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## THE DOUBLE STANDARD \*

BY KEITH THOMAS

"Anything wrong about a man was but of little moment . . . but anything wrong about a woman, . . . O dear!"—Mrs. Wortle, in *Dr. Wortle's School* by Anthony Trollope (1881).

This paper is an attempt to explore the history of an idea which has been deeply rooted in England for many centuries and which by its effect upon law and institutions as well as upon opinion has done much to govern the relations of men and women with each other. Stated simply, it is the view that unchastity, in the sense of sexual relations before marriage or outside marriage, is for a man, if an offense, none the less a mild and pardonable one, but for a woman a matter of the utmost gravity. This view is popularly known as the double standard.

It is an idea which has made itself felt in most aspects of English life. In the field of opinion it gives rise to such maxims as "young men may sow their wild oats," "a reformed rake makes the best husband," "two maidenheads meeting together in wedlock, the first child must be a fool" or, in modern language, "it is best if the man is 'experienced'." Correspondingly, it teaches that a woman who has lost her honor has lost all and it leads to a great exaltation of female virginity for its own sake. "Chastity in women," said a politician in 1923, "is a star that has guided human nature since the world began, and that points far higher and teaches us of the other sex things which we could not otherwise know. We bow in humble reverence to that high star of chastity, and we celebrate it in song and poetry. But I do not think that any mere man would thank us for enshrining him in such a halo."<sup>1</sup> Both before and after marriage men were permitted liberties of which no woman could ever avail herself and keep her reputation. From Henry I to George IV most of the Kings of England kept mistresses and their examples were followed by many of their subjects. At the court of Charles II, where debauchery was almost a proof of loyalty, Francis North, Lord Guildford, was seriously advised to "keep a whore" because, we are told, "he was ill looked upon for want of doing so."<sup>2</sup> But on the other hand if a woman once fell from virtue her recovery might be impossible.

From this state of affairs sprang the extreme wenching attitude associated with periods like that of the Restoration. Society trained up its daughters to trap men into matrimony without yielding any of its benefits in advance, so the men hit back in the only way they

\* I am much indebted to discussions with Mr. Alan Tyson, although I fear that he is unlikely to accept many of my conclusions.

<sup>1</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 5th Ser., Vol. 160, col. 2374.

<sup>2</sup> R. North, *The Lives of . . . Francis North, Baron Guildford, . . . Sir Dudley North . . . and Dr. John North* (London, 1826), II, 164.

could.<sup>3</sup> The illicit nature of their attempts on female chastity constituted a large part of their attraction. "I'd no more play with a man that slighted his ill fortune," says Fainall in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, "than I'd make love to a woman who undervalued the loss of her reputation."<sup>4</sup> Or, as Jeremy Collier put it, "difficulty and danger heighten the success, and make the conquest more entertaining."<sup>5</sup> The role of seducer and rake was more attractive than that of husband. As Mr. Badman remarked, "Who would keep a cow of their own that can have a quart of milk for a penny?"<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that in eighteenth-century England there was a decline in marriage, or at least a rise in the proportion of bachelors.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps significant that it was also in the eighteenth century that the demand for virginity in the brothels of England culminated in a mania of defloration which contemporary observers agreed was without parallel in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

When men took liberties, women had to be educated to tolerate them, and in the great mass of didactic literature for young ladies one of the main themes was that women should recognize that the double standard was in the nature of things, that model wives should turn a blind eye to their husband's liaisons. Here is the first Marquis of Halifax writing to his daughter at the end of the seventeenth century:

You are to consider you live in a time which hath rendered some kind of frailties so habitual, that they lay claim to large grains of allowance. The world in this is somewhat unequal, and our sex seemeth to play the tyrant in distinguishing partially for ourselves, by making that in the utmost degree criminal in the woman, which in a man passeth under a much gentler censure. The root and excuse of this injustice is the preservation of families from any mixture which may bring a blemish to them: and whilst the point of honour continues to be so plac'd, it seems unavoidable to give your sex the greater share of the penalty . . . Remember, that next to the danger of committing the fault yourself, the greatest is that of seeing it in your husband. Do not seem to look or hear that way: If he is a man of sense, he will reclaim himself . . . if he is not so, he will be provok'd, but not reformed . . . Such an undecent complaint makes a wife much more ridiculous than the injury that provoketh her to it.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On this see Mr. Christopher Hill's brilliant article, "Clarissa Harlowe and her Times," *Essays in Criticism*, IV (1955), esp. 324. <sup>4</sup> Act I, scene 1.

<sup>5</sup> "Of Whoredom," in *Essays upon Several Moral Subjects*, III (3rd ed.) (London, 1720), 114-115.

<sup>6</sup> J. Bunyan, *Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, ed. J. Brown (Cambridge, 1905), 154.

<sup>7</sup> H. J. Habakkuk, "Marriage Settlements in the Eighteenth Century," *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 4th Ser., Vol. 32 (1950), 24.

<sup>8</sup> I. Bloch, *Sexual Life in England Past and Present*, trans. W. H. Forstern (London, 1938), 176.

<sup>9</sup> *Miscellanies by the Right Noble Lord, The Late Marquess of Halifax* (London, 1700), 17-18.

But if society was to allow men comparative sexual freedom and at the same time keep single women virgin and married women chaste then a solution had to be found which would gratify the former without sacrificing the latter. The answer lay in prostitution and the widespread view that a class of fallen women was needed to keep the rest of the world pure.

The classic statement of this belief is to be found in W. E. H. Lecky's *History of European Morals*, where he describes the prostitute:

a figure which is certainly the most mournful, and in some respects the most awful, upon which the eye of the moralist can dwell. That unhappy being whose very name is a shame to speak; who counterfeits with a cold heart the transports of affection, and submits herself as the passive instrument of lust, who is scorned and insulted as the vilest of her sex, and doomed, for the most part, to disease and abject wretchedness and an early death, appears in every age as the perpetual symbol of the degradation and the sinfulness of man. Herself the supreme type of vice, she is ultimately the most efficient guardian of virtue. But for her, the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted, and not a few who, in the pride of their untempted chastity, think of her with an indignant shudder, would have known the agony of remorse and despair. On that one degraded and ignoble form are concentrated the passions that might have filled the world with shame. She remains, while creeds and civilisations rise and fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people.<sup>10</sup>

But the view of the prostitute as a necessary evil and a buttress for the morals of the rest of society goes back to a time long before Lecky. "Remove prostitutes from human affairs," wrote St. Augustine, "and you would pollute the world with lust."<sup>11</sup> Aquinas compared her to a cesspool in a palace, unpleasant but necessary.<sup>12</sup> And in the eighteenth century that engaging writer Bernard Mandeville, who argued that private vices were public benefits, produced *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724) in which he made a strong case for state-regulated brothels. The existence of male lust had to be recognized; even Socrates had confessed in his old age that when a girl touched his shoulder "he felt a strange tickling all over him for five days."<sup>13</sup> This lust had to be channelled off by way of the stews if female chastity (which he shrewdly analyzed as an artificial combination of honor and interest<sup>14</sup>) was to be preserved. "If courtes-

<sup>10</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals* (London, 1913), II, 282-283.

<sup>11</sup> *De Ordine*, ii, 4, quoted in E. Westermarck, *Christianity and Morals* (London, 1939), 363.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in G. R. Taylor, *Sex in History* (London, 1953), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Mandeville, *A Modest Defence*, iv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

zans and strumpets were to be prosecuted with as much rigor as some silly people would have it, what locks or bars would be sufficient to preserve the honor of our wives and daughters?"<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not it existed for the sake of wives and daughters there can be no doubt that prostitution was widespread in England throughout the whole of medieval and modern times. It was regarded as universal and inevitable and it received a good deal of official sanction from the state. Regulations for the management of the stews at Southwark were issued by Henry II and these licensed brothels survived until the reign of Henry VIII. They came under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Winchester and their inhabitants were popularly known as "Winchester geese." It is impossible to quote reliable figures, but it is clear that by Victorian times prostitution in London and the industrial cities was carried out on an enormous scale. In 1841 the Chief Commissioner of Police estimated that there were 3,325 brothels in the Metropolitan district of London alone<sup>16</sup> and this calculation takes no account of part-time prostitution produced by inadequate female wages. "I am afraid," said Gladstone in 1857, "as respects the gross evils of prostitution, that there is hardly any country in the world where they prevail to a greater extent than in our own."<sup>17</sup>

The most horrible aspect of this state of affairs lay in the different standards applied to the prostitutes themselves on the one hand and to the men who availed themselves of their services on the other. As late as 1871 a Royal Commission declared, "we may at once dispose of (any recommendation) founded on the principle of putting both parties to the sin of fornication on the same footing by the obvious but not less conclusive reply that there is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them. With the one sex the offence is committed as a matter of gain; with the other it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse."<sup>18</sup> Such indulgence was made possible by the law. In 1881 a Select Committee reported: "In other countries female chastity is more or less protected by law up to the age of twenty-one. No such protection is given in England to girls above the age of thirteen."<sup>19</sup> Until 1875 the age of consent had been only twelve and when in 1885 it was finally raised to sixteen the vehement opposition which had previously greeted this proposal was only overcome by the publicity afforded to the sensational prosecution of the journalist W. T. Stead who had delib-

<sup>15</sup> *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Oxford, 1924), I, 95-96.

<sup>16</sup> G. R. Scott, *A History of Prostitution from Antiquity to the Present Day* (London, 1954), 98.

<sup>17</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 147, col. 853.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts* (London, 1871), I, 17.

erately purchased a young girl from her mother for five pounds, had her virginity certified by a midwife, took her to a brothel for a night and finally shipped her abroad—all to show just what could be done under the then existing state of the law. His subsequent articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, entitled *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, caused an outcry and made reform inevitable. Yet Stead himself was sent to prison and, as he remarked of the House of Lords, "Stringent legislation against the fraud and force by which brothels are recruited could hardly be expected from legislators who were said to be familiar visitors at Berthe's in Milton Street, or Mrs. Jeffries's in Chelsea."<sup>20</sup>

In no way did these legislators demonstrate the direction of their sympathies in this matter more clearly than in the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts. These were a series of measures issued in the 1860's. They were modeled on a scheme devised by Napoleon and they provided for a system of state regulated prostitution in the garrison towns of England. Under their provisions any woman could be arrested merely on the suspicion of a plain-clothes government spy and be compelled to sign a voluntary submission to be medically examined once a fortnight or else vindicate her character in the police court. After a notable campaign led by Mrs. Josephine Butler the Acts were repealed in 1886. They had led to much incidental hardship and cruelty, but their main relevance to our purpose here is that they represent the high-water mark of the tendency we have been describing. By their bland assumption that prostitution was a permanent and necessary evil and by their direct application of the double standard in that all regulation and medical examination applied to the women alone they yield an interesting commentary on a too often forgotten aspect of Victorian England.

The branch of English law, however, which best illustrates the effects of the double standard and the tenacity with which it survived is that relating to divorce. Here we see how, during those periods when divorce and remarriage have been allowed, adultery on the part of the married woman has almost invariably been recognized as valid grounds for such a divorce, but the wife, on the other hand, has very seldom been entitled to seek the dissolution of the marriage solely on the grounds of a similar offense on the part of her husband. A brief survey of the facts should serve to demonstrate this point.

In Anglo-Saxon times the conventions governing marriage and divorce are shrouded in a certain amount of obscurity, but it appears that under ancient Germanic law adultery was, strictly speaking, not a crime that a man was capable of committing against his wife at all.

<sup>19</sup> *The Truth about the Armstrong Case and the Salvation Army* (London, n.d.), 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

If he were punished, it would be not for unfaithfulness to his wife, but for violating the rights of another husband. For similar misconduct on her part, however, the wife was sometimes put to death—which would have obviated the need for any divorce proceedings.<sup>21</sup> The code of King Ethelbert suggests that divorce was possible at the will of either spouse,<sup>22</sup> but in the penitentials of Theodore we see the clear operation of the double standard. In cases of adultery discretion was exercised in favor of the husband. Should the wife be unfaithful he had the right to repudiate her, but if he committed adultery she was unable to free herself from him save by his departure for a monastery.<sup>23</sup>

After the Norman Conquest all matrimonial cases were dealt with in the spiritual courts and came under the jurisdiction of the canon law. This did not recognize the existence of divorce at all, at least not in the sense of divorce with the right of remarriage (*divortium a vinculo matrimonii*); although, if the parties were sufficiently rich or influential, it was usually possible to find an impediment on the grounds of which the marriage might be annulled, so that it was deemed never to have taken place. The ecclesiastical courts, however, could grant a separation (*divortium a mensa et thoro*) by which the marriage was effectively brought to an end, although neither party would be allowed to remarry. Adultery by either partner was good grounds for a separation and here it might seem as if the double standard went into abeyance. But such an impression would be misleading, for in practice it usually only the husband who was in a position to take advantage of this. The wife was seldom able to claim a separation from her husband. The reasons for this were economic; she would probably be unable to support herself during such a separation, because, although separated, she was still subject to all the legal disabilities of a married woman. In other words, she was now in a state of virtual outlawry, for her husband retained all his rights over her property, including even the wages she might earn after her separation; she was incapable of conducting a legal action by herself, and she could not even claim access to her children. All she had was a small allowance in the shape of alimony and the payment of this was often difficult to enforce. As a result it was only those wives of higher social status with independent property rights secured to them by

<sup>21</sup> G. E. Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions* (Chicago & London, 1904), II, 35–36. Cf. J. R. Reinhard, "Burning at the Stake in Medieval Law and Literature," *Speculum*, XVI (1941).

<sup>22</sup> F. L. Attenborough, ed., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), 15.

<sup>23</sup> A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents* (Oxford, 1871), III, 199.

equity who were in a position to take advantage of their theoretical right to gain a separation from a husband on the ground of his adultery.

The jurisdiction of the spiritual courts survived the Reformation and the law remained unchanged until 1857. But from the end of the seventeenth century a new factor emerged: divorce by Act of Parliament. A marriage might be dissolved and the partners allowed to marry again as a result of a petition and bill presented to the House of Lords. This procedure made divorce with the right to re-marriage legal in England for the first time since the Norman Conquest, but its effects were limited. The process was enormously expensive and few people were in a position to take advantage of it—to be precise, there were only a little over 200 such divorces granted in the whole period up to 1857. Of these only about half a dozen were granted at the suit of a woman. Whereas adultery by the wife was regarded as good grounds for granting the husband a divorce, she on the other hand had no hope of getting her bill through if she had no stronger claim than that of infidelity on the part of the husband. The doctrine was that the marriage should be dissolved only if circumstances had arisen which were deemed such as to make the continuance of the union impossible. Adultery by the wife *was* such a circumstance, but adultery by the husband was not. In *Mrs. Moffat's Case* (1832) it was stated that the husband had “committed an act of infidelity on the very night of his marriage, and occupied himself afterwards in constant experiments on the chastity of his female domestics, by one of whom a child was born to him.” Her petition for divorce was rejected.<sup>24</sup> The opinion of parliament was that the wife should forgive the guilty husband but that the husband *could not* forgive the guilty wife. Another rejected petition was that of Mrs. Teush in 1805, whose husband had treated her with great brutality and was living openly with a mistress by whom he had had several children. Lord Eldon said that “he never recollected a more favorable representation given of any woman; but yet, on general grounds of public morality, he felt it his painful duty to give a negative to the original motion;” and the Bishop of St. Asaph was of the opinion “that however hard the rule might press upon a few individuals, it would, on the whole, be better if no bill of this kind were passed.”<sup>25</sup> Only if her husband's adultery was incestuous adultery or was greatly aggravated by other circumstances was the wife entitled to expect a divorce.

Although England was the only Protestant country in Europe to maintain this distinction, it was not discarded in 1857, when matri-

<sup>24</sup> J. Macqueen, *A Practical Treatise on the Appellate Jurisdiction of the House of Lords and Privy Council* (London, 1842), 658.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 603-4.

monial jurisdiction was transferred from the realm of canon law to a new civil divorce court. In permitting dissolutions of marriage the new court was to follow the rules which had governed the earlier divorces by Act of Parliament. The husband merely had to prove one act of adultery committed by his wife, but his wife had to show her husband guilty of adultery *plus* some other injury—bigamy, cruelty, desertion, incest, rape, or unnatural offenses. “It had ever been the feeling of that House,” said that Lord Chancellor, introducing the bill in the Lords, “indeed, it was a feeling common to mankind in general that, although the sin in both cases was the same, the effect of adultery on the part of the husband was very different from that of adultery on the part of the wife. It was possible for a wife to pardon a husband who had committed adultery; but it was hardly possible for a husband ever really to pardon the adultery of a wife.”<sup>26</sup> Despite a good deal of opposition, notably from Gladstone, the double standard was preserved in the act of 1857 and it was only in 1923 that the grounds for divorce were made the same for both sexes.

Prostitution and divorce have provided us with two examples of the way in which the law enforced the double standard, but there are many others, for instance, the laws relating to the property of married persons. Should either spouse die intestate, the surviving partner was allowed to retain a proportion of the property of the deceased. The wife had a third of the estate as her dower, the husband was permitted by what was called *courtesy* to remain in possession until his death of all the land which the couple had held during the wife’s lifetime in her right, provided a child had been born to them. The double standard appears in the conditions under which dower or courtesy might be forfeited. The wife lost her dower if she was proved to be unfaithful, but a similar act of adultery did *not* deprive the husband of his courtesy.<sup>27</sup> The same distinction applied also to unmarried women, for under feudal law an heiress who was demonstrated to have been unchaste was deprived of her inheritance—a penalty which was not demanded of a man who had behaved in a similar manner.

As a final instance of the double standard at work in English law, let us recall that until half-way through the nineteenth century the

<sup>26</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 145, col. 490. A stronger view was expressed by Sir John Nicholl in 1825: “Forgiveness on the part of wife, especially with a large family, in the hopes of reclaiming her husband, is meritorious; while a similar forgiveness on the part of the husband would be degrading and dishonourable.” J. Haggard, *Reports of Cases argued and determined in the Ecclesiastical Courts at Doctors’ Commons, and in the High Court of Delegates* (London, 1829–1832), I, 752.

<sup>27</sup> T. E., *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (London, 1632), 146 has some spirited remarks on this topic.

husband was entitled to use violence and physical restraint to secure the person and services of his wife (her *consortium*) whereas she was able to regain her renegade husband only by means of a court order for restitution of conjugal rights.

There is therefore abundant evidence for the extensive operation of the double standard in both English law and opinion in medieval and modern times.<sup>28</sup> But it is hardly necessary to add that this double standard did not meet with uncritical acceptance by all elements in the community. In particular, two main currents of opinion ran counter to it. The first was that of Christianity.

The idea of reciprocal fidelity was not unknown in pre-Christian times, but it is undeniable that it received a new emphasis from Christian teaching. Christ's own treatment of the woman taken in adultery was frequently cited as justification for not discriminating against the woman alone. The attitude of the medieval church was mixed and it is easy to detect a wide discrepancy between theory and practice; nevertheless, the idea that unchastity was as much a sin for the one sex as for the other steadily gained ground,<sup>29</sup> and with the Reformation the attack on the double standard grew stronger. The English Reformers of the sixteenth century were generally in favor of divorce and most of them would have allowed it to the wife for the husband's adultery. The *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* drawn up under Edward VI would have permitted the innocent party of either sex to remarry.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, most of the later Puritan writers urged equality of the sexes in divorce and enjoined chastity as a duty for men and women alike. "Keep chaste till the coming of the Lord Jesus," wrote Daniel Rogers; "Know that this is an equal duty of both, . . . think not thy husband tied to this rule, O woman; nor thou thy wife tied, O husband, and the other free: the tie is equal."<sup>31</sup> Perkins declared that the husband's superiority gave him no immunity from the prohibition against adultery,<sup>32</sup> and William Gouge wrote, "I see not how that difference in the sin can stand with the tenour of God's Word." It might be that greater consequences followed from a lapse on the part of the wife, but at least "God's Word

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of some of the consequences of the double standard as it operates in modern American society see I. L. Reiss, "The Double Standard in Premarital Sexual Intercourse. A Neglected Concept," *Social Forces*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (March 1956).

<sup>29</sup> *Dives and Pauper* (1493), 6th Commandment, cap. 5, actually says that the husband's adultery is the more serious offense, on the grounds that he is the woman's superior and the greater the sinner, the greater the sin.

<sup>30</sup> E. Cardwell, ed., *The Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws* (Oxford, 1850), 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Matrimonial Honour* (London, 1642), 181-2.

<sup>32</sup> *Workes* (Cambridge, 1609-1613), III, 53.

maketh no disparity between them.”<sup>33</sup> By the time of the Restoration the attitude of most divines was that adultery was as great a sin in the husband as in the wife, but that account had to be taken of the more enduring consequences when it was committed by the latter.<sup>34</sup> Up to the nineteenth century this position was the standard one, and in the debate on the Divorce Bill in 1857 most members agreed that the sin was the same but that the effects were different. By itself, therefore, the Christian insistence upon the equality of the two sexes before God was not sufficient to bring about a radical change in social attitudes, since by their own admission its exponents did not claim to provide a yardstick by which the full consequences of unchastity might be measured.

The other main source of opposition to the double standard was the ever-growing current of what can only be described as middle-class respectability. From the seventeenth century, if not earlier, there becomes apparent a strong tendency to place a new and heightened emphasis upon the values of family life and to deplore any aristocratic or libertine conduct which would be likely to jeopardize domestic security. This attitude is intimately connected with Puritanism, though it stems from certain strong material values as well. It is associated with propriety and prudery and is exemplified in the attack on the Restoration stage. It is also essentially a middle-class morality, which the rich despise and the poor cannot afford. Sexual promiscuity was condemned because it was incompatible with the high emotional values expected from marriage, because it was wasteful, and because it took time and money which would have been better spent in the pursuit of a gainful occupation.

The representative exponents of this outlook were totally opposed to the double standard. “It is certain,” wrote Richard Steele, “that chastity is . . . as much to be valued in men as in women.”<sup>35</sup> He deplored the state of affairs by which the world “instead of avenging the cause of an abused woman, will proclaim her dishonour; while the person injured is shunned like a pestilence, he who did the wrong sees no difference in the reception he meets with, nor is he the less welcome to the rest of the sex who are still within the pale of honour and innocence . . . I know not how it is, but our sex has usurped a certain authority to exclude chastity out of the catalogue of masculine virtues, by which means females adventure all against those who have nothing to lose.”<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Collier attacked the aristocratic seducer.

<sup>33</sup> *Of Domesticall Duties, Eight Treatises*, 3rd. ed. (London, 1634), 221.

<sup>34</sup> R. B. Schlatter, *The Social Ideas of Religious Leaders, 1660-1688* (London, 1940), 28-9.

<sup>35</sup> *Tatler*, No. 58, also quoted by R. Blanchard, “Richard Steele and the Status of Women,” *Studies in Philology*, XXVI, 3 (1929), 349.

<sup>36</sup> *The Guardian*, No. 45 (2 May, 1713).

“Why,” he asked, “is not he that steals a woman’s honour as uncreditable as a common surpriser of property<sup>37</sup> . . . . What think you of sending a wench to Bridewell, and doing nothing to the fellow that debauch’d her, tho’ sometimes the first is single, and the other married?”<sup>38</sup>

Since the late seventeenth century there has always existed a large body of middle-class opinion which has regarded illicit sexual activity outside marriage as equally unrespectable in men and women alike. Yet its influence has been limited, in that its main attention has always been directed towards safeguarding the chastity of married women and of the daughters of respectable families. Towards the large body of lower class and of “fallen” women it has been less indulgent. Moreover, the emphasis on outward respectability has resulted in the absence of any serious deterrent against successfully conducted clandestine activity. Concealment has always been more difficult for women than for men; as for the Victorian father the volume of nineteenth-century prostitution tells its own tale.

Before we embark upon the question of why this double standard existed, there are two observations which should be made.

The first is that the double standard is in no way peculiar to England. The moral and legal codes of most advanced peoples reflect the same distinction. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Zoroastrians, the ancient Hebrews, all to a greater or lesser extent regarded chastity as primarily a female virtue, an essential quality for all women, but for men, if perhaps an ideal, yet scarcely an attainable one.<sup>39</sup> But it is not true that a high value has been set on female chastity by the whole human race at every stage in its development. As Locke remarks, “He that will carefully peruse the history of mankind, and look abroad into the several tribes of men, and with indifferency survey their actions, will be able to satisfy himself, that there is scarce that principle of morality to be named, or rule of virtue to be thought on . . . which is not, somewhere or other, slighted and condemned by the general fashion of whole societies of men, governed by practical opinions, and rules of living quite opposite to others.”<sup>40</sup> Some societies have set great value on female chastity; some have not. And if it is admitted that it is comparatively rare for infidelity by married women to be condoned, then it has also to be recognized that active contempt for unmarried females who are still virgin is by no means infrequent. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the origin of the double standard lies in the nature of things. It is

<sup>37</sup> “Of Whoredom,” *op. cit.*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>39</sup> E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (London, 1906–1908), II, 427–8.

<sup>40</sup> *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (London, 1690), 19.

not to be found in every society and we may reasonably conclude that when it does appear, as in England, we may discuss it as a genuine product of historical circumstance.

The second observation is that the double standard is not to be found in all levels of English society with the same intensity. In particular, it has been much less marked in the lower classes. This is made clear by a volume of nineteenth-century comment the force of which cannot be gainsaid, even when all allowances for the deficiencies of the observers have been made. "There is no chastity among the absolute poor," wrote Place in 1822.<sup>41</sup> A country vicar reported to a Royal Commission, in 1843, "I remark also a particular deficiency of the women as to chastity; in many instances they seem hardly to comprehend or value it as a virtue."<sup>42</sup> The Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 were told that "it is scarcely possible in a civilised country, and where Christianity is professed, for there to be less delicacy on the point of chastity than among the class of females in farm service and the labouring community generally"<sup>43</sup> . . . . The moral sanction is wholly ineffective amongst the labouring classes."<sup>44</sup> "Sexual intercourse was almost universal prior to marriage in the agricultural district," wrote Gaskell; "marriage was generally deferred till pregnancy fully declared itself." He went on to explain that this kind of intercourse "must not be confounded with that promiscuous and indecent concourse of the sexes which is so prevalent in towns, and which is ruinous alike to health and to morals. It existed only between parties where a tacit understanding had all the weight of an obligation—and this was, that marriage should be the result. This, in nineteen cases out of twenty, took place sooner or later."<sup>45</sup> But there is little doubt that what indignant observers like Gaskell mistook for the effects of the Industrial Revolution upon the morality of the cotton mills represented merely the standards which the laboring classes had always known and which overcrowded housing conditions now did everything to encourage.<sup>46</sup> Among the lowest classes of society the tradition of promiscuity was too strong to allow the emergence of so sophisticated a concept as that of the double standard.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in M. C. Stopes, *Contraception*, 6th ed. (London, 1946), 280.

<sup>42</sup> *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture* (London, 1843), 201.

<sup>43</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1834, XXXVII (Appendix C to Report of Poor Law Commissioners), 407.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>45</sup> P. Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England* (London, 1833), 28, 31.

<sup>46</sup> M. Hewitt, "The Effect of Married Women's Employment in the Cotton Textile Districts on the Organization and Structure of the Home in Lancashire, 1840-1880" (London, Ph.D. thesis, unpub'd) 1953, 73.

With these reservations in mind we may now turn to consider some possible explanations as to the origin and cause of this double standard.

Of these explanations the first is the one which the present writer is least competent to discuss, for it is matter of psychology, but it is an important one which has to be considered at the very outset. In one of his essays Freud describes what he regards as a common characteristic of civilized men: their inability to fuse the two currents of love and sensuality into love for one person and the resulting tendency to find with women of a lower social order, whom they despise, that sexual satisfaction which they are unable to obtain from their relationship with their wives, for whom they feel only tenderness, affection, and esteem. Of such men he says that "where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love."<sup>47</sup> This dissociation of sexual attraction from the other elements of love and the inability to focus both on a single object Freud attributes to the frustration of intense incestuous fixations in childhood. He admits that women to some extent are also subject to this dissociation, which in their case takes the form of frigidity and occasionally produces Lady Chatterley-like situations. But, on the whole, it seems fair to say that the conclusion which follows from Freudian psycho-analysis is, in the words of one of its best-known exponents, that "with women the directly sexual elements of love are more frequently aroused together with the elements of tenderness and esteem, than is the case with men."<sup>48</sup>

Now if this were true it would suggest that when people have regarded an act of marital infidelity on the part of the woman as having far greater significance than a similar act committed by the man they were doing no more than stating a psychological fact. Such an explanation would go a long way towards accounting for the existence of a double standard of morality. It lends much support to Mr. Gladstone's analysis in the debate on the 1857 divorce bill of the "mode in which temptation operates on parties guilty of adultery according as they are men or women. I believe that a very limited portion of the offences committed by women are due to the mere influence of sensual passion. On the other side, I believe that a very large proportion of the offences committed by men are due to that influence."<sup>49</sup> The findings of the Freudian school of psycho-analysis have to be considered by the historian of morals who endeavors to disentangle the permanent factors from the variable. Thus Dr. Ernest

<sup>47</sup> "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," (trans. A. Tyson), in *Works* (Standard Ed.), ed. J. Strachey *et al.*, XI (1957), 183.

<sup>48</sup> J. C. Flügel, *The Psycho-Analytic Study of the Family*, 3rd ed. (London, 1929), 112.

<sup>49</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 147, cols. 1273-1274.

Jones once declared that "prostitution is not altogether a mere *faute de mieux* replaceable, for instance, simply by making early marriage possible."<sup>50</sup> He added that "in a large number of typical cases potency is incompatible with marital fidelity, and can be attained only at the cost of adultery,"<sup>51</sup> and that "there is reason to think that the state of affairs would not be so very dissimilar if the social restrictions on sexuality were greatly diminished."<sup>52</sup>

If all this is accepted, then our search for the origins of the double standard would be at an end, for it would have to be recognized that it was no more than an inevitable by-product of a permanent feature of human psychology, namely the inability of the male to find complete satisfaction within marriage. But it is scarcely as simple as all that. There are good reasons to believe that the conclusions of Freudian psycho-analysis, represented as valid for the whole human race and reinforced by numerous indisputed case-histories as they are, do not necessarily hold outside the nineteenth-century, Western European middle-classes from whom they were derived. It is not just that Freud held many of what we would now regard as characteristically Victorian prejudices and in his attitude to women embodied many of the patriarchal assumptions of his time.<sup>53</sup> What is more serious is that he rarely seems to have considered the possibility that what he regarded as permanent attributes of human nature might have been more temporary affairs influenced or determined by economic and social factors which his investigations did not take into account.

It is true that the incestuous motif which he identified as the fundamental cause of dissociation and therefore of the double standard is less easy to explain away as merely the product of one society than are the various subordinate causes such as the view of the sexual act as something degrading. On the other hand the universal existence of this incestuous fixation would seem to be equally hard to establish. It is not clear exactly how propositions relating to the unconscious are to be proved or disproved, but it can at least be seen that Freud's account of dissociation can hardly be a complete statement of the facts, since there obviously do exist men who succeed in uniting the two streams of love, and since he leaves curiously uncertain the plight of the large majority of men—those of the lower strata of society for whom there exists no class of socially inferior women at whose expense they may gratify their sexual appetites.

<sup>50</sup> E. Jones, *Papers on Psycho-Analysis*, 3rd ed. (London, 1923), 569.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 575.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. C. Thompson, "Cultural Pressures in the Psychology of Women," *Psychiatry* (Aug. 1942) V, 3.

Those features of sexual morality which Freud explains by reference to incestuous fixations can, I think, be equally well accounted for in terms of the *mores* of a society that held that sexual desire unadorned was something no respectable lady could ever confess to having known, that produced prostitution by paying single women inadequate wages, and, by assuming that men should conduct the political and professional affairs of the world while women confined themselves to domestic affairs, created a situation in which the casual onlooker would have agreed with Byron that

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,  
'Tis woman's whole existence.

In short, it may be argued that Freud was analyzing not the cause of the double standard, but the result.

A better-known solution to our inquiry was provided by a highly successful interpreter of English life, Dr. Johnson. He regarded female chastity as of the utmost importance because "upon that all the property in the world depends."<sup>54</sup> As for adultery, "confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime; and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more criminal than a man who does it. A man, to be sure, is criminal in the sight of God; but he does not do his wife a very material injury, if he does not insult her; if, for instance, from mere wantonness of appetite, he steals privately to her chambermaid. Sir, a wife ought not greatly to resent this. I would not receive home a daughter who had run away from her husband on that account."<sup>55</sup> . . . Wise married women don't trouble themselves about infidelity in their husbands . . . . The man imposes no bastards upon his wife."<sup>56</sup>

There is obviously a good deal of truth in this. A valid reason for discriminating against the adultery of a married woman is that it might well produce bastard children who then intrude into the husband's inheritance. But as an explanation for the double standard it is far from complete. If "confusion of the progeny constitutes the essence of the crime," then the woman should be blameless if there is no confusion or if there is no progeny. When Boswell quoted the example of the lady who "argues that she may indulge herself in galantries with equal freedom as her husband does, provided she take care not to introduce a spurious issue into his family," Johnson retorted, "this lady of yours, Sir, I think is very fit for a brothel,"<sup>57</sup> yet there was logically no reason why he should have disapproved of her argument. Even on Johnson's premisses it is clear that the double standard derives from something more than fear of bastard children.

Yet, fundamentally, female chastity has been seen as a matter of

<sup>54</sup> G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, eds. *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1934-1950), V, 209. Cf. *Ibid.*, II, 457.      <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 55-6.      <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 406.

property; not, however, the property of legitimate heirs, but the property of men in women. The language in which virginity is most often described should tell us this, for it is that of the commercial market. "The corrupting of a man's wife, enticing her to a strange bed," says *The Whole Duty of Man*, "is by all acknowledged to be the worst sort of theft, infinitely beyond that of goods."<sup>58</sup> A maid who loses her virginity is described by a sixteenth-century writer as "unthrifty"<sup>59</sup> and a hundred years later a poet tells us that "Wives lose their value, if once known before."<sup>60</sup> In other words, girls who have lost their "honor" have also lost their saleability in the marriage market.

The double standard, therefore, is the reflection of the view that men have property in women and that the value of this property is immeasurably diminished if the woman at any time has sexual relations with anyone other than her husband. It may be that this only pushes our investigation back one stage further, for the reasons for the high value set on pre-marital virginity, on retrospective fidelity, as it were, are hard to find and they certainly spring from something more than mere certainty of the legitimacy of the children. Nor do they derive entirely from the fear that a woman who has been unchaste before marriage is likely to be unchaste again, for there have always been men like Angel Clare in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* who are totally unable to entertain the idea of marriage with a woman who has experienced sexual relationships with another man, no matter how extenuating the circumstances, or who in casual or venal intercourse would insist on a virgin for a partner.<sup>61</sup>

At all events this attitude is to be found in many different kinds of patriarchal society, even if it has varied in intensity according to the social level of the persons concerned and has been weakened by some economic circumstances and strengthened by others. Although reinforced by the growth of capitalism and the influence of the middle-classes it was not entirely derived from those phenomena in the way that some Marxist writers, for example, have suggested. "The heaven-blest merit of chastity," which is so exquisitely celebrated in *Comus*, one of them asserts, "is not unconnected with the Puritan-capitalist reaction against irresponsible consumption."<sup>62</sup> Despite its

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 25.

<sup>58</sup> London (1804), 152.

<sup>59</sup> L. Vives, *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, trans. R. Hyrde (1541), f. 16<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> G. Goodwin, ed., *The Poems of William Browne of Tavistock* (1894), II, 160.

<sup>61</sup> Flügel, *op. cit.*, 115-6. By way of example, we may cite the customers of the eighteenth-century brothels mentioned above.

<sup>62</sup> E. Rickword, "Milton: The Revolutionary Intellectual," in C. Hill, ed., *The English Revolution, 1640* (London, 1949), 108, note 1. Cf. C. Hill, "Clarissa Har-

comic overtones, there is an element of truth in this statement in that the middle-class outlook which emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although superficially opposed to the double standard, did much to intensify existing ideas on the subject of female chastity. But it is not a complete answer and the thinly-veiled implication—banish capitalism and banish the double standard—is, it has to be recognized, just not true. What, for example, could provide a better instance of this allegedly peculiarly *bourgeois* view than this law dating from the pre-capitalist times of King Ethelbert? "If one freeman lies with the wife of another freeman, he shall pay the husband his or her wergeld and procure a second wife with his own money, and bring her to the other man's home."<sup>63</sup> The adulterer was expected to buy the aggrieved husband a new wife because the first had been paid for in money. Modern anthropologists, however, agree that the insistence on pre-nuptial chastity is not a result of the system of wife-purchase, but goes back before it, and that the most that can be said is that such a form of marriage provided an additional reason for an existing prohibition.<sup>64</sup>

Yet much of English feudal law was based on the need to protect the property rights of the woman's father or husband. A female heir who was unchaste during the period of her custody was excluded from her inheritance because the advantage to the lord of her marriage might now be lost through her having lost her honor.<sup>65</sup> At a lower social level the same principle applied. The lord of the manor assumed the right to take a fine from girls who bore illegitimate children in exactly the same way as he took fines from those of his tenants who sought permission to give their daughters in marriage.<sup>66</sup> In each case he was losing the value of the woman's marriage, because that depended upon her chastity.

The laws relating to seduction illustrated the same principle. The abduction of heiresses only became a public crime as opposed to a private injury in the reign of Henry VII, and under Elizabeth I it was made a felony without benefit of clergy.<sup>67</sup> But everything depended upon the woman's being an heiress.<sup>68</sup> If she owned no land

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lowe and her Times," *loc. cit.*, 331. "Insistence on absolute pre-marital chastity goes hand-in-hand with the bourgeois conception of absolute property, immune alike from the king's right to arbitrary taxation and the church's divine right to tithes."

<sup>63</sup> Attenborough, *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> M. Ginsberg, *Essays in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, II, *Reason and Unreason in Society* (London, 1956), 81.

<sup>65</sup> G. May, *Social Control of Sex Expression* (London, 1930), 6, note 1.

<sup>66</sup> D. M. Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London, 1957), 83.

<sup>67</sup> 3 Hen. VII, c. 2. 39 Eliz., c. 9.

<sup>68</sup> W. S. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law* (London, 1925), VIII, 427-9.

or goods then her forcible abduction was a much less serious offense. In the late seventeenth century men were hanged for stealing heiresses, but the women had to be heiresses. In feudal society there was always somebody with a financial interest in every woman's marriage whether she was an heiress or not, but when this situation disappeared it was only the chastity of women with property which continued to be legally protected, because the loss in the case of landless women was nobody's but their own. On the other hand, the father was always at liberty to bring an action against his daughter's seducer on the grounds of the loss of her services which he had thus incurred.<sup>69</sup> Similarly the injured husband could bring against his wife's seducer an action for criminal conversation to recover damages for the loss of his wife's *consortium*. This action was based on the legal fiction that as the husband and wife were one person at law the wife was consequently incapable of consenting to adultery and the husband might therefore claim damages for trespass and assault. This action for criminal conversation was abolished in 1857 but survived in the form of the damages the husband might claim from the co-respondent, the adulterer being liable because he had infringed the husband's right of property in his wife.

Needless to say, none of this worked in reverse. The wife had no claim for damages against her husband's mistress; and on the only occasion in modern English history when adultery was made a criminal offense, and a capital one at that, in 1650, it was the adultery of the married woman and not of the married man which was made punishable.<sup>70</sup> The Puritans took such strong action against adultery, partly because of their respect for the Mosaic law and partly because of the great value they set on family life, but they still adhered to the double standard, based as it was on nothing more than men's property in women.

This deeply entrenched idea that woman's chastity was not her own to dispose of persisted for a long time and was reinforced by the system of arranged marriages which prevailed in the higher reaches of society for most of English history. As long as these unions were a means of social and economic advancement and as long as the bridegroom expected his partner to be a virgin, so long have the arrangements of society been specially designed to preserve female chastity. A woman could no more be unchaste than she could resist her

<sup>69</sup> As Sjt. Manning remarked, "the quasi-fiction of *servitium amisit* affords protection to the rich man whose daughter occasionally makes his tea, and leaves without redress the poor man whose child is sent unprotected to earn her bread amongst strangers." Holdsworth, *op. cit.*, 429 n.

<sup>70</sup> C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660* (London, 1911), II, 388.

parents' commands concerning her marriage. Rogers tells us how a Puritan preacher "once said to a coy virgin, 'thy virginity is not all thine to dispose of: in part it's thy parents', father hath a stroke in it, mother another, and kindred a third: fight not against all, but be his whom they would have thee.'" <sup>71</sup> Once married, her chastity was transferred to another owner. "A woman hath no power of her own body, but her husband," wrote Vives; "thou dost the more wrong to give away that thing which is another body's without the owner's licence." <sup>72</sup>

The absolute property of the woman's chastity was vested not in the woman herself, but in her parents or her husband. And it might be sold by them. "For very need," writes one of the Pastons, "I was fain to sell a little daughter I have for much less than I should have done by possibility." <sup>73</sup> Even the husband might do a little marketing himself. In 1696 Thomas Heath was presented by the churchwardens of Thame for cohabiting unlawfully with the wife of George Fuller, "having bought her of her husband at 2¼d the pound." <sup>74</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries foreigners were firmly of the opinion that Englishmen could sell their wives, provided they put a halter around their necks and led them into the open market; and in fact many actual transactions of this kind seem to have taken place. <sup>75</sup> One does not have to prove the widespread existence of wife-selling in order to be able to assert that until the mid-nineteenth century the ownership of most women was vested in men, but it provides an interesting if somewhat exaggerated illustration.

The double standard, therefore, was but an aspect of a whole code of social conduct for women which was in turn based entirely upon their place in society in relation to men. The value set on female chastity varied directly according to the extent to which it was considered that women's function was a purely sexual one. Until modern times women were, broadly speaking, thought of as incomplete in themselves and as existing primarily for the sake of men. Hence the contempt for unmarried women—"old maids" who had failed to achieve the main purpose of their existence. The virtue of women was relative to their function and their function was to cater to the needs of men. For this task the first qualification was chastity;

<sup>71</sup> D. Rogers, *op. cit.*, 303.

<sup>72</sup> L. Vives, *op. cit.*, f. 66r.

<sup>73</sup> J. Gairdner, ed. *The Paston Letters, 1422-1509* (London, 1900-1901), *Introduction*, clxxvi.

<sup>74</sup> S. A. Peyton, ed., *The Churchwardens' Presentments in the Oxfordshire Peculiars of Dorchester, Thame and Banbury* (Oxford Records Society, 1928), 184.

<sup>75</sup> *Notes and Queries*, 1st Ser., VII (1853), 602-3; 4th Ser., X (1872), 271, 311, 468-9; H. W. V. Temperley, "The Sale of Wives in England in 1823," *The History Teachers' Miscellany* (May 1925), III, 5.

hence, chastity was the essence of female virtue. In the sixteenth century Vives had written that "no man will look for any other thing of a woman, but her honesty: the which only, if it be lacked, is like as in a man, if he lack all that he should have. For in a woman the honesty is instead of all."<sup>76</sup> Three hundred years later the sentiment was repeated when Josephine Butler in the course of her travels was told that "A woman who has once lost chastity has lost every good quality. She has from that moment 'all the vices.'" <sup>77</sup>

It is not for us to comment here on the ironies of a code of morality which made virtue and honor a mere physical fact to which intention and circumstance were not relevant. As finally developed in the eighteenth century, this view of honor held out no hope to an injured girl save the unlikely *deus ex machina* of marriage, what Fordyce called "a sponge to wipe out in a single stroke the stain of guilt."<sup>78</sup>

From this prime insistence on woman's chastity emerged most of the other social restrictions upon her conduct. As Mrs. Knowles said to Dr. Johnson, "the mason's wife, if she is ever seen in liquor, is ruined; the mason may get himself drunk as often as he pleases, with little loss of character."<sup>79</sup> And not only sobriety was expected, but modesty, delicacy, bashfulness, silence and all the other "feminine" virtues. For centuries the ideal woman was a Griselda, passive and long-suffering, or a Lucrece who put death before dishonor.<sup>80</sup> And in courtship women existed to be pursued, not to do the pursuing. Ultimately such conduct was regarded as springing not merely from the usages of society, but from the fundamental attributes of female nature itself. The claim of men to the exclusive sexual possession of women resulted not only in two separate codes of conduct, but in a highly exaggerated view of the innate differences between the two sexes themselves.

<sup>76</sup> Vives, *op. cit.*, f. 17<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> J. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (London, 1896), 149.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted on 171 of I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London, 1957).

In this connection it is noteworthy to see how Richardson advances from the repulsive marriage-covers-all morality of *Pamela* (the story of a maid-servant who holds off the advances of her lecherous employer until he has agreed to marry her) to the superior theme of *Clarissa*, who is raped after being drugged and can find escape only in death, yet whose chastity of intention remains unchallenged. See C. Hill, "Clarissa Harlowe," *loc. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, *op. cit.*, III, 287.

<sup>80</sup> For example, Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (III, i, 104-106). She cannot yield her chastity to save her brother but

*Isabella:* O, were it but my life,  
I'd throw it down for your deliverance  
As frankly as a pin!  
*Claudio:* Thanks, dear Isabel.

The final step in the campaign to protect female chastity was the most remarkable of all, for it amounted to nothing less than the total desexualization of women. It is now well-known how the eighteenth century witnessed the triumph of the new feminine ideal afforded by Richardson's *Pamela*—delicate, insipid, fainting at the first sexual advance, and utterly devoid of feelings towards her admirer until the marriage knot was tied.<sup>81</sup> Slowly there emerged two quite different standards of what constitutes propriety for either sex. And the origin of these standards can be seen quite clearly in the male desire to build a protective fence round male property—female chastity.

The association of sexuality primarily with men and the male organ was not new and may well have some basis in fact, particularly in the case of younger people. Dr. Kinsey tells us that "the average adolescent girl gets along well enough with a fifth as much sexual activity as the adolescent boy."<sup>82</sup> Be this as it may, this distinction was fostered out of all proportion by the tendencies we have been describing. An article in *The Westminster Review* for 1850 remarked that, save in the case of fallen women, sexual desire in women was dormant "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. . . . Were it not for this kind decision of nature, which in England has been assisted by that correctness of feeling which pervades our education, the consequences would, we believe, be frightful."<sup>83</sup> Less stress on the effects of education was laid by the leading authority on sexual matters in later Victorian England, who declared that "happily for society" the supposition that women possess sexual feelings could be put aside as "a vile aspersion."<sup>84</sup>

Respectable Victorian wives therefore were educated to regard the act of procreation as a necessary and rather repulsive duty; and of course the process was circular. The sense of shame in the woman and the lack of consideration on the part of the man, who was, after all, encouraged to regard this particular part of matrimony as existing primarily for his benefit, led women to take an unduly fastidious attitude and helped to create the enduring legacy of frigidity in women, all traces of which have not yet departed.

As a final proof that the double standard was based on something

<sup>81</sup> See R. P. Utter and G. B. Needham, *Pamela's Daughters* (London, 1937) and I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*.

<sup>82</sup> A. C. Kinsey, W. B. Pomeroy, C. E. Martin, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Philadelphia and London, 1948), 223.

<sup>83</sup> *The Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* (April–July 1850), 457.

<sup>84</sup> Acton, quoted by H. Ellis, "The Erotic Rights of Woman," *The British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, Publication No. 5* (London, 1918), 9.

more than fear of the risk of illegitimate children, some of the arguments deployed by the opponents of birth-control may be cited. Although a modern feminist work speaks in passing of "the comparative unimportance of physical fidelity now that birth-control is possible,"<sup>85</sup> it does not seem that contraception by eliminating some of the consequences has eliminated everything which went into making the double standard. At the famous trial of Mrs. Besant and Charles Bradlaugh for publishing Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*, a manual on birth control, the prosecuting counsel described the work concerned as a "dirty, filthy book" which would enable the "unmarried female" to "gratify her passions."<sup>86</sup> In doing so he was clearly revealing that his demand for female chastity was not based upon the dread of illegitimate children at all. And yet it may be that all the details of the double standard are mere elaborations of the central fact that when a man and a woman have sexual relations the woman may conceive whereas the man will not. The whole social and ethical structure may well follow from this in practice without following logically. "When a general rule of this kind is once established," says Hume, "men are apt to extend it beyond those principles from which it first arose . . . and though all these maxims have a plain reference to generation, yet women past child-bearing have no more privilege in this respect than those who are in the flower of their youth and beauty . . . the general rule carries us beyond the original principle, and makes us extend the notions of modesty over the whole sex, from their earliest infancy to their extremest old age and infirmity."<sup>87</sup>

Hume's remarks notwithstanding, it seems that the English insistence on female chastity cannot be explained by reference to the fact of child birth and elaborations thereon, but that the solution is more likely to be found in the desire of men for absolute property in women, a desire which cannot be satisfied if the man has reason to believe that the woman has once been possessed by another man, no matter how momentarily and involuntarily and no matter how slight the consequences.

I am well aware that this conclusion leaves many questions unanswered, notably why this desire for property in women should vary in degree according to the social level of the men concerned. This problem, together with allied questions, must be left to future investigators. My main concern here is to pose the question, not to provide all the answers.

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<sup>85</sup> I. Clephane, *Towards Sex Freedom* (London, 1935), 230.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>87</sup> *Theory of Politics*, ed. F. Watkins (London, 1951), 124-5.