

# Sexual Violence, Marital Guidance, and Victorian Bodies: An Aesthesiology

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In *Vanity Fair* (1848), William Makepeace Thackeray satirizes novels that end with the marriage of the chief protagonists. “As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier,” he writes,

the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if the drama were over then: the doubts and struggles of life ended: as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but link each other’s arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition. (250)

As Thackeray recognized, nothing could be further from the lived experience of many Victorians. Sexual intimacy within marriage was fraught with conflicting emotions: desire, joy, disgust, and fear mediated the boundaries between bodily and social space, potentially disrupting both.

These emotions have to be made visible in order to be analyzed historically. As many theorists have shown, emotions can be approached as a language game that follows generic and narrative frameworks. Emotion-rules, encoded in grammars of representation, can reveal changes over time in the ways human subjects represent their feelings. As Clifford Geertz notes in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, “not only ideas,

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines some of the emotional rules, encoded in grammars of representation and framed within law and prescriptive marital advice literature, regarding the expression of male sexual aggressivity within the bedroom. Despite the general Victorian idealization of marriage, many wives suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands, marital rape drawing particular attention from early feminists, psychologists, physicians, and evolutionary physiologists. In the 1870s, a belief that unrestrained sexual license was a symptom of degeneration led these commentators to consider marital rape particularly harmful to husbands. By the turn of the century, however, the focus of this harm had nominally shifted to women, who might become frigid if forced to submit to sex—a problem for wives but for husbands as well. As sexology and psychology gained greater influence, couples came to rely on the emotion-talk of commentators to negotiate mutually agreeable bedroom activity.

but emotions too, are cultural artifacts in man” (80). Geertz reminds readers that

the achievement of a workable, well-ordered, clearly articulated emotional life in man is not a simple matter of ingenious instrumental control, a kind of clever hydraulic engineering of affect. Rather, it is a matter of giving specific, explicit, determinate form to the general, diffuse, ongoing flow of bodily sensation; of imposing upon the continual shifts in sentience to which we are inherently subject a recognizable, meaningful order, so that we may not only feel but know what we feel and act accordingly. (81)

Or, as Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine A. Lutz express it, emotions are “a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotion talk” (12). In other words, emotions link the individual with the social in dynamic ways. They are always about social interaction, and for this reason, the history of the emotions can be characterized as “aesthesiology” (Bourke, “Fear”). The classical Greek term “aesthesia” refers to the senses and sense perception but also to feelings and emotions. Aesthesia is thus a sensual reaction to external stimuli as well as an emotional involvement with the world. In this sense, aesthesiology describes the study of feeling or the history of bodily and emotional reaction to the world. As opposed to anesthesiology, which studies unconsciousness to feeling, aesthesiology considers the emotional reaction of the self to stimuli in lived experience.

As I shall argue in this article, sexual desires constitute one form of emotion-work through which people are sorted into positions within the social hierarchy. As newly emerging ideologies of gender in Victorian society disrupted established orders of emotion, Victorian commentators became increasingly vocal about the need to discipline feelings within private spheres. Self-designated experts in philosophy, law, and medicine—well aware that their negotiations of the psychological and the social engaged highly gendered expressions of power—defined new forms of emotional labor. I examine here some of their emotional rules, encoded in grammars of representation and framed within law and prescriptive marital advice literature, regarding the expression of male sexual aggressivity within the bedroom.

Victorian literature on the home as a self-contained space of harmony and conjugal unity was most idealistically portrayed in John Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). There Ruskin writes, “This is the true

nature of the home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” (147-48). Nineteenth-century matrimonial law, however, allowed for significant levels of injury. The marital bed proved to be the site of much terror. Until the case of *Kelly v. Kelly* in 1870, legal accusations of violence within marriage were assumed to involve extreme physical (as opposed to psychological or emotional) brutality. The judgment of William Scott in *Evans v. Evans* (1790) formed the basis of law throughout most of the nineteenth century. According to Scott, for a wife to claim cruelty by her husband, the

causes must be grave and weighty, and such as shew an absolute impossibility that the duties of married life can be discharged. In a state of personal danger no duties can be discharged; for the duty of self-preservation must take place before the duties of marriage, which are secondary both in commencement and in obligation; but what falls short of this is with great caution to be admitted. (*Evans v. Evans* 467)

In case the message was not clear enough, Scott continues:

What merely wounds the mental feelings is in few cases to be admitted where they are not accompanied with bodily injury, either actual or menaced. Mere austerity of temper, petulance of manners, rudeness of language, a want of civil attention and accommodation, even occasional sallies of passion, if they do not threaten bodily harm, do not amount to legal cruelty. (467)

Of course, the Victorian husband was not granted absolute freedom in the way he treated his wife. Hatred was no excuse for murder, for instance. Equally, when anger resulted in a vicious beating, a wife could charge her spouse with assault and battery. A. James Hammerton's analysis of assault charges brought by wives against their husbands in the nineteenth century reveals that many of these assaults were described as having taken place in bed “with no explanation of precipitating arguments” (108). It is a reasonable assumption that many wives were using evidence of physical assault to punish sexually abusive husbands.

Wives had recourse to the law of assault and battery because they were unable to appeal to rape law, as forced sexual intercourse was legal. The “marital rape exemption,” commonly ascribed to Sir Matthew Hale in 1736, meant that a wife was presumed to have granted lifelong consent to sexual intercourse with her husband. Under the marriage vows, husband and wife became “one person under the law” (628). It was

a contract that “she cannot retract” (629). Thereafter, as James Schouler explains in *A Treatise on the Law of Domestic Relations* (1870), “wilfully declining matrimonial intimacy and companionship” was nothing short of a “breach of duty, tending to subvert the true ends of marriage” (37). Emotional coldness, irritability, and “sallies of passion” were supposed to be met with calm resignation by good wives.

Around the middle of the century, however, these views began to be questioned by two important groups: advocates of women’s rights and proponents of evolutionary theory. Feminists were perhaps most vocal in challenging the physical expression of male power within the marital relationship. Real manliness, they insisted, was enacted through self-restraint rather than sexual appetite. The truly “pure, honest, noble, *manly*” husband would never “demand sensual gratification, against the wishes of his wife,” declared the author of *The Unwelcome Child* in 1858 (Wright 192, 194). There were practical reasons to promote the politics of emotional restraint in marital relations. Sex—whether forced or not—was tied to pregnancy and childbirth. At the very least, women’s reproductive health (prolapsed uteri, unsutured perineal tears, and vaginal fistulas were widely and legitimately feared) and the promotion of women within the public sphere depended upon discrediting the notion that husbands had unlimited access to their wives’ bodies.

But an insistence on women as social and sexual subjects in their own right also motivated such politics. Most famously, John Stuart Mill asked whether a married woman was little more than the “personal body-servant of a despot” (463). Was sexual intercourse simply a mechanical act to which a wife had a duty to submit? What were the right and proper emotions allowed expression during the conjugal act? If a married woman could be “made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclination,” Mill asked, wasn’t this a modern form of servitude? A female slave at least possessed “an admitted right,” if not “a moral obligation,” to “refuse to her master the last familiarity,” Mill pointed out in “The Subjection of Women” (1859).

Not so the wife: however brutal a tyrant she may unfortunately be chained to, though she may know that he hates her, though it may be his daily pleasure to torture her, and though she may feel it impossible not to loath him—he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being. (522)

A husband’s hatred of his wife could only inspire loathing in return. In such a situation, Mill provocatively concluded, marriage was nothing

more than “actual bondage. . . . There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house” (522).

The wife’s virtual slavery increasingly troubled a range of political commentators, from progressive feminists like Mill to conservative moralists. In particular, the analogy with slavery was very popular with early feminists, many of whom were also abolitionists. By employing the slave motif, the movement for reform could be tied to broader campaigns against the slavery of African-Americans and against the white slave trade associated with prostitution. As leading American suffragist Victoria Woodhull declared in 1873, she “would rather be the labor slave of a master, with his whip cracking continually about my ears, than the forced sex slave of any man a single hour” (qtd. in Griswold 733). Similarly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony referred to married women forced to flee their violent husbands as “fugitive wives: running to Indiana and Connecticut divorce mills, like slaves to their Canada, from marriages worse than plantation slavery” (qtd. in Davis, *History* 66). They proposed introducing the right to divorce and the right of voluntary motherhood as measures aimed at rescuing wives from their sexually sadistic husbands.

There was a second tradition of theorizing relations between the sexes, however. Commentators influenced by evolutionary and racial thought increasingly focused on emotional comportment as the guiding principle in relationships between husbands and wives. Thus, according to one line of thought, it was wrong to force a wife to engage in sexual intercourse because such an act denoted a regression to earlier life forms. Indeed, rape in marriage was an attempt to place the wife at an even lower level than animals. In the words of Russell Thacher Trall, mid-nineteenth-century founder of the Hygeo-Therapeutic College in New York and self-proclaimed expert on medical treatments for women,

No male animal offers violence to the female. . . . [He] never compels her to submit to the sexual embrace against her desire, nor forces her to bear offspring against her inclination or will. But, when she is in condition to propagate her kind, and desires the co-operation of her male partner, she informs him of it. (xi)

Or, as John Harvey Kellogg noted in *Plain Facts for Old and Young* (1884), it was the female of the species who initiated sex. Why should female humans be refused this exclusive prerogative? (225-26).

Indeed, a husband who treated his wife in such a way was a typical example of a degenerate. Such men were “broken-down” and

mentally weak; they unmistakably displayed the “stigmata of degeneracy” (such as a tiny penis or monorchidia), argued Henri Colin, author of “Mental and Physical State of Criminals Convicted of Sexual Crime” (1898) (659). Their “infantile” sexual organs were only one sign of degeneracy (660). They also had “imperfect” teeth and jaws, “marked cranial and facial asymmetry,” and were “weak-minded” (660). Like sexually violent men generally, it was likely that such “degenerates” had been born into families with a history of neuroses, added Martin W. Barr, Chief Physician at the Pennsylvania Training School for Feeble-Minded Children. Being themselves the “offspring of exaggerated lust,” they cultivated an aggressive sexuality in turn (611-12). The stigmata of degeneracy could be seen in their irregular spines, asymmetrical heads, and ears with adherent lobules. “Defect, unlike disease, knows no cure,” Barr gloomily intoned (617).

The influential sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis concurred, reporting that physiognomy could be used to identify men likely to use violence in sexual encounters. Although he was referring to sex criminals more generally, his argument was effortlessly applied to abusers within the domestic sphere. Anomalies of genitals had “no small diagnostic importance,” reported Ellis, “especially when united to other characters which distinguish them [sex criminals] from the honest and from criminals in general” (80-81). These other likely characteristics included malformed ears and noses, blue eyes or different colored irises, asymmetrical faces, and voluminous lower jaws. Hair was also important, with sex offenders more liable to sport an “abundance of hair” (a trait correlated with animal vigor), and this hair was more likely to be fair, especially red (92-93). They were more likely to suffer from epilepsy, the most common mark of degeneracy (101-02) According to these theories, the corporeal surface revealed the truth about the person’s inner nature. The body itself was the index of interior states and dispositions.

Ellis also emphasized alcoholism as “a symptom as well as a cause of degeneration” (111). The danger of alcohol lay “not in any mysterious prompting to crime,” but “in the manner in which the poison lets loose the individual’s natural or morbid impulses” (111-12). According to temperance reformers, working-class homes (as well as streets) were plagued with the scourge of drink. As leading reformer Francis William Newman (brother of Cardinal Newman) lamented in 1889, the existence of “omnipresent drink-shops” led “vile plebeians” to “corrupt” women “of their own order.” Under the influence of the “fatal cup,” men’s

emotions came to resemble those of the “beasts” and women were rendered “as defenceless as the child of 14” (7). Although Newman was a staunch advocate of abstinence in tobacco and meat as well as alcohol, his proselytizing activities were highly class based. He was most condemnatory of “vile plebeians,” in part because he believed in the greater ability of wealthy consumers to control their emotions when inebriated. For many middle-class commentators, trade unionism, suffrage campaigns, and other increasingly vocal political movements served as evidence that working-class emotions were already unstable. In this context, the working-class family was not seen as a natural institution that emerged out of conjugal love and paternal duty but as something that required significant middle-class intervention to achieve.

Of course, according to many of these commentators, the inclination to act in sexually aggressive ways distinguished the respectable from the unrespectable poor, the so-called civilized from the savage. Racial anxieties underpinned these debates about the dangers of sexual violence within and outside of the home. Some people failed to develop, and so were stuck at a lower level of evolution; these developmental failures were not only characteristic of the laboring classes but were believed to be most common among non-white races. According to George E. Dawson, psychologist at Clark University and author of “Psychic Rudiments and Morality” (1900), the sexually violent man illustrated the “persistence of a very primitive sex diathesis in the midst of civilization” (193). “Among savage peoples,” he explained, force was “often employed in sexual union” (193). It did not surprise him, therefore, that “the crime of rape should be so common among our Negro and Indian populations” (193). For Dawson, an adherent of recapitulation theory in which the individual’s body, mind, and emotions recapitulated the life of the species, evidence of sexual violence within certain groups in society proved the persistence of savagery into modernity. He believed that the savage tendency in African-Americans had been suppressed by slavery because they had been “placed under white taskmasters” and were therefore “obliged to work somewhat after the manner of the civilization surrounding them” (203). Emancipation, however, unleashed the “race instinct of carelessness and improvidence” (203). The result was an increase in sexual violence, including within African-American marriages (203).

This physiologically motivated discourse on the wrongs of marital rape eschewed notions of sexual equality between husbands

and wives. Instead, for these late-Victorian physicians, biologists, and self-styled sex-experts, forcing a wife to have sex was wrong because it harmed the husband. Aggressive husbands suffered in ways similar to men who masturbated. Both were in danger of suffering from a “general weakness of the nervous system,” a “weakening of the joints,” a “softening of the muscles,” and a “want of strength,” according to John Cowan in his 1869 *The Science of a New Life* (105). Fifteen years later, a similar catalog of woes was reeled off by the author of *The Transmission of Life* (1884). Forcing sex on an unwilling wife risked giving the husband heart palpitations, impairing his digestion, and causing dyspepsia. The sexually abusive husband would literally observe his strength seeping away. Even worse, he would suffer spermatorrhoea (the involuntary leaking of semen without erection) and his “genetic powers” would “lose their vigor” (Napheys 179–80). The offspring of forced sex within marriage would also inherit their father’s weakness, having been endowed even before birth with “lustful passions and morbid appetites” (Stockham 154). In the words of B. O. Flower in “Prostitution Within the Marriage Bond” (1895), the husband who forced sex on his wife would find it “inevitably redounded [sic] to men’s material, emotional, and dynastic detriment as husbands and fathers” (76). According to this perspective, male bodies were a closed system, sapped by ordinary sexual intercourse but doubly drained if the husband had to use force to attain what he hankered after.

Such discussions of forced sex focused on the husband’s well-being as opposed to the wife’s in part because of a growing interest in the cult of masculinity. As John Tosh observes, proponents of “male domesticity” were not concerned with equality between the sexes (Mill’s political platform), nor were they bothered by the unequal distribution of domestic labor (women were still expected to be responsible for housework). Rather, they saw the home as a restful location where husbands could forge congenial and companionate emotional relationships with their wives. Male dominance in the home was unquestioned, of course. Indeed, astute commentators like the novelist Mona Caird recognized that the new masculine language of emotional attachment was often employed as part of the arsenal of persuasion used to pressure reluctant women into sexual relations. Indeed, she warned in *The Morality of Marriage* (1897), the most abusive “tyrant” is the husband who professes “love and devotion” yet demands sexual favors in order to retain that devotion. Such tyranny “expresses itself profitably by appeals to the pity



and the conscience of the victims; by threats of the suffering that will ensure to the despot, if his wishes are heartlessly disregarded" (105). Once such husbands realize that their protestations of love and affection do not have the desired effect, they will return to physical abuse, or what she calls "more drastic methods" (106).

Nevertheless, the rise of the male domestic ideal affected every aspect of middle-class domestic interaction. It was particularly significant in reducing the tolerance of cruelty within marriage. In America from 1867-1871 to 1902-1906, for instance, the number of divorces granted to wives on the grounds of cruelty increased by 900 percent. In the years 1867 to 1871, eighteen percent of divorces granted to wives were based on accusations of cruelty; by the early 1900s, this had jumped to twenty-nine percent (Griswold 722). Both husbands and wives expected more emotional succor from their marriages. Individual fulfillment and affection became the bedrock of modern matrimony, not gratifying extras. Even domestic architecture changed subtly in response to this companionate ideal. The typical upper-working-class and middle-class Victorian house with all its rigid separations (a discrete parlor, study, and sitting room, for example) gradually gave way to more open, family-orientated spaces, such as the living room (Marsh 179-80). Marital rape continued to take place, but it was less readily tolerated and significantly more private—a guilty secret. If the household was to retain its respectable position within society, rape could only take place out of sight.

This did not mean, of course, that more people recognized the basic equality of men and women or the need for each spouse to respect the other's desires. Often writers premised their attacks on marital brutality upon the unequal and separate natures of men and women. Husbands had to respect the sexual integrity of their wives not because of a shared humanity but because women were different from men, more emotional and more pure. Such commentators cautioned against the imposition of male lusts upon innocent womanhood. This view led the charismatic public speaker Andrew Jackson Davis to warn against marriages that originated "in the heat of the blood, and in the blind ignorance of passion" (20). Such unions were doomed to misery. In *The Genesis and Ethics of Conjugal Love* (1874), Davis reminded his readers that in the "rage of an uncontrollable sexual attraction," rape was inevitable. He insisted on defining sexual violence within marriage as rape, "notwithstanding its legal recognition by the State and the

solemn sanction of the Supervising Church" (20). The domestic sphere had been corrupted by male lusts, he lamented. "In the home,"

woman has been imprisoned, scourged, branded with the red-hot irons of cruelty, and for what? Because, sometimes she *dared* to claim her body and her soul as *her own property*—denying to the male-master the liberties he sought with her inalienable private rights and this with her own person. (20)

When the wife resisted her husband's "hot impulses and lawless usurpation," he punished her "with unaccountable cruelties, perpetual dependence, imprisonment in her own home" (20). Such a man needed to be taught to "tenderly respect his wife's spiritual and physical rights, which are as irrevocable and inextinguishable as his own" (20).

Davis was hardly typical. He went on to promote a radical "bill of rights" that would have given every wife rights over the property of the home and provided her with an entitlement to an "apartment exclusively and sacredly her own, the same as if she were yet a maiden, wherein she may sleep and make her toilet unmolested and alone" (25). Separate bedrooms and separate beds would allow each party to "retire from and approach each other with polite defence and affectionate regard; avoiding every form of intrusion and indecorous familiarity, remembering the holy relation in which you live under the observation of innumerable angels" (26). This "restoration of Eve to her garden of sacred maidenhood and graceful independence" would end "all troubles of a sexual origin" (26).

Critics wondered whether Davis's solution would exacerbate rather than ameliorate ungratified sexual impulses, but Davis was uncompromising. Sexual frustration was a problem for only one half of the married couple, he claimed; women were fortunate in that menstruation provided "infallible and periodical relief" from sexual urges (27). Women's "enlarged centres of conjugal vital essences" were "soothed into tranquillity with every moon" (27). In contrast, men were "charged to repletion, even to the verge of uncontrollable violence" by their sexual urges (27). Under no circumstances should this biological fact be used by a husband to "invade the sacredness" of his wife's bedroom uninvited (27). "Man is constituted to *conquer* all impulses of the subservient blood," Davis thundered (27). "When his spirit speaks," he continued, "his passion is essentially allayed, and his wild rage for sexual intercourse is gone; for thus, in all realms of higher being, matter is over-shadowed and mastered by Mind" (27). If a man's emotional frenzy could not be

restrained, Davis advised his male readers to alter their dietary routines and adopt more moderate drinking habits. Husbands needed to “fix upon nobler physical habits” in order that their “salvation shall be sure, beautiful, and sublime” (28).

Davis became known as the John the Baptist of modern spiritualism, a movement that was actively involved in political and social reform in America. In late-nineteenth-century Britain, too, reformers from a range of religious and secular backgrounds attacked the myth that male health depended upon regular sexual intercourse. After all, as Newman reminded his audience in the 1880s, “a ship-crew of young men, chiefly under the age of twenty-five, picked for masculine vigour,” could “go to Arctic regions for a year or two, and return in splendid condition without seeing a woman’s face” (10). If individual men’s well-being could be assured within a celibate state, it was even more the case that the healthiness of society—nay, civilization itself—could be preserved only if the weaker sex was respected. In Newman’s words,

A married man is bound sternly to act the celibate during long months; and in some cases totally, through the weak health of his wife. (Not but that even here our law most cruelly treats a wife, stripping her of that self-defence against a brutal sensual husband which every female dog and cat retains and exercises.) . . . Self-restraint is necessary and salutary for every man. (10-11)

Husbands who did not exercise restraint could be regarded as suffering from a kind of madness. In *Is it I? A Book for Every Man* (1867), Horatio Storer derided such husbands as “the veriest satyrs, erotomaniacs, madmen” who “in the face of remonstrances, entreaties, tears” willfully “persist in their demand for what at the best is but a momentary gratification” (107). Giving free rein to sexual emotions was not the sign of manliness but of moral insanity.

These commentators were particularly sensitive to the fact that a wife was most vulnerable to her husband’s overwhelming emotional sensuality on her wedding night. As the advice book *Satan in Society* (1871) warned, the new husband must stop any sexual overtures at the “slightest intimation of pain or fear” (Cooke 146). Sex that was not “obviously invited and *shared*” was equivalent to “committing a veritable outrage on the person of her whom God has given you for a companion” (146). The “first conjugal act” should never become “little else than legalized *rape*” (146). Presuming that the new wife was a virgin, everything depended upon the husband’s ability to exercise self-control.

The assumption that most women approached the marital bed for the first time with great trepidation was prevalent throughout prescriptive literature. As Delos Wilcox put it in *Ethical Marriage* (1900), one reason for “the shock experienced by woman on the wedding night is the sudden change in the degree of physical intimacy” (84). For this reason he strongly advised that “procreation should not take place until husband and wife have become familiar with each other’s bodies” (84). The “nervous shock of first intercourse is much greater when it is accentuated by the acute sensation of strangeness usually accompanying the first physical intimacies of a man and a woman,” he reminded readers (84). There was another factor that husbands needed to be made aware of on that wedding night, however. In Wilcox’s words, the wife’s “sudden discovery” that she was “no longer a free woman” also militated against harmonious marital relations (84). Prior to marriage, “her lover was all deference to her wishes and respect for her personality,” but “when once the keys to her sanctuary are in his hands,” her man is “transformed by some perverse alchemy into a sensual tyrant. He may use violence, he may use only the persuasions of the benevolent despot”; in either case, “her freedom is gone” (119-20).

From the turn of the century, the problem of men’s aggressive sexual drive was no longer characterized as damaging to a man’s sex organs or to his general strength and virility, as it was in the mid- to late Victorian period. Rather, the drama of the wedding night potentially threatened the husband indirectly by causing his wife to become frigid. As the author of *Christianity and Sex Problems* (1906) warned, husbands had to be aware that forced intercourse might make the wife repulsed by sex, and revulsion could easily develop into “chronic frigidity” (Northcote 129). In 1902, Elizabeth Blackwell explained that it was “well known” that “terror or pain in either sex will temporarily destroy all physical pleasure” (46). Any “brutal or awkward conjugal approaches” could cause “unavoidable shrinking from sexual congress, often wrongly attributed to the absence of sexual passion” (46).

So what was to be done on that decisive first night? Marital advice literature only rarely instructed men to pay attention to their wives’ sexual responses. This was the view of Blackwell, however. In *The Human Element in Sex* (1894), she observed that some “affectionate husbands of refined women” complained that their wives did not seem to “regard the distinctively sexual act with the same intoxicating physical enjoyment that they themselves feel” (50). These women would often

confide in their medical adviser, though, that “at the very time when marriage love seems to unite them most closely, when her husband’s welcome kisses and caresses seem to bring them into profound union, comes an act which mentally separates them, and which may be either indifferent or repugnant to her” (50). Blackwell informed readers that it was “not the special act necessary for parentage which is the measure of the compound moral and physical power of sexual power” (50). Rather, it was the “profound attraction of one nature to the other which marks passion; and delight in kiss and caress—the love-touch—is physical sexual expression as much as the special act of the male” (50). Men should indulge their wives’ delight in touch, as opposed to penetration.

Blackwell’s advice was unusual. It was much more common for wives to be advised of their need to play an affirmative role on that first, dramatic night. Wives had to be wary of the “danger” of “tantalizing and straining to a harmful extent” their husbands’ “organs and constitution,” explained Hugh Northcote in 1906 (129). William J. Robinson echoed this concern in *Woman: Her Sex and Love Life* (1917). In a section about husbands who “tortured” their wives by demanding sexual intercourse against their “marital feeling,” he warned wives not to “repel your husbands when they ask for sexual favors,” adding “at least do not repel them too often” (344).

The central assumptions in these turn-of-the-century discussions were immeasurably strengthened by sexological thought, with its sensitivity to the more emotional mechanisms of desire. Indeed, as Robinson explained, since men were “more esthetic” and “sensitive” than women, it was imperative that wives refrain from urinating in their presence or letting them see “soiled menstrual napkins” (346). The “sexual act” was “a very delicate mechanism, and it is very easy to disarrange it,” he sternly warned (346). These “sensitive” husbands did need to discipline their emotions, though. As psychiatrist Leopold Loewenfeld insisted in *On Conjugal Happiness* (1913), the new husband had to respect his wife’s feelings if he was to remove the “psychical obstacle” created by her high investment in virginity (200). “Brutal insistence” on sex might lead to “the most serious consequences to the mental state of the wife” (200). Indeed, Loewenfeld was surprised that the wife’s “first night” did not become “the starting-point of hysteria” more frequently, since “what takes place often amounts to nothing more or less than rape” (200).

In case the balance of power within the marital relationship was tipping too far toward the wife, however, Loewenfeld went on to

argue that, while a “man of fine feeling” would restrain himself once he realized that he was causing his wife pain, so too the wife had to be “self-sacrificing enough not to expect her husband to completely abstain simply because intercourse causes her some discomfort” (201). While the husband did have to rein in his emotions, it remained the case that the wife had a duty to submit to her spouse. If intercourse caused “serious trouble” (Loewenfeld mentions hemorrhaging), the wife should calmly yet speedily “call in medical assistance . . . so as to relieve her husband from protracted abstinence” (201). Submitting to her husband’s “wishes and needs” was important if the wife was to “bind him enduringly to her” (201). Indeed, “a refusal to grant it without valid reason” was “not permissible” (201). “Sensible and fine-feeling women who are devoted to their husbands,” Loewenfeld concluded, would willingly yield to their spouses’ demands “even though sexual intercourse may give them little or no pleasure” (201).

Loewenfeld was frank, if not brusque, about the pragmatic jostling between spouses in the bedroom. The German sexologist Theodor Hendrik Van de Velde took this one step further. His best-selling advice book *Ideal Marriage* (1928) was translated into English by the distinguished British sex reformer Stella Browne. Like Loewenfeld, de Velde believed that the body was like a machine that could be made to perform efficiently. However, he placed greater emphasis on the unconscious and on the role of the husband as teacher. Indeed, the binary of male-active and female-passive roles was particularly pronounced in his account. On the marriage night, de Velde advised, the husband had to recognize and respect his wife’s anxieties, even if they were unconscious ones. This did not mean that the bridegroom should deal with his wife’s fears with “weak submission, sentimentality, or least of all, misplaced pity” (228). The happiness of both spouses depended on the husband showing “delicate consideration” and “technical proficiency” (de Velde does not indicate how the new husband was to gain the necessary know-how) (228).

So how was the husband to respond if his wife met his sexual advances with “defensive struggles, gestures of repulsion, or closed thighs?” (229). How was such a wife to be “wooded into compliance,” de Velde asked (229)? Should, for instance, the first intercourse be preceded by “genital stimulation” or foreplay (229)? Absolutely not. For one thing, he explained, any pleasurable “*sensory* result” would “be entirely cancelled by the [subsequent] pain of defloration” (229). More

to the point, de Velde lectured, there were “advantages in restricting her first coital experience to the removal of the hymenal barrier, and the opening of the sexual passage” (230). A

more detailed activity of the bridegroom on this momentous occasion, an initiative that went beyond what was strictly necessary, might easily deeply offend the modesty of a more or less timid and quite inexperienced virgin bride. This should be avoided, for the psychic stresses and conflicts of the situation are in themselves great! And womanly modesty is in itself something so beautiful and precious—and so often disregarded by modern customs and costumes—that the husband should show it all possible reverence. (230)

De Velde recommended that “intensively erotic and definite stimulation” should be only “sparingly applied” and complete nudity avoided. After all, “display[ing] the male member,” which would “seem gigantic to her unaccustomed eyes,” would only “terrify her and accentuate her unconscious psychic dread” (231).

Other writers, of course, had advice for these terrified wives. William Robinson not only estimated that between one-quarter and one-third of women were frigid, but insisted that such wives should never inform their husbands of the fact. He argued that some husbands might regard frigidity as “a blessing, a God-sent treasure,” because it meant that they could “consult their own wishes in the matter, they can have intercourse whenever they want and *the way they want*. They do not have to accommodate themselves to their wives’ ways, they do not have to prolong the act until she gets the orgasm” (305). However, many more husbands “feel extremely bad and displeased when they find out that their wives have ‘no feeling’” and may “become furious” or “disgusted” (305). For this reason, Robinson recommended that wives fake orgasm. In his words,

If you belong to the independent kind, if you scorn simulation and deceit, if, as the price of being perfectly truthful, you are willing if necessary to part with your husband or give him a divorce, well and good. . . . But if you care for your husband, if you care for your home and perhaps children, and do not want any disruption, then the only thing for you to do is not to apprise your husband of your frigid condition. (306)

It “won’t hurt you to simulate a feeling which you do not experience and even to imitate the orgasm,” Robinson went on, since “he won’t be any the wiser, he will enjoy you more, and nobody will be injured by your little deception” (306).

Loewenfeld, de Velde, and Robinson at least address female sexuality, albeit only in the form of a dread to be conquered in the interest of gratifying male sexual desire. For them, the wrong of forcing sex within marriage was very different from the wrong identified by their nineteenth-century predecessors. From the 1870s to the turn of the century, marital rape was portrayed as an evil because of the dangers of unrestrained sex for husbands. For the sake of male health and well-being, husbands needed consciously to adopt the sexual standards of their wives. In contrast, by the time Loewenfeld and de Velde were writing, marital rape was considered harmful because it caused female frigidity. This approach did acknowledge the sexual responsiveness of wives, even if it still implied that women's frigidity was a problem only because it threatened male sexual pleasure.

A vast array of social commentators in philosophy, law, and medicine intervened into the intimate relationships of Victorians and early Edwardians in their attempt to forge new emotional lives for married couples. The emotion-talk of the commentators discussed here provided couples in Victorian and Edwardian society with new languages within which to live out the sexual aspects of married life. Despite significant differences between mid-nineteenth-century feminists like John Stuart Mill, legal commentators of the 1880s, and the sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, authoritative interventions into the privacy of the marital bed were based upon two assumptions. First, sex did not come as naturally, and was not as benign, for humans as it was for the birds and bees. It was fraught with the potential eruption of dangerous, destructive emotions. Second, and as a direct consequence, correct emotional comportment was required.

When, in 1848, Thackeray sneered at novels in which the marriage of the protagonists signaled the end of "doubts and struggles," leaving husband and wife nothing to do except "link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition," he was recognizing the inadequacy of such a portrayal of Victorian marriages. Novels such as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1874-76) went even further than Thackeray in portraying vicious emotional cruelty practiced by some husbands. The shift of emphasis from physical to emotional cruelty was reflected in law when William Scott's judgment in *Evans v. Evans* (1790) was overturned. *Kelly v. Kelly* broadened the definition of matrimonial cruelty from the narrow emphasis on physical injury, allowing for forms of cruelty that were more



emotional and psychological in nature. A wife's sexual act was no "mechanical act," shared by beast and human. Husbands and wives had to harness their emotions and, increasingly, employ psychological knowledge if they were to negotiate mutually agreeable bedroom activity. Finally, while there were different recommendations about how to deal with the sexual tensions portrayed as inevitable between husbands and wives, there was general agreement that wives were more reluctant to have sex than their husbands. As such, there was always a risk that husbands would attempt to force intercourse. It was an assumption that remained intact until the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

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