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SOCIALISM AND FEMINISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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FEMINIST SOCIALISTS: SOME PORTRAITS

Until the late 1820s, adherence to Owenite views was almost entirely confined to a small number of radical intellectuals. But in the 1830s and 1840s support for the New Science of Society mushroomed. Little knots of Socialists appeared in almost every part of the country, one journalist on The Whigman Herald observed in 1842, describing how even in his own small city the Owenite presence had swelled from two or three individuals to a band of several hundred, 'of whom a considerable proportion were females...'. Women appear to have taken an active part in this development right across the country. In 1833 a visiting Saint Simonian reported seeing large numbers of women at all Owenite meetings, including several who were 'noted for their writings and lectures'. I have seldom seen faces so animated as theirs,' he wrote admiringly. They felt their equality with men... Seven years later, in 1840, hostile observers were commenting on the 'crowds' of women who regularly attended Owenite lectures and meetings around the country. Similar reports persisted until the collapse of the movement in 1845.

The majority of these women, like the men in the Owenite movement, came from the upper working class, with a substantial minority from the lower middle class and a tiny number from wealthy backgrounds. The women who joined Queenwood, a Hampshire Owenite community, were mostly the wives and daughters of skilled factory operatives, who before entering the community had worked as dressmakers, straw-bonnet-makers, weavers and domestic servants. One was the wife of a former civil servant (who had been sacked for his Socialist beliefs); another was a teacher. Other communities,
such as the little Ham Common Concordium, boasted a few wealthy ladies among their residents; the women at the Ralphine community, on the other hand, were mostly poor peasants. The London and Brighton Co-operative Societies had one or two lady aristocrats at their meetings in the late 1820s; by the early 1830s Owen's Charlotte Street Institution in London was sponsoring large meetings of working women, who formed co-operative associations and trade unions. Manchester Socialist branch reported many female domestic servants in its ranks in the early 1840s; while the Leicester group noted the presence of many women schoolteachers at its public meetings over the same period.

What proportion of these women were feminists it is impossible to judge. Hundreds of women attended Owenite lectures on women's rights, and scores wrote to the Owenite press on women's issues, although usually under pen-names to ensure anonymity. A broad commitment to the principle of sexual equality was expected of every dedicated Owenite, male or female; but the number willing to publicly promote that principle, particularly the number of women publicists, was always small: less than a dozen women became well-known Socialist feminist propagandists, supplemented by a slightly larger number who delivered occasional lectures on the subject. Even at the height of Owenism's strength, its self-proclaimed feminists were never more than a minority - albeit a volatile, influential minority - of its female membership.

Nor was this feminist contingent representative, in class terms, of the wider movement to which it belonged. Some Owenite feminists were from working-class backgrounds, and some few from upper bourgeois or even landowning families, but the majority seem to have come from that ambiguous region inhabited by respectable ladies of smallish means - a region on the border between the lower middle class and the upper working class where social distinctions between genteel and plebian often

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blurred. This generalization, it must be stressed however, is based on evidence which is fragmentary and impressionistic. Many Owenite feminists appear only as signatures at the bottom of angry letters, or as voices in meetings, or in the occasional report from the secretary of a local Owenite society. Even some of the leading publicists remain shadowy figures, with their personal lives largely hidden from us. The series of biographical sketches which follow are, therefore, simply that: sketches whose outlines are often smudgy and obscure. Yet when these partial portraits are scrutinized together, there begins to emerge a common profile whose most marked feature, without a doubt, is its deviance from the feminine norm. Owenite feminists, whatever their social origin, tended to be, in George Gissing's phrase, 'odd women', who in their lives, as well as in their ideas, sharply transgressed social convention. At a time when 'women's place' in society was becoming increasingly circumscribed, these were women who either would not or could not dwell within its narrowing boundaries: a factor which was important in determining the nature and strength of their feminist commitment. The first women to publicly espouse Owenite feminist ideals were Anna Wheeler and Frances (Fanny) Wright. Both were women from wealthy backgrounds, with prestigious male connections - factors which served to ensure that their careers, unlike most of their Owenite sisters, were recorded in some detail.

ANNA WHEELER (1785-?)

She was born Anna Doyle, the daughter of a radical Protestant Archishop in Limerick, and god-daughter to the leading Irish nationalist, Henry Grattan. No doubt this progressive background contributed to Anna's later political development, but its influence wasn't obvious in her early years, when as the belle of the local squirearchy she was more interested in flirting with locals lads than in discussing social reform. At fifteen, despite parental disapproval, she married a boy from a nearby estate, Francis Massey Wheeler. He turned out to be a fool who cared only for fox-hunting and heavy drinking, and life in the Wheelers' Ballyshane home soon deteriorated into miserable scenes of wrangling resentment, with Anna constantly pregnant or nursing
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... (she had six children, of whom two survived) and Francis perpetually drunk. Furious with her husband, and fed up with dreary domesticity, Anna gradually retreated into an intensive programme of self-education: between the births and deaths of her children she spent day after day, her daughter Rosina later recalled, 'stretched out on the sofa, deep in the perusal of some French or German philosophical work that had reached her via London'. Reading away, while Francis shamboled about in a stupor and the farm gradually crumbled about them, she became 'imbued with the fallacies of the French Revolution' and, eventually, with the 'corresponding poisons' (Rosina's description again) of feminism. One bundle of books from London contained the Vindication. One imagines Anna's feelings as pregnant for perhaps the fifth or sixth time by her louche spouse, she opened Wollstonecraft's book. Easy too to imagine how she must have identified with Wollstonecraft's unhappy sexual life, for her own miserable marriage gave her later feminist propaganda a bitter edge very similar to that of the Vindication. One 1829 lecture began, 'Having learned only to serve and suffer, in my capacity as slave and woman ...'

But after twelve years of suffering and servicing her husband Anna had had enough, and in 1812 she gathered up her daughters and fled - first to the home of her uncle, the Governor of Guernsey, and eventually to France, where she became involved with the Saint Simonians. The next twenty years were spent moving between radical groupings in England, France and Ireland, providing an important point of contact between the emergent socialist movements in these countries. In France, she was closely associated with the Saint-Simonian feminists (whose writings she translated for the Owenite press) and also with Charles Fourier and Flora Tristan. In England, Owen and William Thompson soon became close friends and colleagues. By the late 1820s she was writing for Owenite newspapers and speaking on radical platforms, 'and always on one subject,' a friend recalled, 'the present condition of women and their rights as members of society and equals with men.' In 1833 as the Owenites became drawn into a national trades union mobilization, she sat on the executive of the Grand Moral Union of the Productive Classes, Owen's first attempt to construct a 'general union of all trades'.

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But by then she was feeling tired and unwell, complaining of depression, neuralgia, and 'a cruel nervous malady which deprives me of the free use of both arms ...' And although she was still alive to celebrate the 1848 revolutions ('the rights of women are constantly put forth in all the clubs,' a friend wrote from the barricades, 'could you not come over?') her active political life had ended almost fifteen years earlier.

As a feminist from an upper-class background, Anna was poised between the reform-minded elite of polite society, in which she had been raised, and the less conventional Owenite intelligentsia which developed in the 1820s and 1830s. In London, like Wollstonecraft three decades earlier, she moved in radical circles which encompassed not only leading Socialists but also the followers of Bentham (whom she 'adored as a philosopher and loved ... as a friend') and the many progressive literati whom she met through her son-in-law, the novelist Bulwer Lytton. These included the young Benjamin Disraeli who described her, however, as 'not so pleasant, something between Jeremy Bentham and Meg Merrilies, very clever, but awfully revolutionary.' His disapproval is revealing, for if being 'awfully revolutionary' was de rigueur at the dinner parties Mary Wollstonecraft had once attended, it was certainly no longer so by the 1820s, when Anna's militant feminism and her support for Owenite ideas ('system-mongering', as her son-in-law dubbed it) placed her well to the left of her liberal associates. At times she felt this distance intensely. Before a woman inclined to do good in any way, is permitted to do so in this country, there must be a reform indeed which our Radicals do not contemplate,' she wrote bitterly in 1832. Shortly after her Benthamite associates had helped push through Parliament a Reform Bill which, in her words, 'had not a word about justice to women' in it, and in fact explicitly excluded women from the expanded franchise (as well as nearly all working men). The protest of the Ayme had been ignored. In an angry, cynical letter written to a friend at the time, she dismissed any further hopes of feminist reforms from these men who, even if they acquired greater political power, could be expected only to introduce expanded educational facilities for women 'since they acknowledge that Women would make better Servants if they were better instructed ...'
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But as to a beneficial change in the social condition of women, that must depend on their will and energy... or it involves so complete a change in all human and social arrangements, as will compel men in their own interests to relinquish their shameless exploitation of half the human race... 24

That tone of angry disillusionment must at least partly explain why feminists from upper- or middle-class backgrounds could be drawn towards Owenism. This is not to suggest that sexual egalitarians were to be found only in the Owenite ranks. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s the South Place Chapel in London (where Anna occasionally lectured) was the meeting place for a group of radical Unitarians including such militant women’s rights advocates as Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill and W. J. Fox. Fox’s journal, The Monthly Repository, carried many articles on women’s position, and his own views on marriage were so advanced that they finally got him into serious difficulties with the Unitarian leadership. 25 Mary Leman Grimstone, Harriet Martineau, and Anna Jameson were all feminists of a radical-liberal hue whose writings were reprinted in the Owenite press (although occasionally with an editorial comment reminding readers that only communalized property and collectivized family life could ensure female equality). 26 But the number of non-Socialist radicals prepared to take up women’s cause in the first half of the century was few, nor is it surprising to discover that the most militant among them — Fox, Mill, Taylor, Grimstone — all took a sympathetic interest in Owenism and Owenite feminism. 27

Outside radical ranks even this limited support for feminist ideals was absent, smothered under a blanket of prejudice and anxiety which effectively suffocated any expression of women’s independent aspirations. Attempting to pierce this fog of fearful conservatism, particularly among women themselves, was no doubt a daunting and exhausting task: Anna certainly seems to have found it so. On several occasions she expressed her dismay at the apparent refusal of most women around her to confront, or even to acknowledge, their oppression. In speaking of the degraded position of my sex, I am... but too well aware, that my remarks... will draw upon me the hate of most men, together with that of the greater portion of the very sex, whose rights... I attempt to advocate, she told one audience in 1830. 28

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while in a later letter she expressed pessimism as to whether ‘the Emancipation of Women’ would ever be achieved since ‘women... are passive and indifferent to the suffering of their species’:

The love of rational liberty forms no part of the nature of this willingly degraded sex, and their very propensity for slavery is indeed a justification of the dogma that they originated the fall of man. Women are capable of great personal courage... but it is chiefly exhibited in the indulgence (sic) of oppression... There is something very depressing in contemplating this true, but dark side of the human picture. 29

This gloomy assessment was made at a time when Anna was ill and unhappy. But the sense of estrangement from average womanhood which it expressed repoussed elsewhere — not only in her own writings but in those of other Owenite feminists as well. Feminists clearly were a peculiar breed — with their unorthodox notions, their public political roles, their unconventional private lives — and this produced a sense of personal freakishness (Fanny Wright complained that respectable ladies made her feel like ‘a beast from the south sea’) which could be intensely isolating. In particular, such women tended to be set apart by their fierce intellectualism. At a time when the most formal schooling any woman, even a wealthy one, could generally expect to receive was a smattering of general knowledge plus training in ‘accomplishments’ (dancing, drawing, enough French to flirt in), genuine education was almost invariably self-acquired. 30 "Knowledge is power," say men," as Anna told one audience, hence "to keep women our slaves, we must keep them ignorant"... 31 Her own vigorous struggle to escape this mental enslavement, buried in books and nannies in Ballywulree, exemplified a common pattern of feminist development. For if docile ignorance was a mark of conventional femininity, so the battle for self-empowerment was a true mark of a female

1 To speak or write ideas in lucid order forms no part of a woman’s mental training, one woman wrote to The New Moral World, and in Anna’s case the effects of this could still be seen in her later writings, in which ideas often poured out in a confused rush. Her spelling and grammar were also very bad. It is interesting to speculate whether this was one reason why Thompson took the major initiative in writing the Appeal, rather than Wheeler.
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dissent - and Ovenses contained many such fervent auto-
didact in its feminist rariss.

The lecturer who succeeded Anna as the movement's leading
feminist publicist, for example, was a Bristol woman named
Emma Martin who somewhere in the middle of raising a family,
running a school, and working for the Baptist church (in her pre-
Owenite days), had found time to teach herself several languages
(including Hebrew and Italian, which she translated), basic
medicine and physiology, and enough theology to put many of
her later clerical opponents to shame. Two other Owenite
feminists, Margaret Chappellsmith and Eliza Macaulay, were fas-
cinated by economic theory. Margaret's lectures on currency
reform and 'the history of British financial institutions' (copiously
illustrated with charts and graphs) were among the most popular
offered by the Owenites in the 1840s; Eliza had offered instruction
on similar themes to London audiences a decade earlier. Other
feminists wrote to the Owenite press of their explorations in
mathematics, natural science, and 'the most enlightened
philosophy' of the day, including the works of Godwin,
Wollstonecraft, Shelley (the feminists' favourite poet) and, of
course, Owen himself. 'There are, I believe, many women who,
like me, deplore the irrational education they are compelled to
receive,' as one of these women (who signed herself 'A Friend to
Truth') wrote to an Owenite newspaper in 1839.

and who, when they have got rid of their school-mistress, and
can withdraw from a round of insipid and frivolous pursuits,
and begin to cultivate their own minds, and dare to think for
themselves . . . .

She herself had had access to the universities modern libraries' where in struggling through 'masses of error and prejudice' she had
eventually found her way to 'the writings of the benevolent
Owen'. Wearied with the clashing of opinions, overwhelmed
with the view of the wretchedness of the worthy and unfortunate,
stung with indignation at the heartless and systematic cruelty of
some . . . men she had turned 'with rapture and admiration' to
the 'larger field of mental vision' provided by the New Society
of Society: 'Mr Owen's hand tears down the veil, his finger points to

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the origin of the evil, and his comprehensive and noble mind dis-
covers the remedy . . . .

Even Frances Wright, whose own writings were nearly as
popular as Owen's, was almost entirely self-taught. As a girl she
buried herself in libraries, where she worked her way through
everything from Byron (who inspired her to cut her hair in the
mode revolutionnaire) and write bad poetry) and Epicurus ('I
think I have had done with churches,' she confided to her diary
afterwards - and she had) to Mary Wollstonecraft, Bentham,
Hume and countless other enlightened thinkers. Fanny was a
rather brisk young intellectual, who by the age of twenty was
already dashing off essays on Epicurean philosophy and three-act
plays on political themes. But at a time when a bluestocking like
Anna Barbauld could write that 'young ladies ought only to have
such a general tincture of knowledge as to make them agreeable
companions to a man of sense,' even Fanny occasionally
suffered intellectual doubts and anxieties, as one eloquent auto-
biographical passage from her Popular Lectures indicates:

Myself a scholar, not a teacher, who have purchased such
knowledge as I possess, by years of self-directed study, persevering
observation, and unceasing reflection, I can well conceive, for I
myself have experienced, the doubts, difficulties, hopes, fears, and
anxieties, which beset the awakening mind in the early stage of
enquiry: the indistinct and, often, evanescent perceptions which
encourage, and then check, and then again encourage, again to
intimate its advance; the conflicting thoughts and feelings with
which it has to struggle ere it can vanquish early impressions, and
consent to receive new ones, admit ideas subversive of those which
had grown with its growth, and which, associated with tender
recollections, cling to the heart as well as the head . . . All this I can
understand, for all this I have . . . hit . . .

Such intellectual growing pains, like the estrangement from
ordinary women which such growth usually entailed, were an
inevitable part of the price paid by feminists for their hard-won
sense of self-determination.

FANNY WRIGHT (1795-1852)

Like Anna Wheeler, Fanny Wright was the product of a well-to-
do, enlightened family, and like Anna also, she was gorgeous,
precocious, and totally impatient of social convention. Her father, a Scottish linen manufacturer of Jacobin sympathies, died when she was only two; her mother a few months later. So Fanny's early years (along with her younger sister Camilla, who spent most of her life in Fanny's wake) were passed in the home of a conventional aunt who clearly found her brilliant, self-dramatizing niece a bit of a handful. Eventually the two girls moved in with another relative, James Milne, one of the leading members of the Scottish school of progressive philosophers. Here, among Milne and his friends, Fanny encountered an intellectual culture whose vigour and iconoclasm made a deep and lasting mark on her thought. The political and personal daredevilry which she also began to display at this time were, however, uniquely her own. Young girls seldom write books, but by her mid-twenties Fanny had written and published several, and made her reputation as a literary lady. Young girls certainly don't set off on long treks across uncivilized lands— but in 1818 Fanny (with Camilla in tow) travelled across America, recording her impressions for posterity in a book whose strongly democratic views won her applause then and fierce criticism in Britain. And, above all, young girls must not enter into dangerously ambiguous personal attachments. But Fanny, heedless of the horror of her friends and the indignant protests of her family, formed an intense attachment to General Lafayette, the ageing hero of the French Revolution, and eventually proposed to him (he affectionately declined). Travelling with him back to America in 1824, she visited Owen at the New Harmony community which he had established in Indiana. She was immediately converted to Owenism, and within a year had sunk nearly her entire personal fortune into a co-operative community in Tennessee whose residents were mostly black slaves purchased by her to begin life anew or a communalist basis. By the end of the decade the scandals surrounding this experiment, plus a series of anti-church, pro-feminist lectures and involvement in the creation of the New York Workingmen's Party (as well as her habitual dress—a pair of bloomers-like trousers designed originally for the women of New Harmony) had all combined to make Fanny the most notorious feminist radical in America— and an object of great admiration to her fellow

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Owenites back in Britain. 'May she find an echo in every instructed woman, and an active ally in every man!' as Anna Wheeler told one London audience in 1829. Grateful posterity will no doubt associate her name with the illustrious men of the present age, who, having discovered the principles of real social science, gave them to the world under the name of CO-OPERATION.42

In her espousal of this new social science, Fanny, like Anna, never entirely lost touch with her radical-liberal origins. Her favourite doctrine of 'Free Enquiry' was really little more than a restatement of Enlightenment rationalism, while her social views clearly echoed the humanist tradition of eighteenth-century progressivism.43 Yet in her communism, in her advocacy of class-based political organization, and—above all—in her attitude towards marriage and family life, Fanny, like all the Owenite feminists, reached past that tradition at crucial points. Sexual nonconformity in particular seems to have been a decisive dividing line, especially when it was not merely a policy position but also a mode of personal practice. I am a woman and without a master, two causes of disgrace in England,' Anna wrote to a friend in 1832, twenty years after deserting her husband.44 And it was this 'masterless' sexual status, with all the disgrace it entailed, which set many Owenite women apart from even the most broad-minded liberals of the day.

When Fanny established her Tennessee community, Nashoba, she provided it with an uncompromisingly libertarian sexual code. The marriage law existing outside the pale of the Institution (Nashoba), she declared, is of no force within that pale. No woman can forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and no man assert over her any rights of power whatsoever beyond what he may exercise over her free and voluntary affection. Nor on the other hand, may any woman assert claims to the society or peculiar protection of any individual of the other sex, beyond what mutual inclination dictates and sanctions; while to every individual member of either sex is secured the protection and friendly aid of all... Let us enquire— not if a mother be a wife, or a father a husband, but if parents can supply, to the creatures they have brought into being, all this requisite to make existence a blessing.45
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The result was instant notoriety among the community's conservative Tennessee neighbours and a series of turbulent liaisons among the colonists themselves (most of them involving women who, far from giving 'free and voluntary affection' appear to have been coerced and intimidated by Nashoban men) which eventually destroyed the morale of all concerned, including even Fanny who, in 1830, dissolved the settlement and shipped its black inhabitants off to a new life in Haiti. 14 Her own commitment to free unions was apparently undiminished, however, since she then promptly formed ore with another Owenite, Phileasal D'Arusmont. But finding herself pregnant, she decided to beat a strategic retreat from the high ground of sexual principle and married him - a decision which unfortunately served only to vindicate all her earlier hostility to marriage, since it eventually led to a miserable legal wrangle in which D'Arusmont managed to gain control over her entire property, including all her earnings from lectures and writings. She divorced him in an attempt to regain her financial independence, but died (of an illness following a fall) while the legal machinery was still in motion. 14

Emma Martin, whose story is told below, left her husband, a Bristol businessman, to join the Owenites. Like Anna, Emma had become a feminist in the course of an unhappy marriage; like Fanny, she lost all her property to her husband, although in her case this was probably only a small amount. 14 As in Mary Wollstonecraft's day, this sort of unorthodox behaviour was greeted with prudent abuse by the Owenites' opponents, particularly since these women proved willing not only to leave marriages, but also to lead sexual lives outside them. Both Emma Martin and Fanny Wright took lovers after they left their husbands (Emma had a child by hers), and it is very possible that Anna's intellectual partnership with William Thompson eventually became a sexual liaison. * Anna was a widow when their friendship was formed, and after his early death wrote

* Like Anna Wheeler, William Thompson was also a renegade from the Irish landowning class. I am not what is usually called a labourer, ran the characteristic introduction to one of his Owenite texts, sized 'One of the Idle Classes'. Under equitable social arrangements possessed of health and strength, I ought to blush in making this declaration. For the last twelve years of my life I have been living on what is called rent, the produce of the labours of others. The years which he spent living off the surplus labour of his tenants on his Cork estate

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anonymously of how he had respected a woman who 'when no other obstacles existed but unequal marriage-laws, would refuse to be the legalized servant of any man', while he in his turn remained a bachelor because he was unwilling to become 'master of a slave ... docile to his will ...'. 14 Perhaps they were able to make a more equitable arrangement for themselves. Certainly it would not have been surprising if they had, since most of the feminist publicists who did have mates seem to have chosen men in Thompson's mould; that is, Socialists with a particular interest in feminist issues. Frances Morrison, a working-class feminist, was married to a militant supporter of female unionization; Catherine Bambry to a high-minded young bohemian who espoused Shelleyan views on sexual relations; Margaret Chappelthit to a man who wholeheartedly supported her activities as a feminist lecturer, and occasionally poured the tea at her public meetings. 14 Within the Socialist movement, then, these women found not only a political base but a new type of personal relationship with men, one founded not on dependence and subordination, but - as Anna Wheeler wrote of her relationship with Thompson - 'on generous feelings' and 'moral courage'. 4

Clearly these women were not antagonistic to heterosexual relationships per se, nor even to marriage if by that was meant a loving union of social equals. Of all the leading Owenite feminists, only Fanny Wright ever advocated the total abolition of marriage in favour of liberated liaisons, and even she gave way at the prospect of bearing an illegitimate child. Nor were they hostile to other features of women's traditional role. Motherhood in particular most Owenite feminists valued highly in theory,
although in practice it often proved burdensome and traumatic. Anna Wheeler’s relationship with her daughter, Rosina, was plagued by misunderstandings and by Rosina’s resentment of her mother’s political commitments (although later Rosina came to share Anna’s feminist views). 26 Fanny Wright did eventually make a stab at conventional family life, with D’Arcusmont and their daughter Sylva, but gave it up to return to radical platforms in America. Her re-entry into politics eventually cost her not only her marriage but also her daughter, who remained with D’Arcusmont and became entirely estranged from her mother. 27 Emma Martin, on the other hand, managed to maintain a very good relationship with her three girls, but she had to pay friends to care for them during her lecturing tours or else risk subjecting them to the rigours of a peripatetic political life (including, on one occasion, being stoned in the streets of a hostile town). 28 Small wonder all these women looked forward to a new mode of existence—one which would allow them to combine love and maternity with wider social aspirations.

As an ideological stance, sexual nonconformity was also closely connected to the heterodox religious outlook which was so central to the ethos of early Socialism. The link between feminism and religious free-thought is examined below, but its significance can begin to be measured by the fact that every Owenite feminist was, in contemporary terminology, an ‘infidel’ opponent of organized religion. Anna Wheeler was an avowed ‘materialist’ (to whom Christ was ‘that eastern philosopher’), as was Emma Martin who became one of Owenism’s leading secularists. 29 Fanny Wright won an awesome reputation for godless immorality on the basis of some rather insubstantial but sharply polemical Popular Lectures in which she attacked the church as a citadel of conservatism, particularly sexual conservatism. And in the early 1830s one of the leading Owenite lecturers in London was a woman named Eliza Macauley, who combined vigorously feminist views with intransigent hostility to the ‘superstition-mongering’ clergy. Like Anna and Fanny, Eliza was an independent woman. Unlike them, however, she was also a desperately poor one who lived almost entirely by her wits and her pen; a way of life typical of many Owenite feminists, but hardly compatible with respectable Christian womanhood.

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ELIZA MACAULEY (1787–1837)

According to her sketchy autobiographical memoirs, Eliza was the daughter of a poor Yorkshire farmer who died in the mid-1780s, when she was only an infant, leaving his family destitute. 30 Casting about for a way to support herself, Eliza began an acting career: first in local barns in her neighbourhood and, eventually, in London. She arrived in London around 1805 and for the next twenty years or so went from one low-paid, badly-reviewed theatrical production to another, until finally a sustained period of unemployment (which she blamed on the philistinism of metropolitan theatre directors) led her to abandon the thespian life, or at least to turn her dramatic talents in other directions. 31 By the late 1820s she had moved from the stage to the pulpit, preaching in a little ‘Jacobitical’ chapel in Grub Street. 32 From there she transferred herself—how or why is not recorded—to Owenite platforms, becoming, in her own words, a ‘good Co-operative woman’. 33 By the early 1830s she was deeply involved in London Owenite activities, managing the largest Labour Exchange there and delivering regular lectures on subjects as varied as financial reform, child development, the evils of Christian orthodoxy, and women’s rights to full social equality. 34 She was probably paid a small amount for these lectures, but obviously not enough, since throughout this period she also kept busy giving acting lessons (one visiting group of Saint Simonians hired her for this purpose) 35 and producing small volumes of essays on edifying topics, ‘poetic effusions’, and other staple ingredients of a literary lady’s repertoire. But literary pursuits are the most arduous of any, 36 and subject to the most mortifications—particularly for females, so by 1835 she was to be found publishing her memoirs (sold by subscription) from a cell in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison. 37 She died on a lecture tour, two years later.

A sad, brave little tale, dominated by the types of financial dilemmas which plagued all women of her kind—women who, in her own words, ‘lack goods or fortune, and, if thrown upon the world, have but the choice of industry for existence’. 38 Looking down the social ladder of Owenite feminism from Anna Wheeler and Fanny Wright to the rungs on which the majority of their sisters stood, we see many women of this sort—women who, like
Anna and Fanny, lived a 'masterless' existence outside conventional family life but, unlike them, lacked the income to sustain it. Some, like Emma Martin, had deliberately taken on this independent status by leaving their husbands. But many others, like Eliza, were spinster for whom an unhustled life may well have been an infliction rather than a choice. Certainly getting a husband had never been harder than it was at this time. From the late eighteenth century onward the number of unmarried women in Britain had increased rapidly, while at the same time the economic prospects of such women steadily deteriorated. Eliza Macaulay proliferated, eking out a precarious existence on the margins of professional or literary society. Such women were piti'd for their man-less state, but as one woman sharply pointed out, the reason 'so many unmarried women are unhappy is not because they are old maids, but in consequence of poverty, and of the difficulty they encounter in maintaining a decent position in society...'

When Emma Martin left her husband to join the Owenites, she was initially able to support herself and her daughters with the small salary paid by the Owenite Central Board for her lectures. Later, however, she was forced to take up teaching, shopkeeping and midwifery, none of which provided an income sufficient for the needs of her growing girls. Finally, like Eliza, she was reduced to a public appeal for 'unds'. Over the years Owen himself received many letters from women in a similar plight, including one who had been deserted by her husband and was currently taking in washing for a living, several who sought teaching employment, and a few who simply begged him for financial assistance (which he gave). 'I feel as if I stand alone, unaided, unblessed, without protection, support or comfort,' Jane Leftson, a Manchester widow, wrote to him. 'All to suffer and nothing to enjoy. How long this struggle will last I cannot tell...

Such conditions bred feminists, and many of the most militant contributions to the Owenite feminist literature came from 'odd women' like these. From their fragmentary self-descriptions most appear to have come from petit bourgeois backgrounds... but the conventional class label utterly fails to convey the displaced, ambiguous quality of their lives. Outside traditional women's roles, thrust into an unwomanly independence, women like Eliza Macaulay and Emma Martin soon found themselves living right at the edge of bourgeois gentility, at the point where gruelling work and poverty blurred the line between themselves and the lower orders. Lacking any route into male-controlled professions or commercial opportunities, they often entered jobs shared with women from the class below them. Emma Martin was a schoolteacher, but so also was the working-class Owenite feminist, Frances Morrison, while the many female 'teachers of infant and private schools' reported in attendance at Socialist meetings on women's rights in Leicester in the late 1830s could have been either middle or working class, and were probably some of both. Needlewomen, of whom the Owenite movement contained many, were usually the wives or daughters of working men, but from the beginning of the century their ranks had been steadily swollen by impoverished 'gentlewomen', usually spinster or widows. Certainly some jobs— governessing, writing, serving as a 'lady's companion'—were considered more genteel than others (although they were usually just as badly paid). But in general it was attachment to a man of a particular class position which established a woman's social rank, not her own economic status. When a woman had to labour for a living she could all too easily find herself inhabiting a region where class differences blurred in the face of a common female oppression.

This may help to explain why women like Eliza Macaulay and Emma Martin so strongly identified with the cause of working people—and also why all Owenite feminists identified women's oppression as a trans-class phenomenon. The problems which unified women from different backgrounds may have seemed more important than the social and cultural differences which divided them. Yet the differences obviously remained. In general Owenite feminists tended to ignore them, but in 1833 one group of London women established a Practical Moral Union of Women of Great Britain and Ireland whose aims, in the words of its founding manifesto, was 'to combine all classes of women' in the struggle for sexual equality, so that 'the broad line of demarcation which has been drawn between different classes of women, will be effaced'. This, the first separatist feminist organization established in Britain, was a short-lived venture, collapsing after
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only six or seven months. The reasons for its failure are unclear, but the strong opposition which it met from at least one leading male Owenite may have had something to do with it. Fatal to the advancement of women would be an exclusive union; he wrote to The Crisis shortly after the Union was formed, 'the line of separation would be extended between the sexes...'

Are the interests of man and woman separate, or is their interest one and the same?... If woman denounce the right usurped by man of legislating exclusively for the whole, how can she expect but every rational man will not protest against woman being the legislator, excluding man from any participation in that right?... woman is equal with man by the laws of our physical condition... Do the laws of our nature show we are destined to live together in a social state? If monstresses for men and nunnaries for women be not a violation of the laws of nature, then we should return to that state; but if they are a violation of our social condition, then the projected society of women would be pernicious. Let man see his own interest in restoring woman to freedom, then will he himself be free. 46

In reply, the Union's organizers stated that they had never entertained the slightest idea that the interests of the two sexes are in opposition to each other, but wished only to unite in assisting those men who are putting forth their moral and intellectual strength to extricate that deeply injured half of the human race from the thraldom in which they are involved - a statement reflecting a lack of political confidence which may well have proved the Union's undoing.

No membership lists from the Union survive, but several letters from feminists sent to the Owenite press at the time suggest that they may have been active participants. One of these was from a woman who signed herself 'a London Mechanic's Wife'. 47 She was an enthusiastic advocate of feminist organization among women 'of the labouring class', as well as a promoter of trade unions for working women. Like so many of the working-class women who became involved in Owenism, nothing is known about her personal history. But in 1834 she entered into a brief correspondence with another working-class feminist, Frances Morrison, of whom more is known since she eventually became one of the leading Owenite lecturers in northern England.

Feminists

FRANCES MORRISON (1807-1898)

Frances Cooper was the illegitimate daughter of a Surrey farm-girl. 48 Her early years were spent with her grandmother, who took responsibility for her upkeep and schooling. Later she re-joined her mother in Penshore, and it was there, in 1822, that a house-painter named James Morrison, tramping for work, caught her eye. Frances, only fifteen years old and soon very much in love, agreed to return with James to his native Birmingham, where they lived together without benefit of a wedding ceremony. 49 After four or five years, however, she became pregnant and they wed: a common order of events in the early nineteenth century working class.

The first few years of Frances' married life were occupied with childbirth and childrearing (she had four daughters), running a small newspaper shop, and - with the encouragement of her husband - educating herself in radical politics, particularly Owenite theory. 'Long ere I began to think, my reason warned with the absurd forms of society,' she later wrote to Owen, 'but from an ill-cultivated and wrong direction given to my mind. I could never get a solid idea till on the perusal of your Essays...'

In 1833 James, who had previously been active in the parliamentary reform movement and, latterly, as an activist in the Owenite-dominated Operative Builders' Union, became editor of The Pioneer, a newspaper which soon became the principal organ of Owenite general unionism. 50 Frances, by then also a committed Owenite and a feminist, soon began contributing articles to the paper under the pseudonym 'A Bondswoman', while together she and James produced a series of editorials on feminist themes, ranging from the inequities of the marriage law to the demand for equal pay for equal work: 'A woman's wage is not reckoned at an average more than two-thirds of a man's,' one of these editorials ran, 'and we believe in reality it seldom amounts to more than a third (and wives have no wages at all). Yet, is not the produce of female labour as useful?... The industrious female is well entitled to the same amount of remuneration as the industrious male.' 51

In the late 1830s, after James' premature death, Frances became a paid lecturer for the Owenites, travelling on speaking circuits.
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throughout northern towns where she addressed large audiences on women's rights and marriage reform. Like Emma Marten, she soon discovered, however, that such employment was insufficient to support herself and her daughters, so she apprenticed the girls to the tape-weaving trade and, with Owen's help, found a teaching post in Hulme. She then effectively disappeared from the Owenite scene, although according to her children she remained faithful to her Socialist feminist ideals until the end of her days.

Even in a movement as densely populated with working-class intellectuals as Owenism was, Frances and James Morrison nonetheless stood out as particularly impressive theorists and publicists. Yet in all other respects they were an unexceptional couple, typical of the general working-class membership of the movement. Birmingham, where they lived and worked until James' death, was a strong Owenite centre in which most male Owenites, like James, worked in skilled trades (particularly building or metalwork), while female Owenites were employed as lacemakers, buttonmakers, glassblowers, needlewomen or, like Frances, as small shopkeepers. All were occupations characteristic of the upper stratum of the working class from which most Owenites came — a stratum which they themselves almost invariably described as 'respectable'. The 'great bulk' of the Manchester Socialists, as one of their number wrote, belonged to the more respectable class of artisans and their families, while the Huddersfield Owenites boasted of 'numerous and respectable' attendances at all their meetings.

By respectable we do not mean lords, dukes, baronets, esquires, etc., but the honest, intelligent, and industrious producers of wealth, who are the real respectables...

Engels, surveying the movement in 1844, noted that it drew the 'most educated and solid elements' of the working class. Their body consisted of the most skilful, industrious, steady, sober and moral portion of the working class, another observer noted, 'those, in short, who influence the rest...'

This proletarian respectability was a highly-specified status, bearing little resemblance to genteel notions of social refinement. It was also a status which was clearly differentiated along sexual lines. For a skilled male worker like James Morrison, the key components of a respectable lifestyle were regular employment in a recognized craft or trade which provided a steady income for his family; some small degree of education (at least to literacy level); 'steady habits', i.e. non-addiction to alcohol and a fairly sedate sexual life; and usually membership in one or more of a range of working-class institutions such as a Friendly Society, savings bank, Mechanics Institute, or a trade union. A respectable working man was a sober, industrious, regular provider of family necessities. The ability of a woman to live in a respectable manner largely depended on whether or not her husband met these criteria. Access to a steady income meant regular housekeeping, clean, well-fed children, and a stable domestic life — the defining features of a decent womanly existence. Most wives of artisans also had some small amount of education, probably a few years at a Sunday school or a short period in a church-sponsored day school.* By the early nineteenth century there existed many cheap boarding schools which catered to the daughters of shopkeepers, tradesmen and the 'better class of mechanics', and Frances Morrison briefly attended one of these.

Many Owenite women would also have belonged to one or other female version of a local self-help institution, perhaps a female friendly society (which would provide sickness insurance and lying-in benefits) or a clothing club. And some, as we shall see, were in trade unions and political organizations.

A respectable artisan home was usually financed by the joint earnings of both husband and wife. The Morisons' arrangement — in which the wages James earned at housepainting and newspaper-editing were supplemented by the profits from Frances' shop — was very common. When the London Owenite, William Lovett, married a young lady's maid in the early 1820s he immediately began to look for 'some small way of business that...'

* Two-thirds to three-quarters of the British working class was literate in the early nineteenth century, with the percentage being highest among agricultural workers and lowest in the skilled sector from which the Owenites were drawn. But a marked difference between women and men was visible: far more boys than girls attended charity day-schools in Bolton in 1830, for example, and few of the early Mechanics Institutes admitted women at all. The number of those able to sign the marriage register was always higher among men than among women.
she herself could manage' which might add to the income he earned as a cabinet-maker. They decided upon a pastry-shop, but after a few years Mary Lovett gave this up to become manager of the first London Co-operative shop (taking over from her husband, at one-half his salary!). Owenite women married to domestic craftsmen, such as shoemakers or weavers, usually assisted their husbands at their trades, while others took in laundry, did 'lop' sewing (cheap, ready-made goods) or ran little schools for local children. In his autobiography the Owenite whitesmith, George Holyoake, recalled the wide range of jobs performed by women in his upper working-class neighbourhood in Birmingham in the early years of the century, from the housewives who ran little bakeries and grocery shops inside their own kitchens, to the small button-making workshop which his mother had at the back of their home, where little George learned to bend the button wires almost as soon as he could stand. She received the orders; made the purchase of materials; superintended the making of the goods; made out the accounts; and received the money; besides taking care of her growing family. There was no "Rights of Women" thought of in her day, but she was an entirely self-governing, managing mistress... A respectable working-class wife, then, was one who kept a good home, paid her own bread, and was not a burden upon the scanty earnings of her husband. This did not mean, however, that sexual roles were any less clearly defined in the working class than in the property classes. A woman's primary responsibility was to her husband and children, and no other employments were allowed to take precedence over the servicing of family needs. The woman who had to neglect her home in order to earn money for its upkeep was not considered respectable. Moreover, the wages women earned were usually far lower than those of men, so their financial contribution tended to be viewed as secondary. And even the small sum they did receive was legally the property of their husbands who could, if they wished, spend it on themselves instead of their families. Many men think that the whole amount gained by their wives is so much drinking money gained for themselves,' one man, a button-maker, told a Morning Chronicle reporter. But if the working-class woman, like the middle-class one, was usually a social inferior within marriage, she was certainly not the decorative, dependent inferior that her wealthier sister was. She had a crucial and recognized role to play in her dual capacity as wife/mother and worker. Marriage and family responsibilities did not signal her withdrawal from the world of work and work-oriented relationships, as they did for women of the upper classes, but simply confirmed her particular place within that world. The duties of womanhood were active, demanding ones, not passive, trivial ones. The concept of femininity as graceful parasitism meant nothing to her.

Within the course of the nineteenth century, however, this situation was to undergo a radical revision, as ideals of womanly dependence and decorum forged in the middle class began to appear in the working class as well, particularly in its upper strata. One key symptom of this change was growing disapproval of any extra-familial employment for married women. From having been an essential, if secondary, contributor to family income, the ideal working-class woman became viewed simply as a 'housewife', an unwaged provider of domestic services. Men, on the other hand, were expected to earn wages sufficient to support an entire household. His the public world of work; hers the private realm of home. By the mid-nineteenth century, at the end of the Owenite period, this pattern was already clearly discernible among urban craftsmen and other labour aristocrats from whose ranks many Owenites had been drawn. The most respectable portion of the carpenters and joiners 'will not allow' their wives to do any work than attend to their domestic and family duties. Henry Mayhew reported in London in 1849, and the same was true of many other artisans: 'As a general rule, neither their wives nor children 'go out to work'... 'We keep our wives too respectable for that,' one coachman boasted. On closer investigation, Mayhew found that the wives of many of these men did, in fact, take in washing or keep little shops, so it seems likely that the dependent housewife was still more ideal than real. But it was a potent new ideal nonetheless, and one which was to have a dramatic effect on women's status in all areas of economic and social life. The Owenites stood at the beginning of this transition, and their own views on women were not wholly unaffected by it. But
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in general they remained firmly within the older tradition in which women were viewed not as passive dependents but as active participants in all matters affecting themselves, their families, and their communities. Their support for women’s political involvement reflected this. As a popular movement, Owenism drew on traditions of organized militancy among working-class women which, in the decades immediately preceding the rise of the movement, had reached a high point of intensity and public visibility. Throughout the war years which opened the century, and the depression which followed them, rising prices and falling wages had brought thousands of working-class women onto the streets where they led food riots, supported strikes and demonstrated in favour of popular petitions. After 1815, when Jacobinism re-emerged as a mass movement for parliamentary reform, a national network of Female Reform Societies had been established in which working-class women actively campaigned for the widening of the franchise, annual parliaments, election by ballot — all the demands which were later to appear in the People’s Charter. This level of female activism had horrified upper-class observers, who still recalled only too vividly les femmes de la Révolution. But reform leaders, for their part, usually welcomed the women’s support. This array of women against the system... I deem the most fatal omen of its fall,” Thomas Wooler, editor of the radical newspaper, The Black Dwarf, chortled in 1819.

Female activism of this sort, it should be emphasized, had generally been viewed not as a challenge to women’s traditional family role, but as a necessary extension of it, at a time when the rights and needs of all family members were under attack. It was as ‘wives, mothers, and daughters, in their social, domestic and moral capacities’ that the Female Reformers of Lancashire had marched to political rallies in 1818-19, and it was as ‘mothers of children’ that they had called on other women for support. ‘Our homes which once bore ample testimony of our industry and cleanliness... are now alas! robbed of all their ornaments,’ as Alice Kitchen of the Blackburn Female Reform Society told a rally in 1819, and ‘behold our innocent children!... how appalling are their cries for bread!’ Perhaps, she went on, women were not renowned for physical courage, yet she and her sisters were

Feminist Socialists

prepared to sally forth in defence of ‘that food and raiment for our children, which God and nature have ordained for every living creature; but which our oppressors and tyrannical rulers have withheld from us’. This style of militant wifehood and motherhood both encouraged and limited female activism — allowing women to join social movements without being accused of unwomanliness, while at the same time usually ensuring that the role they occupied within these movements was a secondary, subordinate one. Prior to Owenism, women themselves rarely used radical platforms to raise demands related to their own status. Rather, they saw themselves as primarily engaged, in the words of the Blackburn Female Reformers, in ‘assisting the male population of this country to acquire their rights and liberties’. And the types of activities which absorbed them — organizing fund-raising events, teaching in radical Sunday Schools, sewing Caps of Liberty for leading male radicals — tended to reflect this auxiliary status.

As in the home, so in popular protest women were seen as essential but secondary adjuncts to the men.

And yet, other ideas were also in the air. Any mobilization of women carries within it a potential challenge to sexual conventions, and from the 1790s onward there were always a number of working-class radicals prepared to openly state that challenge. The same ‘Paine-ite’ aspects of Wollstonecraft’s Vindication which had led Walpole to refuse to have it in his library, had placed it firmly within the intellectual culture of the radical working class, where it stimulated a small-scale but lively debate over feminist ideas. Arguments over whether women ought to be granted the franchise appeared in radical newspapers, along with discussions of Wollstonecraft’s views on female education, Godwin and Spence’s anti-marriage doctrines and Shelley’s eloquent vision of a new age of sex equality. In the 1830s and 30s the newspapers published by the leading free press campaigner, Richard Carlile, gave vigorous backing to feminist demands. I do not like the doctrine of women keeping at home, and minding the house and family., Carlile complained in 1832, ‘It is as much the proper business of the man as the woman’s, and the woman, who is so confined, is not the proper companion of the public useful man.’ She certainly would not have been a proper
companion for Carlile, who expected his female associates to sell his illegal publications, run his bookshops, stand trial for these activities, and suffer imprisonment if necessary. In 1832 he established a common-law union with Eliza Sharples, who published, under his direction, a feminist freethought journal named *The Isis*, while at the same time delivering regular lectures on women’s position at the Rotunda (a radical meeting-house in South London which later became an Owenite centre). ‘Sooner or later it [female emancipation] must come.’ *The Isis* told its readers, ‘and no other reason is to be offered against the equality of the sexes, than that which tyranny has to offer on every occasion – its will and power...’

By the 1830s most of these working-class supporters of women’s rights had declared for Owenism, and merged their feminist rhetoric with that of the new movement. Ideas hitherto confined to a small vanguard of radical intellectuals began to find broader channels of expression through the expanding propaganda network of Socialist organization. Not every new convert to Owenism was enthusiastic about this development: ‘Why talk of making women rational until we have first made ourselves rational?’ as Henry Hyett requested, a leading London Owenite, demanded, ‘or why talk of restoring them to their social rights until we have first obtained our own?’ Such hostility, as we shall see in the next chapter, was particularly pronounced among certain groups of Owenite trade unionists, for whom the feminist challenge appeared as a direct threat to their status as a labour elite. But in general the new style of sexual egalitarianism was received with sympathetic interest by the growing popular membership of Owenism. Working-class Socialists, their eyes set on the new social order to be built, took up feminism as part of the ideological equipment necessary for the task.