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# A Strange Liberation: Women and Male Continenence in the Oneida Community

Andrea Monteleone

*Marist College*, [andrea.monteleone1@marist.edu](mailto:andrea.monteleone1@marist.edu)

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**A Strange Liberation: Women and Male Continence in the Oneida Community**

Andrea Monteleone, [Andrea.Monteleone1@Marist.edu](mailto:Andrea.Monteleone1@Marist.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Nicholas Marshall, [Nicholas.Marshall@Marist.edu](mailto:Nicholas.Marshall@Marist.edu)

Marist College

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During the religious revival of the nineteenth-century, known as the Second Great Awakening, several Perfectionist communitarian societies were established in the United States. One such society was the Oneida Community, founded by leader John Humphrey Noyes and his followers in Oneida, New York, in March of 1848. Contemporaries and historians alike have debated the unique and controversial practices of the Community members. The members lived in what they called “complex marriage,” where all Community members were married to each other, and sexual activity between all men and women was encouraged to promote bonding, pleasure, and a strong sense of community. However, this broad sexual activity was not meant to lead to indiscriminate pregnancies. To prevent such pregnancies, Noyes adopted a practice called *coitus reservatus*, or male continence, which required men to control their ejaculation during and after sexual intercourse. For many outside the community, this practice was seen as strange and unnatural. Contrary to this belief, members of the community, in their own words, reveal that this practice actually removed many problematic elements placed on women during the nineteenth century, such as anxiety about pregnancy and childbirth, ridicule for various birth control methods, shaming for sexual activity, and even the erasure of components of female sexuality. Therefore, one might argue that male continence actually did achieve progress for Oneida Community women, including preventing unwanted pregnancies, providing for a full, pleasurable sexual experience, as well as an appreciation of the realities of female sexuality. Their contemporaries struggled to gain these liberations, and they remain goals of present-day American women.

Part of understanding the Oneida Community is understanding the reality of life for women in the nineteenth century. Many women at this time wanted to have children, but the decision to do so was fraught with perils. In 1867, Doctor Russell Trall summarized some of the

reasons women had such anxiety about pregnancy and childbirth. He noted that it was a woman's sole responsibility to "nourish and sustain" a newborn baby and to care for her children, which is undoubtedly stressful.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 1880 Doctor John Cowan noted "...she cannot become pregnant without endangering her life."<sup>2</sup> In support of this statement, it is known that at the end of pregnancy during the nineteenth century, complications during childbirth were very common. Primitive medical technology and knowledge about this process tended to make for an unpleasant and often life threatening experience for women. Historian Janet Bogdan notes many of the problematic practices used by nineteenth-century midwives and physicians during a woman's often complicated labor, such as using the harmful drug ergot to help with a mother's cervical dilation, or even reducing the size of the infant by amputating arms or crushing skulls in order to remove it from the mother and save her life.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the decision to become pregnant was one that many nineteenth-century women were rightly concerned about.

The realities of pregnancy and childbirth caused many nineteenth-century women to seek out various birth control methods. Unfortunately, many of these women were shamed by their society for doing so. Historian Linda Gordon notes many of the various birth control methods sought after and used by nineteenth-century women, including abortion and *coitus interruptus*.<sup>4</sup> Abortion was a common method of birth control for women during the nineteenth century—much more common than we might think. In the early nineteenth century, it was believed that the destruction of a fetus would not be considered criminal until after quickening, or the "first

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Trall, *Sexual Physiology: A Scientific and Popular Exposition of the Fundamental Problems in Sociology*, (New York: Miller, Wood and Company, 1867), 202-203, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 86.

<sup>2</sup> John Cowan, *The Science of New Life*, (New York: Cowan and Company, 1880), 133, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 130.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Bogdan, "Care or Cure? Childbirth Practices in Nineteenth Century America," *Feminist Studies* 4 (June 1978): 94-97.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 13-14.

perception of fetal movement,” which generally happens between the fourth and fifth months of pregnancy. Quickening alone was the only way a woman or physician could be certain of pregnancy, and many were told to be cautious about things that might induce an abortion.<sup>5</sup> Thus, abortifacient information was available to American women, such as through home medical and health manuals and midwifery texts, whether the information was intended to be used to abort a fetus or not. It was often believed that if a woman bled herself, vomited, violently exercised, or even pulled out a tooth, an abortion could be induced, and some women used this advice for just this purpose.<sup>6</sup>

Birth control before conception was, of course, easier and safer than abortion.<sup>7</sup> *Coitus interruptus* requires that a man withdraw his penis from a woman’s vagina before ejaculation so his semen is deposited outside of her body. *Coitus interruptus* was a popular form of birth control, but it required men to have the will and skill to perform these actions effectively during sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy. Women also turned to nineteenth-century advice manuals and advocates for birth control, such as Robert Dale Owen’s *Moral Philosophy; Or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question*, for confirmation that using various birth control methods were acceptable and effective in reducing fertility and pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, American society in the nineteenth century experienced an increase in prudery, forcing birth control knowledge, discussion, and distribution underground, which would have impacted Oneida Community women just as much as their contemporaries.<sup>9</sup> For example, Anthony Comstock launched a campaign against licentiousness and birth control in the 1870s,

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<sup>5</sup> James C. Mohr, “Abortion in America, 1800-1880,” in Linda K. Kerber, et al., eds., *Women’s America: Focusing the Past* Eighth Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 203.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 9.

helping to pass the Comstock Law of 1873, which was a federal ban on the distribution of contraceptive information through the mail.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, would have stopped many women from learning about how to control their reproduction, and physically doing it as well. Those who supported Comstock, such as Doctor Augustus Gardner, agreed that birth control, particularly those used by women, were “sinfully demoralising [sic] procedures for the purpose of destroying and making away with the results of conception,” concluding that “these are the crying evils of the age and of the world.” Gardner also characterized contraceptives as “suggestive of licentiousness and the brothel” and that they “must produce a feeling of shame and disgust” to those who use them.<sup>11</sup> In short, various birth control methods to prevent risky pregnancies and childbirth were available to women during the nineteenth century, but were discouraged or prevented through legal and moral means.

Arguably, shaming for sexual activity and even the erasure of components of female sexuality are some of the most negative aspects of the realities of life for nineteenth-century women. The hegemonic ideology during this time period was that women should only be sexually active if reproduction was the intended end to sexual intercourse, not pleasure.<sup>12</sup> The majority of men at this time agreed that women were inherently passionless, and therefore their pleasure in sexual intercourse should not be of concern.<sup>13</sup> Many authorities also denied that women had a sex drive, which was thought of as a strictly masculine trait.<sup>14</sup> Instead, women were supposed to be chaste and virtuous beings. According to William G. Eliot, Jr., an advice writer in 1855, a woman who was virtuous “drives away all sinful pleasure,” but when she acted

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery*, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Augustus K. Gardner, *The Conjugal Relationships as Regards Personal Health and Hereditary Well-Being Practically Treated*, Fifth Edition, (Glasgow: Thomas D. Morison, 1905), 84-85, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2015), 48.

<sup>14</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 11.

in a wicked way was the “most successful minister of ruin.”<sup>15</sup> Even into the 1880s, women who were passionate within their marriage were often seen as mentally diseased, but their husbands did not face such criticism.<sup>16</sup> Sexual intercourse, therefore, was centered around male pleasure. Historian Linda Gordon argues that sexual intercourse, for women, was “often such a quick act of penetration that they never became aroused,” which possibly led to underdeveloped sex drives in a society that told them they did not have one anyway.<sup>17</sup> Some writers of advice literature, like Doctor Russell Trall, acknowledged that there was a severe power imbalance between husbands and wives within marriage. Women, he concluded, were “degraded to a mere machine,” to be used whenever husbands felt like indulging in excessive sexual intercourse.<sup>18</sup> The denial of the existence of female sexuality only reinforced the ideology that women were only meant to have sex because they were wives and potential mothers, where things like pleasure and birth control should not be a part of their lives.

In sum, then, the vast majority of nineteenth-century American women suffered from these societal constraints, where anxiety, shame, and erasures were prevalent within marital sexual relationships and decisions to become pregnant. However, the women who lived in the Oneida Community often had very different experiences from those of their contemporaries. This, in part, is due to the sexual practice of *coitus reservatus*, or male continence. Evidence from those who lived in this community, especially from the women who were involved in

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<sup>15</sup> William G. Eliot, Jr., *Lectures to Young Women*, Fifth Edition, (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, 1855) 32-33, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> John Cowan, *The Science of a New Life*, (New York: Cowan and Company Publishers, 1880), 103-104, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Russell T. Trall, *Sexual Physiology: A Scientific and Popular Exposition of the Fundamental Problems in Sociology*, (New York: Miller, Wood, and Company, 1867), 202-203, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 86.

sexual relationships that included male continence, reveals that the practice enabled women to transcend the constraints put on them by nineteenth-century society.

Male continence, adopted by Oneida leader John Humphrey Noyes in the 1840s, came as a response to the problems his wife, Harriet, suffered from due to having five traumatizing childbirths, resulting in the death of four of their children. Without eliminating sexual intercourse from their marriage completely, Noyes desired a way to have sex with his wife, but also help her prevent these terrible experiences from happening again. This was what Noyes defined as amative sexual intercourse, where a married couple could express affection for one another through their sexual relationship, but without it ending in propagation. Male continence, therefore, allowed for a couple to engage in a loving sexual relationship where men would refrain from ejaculating during intercourse and after withdrawal.<sup>19</sup> Noyes himself noted that this practice, which was the responsibility of the man in the sexual relationship, was easy to master once a man learned his own limits and never approached the final crisis, or seminal emission, during a sexual union with a woman. He believed that seminal emission was a voluntary act, which could be stopped at any point. Noyes and his followers were a part of the perfectionist spirit, a vision of progress as possible, during the Second Great Awakening. Male continence was a clear way for other community members to improve themselves, marriage, sexual intercourse, as well as limiting and preventing propagation when it was undesired.<sup>20</sup>

Male continence must be understood in its historical and social context within the Oneida Community in order to grasp its progressive elements for the women who were involved in the practice of this technique. In the Oneida Community, broad sexual activity between members

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Free Love: Sexuality in the Oneida Community," in Elizabeth Reis, ed., *American Sexual Histories*, First Edition, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 99.

<sup>20</sup> John Humphrey Noyes, *Male Continence*, (Oneida, NY: Office of Oneida Circular, 1872), 5-10, in Elizabeth Reis, ed., *American Sexual Histories*, First Edition, (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 112-114.



was not meant to lead to indiscriminate sexuality. Within complex marriage, all members of the opposite sex could have sexual intercourse with one another, but they could not form individual attachments to each other. Therefore, sexual intercourse between certain members was probably less frequent than in a traditional, monogamous marriage. Noyes decided it would be best to encourage these sexual unions, but discourage exclusiveness between members so as to retain a loving, supportive, jealousy-free community.<sup>21</sup> Male continence allowed for this practical communal marriage and sexuality, and it also worked as a birth control method to help prevent unwanted pregnancies. It is noteworthy that between the Community's founding in 1848 and its disbandment in 1880, there were only nineteen children born from accidental conceptions out of the roughly three hundred people living in the community over these years.<sup>22</sup>

Male continence was able to take away much of the anxiety that other nineteenth-century women faced during their sexually active, childbearing years. Pleasurable and fulfilling sexual relationships and the appreciation of female sexuality was what these women often experienced instead. Doctor George E. Cragin, a member of the Oneida Community, recorded in his biographical manuscript, "Male Continence or Self Control in Sexual Intercourse: Its History and Its Practice," about the experiences of Oneida women who used the male continence technique with their sexual partners. He noted that a woman fared much better because of male continence, because both her and her partner's pleasure were of concern. Therefore, sexual intercourse would last until both individuals were satisfied, but never to the point of exhaustion. This could be up to two hours for some, where as traditional sexual intercourse outside of the Oneida Community was usually brief and only satisfying for the man. He also noted that this technique encouraged

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<sup>21</sup> George E. Cragin, "Male Continence or Self Control in Sexual Intercourse: Its History and Its Practice," in "Two Documents Detailing the Oneida Community's Practice of Complex Marriage," ed. William T. La Moy, *The New England Quarterly* 85 (March 2012): 130-132.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Richards, "Perfecting People: Selective Breeding at the Oneida Community (1869-1879) and the Eugenics Movement," *New Genetics and Society* 23 (April 2004): 56-57.

unlimited and unrestrained orgasms for women during sex with male Community members, where some women reported having two or three consecutive orgasms in one session. These facts, he concluded, were indicative of Oneida women being given the “perfect freedom to express her sexual emotions without check or limitation.”<sup>23</sup> One Oneida woman who demonstrates this sexual liberation for the women in her community is Tirzah Miller, who kept a memoir about her daily experiences in the Oneida Community from 1867 to 1879. She recorded having numerous sexual partners, including John Humphrey Noyes. In April, July, and August of 1879, Tirzah Miller recorded many of her sexual encounters with James Herrick, how passionate they both were in their lovemaking, and alludes to her unchecked orgasms and pleasure. In April, Miller recorded, “Then in the afternoon we had an exquisite experience which seemed like a baptism of heavenly purity and continence. It put a new quality into our love.”<sup>24</sup> On July 4, she experienced bliss with Herrick in the morning, afternoon, and evening, as if they were one. She also noted how he lovingly remarked to her, “I don’t believe there is another couple in the house who enjoy such rapture as we.”<sup>25</sup> In August, Miller alludes to her orgasms, remarking how she and Herrick “...lay clasped in each other’s arms while waves of heavenly ecstasy rolled over us,” and how wonderful she felt because of it.<sup>26</sup> Historian Linda Gordon notes that there was a common myth in the nineteenth century that in order for women to be less likely to conceive a child during sexual intercourse, she must be a passive participant.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, Tirzah Miller, and undoubtedly other Oneida women who avoided pregnancy, were not passive in their sexual activity.

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<sup>23</sup> George E. Cragin, “Male Continence or Self Control in Sexual Intercourse,” 131-132.

<sup>24</sup> Tirzah Miller, *Desire and Duty*, 168.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>27</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 19.

In April of 1869, however, Miller recorded that she had lost her appetite for sexual intercourse because she felt it was her duty to have a sexual encounter, or sexual interview as they were called at Oneida, with any man in the Community who wanted her to, regardless of if she felt attraction for him or not. When Noyes assured her that she did not have to do this, especially because it was harming to her sexual nature, she was instantly relieved.<sup>28</sup> Many women in the nineteenth-century would not have had the choice to turn down sex with their husbands. Doctor Cragin also confirmed that, in the Oneida Community, “There was no compulsion or forced meetings of the sexes.”<sup>29</sup> This is proof that Oneida women, like Tirzah Miller, had the right to turn down an offer for a sexual interview if she pleased. Countless women did not have the same freedom of choice as Miller, as Doctor John Cowan wrote in 1880, that many men “...will tell you that having nightly intercourse with his wife is with him a law of necessity, and his definition of continence.”<sup>30</sup> Clearly, his statement shows that the average nineteenth-century woman experienced quite a different kind of male continence than her Oneida Community counterpart. Instead, pleasure was encouraged for Oneida women, and their sexuality and choices were respected.

While male continence can be viewed as a progressive sexual practice and form of birth control for nineteenth-century women, it undoubtedly faced criticism at the same time. In 1877, John Harvey Kellogg wrote that, “This abominable practice can be considered as nothing better than double masturbation.”<sup>31</sup> This is clearly a misjudgment, but it is a useful example of how many nineteenth-century Americans viewed the practice. Along with male continence, John

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<sup>28</sup> Tirzah Miller, *Desire and Duty: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir*, Robert S. Fogarty, ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>29</sup> George E. Cragin, “Male Continence or Self Control in Sexual Intercourse, 125.

<sup>30</sup> John Cowan, *The Science of New Life*, 115-117, in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> John Harvey Kellogg, *Plain Facts about Sexual Life*, (Battle Creek, Michigan: Office of the Health Reformer, 1877), in Ronald G. Walters, ed., *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 130.

Humphrey Noyes's manipulating control over the Oneida Community has also been criticized. Historian Lawrence Foster argues that the values placed on all Oneida Community members, such as perfectionism and sexual loyalties, "stressed the subordination of individuals and their private, selfish interests to the good of the larger community, as interpreted by Noyes."<sup>32</sup> In other words, Noyes not only established the values that everyone at Oneida must adhere to, he also controlled them, even down to the most intimate level. His extreme and often problematic meddling is demonstrated through his control over Tirzah Miller, from what hobbies she could enjoy, to whom she should have children with, and intercepting and reading her mail. In December of 1878, Miller had extreme doubts about John Humphrey Noyes and his control over the Oneida Community, stating, "Oh! Is he a crazy enthusiast, who is just experimenting on human beings?"<sup>33</sup> It is likely that other Community members felt similarly to Miller at one point or another.

In addition, within the context of complex marriage in the Oneida Community, many women, including Tirzah Miller, found it frustrating that they could have progressive sexual experiences, but they were not allowed to be in "special love," or monogamous sexual relationships with those of their choosing, or have children with these men whenever they wanted. In February of 1877, Miller remarked how crushed she felt when the Community was opposed to her having a child with Homer Baron.<sup>34</sup> In March of 1879, she also recorded how terrible she felt when James Herrick was glad that they were able to overcome their urges to be in a relationship with one another, and how it, "...made my heart begin to ache in that terrible

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Free Love," 99.

<sup>33</sup> Tirzah Miller, *Desire and Duty*, 163.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

manner that cannot be described.”<sup>35</sup> We must acknowledge that these are legitimate criticisms, and yet, we can recognize that, in the main, the values and practices developed and promoted by Noyes helped his female followers rise above many of the problems women at the time faced in marriage and sexual relationships.

Like the necessary comparison between the average American woman in the nineteenth century to women in the Oneida Community, it is equally important for historians to compare both sets of women, their fears, and their liberations to women today. Today, a clear achievement over the nineteenth century is evident, as the fear of death and complications for women and their newborns during pregnancy and childbirth is relatively small.<sup>36</sup> In the nineteenth century, many women suffered under prudish understandings of female sexuality, while Oneida Community women experienced the opposite. Today, women’s sexual activity and sexuality fall along the lines of acceptance similar to that of Oneida Community women, but shaming for sexual activity is still quite prevalent for American women. The common phrase for this is “slut-shaming,” where heterosexual women are labeled as sexually out of control if they have multiple sexual partners.<sup>37</sup> As we have seen, this is different from the experiences of women in the Oneida Community, who were free to choose when they were to have sex, with whom, and how much, without feeling ashamed. Unfortunately, many American women, like

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>36</sup> In 2012, only 6.05% of births in the United States resulted in fetal mortality, which is much lower than statistics from the nineteenth century. More statistics on fetal mortality in the United States can be found in: “Trends in Fetal and Perinatal Mortality in the United States, 2006–2012,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2014, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db169.htm>. Today, only roughly six hundred women die each year in the United States due to pregnancy and childbirth complications, which is also undoubtedly lower than the deaths of nineteenth-century women during pregnancy and childbirth. More information on death of women due to pregnancy and childbirth can be found in: “Pregnancy-Related Deaths,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 2016, accessed April 10, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/maternalinfanthealth/pregnancy-relatedmortality.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Leora Tanenbaum, “The Truth About Slut-Shaming,” *The Huffington Post*, April 15, 2015, accessed April 10, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/leora-tanenbaum/the-truth-about-slut-shaming\\_b\\_7054162.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/leora-tanenbaum/the-truth-about-slut-shaming_b_7054162.html).

nineteenth-century women, have not achieved this. Thus, we might say, that through the practice of male continence, Oneida Community women experienced a strange liberation.

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