marriage through the lens of oppressive coverture laws and underscoring the ways in which marriage struggles undergirded the battle for the ballot. This nuance, which often feels lost today, may prove helpful when looking to understand the hidden undersides and historical journeys of controversial movements and social alliances today.

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