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Freethought, Free Love and Feminism: secularist debates on marriage and sexual morality, England c. 1850–1885

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This article examines the previously unexplored current of Freethinking feminism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Active in the women's movement of this period, Freethinking feminists were nonetheless viewed as a liability—an attitude that contributed to their exclusion from much of the subsequent historiography. Such marginalisation was due not only to their vocal opposition to all forms of religion, but also their openness to discussing new ways of organising heterosexual relationships. This article focuses on Freethinking feminist critiques of marriage and support for free unions. It demonstrates that these issues continued to be debated in the Secularist movement at a time when many other radical organisations—including much of the women's movement—kept silent on such topics. In this way, Freethinking feminists kept alive the more radical and libertarian critiques of traditional sexual morality developed by Owenite feminists in the 1830s and 40s. The author argues that the ideology of Freethought propelled its adherents to readdress questions of sex within a new 'Secularist' ethical framework. Fierce debate ensued, yet commitment to freedom of discussion ensured that 'unrespectable', libertarian voices were never entirely silenced. Freethinking feminism might, then, be viewed as the 'missing link' between early nineteenth-century feminist visions of greater sexual freedom and the more radical discussions of sexuality and free love that began to emerge at the fin de siècle.

Introduction

The story of Elizabeth Wolstenholme's free union with Ben Elmy, and her subsequent shabby treatment at the hands of the women's movement to which she had contributed

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so much, is well known to students of nineteenth-century feminism. Wolstenholme had lived openly with Elmy until she became pregnant in 1874, when fellow women's rights campaigners eventually persuaded her to marry. Yet even this did not satisfy her more conservative sisters, and on her return to political activity, after the birth of her son, Wolstenholme became the subject of an orchestrated campaign against her continuing public association with feminist organisations. Lydia Becker voted for her removal from the Married Women's Property Committee in Manchester (the motion failed), and also suggested to the meeting that the registry be checked to ensure that Wolstenholme's marriage really had taken place! Another leading feminist, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, wrote privately to Wolstenholme condemning her conduct and asking her to remove herself from activities in order to prevent any further damage to the suffrage movement.¹

This unhappy episode is often pointed to as an example of the refusal of the nineteenth-century women's movement to countenance any form of sexual unorthodoxy. As historians have often noted, most feminists in the mid to late part of the century were against sexual relationships taking place outside of marriage. The movement's leaders even rejected any liberalisation of divorce laws, with Fawcett declaring that 'People ... who think that marriages should be dissolved at will ... are in effect anarchists ... none of the leaders of the women's movement in England have ever countenanced for a moment anarchic methods or anarchic aims'.²

What has never been explored, however, is the Freethinking feminist context to Elizabeth's decision to form such a union with Ben Elmy.³ Elizabeth and Ben were both Secularists—Freethinkers who rejected religion and allied themselves with the National Secular Society, of which Ben was, for a time, vice-president. Maureen Wright's 2007 study of Elizabeth Wolstenholme illuminated for the first time her Freethinking beliefs and their central importance in shaping the course of her life.⁴ Yet the broader Freethinking feminist tradition of which Wolstenholme Elmy was part has never received more than a passing mention in histories of the post-1850 women's movement. This article demonstrates that Wolstenholme's decision to enter into a free union was not an idiosyncratic throwback to the more sexually radical traditions of the earlier part of the century, but rather came out of a long-standing Freethinking critique of Christian marriage which continued post-1850. Other Freethinking feminists during this period also advocated free unions and were prepared to consider a far more radical transformation of heterosexual relationships than anything argued for by the rest of the women's movement. This article begins by introducing the organised Freethought movement, out of which such a critique emerged. It then discusses the feminists who were active within it and their relationship with the wider women's movement, and examines more closely their views on marriage, free unions and sexual morality. Finally, the conclusion raises some questions regarding our understanding of how feminist thinking on sexuality developed over the course of the century.

The Nineteenth-Century Freethought Movement

The nineteenth century witnessed a significant rise in the number and outspokenness of 'Freethinkers'—the term applied to those who questioned religious assumptions

about the ordering of the world and who, as a result, tended to reject all forms of organised religion. It was also during this period that such Freethought sentiment was organised into the Secularist movement, which argued that political, cultural and moral life should be separated entirely from religion.⁵ The term 'Freethinker' was used during this period to describe any individual who disagreed with religion, whereas 'Secularist' implies allegiance to *organised* Freethought. (However, since all of the people discussed in this article did offer such an allegiance, the terms 'Freethinker' and 'Secularist' are used here interchangeably.) Secularism did not simply denote support for the separation of Church and State based upon a neutral disregard for religious faith. The Secularist movement had its roots in a far more partisan and embattled debate, which was concerned not only with the role of religion in politics, but also with whether religion—specifically Christianity—could be considered both true and morally just.

Nineteenth-century Freethinkers saw themselves as the intellectual descendants of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, on the basis that their arguments against the existence of God or the possibility of supernatural occurrences were firmly rooted in an empirical and rational analysis of the workings of the natural world. Miracles were scoffed at along with virgin births and the physical resurrection of Christ. Freethinkers deliberately set about constructing an opposition between the claims of science and those of religion, and they refused to accept that any aspect of religion could be justified in 'rational' terms. Freethinkers also critiqued Christian doctrine through the application of rational moral standards. By contrast to what they believed was the infantilising and hypocritical value-system of the Christian Church, Freethinkers preached a moral code based on autonomy and individual responsibility. Developments in biblical criticism and comparative religion were utilised by Freethinkers to reduce scripture to nothing more than a collection of inaccurate historical documents and to show how religion was merely an expression of man's psychological needs and desires.

But Freethought was not simply an intellectual movement, and its development during this period cannot be separated from the political struggles out of which it emerged. For Freethinkers were political as well as intellectual radicals, consciously identifying with a tradition of rebellion against state religion and arbitrary authority which they traced back through the French Revolution to the Enlightenment. The most prominent and infamous early nineteenth-century Freethinker, Richard Carlile, was imprisoned three times between 1817 and 1831 for writing, publishing and selling blasphemous works, and on the second occasion his wife and sister (and his children with them) were sent to join him for a similar offence.⁶ Such persecution provoked nationwide agitation, and for the rest of the century the Freethought movement was to take a leading role in campaigns for a free press. Carlile also found support for his Freethinking ideas among some British radicals, who in the 1820s formed themselves into infidel Zetetic societies dedicated to 'seeking after truth'.

The next wave of Freethought occurred within the Utopian-Socialist Owenite movement, which was active within popular radical politics throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Its founder, Robert Owen, rejected organised religion as part of the 'old immoral world' and, although not all Owenites were Freethinkers, between 1835 and 1845 this critique of religion became the most vocal, widely printed and publicly prominent

aspect of Owenite doctrine. The more militant of the Owenite Freethinkers held public debates with their Christian opponents, attracting audiences of up to five thousand. Emma Martin (one of the best-known female Freethinkers and Owenites) specialised in invading churches and religious meetings, and denouncing ministers in the middle of their sermons. She often had to be forcibly removed by the police, or hounded out of town by angry, stone-throwing mobs.⁷ By the 1840s the leadership of the movement had sought to dissociate itself from such militant advocates of Freethought. Emma Martin's comrades, Charles Southwell and George Jacob Holyoake, founded their own journal, the *Oracle of Reason*, whose intransigent tone and hard-line atheist attacks on all forms of religion led to the imprisonment of both men on charges of blasphemy.

With the disintegration of the Owenite movement after 1845, many of those who had been involved in the Freethought and free-speech side of Owenism concluded that capitalist society would not be transformed until religion had been eradicated, and they set about building an organised movement that would achieve this. George Jacob Holyoake took the lead, having acquired a reputation following his imprisonment as a martyr for the Freethought cause. In 1851 he decided on the term 'Secularist' to describe the new course upon which Freethought was about to embark, and this was summed up in the statement of the Central Secular Society as a commitment to science and reason and a rejection of the arbitrary authority of religion. Over the next ten years, some sixty local Secular societies began to grow up around the country, and in 1866 most were incorporated into the structure of the National Secular Society, presided over by Charles Bradlaugh. Membership peaked in the mid 1880s with 120 local societies and around 3000 members, but with a sympathetic periphery that might have amounted to 60,000 people, mainly from the lower middle or upper working classes.

Secularism was by no means a rigidly defined ideology. It encompassed deists, pantheists and atheists, and included two rival factions, led by Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh respectively, which differed over whether direct attacks on religion were necessary and whether atheism had to be defined as a positive refusal of the existence of God. Charles Bradlaugh ruled over the National Secular Society, but the Freethought League and the British Secular Union were also founded as alternative organisations for those who supported the more moderate position and/or resisted Bradlaugh's authoritarian style of leadership. However, what did unite all Freethinkers in the Secularist movement was a political adherence to free speech and freedom of the press, which was founded upon a fundamental commitment to the supremacy of individual private judgement in all matters of faith and government.

Women made up only about 12% of membership of the Secular societies, yet, formally at least, Secularist structures were uncommonly open to female participation. Secularism did not distinguish between male and female members in its committees and both men and women were permitted to run for executive positions in the National Secular Society, the British Secular Union and the Freethought League. At a local level Secular societies were relatively unusual (compared to other mid-Victorian organisations such as radical clubs and trade unions) in that their meetings, lectures and branch membership were open to women.⁸ More established local societies, such as the Leicester Secular Society, competed with local churches and chapels in attempting to

provide a wide range of cultural and recreational activities as well as Freethought lectures and debates. Here women were able to involve themselves as Sunday school teachers, choir mistresses, fundraisers and organisers of Secularist tea parties. But small numbers of women also participated in the wider intellectual and public life of the movement, on an equal basis with their male counterparts.

A handful of women gained prominence within nineteenth-century Secularism as journalists, authors and public lecturers. These women contributed to the production of Secularist ideology, gave their views on the direction the movement should take, had their work published in the Secularist press, lectured to large audiences of Freethinkers and were, on the whole, taken seriously by the movement's male leadership. They include Sara Hennell (1812–99), who was friends with George Jacob Holyoake and wrote a number of philosophical works exploring her idiosyncratic version of natural, non-theistic religion.⁹ Hennell was a close friend of George Eliot and the intellectual companionship of the Hennell family proved important to Eliot's renunciation of Christianity. Harriet Law (1831–97) was another prominent female Freethinker—one of the most famous of the Secularists' public lecturers in the 1860s and 70s. She also edited the national newspaper, *The Secular Chronicle*, from 1876 to 1879. From the mid 1870s, however, Harriet Law was somewhat overshadowed by the rising star of Annie Besant (1847–1933), who rapidly rose to the leadership of the National Secular Society after 1874 under the patronage of Charles Bradlaugh. Besant also acquired fame as a public lecturer and prolific journalist for the Secularist movement, before converting to the new age religion of Theosophy in 1889. All of these women were committed and outspoken supporters of women's rights.¹⁰

The relatively low numbers of women in the Secular societies did not deter the movement from mounting a vocal campaign in support of women's emancipation. Freethought had been associated with a current of radical thinking on women since the early 1800s. Historians, including Helen Rogers and Barbara Taylor, have already traced the outspoken feminist views of Richard Carlile's partner Eliza Sharples, and established the importance of feminist ideas to large sections of the Owenite movement.¹¹ What has received far less attention, however, is that such pro-women arguments continued to be made in the newly forming Secularist societies from the 1850s onwards.

Freethinking Feminism

The emergence of an organised women's movement in the second half of the nineteenth century was in fact closely bound up with Freethinking networks. The women's movement in England is usually considered to have begun with the founding of the *English Woman's Journal* in 1858 by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Raynor Parkes, and their campaigning for the extension of women's educational and employment opportunities.¹² The name and idea for such a journal had actually first been raised by George Jacob Holyoake as early as 1847 in an article in the Secularist newspaper, *The Reasoner*, entitled 'Hints to the Advocates of the Rights of Women', in which he called for the founding of a journal devoted to discussing the 'woman question'.¹³

Later, Bessie Raynor Parkes consulted Holyoake about purchasing the magazine that became the *English Woman's Journal*. Numerous such links can be traced between these early pioneers of the women's movement and prominent Freethinkers, who were all part of the same overlapping social and political networks.

In the years that followed, the Freethought press, consisting of journals such as *The Reasoner*, *The National Reformer* and the *Secular Chronicle*, continued to support and advertise feminist initiatives.¹⁴ These journals also carried reports of local Secularist meetings, where one could read of female Secularists lecturing on the need for women to receive as good an education as their brothers, and to be allowed to enter the professions.¹⁵ On many issues Freethinking feminists made far more radical demands than those being advanced within the mainstream of the women's movement. In the 1860s, when the nationwide campaign for women's suffrage was only just beginning, the Freethinking feminist Harriet Law was already calling for universal suffrage for both men and women. In 1866 Law took her message to the streets, during the riots that erupted in Hyde Park when police attacked those demonstrating for franchise extension under the proposed Reform Bill. Law 'overcame one of the stern policemen' and was 'carried in triumph from place to place' by an enthusiastic crowd who forced her to continually address them on the political and social rights of women as well as men.¹⁶ Given that late into this period the women's suffrage movement was still arguing over whether they should call for the vote for married as well as single women, Law's position was an extremely radical one.

The Secularist newspaper *The National Reformer* also affirmed its commitment to female enfranchisement in 1866, and by the 1880s all but one of the Secularist leaders supported votes for women. Opposition to women's suffrage did exist within the rank and file of the movement, but a survey of local meeting reports suggests that such opposition was never voiced without facing counter-arguments. Certainly support for women's rights formed an important part of the self-consciously constructed identity of the Freethought movement. Secularists saw religion as the root of women's oppression, and viewed the Judeo-Christian Scripture as the founding text of female subordination—from which flowed all modern laws discriminating against women. Thus support for women's emancipation was not simply bolted on to Freethought, but lay right at the heart of the Secularist critique of Christianity.

If Secularism made such an important contribution to the women's movement, why then is Freethinking feminism so neglected in its histories? Freethought has received scant attention from historians of the post-1850 women's movement. It is entirely absent from such seminal works as Ray Strachey's *The Cause* (1928) and from the important overviews provided by Olive Banks, Jane Rendall, Philippa Levine and Barbara Caine.¹⁷ Five years after her first study of the women's movement, Olive Banks surveyed biographical data for ninety-eight women active in first-wave feminism and found that 32% were agnostics or Freethinkers. She noted this as significant, but although she suggested that 'religious scepticism and freethought represent an important tradition within feminism' it was not within the scope of her study to explore this further.¹⁸ Likewise, the Freethinking views of a few individual feminists have received some attention, but historians have tended to emphasise their idiosyncratic nature

rather than treating them as part of a wider trend among feminists during this period.¹⁹ Both Judith Walkowitz and Lucy Bland noted the presence of Freethinkers in campaigns around marriage and prostitution,²⁰ but the possibility of a broader and more sustained Freethinking feminist tradition has not yet been explored within the historiography of the women's movement.

Such lacunae are not simply attributable to the neglect of historians, but are reflective of the marginalisation of Freethinking feminists within the very movement in which they were so active. It is not the intention of this article to imply a clear dichotomy between Freethinking feminism and 'mainstream' feminism. As historians have pointed out, there were many 'feminisms' in the nineteenth century which often overlapped with each other, and Freethinking feminists participated in the key national women's rights campaigns of the period.²¹ Moreover, at least during the 1850s and 60s, the 'mainstream' women's movement was perhaps no larger than the Secularist movement. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century feminism was, on the whole, a Christian-dominated movement characterised by the crusading spirit of women such as the Church of England Evangelical Josephine Butler or the cautious reformism of the Anglican Emily Davies. Most women's rights campaigners were deeply concerned to present themselves as respectable, and Freethinking feminists represented an embarrassing reminder of the radical origins of the movement, posing a dangerous threat to its reputation.²² In the 1850s Bessie Raynor Parkes, for example, was happy to correspond with George Jacob Holyoake and to 'enjoy' copies of *The Reasoner*, even asking that it publish some translations of hers, but she was careful to ensure that her name was never printed in its pages, reminding Holyoake to 'carefully suppress' all mention of her.²³ Later in the century many feminists continued to be uncomfortable with the presence of Freethinkers in their movement. In 1874, for example, Annie Besant complained about people who wished to 'shut out' unbelievers from women's rights campaigns, having just come from a meeting to support the removal of women's electoral disabilities where anti-Secularist sentiments had been expressed.²⁴ Yet it was not simply the anti-Christian views of the Freethinkers that caused them to be shunned by many in the women's movement. Freethinking feminists were also considered a liability because they continued to discuss radical ideas on marriage and sexual morality.

Secularist Debates on Marriage and 'Free Unions'

Questions of sex were central to Secularism in the second half of the nineteenth century, for irreligion was irrevocably linked in the public mind with sexual licence. It is possible to trace the connection between religious and sexual unorthodoxies back to the radical dissenting sects of the English civil war, and through the Enlightenment and French Revolution, but in the early decades of the nineteenth century the link between Freethought and 'free love' was made explicit.²⁵ In 1826 leading Freethinker Richard Carlile had published *What is Love?*, which attacked Christian marriage and recommended that men and women enter into free unions, based only on love and sexual attraction, which could be dissolved at will. He subsequently left his wife Jane to enter into just such a 'moral union' with the Freethinking feminist Eliza Sharples. In the

1840s and 50s the Owenites fused these libertarian ideas with a more explicit and coherent feminist agenda, criticising ‘marriages of the priesthood’ for the manner in which they treated women as men’s possessions—a commercial transaction akin to prostitution. The Owenites thus called for more liberal divorce laws and marriages free from the sanction of Church and State, as well as communal living arrangements where all labour, including domestic chores, would be divided equally. Although many Owenites were keen to stress that they did not advocate libertinism or promiscuity, their opponents nevertheless portrayed them in such a manner, severely damaging the movement’s reputation and contributing to its collapse after 1845.

Historians have characterised the mid nineteenth century as a time of relative political stability and social conservatism compared to the momentous social, economic and political upheavals of the preceding decades. It has been argued that radical movements became increasingly concerned to present themselves as respectable during this time, with the working class turning away from utopian visions of a new moral world in favour of trade unionism and self-improvement.²⁶ The earlier desire to transform the social roles of men and women, and the ways in which they related to each other, disappeared from radical movements during this period.²⁷ To what extent did such a shift in attitudes apply to the Freethought movement?

Certainly when Holyoake founded the Secularist movement in 1851 he and fellow Freethinkers were concerned to present themselves as less antagonistic, more reasonable, and less sexually unorthodox than their Freethinking predecessors.²⁸ Some historians have laid great emphasis on how this urge to respectability produced far more conservative thinking on sexual morality among Freethinkers in the second half of the century. Michael Mason, especially, argued that Secularism was central to pushing what he called an ‘anti-sensualist’ agenda in Victorian debates on sexuality which promoted self-control or ‘repression’ rather than sexual liberation. While Mason rightly identified a strong current of anti-libertarian attitudes to sexuality within the Secularist movement, this article challenges his assumption that the intellectual culture of Freethought as a whole can be characterised simply as ‘anti-sensualist’, a category which is itself problematic in attempting to understand debates on sexuality during this period. Mason did not explain why, if Secularist ideology was the main bearer of anti-sensualist opposition to libertarian and libertine visions of sexuality, the very people that he identified as pushing for a more positive attitude to sexual liberation—Richard Carlile, George Drysdale, Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant—were also Freethinkers and Secularists. This article demonstrates that there were a number of aspects of Secularist ideology that easily lent themselves to arguing for a libertarian break with traditional sexual morality.²⁹

Undoubtedly the pressure to appear respectable weighed heavy on the Secularist movement and a retreat from earlier celebrations of ‘free love’ did occur. The marital status of leading Freethinking feminists at different points in the century is perhaps one indicator of this. Both Emma Martin and Annie Besant had been trapped in deeply unhappy marriages before becoming Freethinkers. On renouncing their Christian faith, both left their abusive husbands. But in the 1840s Emma Martin was able to form a free union with another man, and go on to have another child who she

raised alongside her daughters from her previous marriage. By the 1870s Besant found such an unconventional move impossible. Although she lived apart from her Christian husband, and although contemporaries believed she and Charles Bradlaugh were in love with each other, Bradlaugh and Besant never publicly attested to anything more than platonic friendship.³⁰ Yet a closer look at Secularist debates on marriage and sexual morality suggests that the shift in Freethinking attitudes to sexual morality from the first to the second half of the nineteenth century should not be over-determined. Rather than revealing the way in which the Secularist movement reflected a general trend towards social conservatism, what is more striking is the extent to which it resisted such a trend and continued to provide a forum to discuss alternative modes of organising heterosexual relations.

The reasons for this can be found within Freethought ideology. For however much they sought respectability, the post-1850 Secularists could not escape the fact that the sexual unorthodoxies of the preceding era had been founded upon fundamental Freethinking principles. Firstly, the Freethought renunciation of Christianity necessarily entailed a rejection of the moral authority of the Church, particularly its role in legitimising sexual relations. Secularists were therefore required to find a new basis for morality, and the topic of sex was at the centre of this project to establish new ethical criteria. Secondly, in some cases the Secularists' rejection of Christian asceticism and their emphasis on the material world could also lead to a positive attitude to physical passion in both men and women. Thirdly, the central Freethinking principle of free enquiry necessitated a commitment to open discussion of sexual matters. Secularists were compelled by their long-standing commitment to free speech and freedom of the press to represent a variety of differing opinions in the pages of their journals.

Almost as soon as the new Secular societies were founded in the early 1850s, the authors and correspondents of the leading Secularist journal, *The Reasoner*, set about considering the meaning, morality and feasibility of free love unions in a post-Owenite era. The term 'free union' could mean many things within the Secularist movement. In rejecting the religious ceremony of marriage, Freethinkers had by default to accept the legitimacy of some form of free union, though they fiercely debated how such unions should be defined and organised. George Jacob Holyoake remained committed to the need for more liberal divorce laws and the right of men and women to form unions free from the sanction of Church and State. In 1855 he wrote in *The Reasoner* that marriage might well be very 'respectable' but since the 'legal restrictions which marriage imposes upon women are so disrespectful ... marriage itself is not entitled to much respect'. In fact, far from wholly submitting to the pressure of respectability, Holyoake utilised such rhetoric subversively, arguing that Freethought ethics were morally superior to conventional Christian thinking on such matters.

Holyoake was primarily concerned for the security and freedom of women, in both marriages and free unions. He insisted that divorce under the existing system should be allowed so that women might escape abusive husbands, while if an alternative system of civil contracts were established it ought to ensure provision for children in the case of separations. He also opposed the current marriage laws because they introduced compulsion and coercion into relationships. 'We have not so poor an opinion of love',

he commented, 'as to agree to the doctrine that the policeman or the magistrate is necessary to enforce the attachment which affection has formed'. Holyoake argued that love was best left free and spontaneous and that marriage became 'odious' when it was made a 'tyranny'. Divorce for incompatibility of temperament should therefore also be permitted. Holyoake concluded that 'we ... have as much respect for the unmarried, as the married, *provided always* the affection is single, sincere, pure, honourable to relatives, and just to offspring'.³¹ According to such a view, Elizabeth Wolstenholme's union with Ben Elmy would have been entirely acceptable.

Other Freethinkers, however, took a very different position on free unions. One such was Francis Newman, a more religiously inclined Freethinker than Holyoake. He had already made a name for himself as author of *Phases of Faith*, published in 1850, which recorded his 'crisis of faith' and his journey from Evangelical Anglicanism to a form of Freethought. In a series of articles in *The Reasoner* in 1855, Newman maintained that in all societies throughout history, 'unchastity'—which he defined as sexual relations outside lifelong marriage—guaranteed the 'degradation' of women. No man could ever love a woman, he believed, who had herself loved another, and women themselves would become destitute if their husbands were permitted to cast them off as soon as their attentions strayed elsewhere.³² However, Newman did acknowledge that 'our existing laws do press hardly upon wives' who were unable to escape from 'tyrant' husbands, and he therefore struggled to imagine a morally viable alternative. Newman considered the case of Emma Martin and her free love union. After much deliberation, Newman concluded that he could not condemn Martin's actions, and yet he also believed that some kind of institutional body was required to determine which relationships were 'just and sacred' and which were merely 'promiscuous'. Newman's concerns arose from the recognition that, in contemporary society, 'Marriage is *not* ... a union of those who are like and equal ... the man has more to gain, the woman to lose: for many reasons the woman needs *protection* by society'.³³

Women's needs and position in society continued to be a central concern of many contributors to the Secularist debate on marriage. Their agenda was thus essentially the same as that of the rest of the women's movement, even though this led some to different conclusions regarding the degree to which marriage ought to be transformed. The majority of Christian feminists writing about marriage at this time shared Francis Newman's belief that women's extreme vulnerability to sexual exploitation ruled out any possibility for a freer system of love or marriage. Without reliable birth control and adequate educational and employment opportunities, unregulated sexual activity or even just more liberal divorce laws would increase for women the risk of abandonment and financial destitution. The women's movement did campaign for marriage reform, from the 1850s onwards, but focused instead on demanding that women have the same legal and property rights as men *within* marriage, rather than calling for free unions or emphasising women's right to leave unhappy marriages.³⁴ The possibility of women expressing their sexuality outside marriage was never a consideration of such campaigns.

Rather than argue for more freedom, most feminists called for greater self-control on the part of men. This was in response to the fact that the double sexual standard was

often justified on the grounds that the male sexual drive was stronger than that of the female and could not therefore be so easily suppressed. The Matrimonial Act of 1857, for example, permitted men to divorce their wives for adultery but did not grant the same right to women. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1867 and 1869—which introduced the state regulation of prostitution by forcing women suspected of soliciting to undergo medical checks and possible detention in ‘lock hospitals’—were devised on similar grounds, whereby supporters of the Acts argued that male sexual desire made prostitution a necessary evil.³⁵ The feminist campaign to repeal these Acts argued that, rather than make women the victims of male passion, men should conform to the same standards of chastity as women. The social purity movement, which emerged out of the repeal campaign and became a powerful force within the feminism of the 1880s and 90s, made such arguments even more forcefully and often favourably contrasted sexual self-restraint with unbridled physical passion.³⁶

The Secularists' continued support for some form of free unions, and their discussion of more libertarian views of sexuality thus cut against the prevalent atmosphere in the women's movement during this period. Freethinking feminist critiques of marriage continued apace with that of the rest of the women's movement into the 1860s and 70s, and many female Secularists put forward very similar arguments to those made by their Christian sisters. The need for intellectual companionship and equality in marriage was voiced by both Freethinking and Christian feminists, and in 1869 Harriet Law lectured on the subject of ‘Love, Courtship and Matrimony, greatly misunderstood and why’, arguing that men and women should allow friendship to develop before embarking upon marriage, and that if women were better educated, unions between the sexes could become equal partnerships.³⁷ Freethinking feminists also agreed with the rest of the women's movement on the need for women's greater autonomy and independence within marriage. Sara Hennell wrote in 1887 that ‘The girl adequately brought up must be at once fit to be married, and fit to live profitably alone’ and she condemned the idea that a married couple should become ‘one’ in the eyes of God. ‘The kind of love to be hoped for’, she argued, ‘has to ... [cease] to merge the womanhood of the wife into the character of a mere adjunct to the man's nature’.³⁸ Such a belief also motivated the campaign for the right of married women to hold property, which involved many Freethinking women.³⁹

Throughout this period, however, the Freethought movement also continued to provide a space for debating the more controversial subjects of divorce, free love unions and the viability of lifelong monogamy—subjects that the mainstream women's movement generally felt unable to discuss. Secularists put forward a historicised and relativist account of marriage which opposed any notion of it as a sacred or even inherently desirable institution. By 1887 Sara Hennell was arguing that the prevailing system of Christian marriage was the result of the development of a system of private property and that polygamy had only given way to monogamy in order to ensure that property was kept within the family. Monogamy had not, therefore, been initially conceived out of respect for connubial love or the wifely role, but from ‘the gross covetousness of clutching firmly by worldly property’.⁴⁰ Modern ‘Christian marriage’ was, according to Hennell, merely a sentimentalised version of the commercial transactions that had

taken place in earlier societies, so that ‘the idea of sale and purchase in fact lurks throughout our own form of marriage contract’.⁴¹ In the 1850s Sara Hennell had remained close friends with George Eliot after Eliot entered into a free union with the still-married George Lewes, and Hennell later came to advocate a form of ‘natural marriage’ to replace that of the Christian Church. The new ceremony would replace the ‘giving away’ of the bride with a declaration that the woman was to be married to a man of her own choice. Yet she also believed that a married couple had a strong duty towards their children, which meant that any contract between them should be binding, even if ‘affective passion’ had disappeared.

In contrast to Hennell, Annie Besant believed that it was possible for both virtue and happiness to flourish under a more liberalised system of marriage laws. Besant used the familiar Freethought technique—similar to that employed by Holyoake in his 1855 article on free unions—of assuming a moral high ground from which to advocate practices that the majority of people would perceive as dangerously immoral. In a series of articles first published in 1876, Besant insisted that she ‘reverenced’ marriage before going onto explain that:

marriage is different as regarded from the Secularist and from the Christian point of view ... [the Secularist] regards marriage as something far higher than a union ‘blessed’ by a minister; he considers also that marriage ought to be terminable like any other contract, when it fails in its object and becomes injurious instead of beneficial.⁴²

Loveless marriages, Besant argued, led to immoral practices, whereas ‘More reasonable marriage laws would ... tend to lessen prostitution. Reasonable facility to divorce would tend to morality’.⁴³ This was to reiterate arguments put forward by the Owenite feminists in the 1830s and 40s—that the binding nature of the marriage contract produced vice by encouraging men to seek their pleasure among prostitutes, making women the victims of deception and disease.

This argument took on a new significance in the 1870s in the context of feminist opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts. One of the campaign’s main concerns was that ‘innocent’ wives were catching venereal diseases from their husbands. Besant, like many other Freethinking feminists, was involved in the campaign to repeal these laws, but her analysis was far more radical than that of her fellow repealers. The dominant message of the repeal campaign was that men should adhere to the same standards of morality as women, and remain chaste until they married. Besant, by contrast, argued that chastity was not a solution to the problem of prostitution, for it denied the natural expression of sexuality: ‘the enforcement of celibacy on vigorous men always results in libertinage, whether among celibate priests or celibate soldiers’. Moreover, she proclaimed that ‘[the Secularist] does not despise human passion, or pretend that he has no body; on the contrary, reverencing nature, he regards physical union as perfecting the union of the heart and mind’.⁴⁴ The Freethought celebration of the material world over the spiritual, and their belief that health and happiness were adequately guarded by natural laws, had clearly influenced Besant’s arguments.⁴⁵

Other female Freethinkers also took a more tolerant approach to extra-marital relationships or free unions. Harriet Law, for example, printed a large portrait of Mary

Wollstonecraft on the front page of the *Secular Chronicle* in 1878. This was accompanied by an enthusiastic biography written by Harriet Law's daughter, who shared her mother's Freethinking feminist politics.⁴⁶ In the context of the mid-nineteenth-century women's movement, this was a daring move. For as Barbara Caine has described, Victorian feminism, having consciously decided to take a cautious approach to questions of sexual morality, omitted any reference to eighteenth-century feminist pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft from their writings. This was, of course, because Wollstonecraft had engaged in pre-marital affairs and had given birth to an illegitimate daughter.⁴⁷ It seems that Freethinking feminists were more willing than their Christian sisters in the women's movement to at least tolerate and consider alternative modes of organising sexual relations.

Conclusion: rethinking Victorian feminism and sexuality

To bring this alternative Freethinking feminist approach into view is to suggest a rethinking of nineteenth-century feminist attitudes to sexuality. This article has gestured throughout to an accepted chronology on the subject: historians have tended to agree that while early-nineteenth-century feminists put forward radical critiques of marriage, advocating unions based on love and affection and the right to dissolve these unions, by the second half of the nineteenth century with the formation of an organised women's movement such arguments had disappeared. Feminists continued to critique the present marriage system, but they wished only to reform it, never to eradicate it. They continued to accept the religious and state-sanctioned definition of marriage, supported divorce only in the most exceptional of cases, and refused to countenance the possibility of women expressing their sexuality outside marriage. It is generally assumed that it was not until the 1880s and 90s that women's right to sexual pleasure and the possibility of greater sexual freedom began to be spoken of publicly again within the women's movement.⁴⁸

This article nuances such a narrative by demonstrating that the more radical ideas of the Owenite feminists were kept alive in the discussions that took place within the Freethought movement. Secularists *were* affected by the conservative climate of the middle decades of the century, but it is equally important to understand that they also made attempts to resist the closing down of space in which issues such as free unions and sexuality more generally could be discussed. At the very least Secularists kept conversations going on subjects deemed beyond the pale in other radical movements. Very occasionally, these ideas were put into practice, as in the case of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, whose decision to enter a free union needs to be situated within this long-standing Freethinking feminist tradition.

It is also possible to view Freethinking feminism as the 'missing link' between the sexual radicalism of the Owenites and free love ideas that began again to gain some wider currency towards the end of the century. Those *fin-de-siècle* feminists who became known for their more daring views on questions of female sexuality, such as Olive Schreiner and Louise Atkins, were almost invariably Freethinkers, though not directly associated with organised Secularism.⁴⁹ Similarly, Mona Caird drew on Freethinking

ideas when she made her infamous attack on marriage in the *Westminster Review* (1888), provoking the debate in the *Daily Telegraph* on the question 'Is Marriage a Failure?'⁵⁰ When Caird argued that the Christian marriage had developed out of primitive barbarism, and advocated instead contracts between men and women free from religious or state sanction, she was reiterating arguments put forward by her Freethinking predecessors decades earlier.⁵¹

Subsequently, some of the best-known advocates of 'free love' in the period following the one dealt with in this article were Freethinkers or closely related to the Freethought movement. Grant Allen's New Woman novel, for example, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), became famous for its celebration of free unions, featuring a heroine whose rejection of married life was inseparable from her Freethought.⁵² Similarly, the Legitimation League, home to *The Adult: A Journal of Sex*, which in 1897 dedicated itself to the education of public opinion 'in the direction of freedom in sexual relationships', had been founded by a group of Leeds Secularists.⁵³ In the twentieth century, leading Secularists (including Charles Drysdale and Guy Aldred) also contributed to the feminist journal the *Freewoman* (1911–12), which was banned in all branches of W. H. Smith for its open discussion of sex.⁵⁴ Having traced a more continuous connection between Freethought, free love and feminism, this article suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the anti-religious intellectual context in which such arguments were made.

A rejection of Christian morality propelled Secularists into imagining new ways for men and women to love and desire each other. And, in an atmosphere of iconoclasm, free and earnest discussion and a genuine commitment to female emancipation, they were able to do so at a time when other feminists remained silent on this subject. Freethought thus provided a framework, or a language, in which conventional sexual morality might be rejected without necessarily endorsing a cynical amorality, which for women spelt only sexual danger and exploitation. The Secularist emphasis on creating a new and better morality provided a way for some Freethinkers to posit a feminist alternative to Christian repression and hypocrisy on questions of love, sex and marriage. Historians have long noted that religion sat at the heart of nineteenth-century feminism, but the question of irreligion has never warranted more than a brief mention, and a continuous tradition of Freethinking feminism has not, until now, been explored. This discussion of the importance of anti-religious ideas to the emergence of more libertarian feminist attitudes to sexuality maintains that we need to extend our analysis of the relationship between religion and feminism in order to incorporate heterodox, Freethinking and Secularist critiques.

Notes

- [1] S. S. Holton (1994) Free Love and Victorian Feminism: the diverse matrimonials of Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy, *Victorian Studies*, 37(2), pp. 199–222. For Wolstenholme's free union, see also L. Bland (1995) *Banishing the Beast: English feminism and sexual morality, 1885–1914* (London: Penguin); S. S. Holton (1996) *Suffrage Days: stories from the women's suffrage movement* (London and New York: Routledge).

- [2] Quoted in Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 134. Bland found that 'Most feminists disagreed with "free unions"', pp. 153–154.
- [3] The importance of this wider context to Wolstenholme's free union was briefly noted by Holton, but she did not explore it further; Holton, 'Free Love and Victorian Feminism'.
- [4] M. Wright (2007) *Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy: a biography* (PhD, University of Portsmouth); M. Wright (2009) 'An Impudent Intrusion?' Assessing the Life of Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, First Wave Feminist and Social Reformer (1833–1918), *Women's History Review*, 18(2), pp. 243–264.
- [5] For the history of organised Freethought, see E. Royle (1974) *Victorian Infidels: the origins of the British Secularist movement 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); S. Budd (1977) *Varieties of Unbelief: atheists and agnostics in English society 1850–1950* (London: Heinemann); E. Royle (1980) *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press); J. Weiner (1983) *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press); D. Nash (1992) *Secularism, Art and Freedom* (Leicester: Leicester University Press).
- [6] For women in Carlile's movement, see C. Parolin (2008) 'The She-Champion of Impiety': a case study of female radicalism, in M. Davis & P. Pickering (Eds) *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform* (Aldershot: Ashgate) pp. 185–199.
- [7] For Freethinkers in the Owenite Movement, see J. F. C. Harrison (1969) *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: the quest for the new moral world* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul); B. Taylor (1983) *Eve and the New Jerusalem: socialism and feminism in the nineteenth century* (London: Virago).
- [8] S. Shipley (1971) *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London*, History Workshop Pamphlets no. 5.
- [9] S. S. Hennell: (1857) *Christianity and Infidelity: An Exposition of the Arguments on Both Sides. Arranged According to a Plan Proposed by George Baillie Esq.* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co.); (1859) *Essay on the Sceptical Tendency of Butler's 'Analogy'* (London: John Chapman); (1860) *Thoughts in Aid of Faith, Gathered Chiefly from Recent Works in Theology and Philosophy* (London: George Manwaring); (1874) *On Need of Dogmas in Religion. A Letter to Thomas Scott* (n.p.); (1865, 1873, 1887) *Present Religion as Faith Owning Fellowship with Thought*, 3 vols (London: Trubnor & Co.)
- [10] Other female feminists prominent in the Freethought movement include the writer and journalist Sophia Dobson Collet (1822–94) and Kate Watts (1847/8–1924), lecturer, journalist and wife of leading Freethinker Charles Watts.
- [11] For Freethinking feminism in the first half of the nineteenth century, see G. Malmgreen (1978) *Neither Bread, Nor Roses: Utopian feminists and the English working class, 1800–1850* (Brighton: Noyce); I. McCalman (1980) Females, Feminism and Free Love in an Early Nineteenth Century Radical Movement, *Labour History*, 38, pp. 1–25; H. Rogers (1998) The Prayer, the Passion and Reason of Eliza Sharples: Freethought, women's rights and republicanism, in E. Yeo (Ed.) *Radical Femininity: women's self-representation in the public sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 52–78; Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*.
- [12] B. Caine (1997) *English Feminism 1780–1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). See also J. Rendall (1987) 'A Moral Engine'? Feminism, Liberalism and the English Woman's Journal, in J. Rendall (Ed.) *Equal or Different: women's politics 1800–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 112–138.
- [13] *The Reasoner (Reasoner)*, 3(63), pp. 429–437 [N.B. Copies of *The Reasoner* for 1847–8 are not individually dated, only volume and number are listed.]
- [14] For example, the women's employment registry set up by the Langham Place group, and the Victoria Discussion Society, founded by feminist Emily Faithfull, were advertised. See *Reasoner* (8 April 1860), p. 58; *The National Reformer (NR)* (31 Oct. 1869), p. 279.
- [15] See, for example, *NR* (16 May 1869), p. 316, (11 Dec. 1870), p. 396.

- [16] NR (6 May 1866), p. 285, (29 July 1866), p. 72.
- [17] R. Strachey (1928) *The Cause: a short history of the women's rights movement in Great Britain* (London: G. Bell & Sons); Olive Banks (1981) *Faces of Feminism: a study of feminism as a social movement* (Oxford: Martin Robertson); Rendall, "A Moral Engine"?; J. Rendall (Ed.), *Equal or Different*; P. Levine (1990) *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: private roles and public commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell); Caine, *English Feminism*. Historians of Freethought have also failed to explore this feminist current within the nineteenth-century movement. Edward Royle gave one chapter over to 'Women, Sex and Birth Control' in his study of the Secularist movement—see Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*—but nevertheless noted many years later that this was still a woefully under-explored area; E. Royle (1995) Freethought: the religion of irreligion, in D. G. Paz (Ed.) *Nineteenth-Century English Religious Traditions. retrospect and prospect* (London: Greenwood Press), pp. 170–196.
- [18] O. Banks (1986) *Becoming a Feminist: the social origins of 'first wave' feminism* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf). Banks found that Freethought was the second most likely religious affiliation for feminists. Those who were actively religious made up 40% of those she surveyed. Banks therefore concluded that a 'wide variety of religious beliefs ... [were] compatible with feminism', pp. 14–15.
- [19] Anne Besant, the best known of the Freethinking feminists, has often been treated by historians as unique and idiosyncratic, whose ever-shifting views have been seen as an expression of her distinctive personality rather than representative of ideas in wider society; see A. H. Nethercot (1960) *The First Five Lives of Anne Besant* (Chicago: Chicago University Press). Frances Power Cobbe is another leading feminist whose Freethinking views have sometimes been commented upon without linking them to a wider frame of reference. Sandra Peacock situates Cobbe within the Victorian Crisis of Faith but does not discuss the existence of other Freethinking feminists; S. J. Peacock (2002) *The Theological and Ethical Writings of Frances Power Cobbe, 1822–1904* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press). Barbara Caine noted the importance of the connection between Cobbe's feminism and her Freethinking beliefs but although she positioned these in relation to Christian women's religious experiences she did not identify the existence of a distinctive Freethinking feminist tradition; B. Caine (1992) *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); see also B. Caine (1994) Feminist History and Feminist Biography, *Women's History Review*, 3(2), pp. 247–261.
- [20] J. Walkowitz (1980) *Prostitution and Victorian Society: women, class and the state* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Bland, *Banishing the Beast*.
- [21] Kathryn Gleadle stressed how 'different feminisms blurred and overlapped' in the early Victorian period; see K. Gleadle (2000) 'Our Several Spheres': middle-class women and the feminisms of Victorian radical politics, in K. Gleadle & S. Richardson (Eds) *Women in British Politics 1760–1860: the power of the petticoat* (Basingstoke: Macmillan), pp. 134–152, pp. 139–140.
- [22] Caine, *English Feminism*. See S. S. Holton, *Suffrage Days*, for Emily Davies's concern that the suffrage campaign not be associated with the agitation surrounding the Reform Bill in which Harriet Law participated.
- [23] Bessie Raynor Parkes to George Jacob Holyoake, 30 Jan. 1857, Manchester, Cooperative Union Archive, Holyoake Collection, 888.
- [24] NR (20 Dec. 1874), pp. 389–390.
- [25] Although, as Taylor points out, the trajectory remains largely 'unmapped', a connection between irreligion and sexual radicalism in England stretches back to the seventeenth-century dissenting sects; B. Taylor (2003) *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Certainly, by the eighteenth century a minority of radical Freethinking reformers were promoting 'enlightened libertinage'; see, for example, P. Annet (1749) *Social Bliss Considered*; T. Holcroft (1792) *Anna St. Ives*; W. Godwin (1793) *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*; H. Kitchner (1812) *Letter on Marriage*; J. Lawrence

(1811) *The Empire of the Nairs*; Dr Thomas Bell (1821) *Kalognymia*. For a discussion of such writings, see M. L. Bush (1998) *What Is Love? Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex* (New York and London: Verso); G. Frost (2008) *Living in Sin: cohabiting as husband and wife in nineteenth-century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

- [26] J. Belcham (1996) *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Macmillan).
- [27] R. Porter & L. Hall (Eds) (1995) *The Facts of Life: the creation of sexual knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press). Similarly, Ginger Frost suggested that between roughly 1850 and 1880 radicals were more careful about how they expressed their opposition to the current marriage system, and tended to avoid unconventional domestic arrangements themselves; see Frost, *Living in Sin*.
- [28] Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans*.
- [29] M. Mason (1994) *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press). Moreover, Mason ignored the importance of feminism to Freethought responses to the *Elements of Social Science* which in fact reveal opposition to the work to have been far more complex and multifaceted than the term 'anti-sensualism' suggests. Mason has been widely criticised for ignoring the importance of feminist contributions to wider nineteenth-century thinking on sexuality; see, for example, M. Vicinus (1995) Review of Michael Mason's *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* and *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*, *Journal of Social History*, 29(2), pp. 470–472; F. Mort & L. Nead (1996) Sexuality, Modernity and the Victorians, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 1(1), pp. 118–130; J. Bristow (1996) Respecting Respectability: 'Victorian Sexuality' and the Copulatory Imagination, *History Workshop Journal*, 41, pp. 286–292.
- [30] Florence Fenwick Miller was acquainted with both Bradlaugh and Besant and was certain that they were in love, though prevented from marrying; see F. Fenwick Miller, 'An Uncommon Girlhood' (unpublished autobiography), pp. 12–13, London, Wellcome Library, GC/228 [NB: the pagination for this work is inconsistent].
- [31] *Reasoner* (15 July 1855), pp. 121–122.
- [32] *Ibid.* (20 May 1855), p. 60.
- [33] *Ibid.* (1 July 1855), p. 108.
- [34] The first organised campaign for marriage reform was sparked off by the publication of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854), which led the Law Amendment Society to introduce a Married Women's Property Bill to Parliament that proposed to allow wives the same right as single women to make a will and hold property. See also P. Levine (1989) 'So Few Prizes and So Many Blanks': marriage and feminism in later nineteenth-century England, *Journal of British Studies*, 28, pp. 150–174.
- [35] Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.
- [36] However, Christian feminists were, like the Freethinking feminists, highly critical of conventional sexual morality and there were similarities as well as differences in the ways in which the two approached sexuality. Both the Christian social purity feminist Elizabeth Blackwell and the Secularist Ben Elmy wrote sex education manuals in the belief that ignorance was an evil and that women equipped with knowledge of their reproductive functions would be less vulnerable to sexual exploitation. (NB: the authorship of sex education manuals published under the pen-name 'Ellis Ethelmer' is disputed. Margaret Jackson believed they were written by Elizabeth Wolstenholme, Lucy Bland suggested that Ben Elmy was the author but that Elizabeth probably helped to write them, while Wolstenholme's most recent biographer believes that Ben Elmy was the sole author; see M. Jackson (1994) *The Real Facts of Life: feminism and the politics of sexuality c.1850–1940* (London: Taylor & Francis); Bland, *Banishing the Beast*; Wright, *Wolstenholme Elmy*.) For Victorian feminist attitudes to sexuality, see Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*; S. Jeffreys (1985) *The Spinster and Her Enemies: feminism and sexuality 1880–1930* (London: Pandora Press); S. Kingsley Kent (1987) *Sex and Suffrage in Britain, 1860–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press);

- Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*; Bland, *Banishing the Beast*; H. Cook, *The Longest Revolution: English women, sex, and contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); L. A. Hall (Ed.) (2005) *Outspoken Women: an anthology of women's writing on sex, 1870–1969* (London: Routledge).
- [37] NR (21 Feb. 1869), p. 125, (25 April 1869), p. 267. This was also addressed in Annie Besant's very first lecture on *The Political Status of Women*, and by Kate Watt's series of articles on female education which appeared in the *Secular Review*; see A. Besant, *The Political Status of Women*, 3rd edn (London: Freethought Publishing Co., 1874[?], repr. J. Saville (1970) (Ed.) *A Selection of the Social and Political Pamphlets of Annie Besant. With a Preface and Biographical Notes by John Saville* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley); *Secular Review* (SR), 27 Sept. 1879, pp. 193–194, 4 Oct. 1879, pp. 212–214, 18 Oct. 1879, pp. 246–247.
- [38] S. S. Hennell, *Present Religion* iii (1887), pp. 351–353, 348–349.
- [39] *The National Reformer* lauded the success of the 1870 Married Women's Property Bill, though it noted that it did not meet all the feminists' demands, and they lent their support to Wolstenholme's continued campaign. For example, see NR, 28 Aug. 1870, p. 135, 18 Aug. 1874, p. 251, 21 Jan. 1877, p. 39, 18 Mar. 1877, p. 166–167.
- [40] Hennell, iii (1887), p. 307.
- [41] *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- [42] A. Besant (1885) *The Legalisation of Female Slavery in England* (London: Besant & Bradlaugh), p. 8. First published as a series of articles in *The National Reformer*, 4 June 1876, pp. 352–353, 18 June 1876, pp. 387–388.
- [43] Besant, *Female Slavery*, p. 8.
- [44] *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 2.
- [45] In this sense, Besant can be seen as working within the same tradition as George Drysdale whose *Elements of Social Science; or, Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion by a Graduate of Medicine* (1854) is now viewed as one of the key texts of Victorian sexual libertarianism; see M. J. Benn (1992) *The Predicaments of Love* (London: Pluto Press); Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes*. A freethinker, Drysdale had, like Besant here, emphasised the need to reject Christian asceticism in favour of a focus on the natural world and physical passions, leading him to argue for free sexual experimentation for both men and women.
- [46] *Secular Chronicle* (SC), 31 Mar. 1878, pp. 145–146.
- [47] Caine, *English Feminism*, pp. 96–97.
- [48] For example, see G. Robb (2006) Marriage and Reproduction, in H. G. Cocks & M. Houlbrook (Eds) *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 87–108. This short overview discusses 'free love feminism' as a late nineteenth and early twentieth century reaction against the 'social purity feminism' of the Victorian era (p. 96).
- [49] In 1885, for example, the freethinker Dr Louisa Atkins declared herself to be 'very decided that men and woman are not different in strength of sexual feeling'; see Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 16–18. Atkins was a member of the explicitly secular Men and Women's Club, which committed itself to discussing subjects 'from the historical and scientific, as distinguished from the theological standpoint'; Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 4–5. Olive Schreiner also agreed that women's capacity for sexual desire was equal to that of men, arguing that sex should not necessarily be tied to reproduction and that a woman over thirty ought to be allowed to have a child even if she were not married; see Jackson, *The Real Facts of Life*.
- [50] She referred to Karl Pearson's essay on the 'Woman Question' in his *Ethic of Freethought* (1888).
- [51] *Westminster Review*, 130 (Aug. 1888), pp. 186–201, Nov. 1888, pp. 617–636; M. Caird, *The Morality of Marriage and Other Essays* (London: George Redway, 1897); Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 126–130.
- [52] G. Allen (1895) *The Woman Who Did* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

- [53] E. Royle, *Religion, Radicalism and Freethought in Victorian and Edwardian Britain: collection of periodicals 1834–1916. Contents of the Microfilm Collection with an Introduction by Dr. Edward Royle* (Wakefield: EP Microform, 1981). For the Legitimation League, see Bland, *Banishing the Beast*.
- [54] Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 265–271; L. Bland (1995) Heterosexuality, Feminism and *The Freewoman* Journal in Early-Twentieth-Century England, *Women's History Review*, 4(1), 5–23.

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