

“A Dreadful Volume of Heart-Histories”

attributed to Susan B. Anthony – or – Elizabeth Cady Stanton

—*The Revolution*, 8 July 1869.

In a late REVOLUTION is an extract from the New York *Medical Gazette* rebuking a practice common among married women, and demanding a law for its suppression.

Much as I deplore the horrible crime of child-murder, earnestly as I desire its suppression, I cannot believe with the writer of the abovementioned article, that such a law would have the desired effect. It seems to be only mowing off the top of the noxious weed, while the root remains.

We want *prevention*, not merely punishment. We must reach the root of the evil, and destroy it.

To my certain knowledge this crime is not confined to those whose love of ease, amusement and fashionable life leads them to desire immunity from the cares of children; but is practiced by those whose inmost souls revolt from the dreadful deed, and in whose hearts the maternal feeling is pure and undying. What, then, has driven these women to the desperation necessary to force them to commit such a deed? This question being answered, I believe we shall have such an insight into the matter as to be able to talk more clearly of a remedy.

Women are educated to think that with marriage their individuality ceases or is transferred to their husbands. The wife has thenceforth no right over her own body. This is also the husband's belief, and upon which he acts. No matter what her condition, physical or mental, no matter how ill prepared she may feel herself for maternity, the demands of his passion may never be refused.

He thinks, or cares nothing, for the possible result of his gratification. If it be that an immortal being, with all its needs, physical, mental, and moral, shall come into the world to sin, to suffer, to die, because of his few moments of pleasure, what cares he?

He says he is ready to provide for his children, therefore he feels himself a kind father, worthy of honor and love. That is, he is ready to provide for them food and clothing, but he is not willing to provide for them, by his self-denial, sound bodies, good tempers, and a happy ante-natal existence. He gives his wife wealth, leisure, and luxury, and is, therefore, a devoted husband, and she is an *undutiful*, unloving wife, if her feelings fail to respond to his.

Devoted husband? Devoted to what? To self-gratification at the expense of the respect of his wife. I know men who call themselves Christians, who would insist that they are *gentlemen*, who never insult any woman—but their wives. They think it impossible that they can outrage them; they never think that even in wedlock there may be the very vilest prostitution; and if Christian women are *prostitutes* to Christian husbands, what can be expected but the natural sequence—infanticide?

Women who are in the last stages of consumption, who know that their offspring must be puny, suffering, neglected orphans, are still compelled to submit to maternity, and dying in childbirth, are their husbands ever condemned? Oh, no! It was only his right as a husband he claimed, and if maternity or death ensued, surely he could not be blamed for that. He did not desire it. The usual tenor of men's conduct in this respect seems on a par with that of Henry VIII, who when asked if the life of his wife or of his child should be saved, as it seemed needful that one should be sacrificed, answered, “O the child, by all means. Wives are easily obtained.”

Women whose husbands are habitual drunkards and whose children are therefore idiotic, deformed creatures, and who feel assured that such must be the case with all their offspring, must yet submit. And if such a woman as the dying consumptive, rather than bring into the world such miserable children, rather

perhaps than give life to a daughter to suffer all that she has endured, destroys the little being, so she thinks, before it lives, she would be punished by the law, and he, *the real murderer*, would go unrebuked, uncondemned.

All the articles on this subject that I have read have been from men. They denounce women as alone guilty, and never include man in any plans proposed for the remedy of the evil.

It is clear to my mind that this evil wholly arises from the false position which woman occupies in civilized society. We know that in the brute creation, the female chooses her own time, and . . . among Indians . . . yet what Christian woman, wife of a Christian husband, is free to consult her own feelings even in these most delicate situations?

Guilty? Yes, no matter what the motive, love of ease, or a desire to save from suffering the unborn innocent, the woman is awfully guilty who commits the deed. It will burden her conscience in life, it will burden her soul in death; but oh! thrice guilty is he who, for selfish gratification, heedless of her prayers, indifferent to her fate, drove her to the desperation which impelled her to the crime. It is very fine to say:

My Author and Disposer, what thou wilt
Unquestioned I obey—Thus God ordains,
God is my law, thou mine.

But God has never given woman's individuality into the hands of man. If He has, why hold her responsible for this crime? If man takes her individuality he must also take her responsibility. Let him suffer.

No, I say, yield to woman her God-given right of individuality. Make her feel that to God alone is she responsible for her deeds; teach her that submission to any man without love and desire is prostitution; and thunder in her ear, "Who so defileth the body, defileth the temple of the Holy Ghost!" Let maternity come to her from a desire to cherish love and train for high purposes an immortal soul, then you will have begun to eradicate this most monstrous crime.

Teach man to respect womanhood whether in the person of his own wife or the wife of another; teach him that as often as he outrages his wife he outrages Nature and disobeys the Divine Law, then you will have accomplished still more.

Oh, there is a dreadful volume of heart-histories that lies hidden in almost every family in the land! It tells of trust betrayed, of purity violated under sanction of law, of every holy feeling outraged and purest love turned to fear and loathing. If the moral feeling in the heart of woman was not stronger than death itself, the crimes we now chronicle against them would be virtues compared with the depths of wickedness and sin into which they would be driven. But God is stronger than man and he holds us true to our higher natures, martyrs though we be. If, on the other hand, women were not so weak and disgracefully submissive, they would rise to the dignity of womanhood and throwing off the degrading touch, would say, "I am free. And to God alone will I unquestioningly yield myself."

I believe all that is needed is for the eyes of men to be opened up to the true state of affairs. They have received without a thought the faith of their fathers. The misery and degradation have not been personally felt by them. But let every wife dare to be honest, let her open her heart freely to her husband, and I know there are few whose better natures would not be touched, few who would not be awakened to a nobler life, to a more exalted view of marriage.

Then would marriage assume its high and holy place. Then would our children be truly olive plants, types of peace, lovingly desired, tenderly cared for, body and soul. Then the wife, looking with love and respect upon the husband, who has never caused her to fear his manhood, could say: "I am thine, and these are they whom God at our desire has given us."

Excerpted from "[ProLife Feminism: Yesterday and Today](#)", by Mary Krane Derr, Rachel McNair and Linda Naranjo-Huebl, quoting "Marriage and Maternity" from [The Revolution](#), 8 July 1869; www.prolifequakers.org/susanb.htm