

## CHAPTER I

### *Sexual Ideology and the 'Nature' of Woman, 1880–1900*

The sexual ideology and practices of the English bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth century have been widely documented and examined by twentieth-century sociologists and historians.<sup>1</sup> They have shown basic agreement about certain features: the polarisation of women into the chaste and the depraved, the virgin and the whore; the virginity ethic, manifested alike in the fierceness with which 'innocence' was protected in the young and adult woman, and in the 'defloration mania' which dominated English brothels in the 1880s, occasioning widespread child prostitution and a flourishing trade in the surgical reconstruction of the hymen;<sup>2</sup> the double standard; the interdependence of monogamous marriage and the prevalence of prostitution. The general picture emerges of a sexuality at once furtive and dismal, in which wives submit pleasurelessly to the act of procreation in darkened rooms, while men seek sexual gratification in fantasy and with prostitutes:

It was a morality which fostered prurience and hypocrisy. From the stronghold of the chaste, monogamous family it enabled the individual to fulminate against all vicious living while clandestinely he sowed his wild oats. It encouraged wives to become sexual ninnies while their husbands contracted venereal disease. It hounded "fallen" women to become whores in the name of God.<sup>3</sup>

In such a view, sexuality is not merely unspoken, but literally unspeakable; prudery, hypocrisy, and pruriently excessive linguistic delicacy have repeatedly been identified as the hallmarks of Victorian debate on the issues of sex and marriage, and fiction has been frequently advanced in evidence of such an interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, during the later part of the century, there was an enormous growth in the amount of public discussion concerning these supposedly taboo subjects: the debate over the

Matrimonial Causes Act and the subsequent detailed reporting of divorce cases; the Campaign for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts; the issue of child prostitution, Stead's 'Maiden Tribute' articles, and the raising of the age of consent; the 'marriage question' and the problem of 'surplus' women; the Wilde trial and the free union fiction of the 1880s and 1890s – in all these instances, the debate was open and prolonged, in newspapers, essays and fiction, in the courts and the Houses of Parliament, in public meetings and organisations. By the end of the century, the period is notable not so much for the avoidance of such subjects, as for the way in which private sexual experience comes to be publicly spoken. Michel Foucault has characterised 'Walter', the unidentified pseudonymous author of *My Secret Life*, as the Victorian *par excellence*, compulsively doubling his sexual life through narration.<sup>5</sup> It is important, however, to notice that this 'speaking' of sexuality takes particular, well-defined forms: this period represents the decisive shift of sexuality from the area of moral discourse to that of the scientific, a shift which has brought sexuality in the twentieth century under the dominance of the psychoanalytic. A growing medicalisation of sexuality interacted with the far-reaching influence of Darwin's accounts of evolution and its agents to make of science an instrument of social intervention which apparently offered its own guarantees of success. The seeming dispassionate incontrovertibility of scientific law afforded a deceptively simple means of social progress: it would suffice to act in harmony with that which was biologically ordained. There emerged with increasing prominence an ideology of the 'natural' whose workings provide an ironic contrast to the naive optimism of such contemporary apostrophes to science as this by Ellis Ethelmer:

Source of the Light that cheers this later day,  
Science calm moves to spread her sovereign sway;  
Research and Reason, ranged on either hand,  
Proclaim her message to each waiting land;<sup>6</sup>

The transfer from biological law and organisation to social, which seems so obviously metaphorical, is sometimes made with a directness so explicit as to make 'organicism' a barely adequate characterisation:

As, however, we cannot always calculate, before deciding on any course of action, what will be the best for the community, in general it is safest to be guided by our healthy natural instincts, and to do the work we wish to do. . . . Our instincts have been given us by Nature, and Nature always knows what is best for us. There are cases of course, in which these instincts have been perverted by the influence of civilisation. These must be corrected by education; and here science comes in.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of the medicalisation of sexuality can be traced back to the eighteenth century, and seems to have begun with the presentation of masturbation as a disease, or at the least, a symptom. The earliest known work to connect masturbation and organic disease, *Onania: or, the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution, And all its Frightful Consequences, in Both Sexes consider'd, &c* (1710?) makes no attempt at a medical account of the connection, but rather, as its title indicates, treats disease as a kind of secular equivalent of punishment for sin.<sup>8</sup> Later works, such as Samuel Tissot's *L'onanisme* (1760), try to trace the connection in somewhat random pseudo-scientific ways. By the first half of the nineteenth century, the link between sexuality and medicine has been firmly established, and manifests itself in various ways. It reinforces, for example, the institutionalising of childbirth, with the female midwife giving way to the male technician, the obstetrician, and the vast battery of instruments available to the newly established specialist.<sup>9</sup> The medical establishment came to combine the moral authority of the church with the apparent irrefutability of the scientist. A corresponding sexualisation of medical practice sometimes accompanied this medicalisation of sexuality: the dangers inherent in intimately physical contact between male specialist and female patient exercised some authorities; one medical textbook solemnly warns of the corrupting effect of internal examination:

I have, more than once, seen young unmarried women, of the middle-classes of society, reduced, by the constant use of the speculum, to the mental and moral condition of prostitutes; seeking to give themselves the same indulgence by the practice of solitary vice; and asking every medical practitioner, under whose care they fell, to institute an examination of the sexual organs.<sup>10</sup>

A further manifestation of this medicalisation is the emergence of a whole technology of sexuality: anti-masturbation devices

for males, such as cages lined with spikes or locked by parents, contraceptive devices for women like the Vertical and Reverse Current Vaginal Tube or the Irrigator, and the number of patent cures available to treat all manner of sexual problems.<sup>11</sup>

Science could bring ostensibly neutral and dispassionate observation to bear on the vexed issues of the female 'nature' and role; it is no coincidence that in doing so it frequently confirmed not only the long-standing diagnosis of irrationality, pettiness, vanity and inconsequentiality, but also the necessity of confining women to their traditional spheres of activity, home and family. The particular ideological strength of medical expertise was that it was able effortlessly to turn the normative into the rigidly prescriptive; the classic instance is Acton's often cited assertion, in 1862, of female sexual anaesthesia;

. . . there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in abeyance . . . and even if roused (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate compared with that of the male. . . . The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions.<sup>12</sup>

The normative generalisations ('in many instances', 'as a general rule') shade over into explicitly moral norms ('the best mothers', 'a modest woman'). It is worth noting that, although Acton's works on genital and venereal disease and on prostitution were long considered authoritative and were still being reprinted in the 1890s, there was at no stage unanimity among the medical establishment on this issue; a reviewer of Acton's works called attention to his account of female sexuality as

'unphysiological in the first place, and, moreover, experience proves the contrary; for, putting aside . . . the case of courtezans whose desires are a trade, there can be no doubt that both in the human subject and in the lower animals the female *does* participate fully in the sexual passion.'<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Acton himself seems to have been half aware that there was something wrong with this account, for the paragraph I have quoted concludes soothingly: 'No nervous or feeble

young man need, therefore, be deterred from marriage by any exaggerated notion of the duties required from him. The married woman has no wish to be treated on the footing of a mistress.' This version of woman's insensibility is quite evidently constructed by a male writer to allay the fears of a male readership – fears of sexual inadequacy, and of immoderate demands on the part of the woman, at least if she be of the 'mistress' variety. Underlying these fears is the sense of female insatiability as the obverse of female unresponsiveness, in the characteristically Victorian polarisation of women into Virgin and Whore, Lily and Rose, wife and mistress.

A similarly transparent ideological version of female sexuality can be seen in the other *locus classicus* of pre-Darwinian sexology, an anonymous article on prostitution in 1850. The writer argues for a more humane treatment and view of prostitutes, on the grounds that their very 'nature' shows them to be victims rather than debauched:

In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous, and belongs to the condition of puberty. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited; always till excited by undue familiarities; almost always till excited by actual intercourse. . . . Women whose position and education have protected them from exciting causes, constantly pass through life without ever being cognizant of the promptings of the senses. Happy for them that it is so! We do not mean to say that uneasiness may not be felt – that health may not sometimes suffer; but there is no consciousness of the cause.<sup>14</sup>

The writer at once denies and concedes the existence of sexual desire in women: it is absent, but it can cause 'uneasiness' and deterioration of the health. It is evidently not desire that does not exist, but recognition or acceptance of it, 'consciousness of the cause'. After this initial confusion, he is able to assert that there is no struggle for virtue in women: modesty, decency, chastity, are *inherent* female characteristics.<sup>15</sup> The ideal of innocence – protected by 'position and education', the attributes pre-eminently of the bourgeois woman – reveals itself as an ideal of ignorance and repression.

Darwinism, with the *Origin of Species* (1859), but more particularly with *The Descent of Man* (1871), imparted a new momentum to biologically deterministic views of the female 'nature'. Darwin's account of sexual selection worked from the

basis of a fixed polarity of male and female characteristics, at the level of physiology (the controversial question, for example, of absolute and relative difference of brain weight) and, by an unargued extension, at the level of mental characteristics:

It is generally admitted that with woman the powers of intuition, of rapid perception, and perhaps of imitation, are more strongly marked than in man; but some, at least, of these faculties are characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilisation.<sup>16</sup>

The use of phrases such as 'generally admitted' and 'perhaps', the blurring of social and biological causation implicit in the 'therefore', the use of unsupported empirical observation, and, elsewhere, of simple analogy between bodily and mental structures, are all typical of Darwin's method of argument in this account of mental sexual differences.<sup>17</sup>

Darwinism came fairly rapidly to dominate Victorian biology, but in doing so it posed certain problems for contemporary social theory and sociology. Sociologists from Spencer and Comte worked with biological models of social organisation clearly in mind, but laid a greater stress on environmental factors, or acquired characteristics, than the Darwinian emphasis on inherited characteristics would support. Thereafter, the newly dominant scientificism established a new ultimate authority, the ratification of the social *status quo* by the appeal to 'objective' and 'universal' physiological laws. The appeal to science shifts the site of the disabilities of women from history to nature, and in doing so, it undercuts the struggle of women against their oppression. It became necessary, in order to substantiate this appeal to scientific 'law', to supply the link, untheorised in Darwin, between physiological and psychological organisation. Weismann's influential notion of the 'germ-plasm', first available in English in 1882, was one attempt to do so, but it did not identify the locus of the differentiation of male and female mind and temperament. It distinguished, rather, between the unvarying transmissible characteristics of the 'germ-plasm' and the physiologically individualised 'soma', and this distinction was to lend weight to the claims of hereditarian eugenicists that reforms in welfare and social environment could not improve the nation's breeding-stock. Geddes and Thomson ascribed maleness and femaleness to a differentiation of cell-metabolism, between the 'katabolic'

(energy-dispersing) sperm and the 'anabolic' (energy-conserving) ovum, a difference which exercised a determining force over the development of body and mind.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, the periodicity of the female physiological processes of menstruation, pregnancy and lactation could act as the site of differentiation; Frederic Harrison, in an address on the anniversary of the death of Comte, cites menstruation as the reason for the disqualification of women from participation in some aspects of public life:

But there is one feature in the feminine organisation which, for industrial and political purposes, is more important than all. It is subject to functional interruption absolutely incompatible with the highest forms of continuous pressure. . . .

Supposing all other forces equal, it is just the five per cent. of periodical unfitness which makes the whole difference between the working capacity of the sexes.<sup>19</sup>

This urge to find a biological origin and function for the difference between the sexes and for their differing social roles can be seen in works which attempt an ambitious synthesis of physiology, psychology and sociology, such as Ferrero's *The Problem of Woman from a Bio-Sociological Point of View* (Turin, 1893) or Lombroso and Ferrero's *La donna delinquente, la prostituta, e la donna normale* (1893). The best-known English exponent is Havelock Ellis, whose organicist understanding of the connection between biological laws and social institutions finds lyrical expression in the invocation to science in the introduction to *The New Spirit* (1890):

We know that wherever science goes the purifying breath of spring has passed and all things are re-created. . . . We know at last that it must be among our chief ethical rules to see that we build the lofty structure of human society on the sure and simple foundations of man's organism.<sup>20</sup>

When he comes, in *Man and Woman* (1894), to attempt a close analysis of the physiological foundations of that 'lofty structure', he devotes a chapter to the different mental capacities of men and women. His conclusions are predictable – women are more diligent but less rational, quicker and more precocious, but much given to impulse and vanity. His method, however, is interesting – an extraordinary farrago of anthropological, sociological and physiological data. A symptomatic example is

his account, based on *La donna delinquente*, of the female tendency to deceitfulness: its causes include menstruation, which is disgusting and so obliges women to learn to conceal it, and the duties of maternity, since much of the education of the young consists in skilful lying.<sup>21</sup>

Some feminists, accepting the principle of inherent sexual differentiation, argued a different version of evolution (all too often echoing Darwin's cavalier use of 'fact' and evidence, however). Eliza Burt Gamble reviews Darwin's evidence and accepts unchallenged only his statement that pairing arouses distate in females; so she stresses the active role of females in the process of sexual selection in these terms: 'The female made the male beautiful that she might endure his caresses [sic].'<sup>22</sup> She concludes, in Lamarckian rather than Darwinian vein, that 'the diseases and physical disabilities of women' – presumably including menstruation – 'are due to the overstimulation of the animal instincts in her male mate' (p. 45). Ellis Ethelmer puts the same view more succinctly:

Action repeated tends to rhythmic course,  
And thus the mischief, due at first to force,  
Brought cumulative sequence to the race,  
Till habit bred hereditary trace;<sup>23</sup>

Edward Carpenter, too, argued that 'There is little doubt that menstruation, as it occurs today in the vast majority of cases, is somehow pathological and out of the order of nature.'<sup>24</sup>

The attempt to isolate biologically determined and innately differing male and female natures gave a spurious scientific underpinning to the double standard of sexual morality. Clement Scott, writing in 1894, can argue that men are 'born animals' and women 'angels', so that it is in effect only 'natural' for men to indulge their sexual appetites and, hence, perverse – 'unnatural' – for women to act in the same way.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the century, defenders of the double standard (heavily under attack from feminists of various kinds) were justifying it by the appeal to the laws of biology rather than the laws of property and inheritance which had figured prominently in, for example, debates over the grounds for divorce in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857.<sup>26</sup>

The Darwinistic evolutionary perspective is the impulse behind the widespread and growing concern, towards the end

of the century, with eugenics. The choice of a sexual partner, when biological inheritance is all and environment nothing, becomes a matter, not of personal emotion, but of public concern, for upon it depends the continuation and evolutionary progress of 'the race'. Eugenics seemed to offer a truly scientific method of social reform – and (an added advantage for reformists) one which posed no threat to existing institutions and practices; it held out the hope of simply breeding out mental and physical handicap, and such socially undesirable 'strains' as the criminal, the prostitute, even the idle and vicious. Existing kinds of social reform, on the other hand, could be seen as affording unnatural protection to inferior stock which would otherwise die out. Despite the progressive tinge it gained from its alliance with some sections of the contraceptive movement against religious orthodoxy, the reactionary nature of the eugenics movement is clear. It is rooted in the moral and political economy of Malthusianism, a doctrine whose class-interest is self-evident; some early propagandists for contraception argued that it could supplement or even replace trades unions by restricting the available supply of labour and so forcing up wages. Conversely, some eugenicists argued for tax relief as an incentive for middle-class (and biologically superior) couples to breed.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, for some, the eugenics movement appeared compatible with certain kinds of socialism. Edward Aveling, for example, draws a distinction between 'The poor who are thus from their own fault', and 'earnest workers' whose efforts to limit their family size are 'hindered . . . by Conservatives and Christians'. For him, any system of state aid to the poor is a misplaced endeavour:

But, one dreads whether there may not be to the end some few, that may in time come to be regarded as monsters, who finding they can obtain the necessities of life . . . with scarcely any exertion on their own behalf, will prefer, as to-day millions and millions prefer to remain stupid and vicious, and therefore poor. The whole of our criminal classes illustrate on an awful scale to-day that which I mean.<sup>28</sup>

'Stupid and vicious, and *therefore* poor': the phrase encapsulates a widespread argument of the eugenicists – an argument which contains nothing of socialism – that British society of the time offered so much scope for social mobility that a stubborn refusal to rise to fame, fortune, or at least respectability could be

ascribed only to the vices of indolence and stupidity. In effect, this is to displace the whole class-system of the period from economics to nature; it is no more than a biological justification for capitalism.

And yet, incongruously enough, it is an argument employed by Karl Pearson in support of a call for socialism:

I believe in the efficiency of society largely depending on the selection of better stocks, the removal or destruction of the less fit stocks. . . . Now my grave difficulty about Neo-Malthusianism is this: it tends to act in the better, in the physically or mentally fitter, ranks of society among the educated and thrifty of the middle and working classes. . . . While limiting the population we must, at the same time, ensure that the worst stock is the stock which is first and foremost limited. . . . I do not see how, without a strong Socialistic State, it will be possible.<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere, he provides a clue as the nature of those 'less fit stocks' that are to be removed or destroyed:

Shall those who are diseased, shall those who are nighest to the brute, have the right to reproduce their like? Shall the reckless, the idle, be they poor or wealthy, those who follow mere instinct without reason, be the parents of future generations? Shall the consumptive father not be socially branded when he hands down misery to his offspring, and inefficient citizens to the state?<sup>30</sup>

This 'branding', at first sight so obviously metaphorical, takes on a more sinister air when compared to the suggestion of Lady Cook (better known as Tennessee Claflin) that libertines and syphilitics should be branded or tattooed as a warning sign to innocent women.<sup>31</sup>

Such 'socialism' was double oppressive to women, placing a duty to breed on some women, and a duty not to on others, all on criteria of 'fitness' which are at best only a transparent disguise for the socio-economic characteristics of the bourgeoisie. Further, the preoccupation with biological inheritance and transmission tended also towards the containment of sexuality, and especially though not exclusively of female sexuality, within the area of procreation. This is manifested in the legislation of 1885 which criminalised even private sexual acts between adult males; in the subsequent hysteria of the Wilde trial; and in the reinforcement of opposition in some members of the medical establishment to contraception and abortion, insofar as they involved any degree of choice for

women. Even compulsory sterilisation for the 'unfit' was sometimes seen as justified.<sup>32</sup> An interventionist approach to fertility, whether legally or medically effected, could go no further.

Eugenics appealed, nevertheless, to many feminists, offering as it seemed a vital new channel for that 'influence' which women had long been supposed to exercise, however deviously or indirectly, over public events. The 'New Woman' fiction of the 1880s and 1890s is often concerned with the new mission of women, the moral reform of society by race-improvement. This eugenic mission promises a consoling fantasy of power without an unsettling challenge to the existing separation of male and female spheres of influence, in which the woman is consigned exclusively to marriage and motherhood. Such a view could only subvert, and not confront, the sexual double standard. Women had already been held responsible for the continuing existence of the double standard – by William Logan, for example:

And *how* is the vice of unchastity confined within boundaries so rigid in the case of the female sex? . . . it is because *even an unchaste man will marry none but a chaste woman*. . . . Let women in England look upon a proposal of marriage from a profligate man as men in England would regard a proposal of marriage with a Haymarket outcast . . . and unchastity in men will become as rare as it is in women.<sup>33</sup>

Such exhortations are moral; woman's mission to overthrow the double standard becomes in the last twenty years of the century almost a crusade, but the ground has again shifted from the moral to the scientific. If the eugenic work of race-progress by the careful choice of a marriage partner is taken seriously, then the dangers of unregulated, promiscuous breeding and of venereal disease extend beyond personal tragedy to generalised social threat. This sense of moral mission, combined with the simplistic, pre-genetic notion of transmission of characteristics (physical, psychological, moral, even economic, all jumbled together) on which eugenic theories were based, led many contemporary feminists to support the idea of state control of, or intervention in, fertility.

In all this discussion, women became central; but the effect of the emphasis on motherhood, which seems at times to have taken on all the reverence of a religious cult, was to make

synonymous women and ('fit') mothers, and hence to confirm their traditional roles. Women's rights were to be 'balanced' by duties, and both were to be discovered by careful attention to physiology and to evolutionary possibilities. Pearson again puts the argument:

We have first to settle what is the physical capacity of woman, what would be the effect of her emancipation on her function of race-reproduction, before we can talk about her "rights", which are, after all, only a vague description of what may be the fittest position for her, the sphere of her maximum usefulness in the developed society of the future. . . . Feminists must show that the emancipation will tend not only to increase the stability of society and the general happiness of mankind, but will favour the physique and health of both sexes.<sup>34</sup>

The spectre of 'degeneration' – a concept given particular prominence in and after Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (translated in 1895) – was an effective threat to hold over feminists who could not predict with 'scientific' certainty the effects of higher education or the vote upon the physiology of future generations. C. G. Harper (who singles out Hardy for the justice of his portraits of women) claims that

[N]ature, which never contemplated the production of a learned or a muscular woman, will be revenged upon her offspring, and the New Woman, if a mother at all, will be the mother of a New Man, as different, indeed, from the present race as possible, but *how* different the clamorous females of today cannot suspect . . . There is the prospect of peopling the world with stunted and hydrocephalic children.<sup>35</sup>

This kind of sociobiology, with its direct and unmediated connection between zoology and politics, dominated the sexual ideology of the last two decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

The attitudes of feminists to fertility and to contraception varied. Some leading suffragists, such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett, seem to have been unwilling to confront the issue, for fear of jeopardising such widespread acceptance as their aims of political and professional reforms had achieved. Those who discussed it publicly took a variety of positions, from the (temporary) radicalism of Annie Besant to the eccentric position of Frances Swiney, who held that semen was poisonous and accordingly advocated the spacing out of intercourse at two year intervals.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the support for contraception as a method of social engineering, among the Fabians or the

eugenicists like Jane Hume Clapperton,<sup>38</sup> some feminists, like Besant, supported it for libertarian reasons. Feminist opposition to contraception was based on a variety of grounds. Some felt that it deprived women of their significant, active role in the sexual relationship, reducing them to the passive objects of male lust; Elizabeth Blackwell supported Francis Newman in this line in their pamphlet *The Corruption Now Called Neo-Malthusianism* (1889). Josephine Butler and other 'Social Purity' campaigners sometimes combined a demand for male chastity with a more progressive feminist demand for a woman's right to defend herself against infection with venereal disease, selfish or excessive sexual demands, and over-frequent pregnancies. The medical establishment showed considerable reluctance to involve itself in recommending, explaining or providing methods of contraception or abortion; the first English doctor to do so publicly was Dr H. A. Allbutt, whose manual *The Wife's Handbook* (1885) eventually led to his being struck off the Register in 1887. Consequently, they remained largely a para-medical phenomenon, and as a result often placed women at the mercy of false information, quacks, and (in the case of abortifacients) blackmailers or legal prosecution. This places in a rather more rational light the argument, in Carpenter and elsewhere, that there was a possible danger to women's health in the use of artificial methods of fertility control, usually on the grounds of the supposed absorptive ability of the female cells; Frances Newman quotes Blackwell to the effect that 'Her internal structure fights against the success of unnatural arts; her tissues imbibe any poisonous drug, and resent the absence of what is natural.'<sup>39</sup> The anti-contraception writer Ussher provides medical 'evidence' from several sources that artificial birth control will cause hysteria, sterility and still-births. In the light of such arguments, temperance and self-control were often recommended, as by Ellis Ethelmer.<sup>40</sup> More helpfully, the use of the 'safe' period was sometimes advised; Carpenter describes it as natural and practicable, if not certain.<sup>41</sup> In fact, it was an even more unreliable method than it is now, since it was generally thought that conception was most likely to occur immediately before or after the menstrual period.<sup>42</sup> Other 'natural' methods delegated to men the responsibility for preventing conception. Withdrawal seems to have been acceptable even to opponents

of artificial methods, and was practised by W. T. Stead, a leading purity campaigner.<sup>43</sup> The Oneida Colony's method, *coitus reservatus*, was publicised in England by Alice B. Stockham's *Karezza: Ethics of Marriage* (1896) and by the fiction and essays of George Noyes Miller, who commends it thus:

It is not only intrinsically pure and innocent, but in teaching self-control and true temperance, without asceticism, it powerfully reacts for good on the whole character. It is not a merely nugatory device but a splendid stimulus to spirituality.<sup>44</sup>

It is, he claims, good for the physical health of both participants: the woman is spared the undue strains of repeated pregnancies, and the man gains an increase in 'magnetic, mental and spiritual force' from the reabsorption of the semen into his blood.<sup>45</sup> There is also evidence that some women were prepared to take sole control over their own fertility; several contemporary advertisements for the less cumbersome female methods of contraception, pessaries and diaphragm, stressed as a selling point the fact that they could be used without the husband's knowledge.

The increased availability and reliability of contraception gave women a greater chance than before of controlling the formidable biological *donnée* of their reproductive potential. At the same time, however, the mutations of sexual ideology during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century are such that the authority of Christian morality, which at once provokes and leaves room for opposition on both individualist and collectivist grounds, gives way to the apparently universal and incontrovertible authority of biological law. Evolution effectively replaces God as origin and goal of moral behaviour, and merges together the moral and the 'natural'. Opposition, in this case, is disarmed or underestimated by the appeal to the 'nature' of women, fixed by an evolutionary process which defers possibilities of change into an unforeseeable, far-distant future. The eugenic movement recuperated some of the energy of the feminist protest into a long-term strategy for change that was only another version of the doctrine of female influence exercised through maternal function which had informed the earlier, predominantly moral ideology of sexual roles. The sexual ideology of the time cannot be adequately described or explained by what Foucault calls '*l'hypothèse répressive*';<sup>46</sup> there is

no pre-existing given, 'the sexuality of women', which is suppressed or diverted by an external force. Rather, sexuality is constructed through the identification of female reproductive potentialities and the 'nature' of woman, calling on the woman to subject her body to surveillance and intervention, and making of the female body itself at once the site and the determinant of women's social disabilities.

Of course such changes in sexual ideologies cannot be simply transferred by analogy or homology to an account of female characters in fiction of the same period. Nevertheless, the very fact that female sexuality was so much a matter for discussion, speculation and research, and the accompanying questioning of marriage, would have been enough to make unselfconscious writing involving these subjects almost impossible. The choice of a marriage partner, long a staple element of plot, takes on new resonances. For Hardy, it will continue to be a significant structure, but its power as an organising principle of coherence is evidently unsettled. The centrality of female characters in Hardy's novels brings into prominence the problematic question of the female nature, and of its otherness of the male writer, and these pose new problems for the handling of form and narrative voice. I propose now to look at the productive experimentalism and at the tense and ambivalent writing which mark the development of Hardy's fiction in the period.

#### NOTES

- 1 See for instance, J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England*, Studies in Sociology (Liverpool, 1964); Constance Rover, *Love, Morals and the Feminists* (London, 1970); Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: the World of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1969).
- 2 Fernando Henriques, *Modern Sexuality*, Vol. III of *Prostitution and Society* (London, 1968), pp. 279-83; cf. Iwan Bloch, *A History of English Sexual Morals*, trans. W. H. Forstern (London, 1936), pp. 188-91.
- 3 Henriques, *Modern Sexuality*, p. 231.
- 4 E.g. Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1966); Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: the Origins and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (London, 1976).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, Vol. I of *Histoire de la sexualité* (Paris, 1976), pp. 31-2.



- 6 'Ellis Ethelmer' [Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy], *Woman Free* (London, 1893), p. 1.
- 7 Mrs H. E. Harvey, 'Science as a Moral Guide,' *Westminster Review*, 149 (1898), 192-3.
- 8 See Robert H. MacDonald, 'The frightful consequences of Onanism: Notes on the History of a Delusion,' *Journal of History of Ideas*, 28 (1967), 423-31; and R. P. Neuman, 'Masturbation, Madness and the Modern Concepts of Childhood and Adolescence,' *Journal of Social History*, 8 (1975), 1-27.
- 9 See John Hawkins Miller, "'Temple and Sewer': Childbirth, Prudery and Victoria Regina,' in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses*, ed. Anthony S. Wohl (London, 1978), pp. 23-43.
- 10 Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria* (London, 1853), p. 69.
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