



Disorderly Conduct: Women's Health and Women's Rights (1883-1930)

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Abstract

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) is stereotypically characterized by propriety and sexual repression. Yet, during this time conduct literature for girls containing information on sex education as well as care for one's body was widely circulated and read in response to fears over the spread of promiscuity, STDs, and prostitution. The authors of this literature exhibit acknowledgement of the need for women's education on sexual hygiene rather than previously-enforced ignorance, and they also defined aspects of femininity and motherhood in tandem with sexuality in an effort to guide girls on "proper" womanhood. These books reinforced and shaped thought on gender roles which appear to have had persisting influence on the movements for female suffrage and labor rights that continued into the twentieth century. I investigate this issue using two conduct books as well as material from the collection of labor activist Margaret Dreier Robins (1868-1945). This investigation exposed many common values between the former medium and Robins's reform efforts as head of the National Women's Trade Union League, such as the importance of a gender-defined society, the centrality of collectivism and motherhood to the definition of femininity, as well as the harmful endorsement of eugenics in the production of healthy and democratic future generations. By comparing this literature, this paper begins to gather evidence on how the messaging of this conduct literature internalized in childhood could have shaped the direction of the progressive women's movement.

Keywords: conduct literature, feminism, gender roles, women's suffrage, labor rights, Margaret Dreier Robins, National Women's Trade Union League, eugenics

Conduct literature, which by design delineates what constitutes acceptable behavior, shows how a society thought it should act. This genre is usually thought of in terms of its influence on its individual readers. However, it can also reveal how its authors sought to use their own social authority to enforce and to change the definition of ideal behavior. Popular conduct literature for young women and girls historically has reflected existing power dynamics: its focus on manners, status, and marriage bounded women's role in society. Though women's conduct literature has existed since the Middle Ages (Armstrong & Tennenhouse, 1987, p. 4), the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of books for women which were newly forthright about

issues of sex and health, an unexpected development in the context of stereotypically chaste and sexually-repressed Victorian society (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 110).

Perhaps surprisingly, the pious and traditionally-gendered values presented in women's conduct literature from this period would be invoked by the leaders of progressive women's movements of the early twentieth century. This paper looks at the messaging about women's bodies and gender roles present in both Victorian conduct literature and the progressive women's movement and examines their close similarities. The investigation uses historical books and documents from a special collections library as source material, and therefore looks at conduct books as historical objects rather than simply looking at the content within them. This approach prompted the question of how highly personal messaging directed at the individual and communicated through objects such as these hygiene manuals can influence social values at a macro-level. Since conduct literature imparts direct descriptions of historical behavioral values, it provides a convenient method of analyzing how the concepts of gender and body that women's rights activists took in their formative years may have gone on to influence their pursuit of greater autonomy and rights in adulthood. This study provides some initial evidence that conduct literature from the Victorian era could have shaped Progressive activists' views' on womanhood when they were children. However, it invites further investigation and evidence on this subject. To exemplify this phenomenon, this paper looks at the mix of traditional and progressive values in John Harvey Kellogg's *Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease: Girlhood, Maidenhood, Wifehood, Motherhood* (1883) and Mary Wood-Allen's *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* (1898), and in their authors, and show how their ideas were reflected in the ideology of the progressive labor activist Margaret Dreier Robins.

Background on Two Relevant Conduct Books

Vir Publishing Company

What a Young Woman Ought to Know was only one volume of Vir Publishing Company's series of conduct literature for both boys and girls. These books capitalized off of a hole in the market in which sexual education for young people was perceived as needed in order to better maintain purity, but had to be digestible for chaste Victorian audiences as well (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 110). The company's publisher and former Lutheran minister Sylvanus Stall (1847-1915) profited from this need by uniting sex education with religion in his books, which

became typical of conduct literature of the period (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 111). Stall was an avid salesman who also published books and manuals containing rhetorical strategies on selling his literature (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 122). He encouraged salespeople to exploit the customers' values of self-improvement and religion in order to sell his "Pure Books on Avoided Subjects" to middle and working-class families even during hard economic times when other commodities such as food may have been sacrificed (Burek Pierce, 2011, pp. 122, 125) It is therefore possible that the sexually educational conduct book's capacity to serve as a new avenue for profit was a significant factor in pioneering the increase in learning about sex and the body at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Jennifer Burek Pierce in her analysis of Vir Publishing Company's books, a possible reason for the books' success was their employment of traditional values to solve modern problems, which very recently had been considered too scandalous to even discuss (2011, p. 115). They appealed to contemporary calls for chastity by respected figures and organizations such as the American Purity Alliance, but furthermore addressed issues which would become more popular in future such as eugenics in the 1920s (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 115). The author Stall selected to write *What a Young Woman Ought to Know*, Mary Wood-Allen (1841-1908), was the national superintendent of the Purity Department of the Women's Christian Temperance Union as well as a doctor (Burek Pierce, 2011, p. 116), and was therefore also a member of both the spiritual and scientific spheres Each of Stall's conduct books began with numerous endorsements by "eminent people" in both England and America, many of them religious figures. These endorsements bolstered Stall's intended message that it was not immoral or disreputable for young people to learn about puberty and sex, but instead necessary for the betterment of society.

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1943), the author of *Ladies' Guide* and mainly known for his invention of corn flakes or his endorsement of eugenics, was a health reformer and self-published writer on many medical and nutritional subjects. Kellogg was interested in devising and disseminating ideas on healthier living in many areas of life often not previously connected to health and medicine, writing numerous books and pamphlets on everything from diet, exercise, clothing, posture, hygiene, and his definition of racial purity (Davis, 2004, p. 265), many of which were meant to be household guides. Altogether he advocated for what he called

“biologic living,” and used his writing as a vehicle to promote this lifestyle (Davis, 2004, p. 253). He additionally wrote and published several sexually educational conduct books for children and young adults such as *Ladies’ Guide* in which he incorporated his advice on these many areas of study. Though some of his ideas on women’s intelligence and capabilities were progressive for the time period, his books also reflected the pervasive concerns about sexuality, gender-roles, and racial hierarchy representative of both the age and the transatlantic publishing phenomenon of conduct literature.

Traditional and Progressive Values in Victorian Conduct Literature

Both *Ladies’ Guide* and *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* discuss the equality, value, and intelligence of women as individuals and encourage self-esteem in young ladies, but also do not encourage women to attempt to venture outside of their traditional domain. For example, in her first chapter entitled “What Are You Worth?” Wood-Allen (1898) discusses how young women do not, for example, have the power to build houses like men do, “but, rightly educated, they could convert each one of these houses into a home, and to found a home and conduct it properly is to help the world” (p. 24). Of choosing a husband, she invites girls to ask if he views a woman as “an individual with rights, with intellect and heart, with a judgment to be consulted, opinions worthy of recognition, or only an appendage to man, created for his comfort and to be held in her "sphere" by his will?” (Wood-Allen, 1898, pp. 247-248). Wood-Allen emphasizes the importance of women and their great value to society but depicts this importance largely as a result of their ability to influence the home as a wife and mother.

Kellogg (1893) similarly says of a wife “Her sphere of usefulness is necessarily different from his, but it is in no way secondary in importance” (p. 333). Kellogg (1893) states that

Among the women of the day who are calling for a higher and broader usefulness for woman, are two distinct classes: one is earnestly seeking to lead women to see and comprehend the true import of their mission as wives and mothers, and to appreciate the momentous responsibilities which grow out of their ability to shape the destinies of the race; another class, ignoring this natural and important field of work for woman, is clamoring for a place for her outside the order of nature. (p. 334)

Though the advice in conduct literature is not always intended to be followed exactly or read literally, economically successful books can reflect the common views of the period based on

what people wanted to consume. This makes their depiction of women as important, yet strictly domestically so, a helpful insight into what values were shaping the minds of women's rights activists of the 1910s and '20s.

However, both books also emphasize to women the importance of maintaining one's own health and wellness as a good in itself. The contents of *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* encourage some modern ideas of self-care and promote self-worth not only in relation to women's roles. Part One of the book deals entirely with care of the body with chapters such as "Food," "Sleep," and "Exercise." In this way, the individual importance of the woman and her personal well-being are accounted for, and the receptiveness of the public to this book does perhaps reflect a greater sense of the value of women than the stereotypical perception of Victorian thought gives them credit for. Furthermore, the specific perspective proposed to be inherent to woman (and inherently different from man's) is treated as critical to a "clear understanding" of the world, and Wood-Allen states that it is not true "that the brain of one sex is either inferior or superior to the other; ... [but] that they differ" (Wood-Allen, 1898, p. 109). Therefore, while gender is treated as fixed and monolithic, this book read by so many young girls during this time period does speak of their inherent intellectual and physical worth.

Ladies' Guide contains some progressive ideas in the context of the time as well in that it acknowledges the importance of nurture over nature in shaping concepts of gender, yet it also argues that this process results in mental and physical inferiority of women relative to men. Kellogg (1893) states that "As infants, little girls and little boys begin life very much alike" but soon begin to assume different interests and personalities (p. 117). However, he critically suggests that "many of these differences are more largely the result of education than of inheritance" and these actions are undertaken on purpose to weaken women, which should not be accepted, and girls and boys should instead be treated equally prior to puberty (Kellogg, 1893, pp. 117-118). Since "Women as a class are dependent," Kellogg (1893) argues that they should be intellectually stimulated with the same vigor as boys throughout their development in order to have the means to attain social equality (p. 121).

However, these books do additionally discuss the importance of women caring for their health in reference to eugenic ideas of ensuring the health of mothers and children in order to uphold the quality of "the race" and maintain a healthy democratic society in future. Therefore, the aim to create healthy women through conduct literature was also a means to create a certain

future which the authors or publishers saw as desirable. Wood-Allen (1898) perfectly encapsulates this purpose with the following statement from a chapter titled “The Law of Heredity:”

Young women may feel that their individual violation of the laws of health is of no importance, but when they realize that the girls of to-day are the mothers of the future, and that the physical strength or weakness of each individual girl affects the average health of the nation, not only now, but it may be through her posterity for centuries, we can see that each girl's health is a matter of national and of racial importance. (pp. 219-220)

Kellogg's (1893) proclivity toward eugenics is of course especially evident in his chapter on heredity as well, in which he discusses the selective breeding of animals by pedigree and suggests that the same process should be applied to humans in order to stop “race deterioration” (pp. 383-384). According to him, in order to prevent this “every mother ought to study and ponder [the laws of heredity] with the greatest care and thoughtfulness, and see so far as possible to make a practical application of these principles in the rearing of her children” (Kellogg, 1893, p. 396). Later women's movements would emphasize the importance of women in creating healthy future generations as well. The next section of the paper will investigate one such organization, the National Women's Trade Union League, and its leader, Margaret Dreier Robins (1868-1945), who sought to influence women's treatment outside of the home.

Margaret Dreier Robins and the National Women's Trade Union League

A considerable disconnect exists between much of the advice of popular conduct books such as *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* and *Ladies' Guide* and the lives of working women, who constituted around three-fourths of unmarried women in the mid-Victorian period (Mitchell, 1994, p. 255). Whereas this literature portrayed the ideal woman as dependent and working for the collective good of her family at home in the domestic sphere, many women did not have the economic option to embody the middle- and upper-class ideal of the stay-at-home wife and mother which these books prepared them for. It is then interesting that so many overlapping themes exist between these books and the values of class-integrated women's labor rights organizations such as the National Women's Trade Union League over a decade later. One plausible explanation for these parallels could be the leadership of upper-class women such as

Jane Addams and Margaret Dreier Robins herself, who were raised in society that more closely aligned with these ideals. By bringing a mixture of traditional and progressive ideas largely consistent with the previously discussed values, Robins and her organization present a different perspective on feminism than that which would later more commonly be thought of as representative of the "first wave" in that traditional gender norms were still emphasized over equality.

As the daughter of immigrants from the former republic of Bremen, now a state of Germany, Robins always had a sense of civic responsibility impressed on her by both her parents and her perception of her ancestral state's democratic values (Payne, 1988, pp. 9-10, 13-14). Similar to the origin story of Victorian conduct literature itself, her special interest in labor rights originated in the spread of prostitution. Her work in organizations such as the Women's Municipal League and her New York Association for Household Research would encourage her to work to create better working opportunities and conditions for women as an alternative to sex work, specifically vulnerable "unattached women" such as immigrants or those without family (Payne, 1988, p. 26). The National Women's Trade Union League (1903-1950) under her leadership and financing would become an organization which advocated for women's rights and suffrage as a conduit for enhancing their labor rights specifically, rather than just as an end in themselves (Payne, 1988, p. 144). The connection this organization made between women's labor rights and the importance of femininity, maternity, health reform, and democracy form the surprising link between Victorian conduct literature and this cause.

Similar to the two conduct books studied, the League believed in inherent differences between men and women, and in the importance of maintaining a gender-defined society (Payne, 1988, pp. 127, 123). This organization held maternity and collectivism as central to the definition of femininity. According to biographer Elizabeth Anne Payne (1988), Robins "not only accepted separate but equal spheres for the sexes, she actively celebrated and promoted them throughout her career," and the League viewed women as meant for motherhood, whether through biological reproduction, or through a kind of "social motherhood" in which they work for the betterment of humanity (pp. 123-124). Therefore, though the League worked for the improvement of women's rights, they still esteemed the traditional feminine values which had been central to Victorian culture rather than shirking them in order to more easily incorporate themselves into male-dominated society. In fact, the most prominent argument the League put forward for equal pay

for women was that it would maintain the income of the man of the house rather than allow it to fall if their jobs became feminized by female entry (Payne, 1988, p. 128). According to Robins, the latter outcome would jeopardize a woman's potential to become a wife and mother (Payne, 1988, p. 129). Therefore, the League maintained a similar vision of ideal femininity put forth in earlier conduct literature, suggesting that the ideal values of womanhood circulated at the time many of the League members were growing up made a lasting impression on their concepts of gender and womanhood, and thus their own self-concepts and senses of purpose as individuals.

The values of the League also parallel the values put forth in Victorian conduct literature in that they emphasize health reform, its importance to the maintenance of democracy, and harmful eugenic ideas. For example, in one particular speech at the Women's Suffrage Hearing in Washington D.C. in 1910, Robins cites the threat to a woman's ability to give birth following the endurance of harsh working conditions as her main argument for women's suffrage. She describes this increasing lack of fertility by working women as a threat to "womanhood" itself and as "race suicide," further describing the loss of the "strength of the child" even when working women are able to give birth (Robins, 1910, pp. 1-3). In a statement sent for the Suffrage Edition of the New York Evening Post in February of 1915, Robins further advocates for women's labor rights by arguing that current working conditions if continued will "weaken vitality and sap moral fibre" and cause harm to women's "physical health and mental and moral development," once again in the context of the nation (Robins, 1915).

These statements emphasize the link which is often drawn between women's issues and a "greater good" where the ends should be pursued because they will benefit other groups or society as a whole, meaning men as well. This logic implies that the singular motivation to improve women's quality of life is not a sufficient reason, and it is still used to this day such as through attempts to link abortion rights with decreased crime rates or increased women's rights with greater economic prosperity. One might question whether this framing was strategically used by the League when presenting ideas to legislators or the general public, since those groups in power that needed convincing were largely made up of men. However, the internal messaging of the League suggests otherwise. The organization's principles highlight motherhood of society as the purpose of women, suggesting that Victorian concepts of gender truly did take root and make up a primary motivation for the League's activism. Robins herself took issue with women's organizations which pushed for total equality of the sexes in the professional world.

One reason for this was that the League instead worked on passing legislation which addressed women's labor needs specifically rather than giving the same rights to men and women (Payne, 1988, pp. 143-144). However, another reason was that individualistic feminism deemphasized the importance of "feminine uniqueness" which was central to the League's ideology (Payne, 1988, p. 146), and also, notably, to Victorian thought surrounding gender.

Conclusion

This investigation provides preliminary evidence of the potential impact that the values which future activists absorbed in adolescence could have had in shaping the progressive women's rights movement. The conduct literature used in this study provides examples of the messaging which these activists would have internalized in their formative years, due to the defining aspect of the genre which is that it contains information on what society deemed acceptable behavior. Ideas of equity and respect for one's body from *Ladies' Guide* and *What a Young Woman Ought to Know* combine with their coexisting racist, eugenic and constrictively gendered perceptions of the importance of womanhood. These limits and contradictions later appear in the values of the National Women's Trade Union League and women's labor movement as well.

Though this study cannot prove causality linking Victorian conduct literature and the progressive movement, it does highlight curious similarities which invite further investigation on the topic. The contrast between the very personal and individual-oriented medium of the conduct book and the collective-oriented values of a social movement make these two types of sources an unlikely pair, but together they exhibit how the publishing of personal messaging could result in the dissemination of common values which can unite unlikely groups, such as the inter-class alliance of the League. Whether these books are considered to be a direct source of gender-values, a reflection of prevailing ideas young people were exposed to, or a combination of both, they shed light on the origin of first-wave feminism. By building self-esteem for women and encouraging them to see their own value by recognizing the importance of the domestic sphere to public society, traditional concepts of Victorian gender may have unexpectedly planted the seeds of more modern and continuously evolving empowerment, contrasting with stereotypical views of Victorian repression.

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