

THE ART OF HEALING:
MARY GOVE NICHOLS'S CRUSADE FOR WOMEN'S WELLNESS

by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses the life of 19th-century American reformer Mary Gove Nichols to explore antebellum feminism through the lens of health and marriage reform. Using primary sources including the subjects own personal publications, this thesis traces one theme throughout Nichols's life: her passionate drive to educate women on their own health, and to make such knowledge accessible, so that they could acquire it for themselves. This particular theme manifested in two forms: wellness acquired via homeopathic medicine, specifically the water cure; and wellness acquired from a safe and loving marriage. Her life's work, an early form of feminism, aimed to not only aid in women's personal well-being, but opened the door that would allow them to become stewards of wellness for others.

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INTRODUCTION

When Mary S. Gove Nichols published her autobiography anonymously in 1855, *The New York Times* printed a four column review denouncing its presumably ulterior reformist motives. “She has written this book apparently...for the purpose of convincing the world of the advantages of hydropathy, the abominations of Christianity, and the reforming influence of fine art and fornication.”¹ However unfavorable, the reviewer accurately recognized the publication’s very intentions. Serving as Mary’s own personal manifesto, her semi-fictional autobiography advocated for freedom and equality for women, weaving a story out of her own experiences with the aim of defending ideas of free love, health reform, and hydropathy. This was, in fact, the purpose of Mary’s life’s work: to educate and to normalize, and to give women agency over their wellness. While her interests varied across the span of her long career, which commenced in 1837 and lasted until her death in 1884, her reasoning did not sway.

This thesis traces one theme throughout Mary’s life: her passionate drive to educate women on their own health, and to make such knowledge accessible, so that they could acquire it for themselves. This particular theme manifested in two forms: wellness acquired via homeopathic medicine, specifically the water cure; and wellness acquired from a safe and loving marriage. She first strove for the democratization of healing by making homeopathic medicine accessible to all, and by empowering women to serve as

¹ “A Bad Book Gibbeted,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1855, 2.

stewards of the cure, assuming agency over their lives by taking control of their health. As her career matured, she endeavored to educate women on the benefits of a loving and pleasurable marriage, believing that the source of a woman's wellness was not only in her health habits, but in the safety and assured happiness of her partnership with a man.

A number of scholarly works have traced Mary's life, mainly biographical sketches focusing on her work in health reform and free love. Bertha-Monica Stearns's 1933 article, "Two Forgotten New England Reformers," relies entirely on primary source accounts of Mary's life, including her own publications, and the letters and personal papers of Mary's second husband, Thomas L. Nichols. Stearns largely focuses on Mary's activism alongside other prominent names including Edgar Allen Poe and Bronson Alcott, and argues that these interests and colleagues render Mary unrepresentative of the average nineteenth century woman. Instead, her actions categorize her as a reformer worthy of exploration alongside her male contemporaries. John B. Blake's 1961 essay, "Mary Gove Nichols, Prophetess of Health," explores her early career as a lecturer on anatomy and physiology, and defines her life's work as the result of a lonely and chronically ill childhood, where a young Mary devoured medical and scientific texts in an effort to find the cure to her ailments. Blake characterizes Mary's career within the context of the reformist era, noting that while her causes did not necessarily become commonplace, she represented the activist spirit of her time in her tireless work for change, especially on behalf of women.²

² Bertha-Monica Stearns, "Two Forgotten New England Reformers," *The New England Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (March 1933), 59-84.

Jean Silver-Isenstadt's 2002 monograph, *Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols*, represents the primary biography of the famed reformer and her husband Thomas L. Nichols, arguing that both were ahead of their times, laying the groundwork for future health and marriage reform. Through thorough analysis, largely utilizing her subject's own words, the author places Mary's work within the scope of women's activism, characterizing the reformer as one of the earliest American feminist leaders, admiring the way that she followed her passions despite the many obstacles in her path. Silver-Isenstadt notes that her narrative takes a great deal from Janet Hubly Noever's thorough 1983 dissertation, "Passionate Rebel: The Life of Mary Gove Nichols, 1810-1884." Both texts rely heavily on Mary's autobiography to tell the story of her life, crossing their subject's storytelling with other primary source documents to determine the true places and identities of the narrative's characters. Noever argued that the activist used her autobiography as the women's version of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and classified Mary as a "feminist foremother" who moved through various realms of social reform with the goal of emancipating women from the domestic sphere within which she believed her sex to be trapped.³ Joel Meyerson tackled the subject of Mary's autobiography in 1986, placing the events of Mary's life into the context of her era. Meyerson argued that despite its semi-fictional nature, the text's merit lies in its depiction of various realms of reform that gained popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. Since this thesis centers on those very reform movements, I have also chosen to rely heavily on Mary's own words, with an understanding that, although she changed the names of many

³ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Janet Hubly Noever, "Passionate Rebel: The Life of Mary Gove Nichols, 1810-1884" (PhD diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1983).

people and places that influenced her work, the sentiments toward and dedication to her work remained unchanged.

Mary S. Gove Nichols was born Mary Neal in 1810 to parents William and Rebecca Neal in Goffstown, New Hampshire. Her elder siblings were as much as fifteen years older; her sister, closest in age, died of consumption at an early age. Often very sick herself, young Mary took a course of prescribed magnesium pills that only made her more severely bedridden. Mary's lonely childhood arguably caused her to seek fellowship as an adult. Lacking any religious impulse from her parents, she gravitated toward Quakerism on her own, mesmerized by the sense of community, piety, and temperance. Through her community of Friends, she met and married Hiram Gove in 1832, a chronically unemployed Quaker many years her senior, who allowed her to work as a schoolteacher and serve as the sole breadwinner for the household. Orthodox Quaker tradition cautioned Mary against pursuing secular reading interests, and the lack of such, alongside the isolation that she faced in meetings, left Mary bedbound and ill, haunted by thoughts of suicide. She also began to believe that the physical symptoms that she experienced resulted from the emotional abuse inflicted upon her by her husband.

In 1837, Mary heard a lecture from the famed health reformer and educator, Sylvester Graham. She quickly embraced Graham's health practices, which included giving up meat and relying wholly on fruits, whole grains, vegetables, and water for sustenance. She transformed her schoolhouse into a Grahamite boarding school, requiring that all of her students adopt the reformer's diet. At the age of twenty-eight, within a year of hearing Graham's lectures for the first time, Mary addressed the Ladies Physiological Society of Boston. She gave a total of twelve lectures to combinations of married and

unmarried women and girls, speaking on the subjects of anatomy and physiology. She continued to receive invitations to speak at a variety of events around Boston. Before long, she was attracting large crowds of women to the extent that she “had become known as a kind of female equivalent to Sylvester Graham.”⁴

In 1842, she published *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*. About a year later, she began a romantic affair with English reformer Henry Gardner Wright; from him, she first learned the ways of the water cure. After Wright’s death in 1843, Mary traveled to various hydropathy centers to further her knowledge of the cure. At the New Lebanon Springs Water Cure in upstate New York, she delivered her series of health reform lectures and served as the facility’s resident physician. Moving to New York City, Mary became acquainted with a host of reformers, including Marx Lazarus, who educated her on the merits of Fourierism and free love ideology. In addition to her homeopathic interests, she now began to toy with ideas about marriage and love. In 1848, she married journalist-turned-physician Thomas Low Nichols. Aside from opening a water cure school together, the two worked to publish a journal that proclaimed the benefits of a reformist life, including the embrace of the water cure, other homeopathic habits, and free love ideology. They traveled the country, teaching and writing, before converting to Catholicism and moving to the United Kingdom at the outset of the U.S. Civil War.

The first chapter of this thesis outlines Mary S. Gove Nichols’s journey into the world of reform, especially her work within a health and hygiene movement known as

⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 164.

the water cure. Chronically ill throughout her entire life, Mary searched for a therapy that might alleviate her symptoms. The water cure filled this void; to Mary, it served as the ultimate source of wellness, and she devoted the early half of her career to sharing its good news. From the outset as a public lecturer, she focused her energies on women, especially giving them an understanding of female anatomy and physiology, and the benefits of the water cure. As her career gained steam, Mary pushed not only for education, but for women to take up the cause and become stewards of the cure themselves.

A substantial number of publications on health reform, especially exploring the role of women within the movement, appeared in the 1980s. Regina Morantz-Sanchez's *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine*, serves as a comprehensive chronological account of the barriers that women overcame on the road to securing a professional and recognized place in American healthcare. Jane B. Donegan's 1986 work, *Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and Water-Cure in Antebellum America*, uses primary source articles written in the *Water-Cure Journal*, including pieces from Mary herself, to argue that the water cure functioned as a gateway into a career in medicine for American women in the 1830s. With a high rate of female practitioners, often following Mary's own legacy, the cure was more naturally inclined toward women's health than traditional medicine. Donegan explains that female hydropathists particularly emphasized prenatal and postpartum wellness, putting them at odds with traditional practitioners of medicine, whose training was often lacking in the realm of women's reproductive health. The water cure, Donegan argues, quickly came under the dominion of women. In 1987, Susan B. Cayleff's *Wash and Be Healed: The*

Water Cure Movement and Women's Health takes Donegan's argument even further, asserting that water cure centers largely became retreats for women. Gender-segregated bathing houses served as places of empowerment, where social relationships were formed and feminist ideals were shared. In fact, Cayleff notes, activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Clara Barton are both recorded to have taken the waters during their careers. While Mary S. Gove Nichols never embraced the formal women's rights movement, her work paved the way for other women to do so, by creating a safe space for women to commune, socialize, work, and begin to pave the way toward medical professionalism.⁵

The second chapter explores the latter half of Mary's career, in which she embraced free love ideology. Whereas hydropathy was once the cure all, she later began to believe that an absence of knowledge of one's anatomy and physiology was not the cause of women's illness. Instead, she began to formulate the idea that marriage was the detrimental factor in women's lives which made them ill. A marriage without love and equality made even the strongest women unwell, and she proved this by leaving her own abusive husband and engaging in love affairs that affirmed her need for passion and partnership. Where she once was a beloved reformer, these more taboo ideas caused much of her fanbase to condemn her new interests as too scandalous to merit a following, and her American career came to a close. At the outset of the U.S. Civil War, she moved

⁵ Regina Morantz-Sanchez, *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Jane B. Donegan, *Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and Water-Cure in Antebellum America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Susan B. Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed: The Water Cure Movement and Women's Health* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

to England, where she continued to practice the water cure out of her home until her death in 1884.

Mary passionately believed in the necessity for love and affinity that was allegedly missing from the common monogamous marriage in the mid-nineteenth century. John C. Spurlock's 1988 work *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860*, argues that free love developed from a critique of the lack of love and equality in American marriage, and that middle-class Americans tolerated such a movement due to the era of individualism within which the movement arose. Working off of Spurlock's arguments, Joanne E. Passet's 2003 publication *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality*, further asserts that the free love movement, while previously explored for the contributions made by men, was actually more of a women's movement, gaining support potentially as a solution to societal and marital inequality.⁶

It was Helen Lefkowitz-Horowitz who most thoroughly traced Mary's journey into the world of free love reform. Her 2002 publication, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*, asserted that ideologies regarding American sexuality existed in four frameworks: an older, vernacularly shared understanding of sex and sexual health; reformers who worked to educate the population with accurate information on sexual health and birth control; free thinkers who believed that sex was acceptable outside of marriage; and the evangelical Protestants who worked to educate on the dangers of desire. Lefkowitz-Horowitz argued

⁶ John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Joanne E. Passet, *Sex Radicals and the Quest for Women's Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

that Mary walked the line between educator and free thinker. Though she remained an advocate of the sharing of information throughout her life, many of the ideas she formulated in her later career were just taboo enough to leave her ostracized by many of her followers and contemporaries.⁷ Patricia Cline Cohen's "The 'Anti-Marriage Theory' of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols: A Radical Critique of Monogamy in the 1850s" (2014) explains this further, highlighting the way that reformers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton turned away from Mary's ideas after she and her husband began writing about free love in their self-published journal. Cohen's article places Mary's career shift within the context of her era, and ultimately supports the fact that Mary stood out as a women's rights advocate without ever having formally joined the movement.⁸

Alongside such secondary sources, I have chosen to utilize Mary's own personal writing. As previously stated, I rely heavily on *Mary Lyndon: or, Revelations of a Life, an Autobiography*, as it sheds light onto both her private life, and public career. Her first publication, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, gives early insight onto the priority that Mary would continue to place on women's health throughout her life of activism. *Experience in Water-Cure* details the work that she accomplished as a successful student and practitioner of hydropathic therapy. The second half of her career includes the radical publication of *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results*, co-written with Thomas Low Nichols, which marked the shift in Mary's work that alienated her from many of her followers and colleagues. These publications serve as detailed

⁷ Helen Lefkowitz-Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*. (New York: Knopf, 2002).

⁸ Patricia Cline Cohen, "The 'Anti-Marriage Theory of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols: A Radical Critique of Monogamy in the 1850s'" *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 1 (2014), 1-20.

records that allow me to use my subject's own words and thoughts to highlight the reasoning and meaning behind her remarkable career.⁹

A thesis on Mary Gove Nichols thus yields insight onto the vibrant culture of antebellum social reform, which encompassed large-scale activism such as temperance and abolitionism. It also reveals the highly public role that Mary carried out on behalf of less mainstream causes such as health and marriage reform. Above all, the work put forth by this particular reformer sheds light on the roles that women filled in this age of reform, largely due to how atypical it was for a woman to garner as much fame as Mary did during her long career, within such a niche area of reform. Abolition and temperance boast famed male and female activists who worked for change. Smaller movements lack the notoriety of reformers, and yet, Mary Gove Nichols gained celebrity despite working within a small circle of health advocates. Despite her sex, her work was published and visible, and she strove to make other women into stewards and activists. Her life's work, an early form of feminism, aimed to not only aid in women's personal well-being, but opened the door that would allow them to become stewards of wellness for others.

⁹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855); Mary Gove Nichols, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology* (Boston, MA.: Saxton & Pierce, 1842); Mary S. Gove Nichols, *Experience in Water-Cure: A Familiar Exposition of the Principles and Results of Water Treatment, in the Cure of Acute Chronic Diseases, Illustrated by Numerous Cases in the Practice of the Author; with an Explanation of Water-Cure Processes, Advice on Diet and Regimen, and Particular Directions to Women in the Treatment of Female Diseases, Water Treatment in Childbirth, and the Diseases of Infancy*. (New York: Fowlers and Wells, Publishers, 1849); T.L. Nichols and Mary S. Gove Nichols, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities, and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, as a Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race*. (New York: T.L. Nichols, 1854).

CHAPTER ONE: WELLNESS AND THE WATER CURE

In 1882, at the age of seventy-one, Mary S. Gove Nichols informed readers of *The Dietetic Reformer and Vegetarian Messenger* that she was in “excellent health, notwithstanding tumours that would make ‘the house I live in’ untenable with ordinary habits.”¹⁰ Despite advanced age, she spent her days dispensing medical advice through written correspondence and at her home in England, to which she retired with her husband after more than forty years’ worth of reform work in both the United States and the United Kingdom. She specialized in hydrotherapy, or the water cure, a German innovation that she had helped to establish as a popular homeopathic alternative in New England and New York. Strict adherence to the therapy protocols of the water cure, she claimed, allowed her to manage both liver and breast cancer, as well as a lifelong struggle with tuberculosis. “If all persons with cancerous diathesis should live as I live, even they might find life worth living as I do. I have made a long-continued fight for my life, and if I die now, I have not disgraced the principles we teach,” she explained. Even at the end of her life, she focused not on herself, but on those who could learn from her experience and knowledge of the therapy to which she dedicated her entire career. During the early half of her career, Mary S. Gove Nichols strove for the democratization of healing by making

¹⁰ “Death of Mrs. Nichols,” *The Dietetic Reformer and Vegetarian Messenger* (July 1884): 206.

homeopathic medicine, especially the water cure, accessible to all. She especially sought to empower women to serve as stewards of the cure, assuming agency over their lives by taking control of their health and serving as alternatives to the elite and unregulated professionalism that she believed was a plague on popular medicine.

Years before Mary set out to educate others on wellness, she had to find it for herself, first. Among her earliest remembrances in her autobiography, “those of pain--of mental and bodily misery,” she clearly recalled. “I never had a childhood,” she declared; “my earliest youth was a darkened and painful age.”¹¹ Finding their daughter bedridden for long periods of time, her parents relied on traditional medicine, as the popularization of many of the alternative sources of wellness that Mary would propagate had yet to occur in the United States. “People are very much in the dark at this day respecting the laws of health, but *then*,” she lamented, referring to her early years, “the darkness was palpable.”¹² She reminisced about the medical treatments that she received, which seemingly contributed to her illness. Even though she was “weak as a child, and pale as paper,” the family physician bled her until she fainted twice: “once when I first saw the blood, and again when he had taken more than I should regain in many weeks.”¹³ The same practitioner then prescribed a variety of bitters that she ingested with brandy, three times a day, along with a “cerulean mass,” or blue pill, which consisted of mercury, mixed with a number of ingredients that often included licorice, milk sugar, and rose

¹¹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon, or Revelations of a Life: An Autobiography*. (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855),15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52.

oil.¹⁴ “My bloodless lips grew even paler, my wan face thinner, my eyes sunk,” she recorded, “At last, young as I was, I became convinced that the doctor’s drugs were killing me.”¹⁵ In sharing her own struggles, she hoped to instill in her readers the idea that certain popular treatments did more harm than good.

As the standard treatment at the time, allopathic medicine relied almost entirely on practices such as the bleeding that Mary described. Benjamin Rush popularized ‘heroic’ medicine in the United States, referred to as such for its interventionist, rather than preventative, nature. After serving as a member of the Continental Congress, and, briefly, as physician-general in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, Rush emerged as professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, which housed the nation’s first medical school, established in 1760. Rush’s methods were “speculative and empirical,” relying on hands-on efforts, as well as trial and error, in his attempts at healing.¹⁶ He stressed the importance of the blood as the body’s most essential element, containing the answers and means to nearly every form of healing. Bleeding, or phlebotomy, constituted a form of healing for centuries, beginning most famously with Hippocrates, who wrote of its successes in Greek antiquity. Subsequent Western physicians followed his lead. Galen, for example, in the second century, considered bleeding “an essential remedy” for severe diseases.¹⁷ Rush followed their therapeutic example into the nineteenth century.

¹⁴ John King, Harvey Wickes Felton, and John Lloyd, *King’s American Dispensatory* (Cincinnati, OH.: The Ohio Valley Company, 1898), 1242.

¹⁵ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 53.

¹⁶ Ira Rutkow, *Seeking the Cure: A History of Medicine in America* (New York: Scribner, 2010) 36.

¹⁷ Shigehisa Kuriyama, “Interpreting the History of Bloodletting,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 50, no. 1 (January 1995), 11.

If bleeding did not work, physicians relied on upsetting and emptying the gastrointestinal system by prescribing doses of mercury, a poison to the stomach. Blistering served as another alternative; the application of an irritant blistered the skin, which allowed for puncturing and draining. Still others relied on cupping, wherein a small glass bowl, heated on the skin, brought blood to the surface, which, once lanced, released the infected humors that allegedly caused illness. Subsequent medical schools and instructors stressed the necessity of these interventionist practices to their students, cementing them as principle forms of healing, no matter the ailment.

Early American medical training comprised a one-on-one education from a local practitioner who, no doubt, had learned his trade in the same fashion. By the turn of the century, though, the physician's path shifted from traditional apprenticeships to a more formal education in a university setting. Quickly realizing the monetary benefit of teaching a group of learners versus one at a time, established practitioners opened medical schools across the country, eager to attract students in rural areas who could not relocate to larger urban universities. A diploma from any medical school served as a license to practice, meaning that young men who earned as high as a Doctor of Medicine degree, or as little as a Bachelor degree, could attain the same job opportunities and professional status. As medical schools developed into institutions of wealth and influence, they gained the power to lobby against legislative efforts to put restrictions on licensure or curriculum. Thousands of American doctors consequently practiced medicine with an unquantifiable and unregulated amount of experience or knowledge.¹⁸ What

¹⁸ For more on early American medical practice, see Ira Rutkow, *Seeking the Cure: A History of Medicine in America* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

knowledge they did carry, they did not pass on to their patients, as their roles in society took the form of savior, rather than teacher. Perhaps remembering her own childhood, Mary lamented in her later lectures that “mothers...neglect to learn their own anatomy, and thus neglect to teach their children, for the plain reason that they cannot teach what they do not know.”¹⁹ As an adult, her work often focused on ensuring that parents not only knew the basics of good healthcare, but also understood the danger of relying on physicians to cure their children.

In 1831, Mary left home and married Hiram Gove. “My first feeling, on being introduced...was one of deep and most decided aversion,” she remembered. “There was a seeming all over and around him, which no word could express but meanness.”²⁰ After a childhood marred by confinement to bed, and the loneliness that it brought, she quickly accepted the proposal of this Quaker, whose very faith promised her a life of companionship.²¹ It was not long, though, before she regretted her decision. “A dull and indescribable misery took possession of me, which had one glimmer of relief,” she revealed: “the hope that I might die before the time came for my marriage.”²² In *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results*, which she wrote with her second husband, in 1854, Mary stated that “I would have been considered mad, or wicked to the last degree, if I had had the courage to avow my real feeling—my detestation of the man to whom I was married.”²³ Already chronically ill, Mary faced a new layer of misery in her

¹⁹ Mary S. Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology* (Boston: Saxton & Peirce, 1842), 25.

²⁰ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 119.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

²² *Ibid.*, 121.

²³ *T.L. Nichols and Mary S. Gove Nichols, Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities, and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, as a*

life: an inability to bear children. During her first marriage, Mary suffered four miscarriages or stillbirths. Elma Penn Gove, born in 1832, was, as Mary recorded, “the only one of five who was destined to live to know me and love me. I endured all the sufferings of maternity, without its solace.”²⁴ The latter half of her career would manifest in the form of a crusade to educate women on marital health, something that she possibly felt obligated to provide, as she recalled her own lack of education.

Much of the suffering and chronic pain that she experienced, as Mary acutely understood, stemmed from the severe feelings of anxiety that her violent and jealous husband had elicited. “Every time he approached me, or laid his hand on me, a convulsive spasm ran over my whole system, giving me indescribable pain.”²⁵ Due to a miserable childhood, she did not trust the aid of physicians or medications, and did not seek their help. When Hiram Gove permitted her to visit her ailing father, she carried with her two ulterior motives: to seek wellness far from her husband’s grasp; and beg her father for his assistance in leaving the mean old Quaker once and for all. William Neal acquiesced. As she described in her autobiography, “My father stated to [Hiram] distinctly that he was to leave me and my child with him, that he was not to claim my earnings, or persecute me with his presence.”²⁶ The promise to forget all debts that Hiram owed to Mary’s father convinced the greedy man to consent to a separation.

Immediately returning home to live with her parents, she rejoiced in her freedom, but was quickly subdued by illness once again. On an early morning walk to the post

Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race (New York: T.L. Nichols, 1854), 194.

²⁴ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

office, she suddenly found herself lightheaded. “I had gone near half a mile,” she wrote, “when there was a rushing into my throat, and strangling sensation. I coughed, and threw up a quantity of blood.”²⁷ She ran home and “continued to raise blood in quantities varying from a half pint to a pint, for four days...[the] family physician was very anxious that I should take the usual Allopathic remedies, but I kindly and firmly refused him.” She clung to life in a panic, mystified as to the cause of her suffering. Her only reason to cling to life, she observed, was her daughter, whom she knew could not be trusted to the care of her husband. She was desperate for an answer.²⁸ In her autobiography, she reminisced about a particular retreat to the countryside home of a family friend to recover, where she soon found that, “The first really joyful feeling I had known...was when I felt myself free from fear of lancet or medicine, lying on a mossy knoll, under a great tree, on the edge of some grand old woods, just back of my father’s house.”²⁹ As she suffered through adolescence and long into adulthood, she longed for respite, frustrated by the fact that the aid of doctors only caused her to worsen. Scarred by an inability to find a firm source of wellness for herself, Mary understood the importance of democratizing healthcare for Americans, believing that the basics of anatomy and physiology should be accessible to all. It would not be long at all before she found others who believed the same.

²⁷ Ibid., 159.

²⁸ Ibid., 160; In *Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols*, Jean Silver-Isenstadt concluded that the reformer suffered from consumption, or tuberculosis. Nichols believed that it was a family disease inherited from her mother, as she, her mother, and her brother all suffered from heavy coughing and blood in the lungs, symptoms so common to the disease. Tuberculosis was, of course, contagious, which explains why so many of her family members shared the same suffering. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 41.

²⁹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 53.

In 1837, Mary attended a lecture from the health reformer and educator, Sylvester Graham. Despite a fairly brief public career, Graham made a significant impact on the world of reform. He began his work as a temperance lecturer, before moving on to speak and write on the subjects of male chastity and dietary reform. Historians often facetiously regard Graham's slogan as, "if it feels good then don't do it."³⁰ Above all, he believed that stimulation caused, rather than cured, debility or illness. Stimulation, according to Graham, came from things such as alcohol, red meats, spices, masturbation, and sex. Instead, he reasoned that individuals should bathe regularly, wear loose-fitting clothing, and spend time in the fresh air. They should drink cold, clean water, and eat a diet heavy in coarse grains like those found in what would famously become known as the Graham cracker.³¹

Addressing the large crowd in Lynn, Massachusetts, Graham shared the experiences that contributed to his lonely childhood and long history of illness. His words struck a deep chord within Mary.³² His reform measures not only potentially aided in her own wellbeing, but also gave her the sense of autonomy that she strove for within an oppressive marriage. Soon after attending his speech, Mary embraced Graham's health practices, which included giving up meat and relying wholly on fruits, grains, vegetables, and water for sustenance. "The knowledge I obtained from Mr. Graham gave vitality and consequent usefulness to what I had before learned," she pointed out. At the boarding school that she ran in Lynn, she implemented the reformer's ideology, requiring that all

³⁰ Ira Rutkow, *Seeking the Cure*, 47.

³¹ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 472.

³² Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1997), 149.

of her students adopt his recommended diet, and exercise in the fresh air of the outdoors.³³ Graham additionally inspired Mary to entertain the notion of public speaking for herself. She enjoyed teaching students, but she wanted to share the Grahamite lifestyle with more people, especially women. She began to lecture publicly to small crowds, in the vicinity of her New England home, focusing on the health benefits of a nature-based diet and fresh air.

At the age of twenty-eight, within a year of hearing Graham's lectures for the first time, Mary Gove addressed the Ladies Physiological Society of Boston. The lecture was advertised as including "physiological facts of a delicate nature and which many ladies would not bring themselves to hear from a gentleman, but a knowledge of which is of great importance." It was warned to the public that, "The course... will be given to ladies and to ladies only."³⁴ She gave a total of twelve lectures to combinations of married and unmarried women and girls, touching on the subjects of "the bones, muscles and reproductive organs...the value of a healthful diet, and from the evils of tight lacing and masturbation to the importance of exercise, fresh air, and regular bathing."³⁵ She continued to receive invitations to speak at a variety of events around Boston, and word of her ability and knowledge soon spread throughout New England. "No woman in America," according to historian Jean Silver-Isenstadt, "had ever publicly described the workings of the human body."³⁶ As her fame increased, she continued to give credit to the man whose ideas influenced her own. "Those who have heard my lectures know that I

³³ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, p.31-34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

regard Mr. Graham as one of the greatest benefactors the world ever had,” she wrote. “For most of what is practically valuable in this work, I am indebted to his teachings directly.”³⁷ Before long, her events attracted large crowds of women, to the extent that she emerged nearly as famous as Graham himself.³⁸ One Boston lecture in particular drew 2000 people. Physicians began to take notice of her, as well: one local physician invited her to view the autopsy and dissection of a young victim of tuberculosis, while others lent her their medical textbooks and anatomy plates.³⁹

Mary published her first text, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, in 1842, using the money that she had earned from her lecturing fees. In a brief introduction, she expressed a desire that what others taught her she must pass on, so that this knowledge would become “useful to the world.”⁴⁰ Her wishes hearkened back to an older tradition of American medicine, in which word of mouth spread the methods of healing from one practitioner to the next. Before encountering Mary’s text, likely very few women had familiarized themselves with the anatomical or scientific workings of their own bodies. “From their youths,” Jean Silver-Isenstadt wrote, “girls were taught to preen their looks and sweeten their dispositions, not to study their innards.”⁴¹ In her lectures, Mary explained, in great detail, the workings of male and female anatomy, so that readers could understand the way that their body operated. Throughout fourteen chapters, she gave examples of common ailments and how they could be resolved by means other than

³⁷ Mary Gove Nichols, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, vi.

³⁸ Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1980), 164.

³⁹ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 39.

⁴⁰ Mary S. Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, vi.

⁴¹ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 59.

drugs. “Were people fully aware of the wonderful and intricate machinery of all parts of the human frame, they would be cautious,” she rationalized within a chapter on the skeletal system, “they would revolt from the idea of employing quacks and ‘natural bonesetters’ to wrench their limbs.”⁴² She advised readers not to “trust their lives in the care of those who are not even pretenders to medical knowledge...who would fain persuade us that they have found a shorter road to the healing art than rational, laborious study.”⁴³ Rather, she encouraged personal study, allowing individuals to not only care for themselves, but for those around them. Her warnings were bold, and needed no interpretation: “Being a member of a medical society, does not hinder a man from being a quack. Knowledge is what we want. It should be diffused, not locked up in any profession.”⁴⁴ This desire to diffuse such knowledge drove the rest of her career.

Mary very quickly understood that she could not perform this work alone, and she harbored a very specific idea of *who* should share this knowledge with the public. “Women are peculiarly fitted to practice the art of healing. In sickness we want sympathy and kindness; we want abundance of the love which creates and strengthens continually. Everybody knows that it is woman’s business to love, whilst love is an episode to man. Behold, then, the proof of woman’s fitness to relieve sickness and suffering. Indeed, woman has given ages of proof of her loving humanity, by not entering the profession of medicine during its ‘reign of terror.’”⁴⁵

⁴² Mary S. Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, 56.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁵ M.S. Gove Nichols, “Woman the Physician,” *The Water Cure Journal* 12, no. 4 (October 1851): 74.

Speaking in 1851, she expressed her belief that everyone deserved the ability to pursue their own wellness, but that women were best suited to share that information with others. At the height of her career, Mary witnessed an apparent revolution in American healthcare. She thought that allopathic medicine represented an archaic and dangerous form of treatment, and she trusted that women had not previously practiced medicine because the field was not yet worth their efforts. “[As] the profession of medicine has become humane...as it has *become* what it has always *claimed* to be, – the art of healing,” she explained, “just in that proportion has woman been found ready to engage in it, and make it her life work.”⁴⁶ As safer alternatives to allopathic medicine grew in popularity, only then did the practice of healing develop into a suitable profession for women, and she was not alone in her opinion.

The long held tradition of bleeding and purging patients began to wane in the mid- nineteenth century. European schools of medicine offered more thorough training in anatomy and physiology, and emphasized the ability of physicians to specialize, making themselves more marketable to the public. “Over seven hundred American doctors spent time in France from 1820 to 1860,” historian Ira Rutkow calculated. These physicians, upon returning home, found more success than those physicians who did not seek further training.⁴⁷ Homegrown doctors who could not travel to Europe elected to continue practicing with their limited knowledge, something that they could still get away with in rural areas of the country, such as the small town in which Mary’s family lived when they called for a doctor for their ailing young daughter. Still others eschewed the ever more

⁴⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁷ Ira Rutkow, *Seeking the Cure*, 44-46.

formal medical industry altogether, turning to embrace more nature-based sources of healing than the interventionist practices in which they had been schooled. It seemed as though Americans returned to what they knew before the rise of medical professionals: the healing power of nature. As Mary traveled and lectured her way across New England, she acquainted herself with other ardent proponents of hygiene and wellness. It was through one such principled individual that she would become acquainted with the water cure.

Henry Gardner Wright, a devotee of Graham's health and hygiene protocol, migrated from England to the United States to join the educational reformer, Bronson Alcott, in creating a utopian farm in Massachusetts.⁴⁸ Similarly to Mary's own crusade for personal wellness, Wright searched for a personal cure of his own. Dying of cancer, he sought out every natural form of healing that he could in order to lengthen his life. He found the rapidly growing field of hydropathy, or the water cure. "A distinguished physician," Mary wrote, "told him that his only chance for life...[was to add] the good of Water-Cure to his pure and simple diet. He had evidently been held to the earth by these means, though living very near the heavens."⁴⁹ Under the hydropathic protocol, Wright drank thirty cold glasses of water a day, and took cold baths, encouraging Mary to partake in both activities to combat her own chronic symptoms. Mary learned all that she could about hydropathy from Wright, before he returned to England in 1843 to visit his wife and child, and ultimately succumbed to his illness. A burgeoning knowledge of the

⁴⁸ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 63-64.

⁴⁹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 197.

water cure allowed Mary to take her passions for teaching and health reform and make a name for herself as a leading female educator and activist.

Dedication to the practices of the cure led Mary to the realization and fulfillment of the very ideals that she wished to share with anyone who would listen. She traveled to various water cure treatment centers across New England and upstate New York, informing herself of the best practices and techniques of what was still a fairly new therapy in the United States. Vincent Preissnitz, a peasant farmer living in the province of Silesia, in what is now the Czech Republic, first conceived the water cure as a therapeutic procedure. After injuring his ribs in a wagon accident, Preissnitz wrapped himself with cold, water-soaked bandages to help with the swelling, and manually moved his ribs back into place by applying great pressure to his chest with the aid of a chair. Within ten days he could move again; within a year he could return to the fields.⁵⁰ Preissnitz, convinced that the cool wet wrapping had saved him, began to spread the word of his good fortune. As similar injuries prevailed among the hardworking farm families across the countryside, his neighbors eagerly applied the same practice to their own ailments. In 1826, Preissnitz, realizing the commercial potential of his discovery, opened a clinic in the small Silesian mountain village of Gräfenberg. He advocated cold soaks and baths for localized pain and disease, and innovated the wet sheet packing treatment in which Mary Gove Nichols later famously specialized.

Despite Preissnitz's lack of credentials, the center attracted a number of physicians from across Europe and the United States, who would advocate for his work.

⁵⁰ For a thorough investigation of the water cure, especially its popularity among women in the United States, see Susan E. Cayleff, *Wash and be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women's Health* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987)

Many brought the practices that they observed home with them, opening treatment facilities of their own, and publishing tracts in which they applied medical theory and terminology to Preissnitz's rudimentary ideas. James M. Gully opened a hydropathy clinic at Malvern, a village in the English countryside that had already boasted the health benefits of its spring water as early as the seventeenth century. After visiting Gräfenberg, Gully outlined his own principles of the cure. Perhaps most importantly, physicians promoted the use of water largely as an alternative to allopathic practices, such as lancing and bloodletting, as well as the prescribing of dangerous drugs with abandon. "Violent and sudden stimulation of the nervous system," Gully explained, referring to the body's reaction to lancing and bleeding, or treatment by other heroic measures, "is invariably followed by exhaustion and increased inflammation...Hence the impropriety of alcoholic and medical stimulation." He added that gentle stimulation, "according to the organic powers, conduces to the development and maintenance of its strength." In other words, clean water and air would "fulfill this intention of stimulation and strengthening most effectively."⁵¹ Gully was one of many who applied Preissnitz's work to previous medical knowledge, proving to patients and colleagues alike that the practice of the water cure had the potential to serve as a legitimate and respectable form of treatment.

Preissnitz and his fellow practitioners recommended different forms of therapy based on the ailment or complaint. For ailments of the eyes, ears, or nose, he advised simple rinsing, or slow injections of lukewarm water. Injections could also clean out

⁵¹ James Manby Gully, *The water cure in chronic disease: an exposition of the causes, progress, and terminations of various chronic diseases of the digestive organs, lungs, nerves, limbs, and skin, and of their treatment by water and other hygienic means* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), 402.

one's gastrointestinal system.⁵² For external diseases afflicting one's skin, a course of "Rubbing Wet-Sheet," or "Abreibung," in which a coarse wet linen sheet is quickly rubbed all over the patient's body, causing friction to make the skin "reddened and warm."⁵³ In cases of fever, a practice called the "Lein-tuch" required the wrapping of patients in a cold, wet sheet. Enveloped by the initial sheet, additional thick blankets covered the patient in order to sweat out the fever. Similarly, wet bandages could be applied to places of local infection or pain, with the same intended effect.⁵⁴ Physicians who studied under Preissnitz believed that cold wrapping was capable of "determining the force of oxygen from one part to another," and producing "all the effects of both bleeding and blistering, except the pain."⁵⁵ This was the therapeutic protocol that gained popularity after the therapy's arrival in the United States. Other recommendations included taking a bath or a shower daily and exercising outdoors, all for the continuance of one's good health. Water cure professionals also often stressed the importance of a plain diet, though it wasn't officially a part of hydropathic protocols.⁵⁶ Perhaps the most lasting recommendation: drinking eight glasses of cold water daily.⁵⁷

In central Europe and the United Kingdom, the availability of hydropathic treatment was limited to water cure facilities often located in the mountains or

⁵² Joel Shew, *Hydrophy; or, The water cure: its principles, modes of treatment &c.* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 176-177. Along with describing the history of Preissnitz's cure and explaining, in detail, the various forms of hydrotherapy, Shew's publication compiled the knowledge and recommendations of many noted European water cure therapists who, often carrying medical degrees of their own, had become proponents of Preissnitz's practices.

⁵³ Joel Shew, *Hydrophy*, 178.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200-212.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

countryside. Despite the therapy's meager beginnings, Preissnitz's Gräfenberg getaway and subsequent water cure centers attracted upper-class Europeans who could afford a stay in a comfortable resort focused on quiet healing through various water-based applications. Gräfenberg's first year saw only 49 patients, but by the end of the 1840s, the center boasted between 1500 and 1700 visitors annually, including "one royal highness, one duke, one duchess, 22 princes and princesses, 149 counts and countesses, 88 barons and baronesses..." and hundreds of civil servants, military officials, religious figures, artists, and physicians from all over Europe.⁵⁸

Hydropathy did not arrive in the United States until the 1840s, where it evolved differently. Initially, the idea of relying on natural methods for healing purposes complimented evangelical faith-healing trends that developed out of the Second Great Awakening. Sylvester Graham helped to pave the way for the cure's popularity in the religious reform circuit. By using the millennial preaching style of the era to spread his message of health reform, the Presbyterian minister effectively transformed the simplest ways of taking care of oneself into virtuous acts, by asserting that bathing in and drinking clean water would purify both body and soul.⁵⁹ The cure quickly caught the attention of other moral reformers, including American crusaders for health and hygiene, such as William Alcott. Those who practiced and advocated for the use of hydropathy framed it as the alternative to dangerous interventionist medicine. The timing of the water cure's arrival coincided perfectly with the nationwide frustration with the state of professional healthcare. Marketed as a safer approach to healing, hydropathy emphasized the power of

⁵⁸ Susan E. Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed*, 4-5.

⁵⁹ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 471-72.

nature as a cleansing and detoxifying agent. Rather than serving as authoritative sources of inaccessible medical knowledge, hydropathists presented themselves simply as aids in the natural course of recovery. Additionally, hydropathy appealed to Americans who could not travel in search of medical care. Publications, such as Joel Shew's *Water-Cure Journal*, provided readers with the knowledge to practice treatment at home, along with other similar clean eating and exercise tips. This accessibility ultimately influenced Mary's own personal crusade.

In 1845, she traveled to Brattleboro, Vermont, where she sought professional instruction in water cure methods from Dr. Robert Wesselhoeft. Wesselhoeft received his own training directly from the specialists at Gräfenberg, before bringing his knowledge to the bank of the Connecticut River. "The establishment is thoroughly German from cellar to attic...it is as if Gräfenberg were transplanted to Vermont," one visitor reported.⁶⁰ The Brattleboro center, upon its opening in May of 1845, initially saw only eighteen patients at a time. The facility boasted hot and cold running water, as well as a nearby outdoor spa at which patients benefitted from not only cold bathing, but also fresh air and the exercise that one accomplished while walking to the springs. The educational reformer Catherine Beecher sought refuge at the facility a number of times in 1847, and recommended its healing properties to her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁶¹ Under Wesselhoeft's tutelage, Mary studied all of the different hydropathic therapies and, in return, she offered some of her earlier physiology lectures to the patients and local residents of Brattleboro. Perhaps

⁶⁰ "Hydropathic House, Brattleboro, Vt., June 9th, 1847," *Vermont Phoenix*, August 12, 1847.

⁶¹ Philip F. Gura, *Man's Better Angels: Romantic Reformers and the Coming of the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 180-81.

most importantly, Mary learned from Wesselhoeft the art of individual diagnosis and prescription.⁶² She spent three months at Brattleboro before accepting an invitation to serve as a resident physician at New Lebanon Springs, a water cure center near Albany, New York. There, she met Joel Shew, the water cure therapist largely responsible for the rise of hydropathy in the United States. Shew began to advertise Mary's work in the *Water Cure Journal* that he published out of New York City. His wife, Marie Louise, invited Mary and her daughter to stay in their Manhattan home. The Shew residence functioned as a hydropathy center, and Mary continued to observe and practice as she saved money to not only buy a home for herself and her now teenaged daughter, but to rent space large enough to teach classes on Grahamite reform and the water cure to women.⁶³

Hydropathy represented a far more welcoming sect of medicine to women than more traditional paths to professionalization. Before the nineteenth century, women generally tended to their own when it came to female physiology and wellness. The increasing professionalization of the field changed the way that physicians thought about women's bodies. With the normalization of interventionist medicine, many natural bodily processes were suddenly considered worthy of the involvement of a physician. As historian Susan E. Cayleff explains, "what had previously been considered the natural sequence of women's physiology—puberty, menstruation, childbirth, and menopause—was now diagnosed as a series of potentially serious medical events."⁶⁴ Women were no longer trusted to manage their own wellbeing, and the old ways of sharing knowledge

⁶² Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 74-75.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, *Shameless*, 75-77.

⁶⁴ Susan E. Cayleff, *Wash and Be Healed*, 8.

from woman to woman began to wane in popularity, especially in the more urban areas of the United States. Despite a lack of faith in their general ability to care for themselves, white middle class women still constituted the moral centers of home and society, at least in the eyes of their male counterparts. As moral reform societies grew in popularity across the country, women gained a sort of freedom as their sphere of acceptable public life increased to allow them to contribute to these organizations.⁶⁵ For Mary, this allowance was not enough; she continued to stress the necessity of women within the field.

In some of her earliest public lectures, she explained that human beings would continue to suffer at the hands of inept physicians until they understood their own physiology. “How can the dawn of this day be hastened?” she asked, knowing full well that the answer was clear: “By the efforts of woman: let woman use her energies, let her attain that moral and intellectual elevation which is her right...Let her nobly resolve that she will have science, that she will be no longer a plaything, a bauble.”⁶⁶ She asserted that her 1849 publication, *Experience in Water Cure*, “contains more particular directions to women, and treats more of their peculiar diseases, than any work I have ever seen.”⁶⁷ Her mission, through this manual, was to “instruct and help woman,” as she stressed her personal belief that “it is a great error to suppose that Water-Cure can only be used

⁶⁵ For an exploration of women and moral reform, see Lori D. Ginzberg, *Woman in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000).

⁶⁶ Mary Gove Nichols, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, 57.

⁶⁷ Mary Gove Nichols, *Experience in Water Cure: A Familiar Exposition of the Principles and Results of Water Treatment in the Cure of Acute and Chronic Diseases: Illustrated by Numerous Cases in the Practice of the Author: with an Explanation of Water-Cure Processes, Advice on Diet and Regimen and Particular Directions to Women in the Treatment of Female Diseases, Water Treatment in Childbirth, and the Diseases of Infancy* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1849), 5.

successfully in Water-Cure establishments.” If society relegated women to the home, then, they could at least take agency over their own wellness, and that of their loved ones.

In 1851, Mary and her second husband, Thomas Low Nichols, opened the American Hydropathic Institute in New York City, the nation’s first water cure school. Mary’s mission to make the water cure accessible to all culminated in this massive undertaking, as she created a place that would allow both men and women to learn the ways of the cure and disseminate that knowledge to the public. The school offered, from Mrs. Nichols, “special subjects in physiology, midwifery, and the diseases of women and children,” while Thomas Nichols lectured on “chemistry, anatomy, physiology, pathology, theory and practice of medicine, and surgery.”⁶⁸ Their aim was to recreate “a complete medical education,” by combining “the theory and practice of Water-Cure” with “the allopathic and homeopathic methods, so as to give the student a knowledge of each, and enable him to understand their relative merits.”⁶⁹ The merits of allopathic medicine, of course, were few; under Mary and Thomas, they were taught to consider “pure Hydropathy as the only natural method of preventing and curing disease, and that any other simple or mixed treatment only increases the number of diseases and their so-called remedies.”⁷⁰ Aside from the inclusion of the water cure, this informal medical school could boast one major difference from its formal competitors: it allowed women to enroll. Mary’s strong crusade for the education of women became integral to her school’s identity, and the Hydropathic Institute’s first graduating class boasted nine

⁶⁸ “American Hydropathic Institute” *Water Cure Journal* 11, no. 4 (April 1851), 91.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁰ “American Hydropathic Institute” *Water Cure Journal* 13, no. 2 (February 1852), 41.

women and eleven men.⁷¹ Women who graduated from the institute often opened their own cure centers, or worked in private practices, working to take the water cure across the country. While Isabel Pennell Stevens and Hester A. Horn both opened centers in New York, Mary Ann Torbett carried the cure deep into the South, opening a facility in Auburn, Alabama, and Esther C. Wileman took a position at a private water cure practice in Marlborough, Ohio. Harriet N. Austin, among the first graduating class of the American Hydropathic Institute, became a leading hydrotherapist who devoted her abilities to women's sanitariums across New England and Upstate New York.⁷²

It seemed as though Mary's crusade was fulfilled. She believed that hydropathy was the cure-all that she had sought for so many years. The trials that she faced as an ailing young woman at the hands of professional physicians, were rewarded by the popularity that she gained as a formal lecturer and healer. But perhaps most importantly, she made her passion for wellness accessible. In her drive to seek the cure for her suffering, she developed for herself a career that would last a lifetime, and she provided other women like herself with the same path toward not only good health, but usefulness outside of the home, as stewards of the water cure. She helped to democratize homeopathic medicine by ensuring that a new generation of water cure therapists would spread across the United States, educating others in the ways of safe and easy healthcare as opposed to the dangerous and unregulated popular medicine that afflicted society.

But she was far from finished. The path that led Mary through the many realms of nineteenth century reform opened her eyes not only to the world of homeopathy, but to

⁷¹ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 135-137.

⁷² *Ibid*, 275-76

free love, as well. By the time that she married for the second time, she had become radicalized in more ways than just medicine, and she began to think more fully about the ways in which women were truly barred from living their healthiest lives.

CHAPTER TWO: WELLNESS AND THE WIFE

Harriot Hunt was the first woman to apply to Harvard Medical School. Despite twice receiving a rejection, she practiced medicine anyway, traveling across New England and tending to the public without a degree. When she travelled through Lynn, Massachusetts, she stayed with her dear friend and colleague, Mary Gove. Both shared the belief that, due to the benevolent and caring natures of women, they were well suited to health care. Although they did not concur on the subject of Grahamism and the benefits of homeopathic practices, such as the water cure, Harriot greatly admired Mary, specifically her ability to lecture on anatomy and the workings of the human body to throngs of women who wished to educate themselves on their own health.⁷³ “As a lecturer on physiology she was excellent,” Harriot commended her friend, “she spoke with enthusiasm and power” Before long, though, Harriot grew concerned about her friend’s more recent subjects of interest. “With regard to Mrs. Nichols,” she stated in 1856, “I cannot look with leniency on the peculiar doctrines she has embraced in later life. I not only cannot sympathize with them, but I shudder at their character, and would remove myself from *every influence* tending to favor them.” Harriot was clearly scandalized by Mary’s newfound concentration. “My sympathies are with [her] deluded

⁷³ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 184.

followers,” she wrote, giving no hint as to what was so shocking about her friend’s career move.⁷⁴

As she became more deeply entrenched in the world of reform, Mary’s views began to evolve. The first half of her career focused on making healthcare, by way of the water cure, both accessible to, and administered by women. As her fame as an activist flourished, Mary’s priority remained on members of her sex and the democratization of wellness. She began to formulate, however, the idea that it was not just the realm of medicine that kept women from living their healthiest lives. In her personal publications, Mary consistently referred to herself as imprisoned by marriage, longing for freedom and safety. She slowly began to sense that the institution of matrimony was most detrimental to women’s wellbeing.

The state of American healthcare in the 1840s left much to be desired in the way of women’s wellness. Through her lectures and publications, Mary strove to make health a teachable skill that could be harnessed by all. As she established herself as a medical practitioner, she realized that the water cure was a profession in which women could especially thrive, allowing them to become strong agents for both healthiness and female empowerment. But the treatment and education of women on their physical health constituted only one step toward alleviating the burden that she believed her sex lived under in the 1850s. During the second half of her career, Mary emerged as a radical critic of the standards of marriage that afflicted her generation. She believed that society dealt women an unfair hand, and that their health suffered as a result.

⁷⁴ Harriot K. Hunt, *Glances and Glimpses, or, Fifty Years Social, Including Twenty Years Professional Life*. (Boston: J.P. Jewett and Co., 1856), 139-140.

In the same way that Mary's path to serving as a steward of the water cure stemmed from her own battle with illness, the misery of her first marriage played a significant role in the formation of her later reformist ideals towards a supposedly sacred tradition. As she documented in her writings, she carried a strong aversion to the institution. In 1831, she married Hiram Gove, a "tyrant" whose abuses left her chronically ill and anxious.⁷⁵ "Many a woman has been cheated into marriage," she explained in her autobiography, "because she thought a man holy." This, she supposed, was her mistake in marrying Gove, a pious Quaker whose very congregation, she hoped, would grant her the sense of community for which she always longed.⁷⁶ She quickly realized, however, that piety did not alone make a marriageable man, nor she a marriageable woman, despite her own devotion to Quakerism. Initially, she believed the error to be her own. "I felt that I did not, that I never could love him," she explained.⁷⁷ She lamented her own weakness and lack of desire to serve as a settled and sympathetic wife. "The whole body of Quakers, as one," she added, "regarded a broken engagement as a sin of the blackest dye. I might as easily have been raised to life from a coffin buried deep in the ground," she grieved, "as have escaped this marriage among this people."⁷⁸ She truly believed herself to be trapped: "A dull and indescribable misery took possession of me, which had only one glimmer of relief—this was the hope that I might die before the time came for my marriage."⁷⁹

⁷⁵ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 135.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

Within the pages of her autobiography, Mary first suggested her openness toward open relationships, that is, free love ideals. Just before she married Gove, she met a young man who remained nameless in her autobiography. “My heart sprang toward him,” she described, “as the flower lifts its petals to the warm sunlight.”⁸⁰ She confided in him that she dreaded her impending nuptials but feared her fellow Quakers would deem the attraction as a crime. When Gove saw the two together, Mary quickly realized the power of her betrothed’s temper. “[He] heard us repeat impassioned poetry; saw me drink in life from the bright one. His whole appearance said, ‘I can kill,’ as with set teeth, compressed lips, and an iron sternness of features he regarded us.”⁸¹ Mary was mortified. “I was in a paroxysm of tears. I dreaded and abhorred [Hiram Gove] more than any living creature I had ever seen of conceived of, and yet I had promised to be his wife, and I believed that the torments of hell awaited me if I broke my word.” Gove even threatened her life should she embarrass him again: “[He] portrayed my doom if I dared to break my vow,” she warned, “till I grew giddy at the thought.”⁸² She believed that she was trapped with Gove forever, with only death to do them part.

Marriage in the antebellum years commonly functioned as a contract between husband and wife. The wife conceded to the wishes of the husband and operated, most importantly, as a vessel for procreation. When it came to legal rights, the scales almost entirely tipped in favor of the husband. A natural assertion of authority, or a measure of his passionate affection and desire for his wife, often absolved him of his abuses. Marital rape lay outside the scope of illegality, because it was the supposed duty of the wife to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁸¹ Ibid., 121.

⁸² Ibid., 122.

cater to her husband's needs. The first push toward more rights on behalf of wives resulted, in large part, in the temperance movement, which, perhaps for the first time in the United States, gave wives a platform with which to protest the injustices brought upon them by drunken husbands. Since Quaker marriages were not often marred by drunkenness, Mary's options when it came to protesting her marriage were few.⁸³

The misery that she experienced stemmed both from her relationship with Gove, and from the environment in which she lived while married to the man. Rather than stay near her own family, Gove took her to live among his long-established community of Quakers in Lynn, Massachusetts. The relocation changed her life immediately. Finding an "absence of cultivated and educated society," she quickly realized that "people of common sense, industry, and very slight literary acquirements" surrounded her.⁸⁴ "I was tacitly forbidden to make any acquaintance out of the Society," she explained.⁸⁵ Having spent her adolescence among those who challenged her intellect, she now found that there was no one with whom she could spar intellectually, as she had once done with her father. Her community looked at her old hobbies with loathing. "They regarded poetry as a sort of black art, and fiction as downright lying."⁸⁶ Lonely without companions who might stir her thoughts, and looked down upon for her interests, her health deteriorated. "Cut off from writing, and mostly from reading, except the Scriptures, and from social

⁸³ For more on nineteenth century marriage, see Nancy Isenberg, *Sex & Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC.: The university of North Carolina Press, 1998), 155-190; Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁸⁴ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 124.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

intercourse in a great degree,” she wrote, “I became so ill, that it was impossible for me to sit up but a few hours in the day...the thought of self-destruction haunted me.”⁸⁷

The world in which the wife of Hiram Gove had to live grew smaller and unlivable, and Gove grew to be dangerous when opposed. When she showed interest in hobbies and reading outside of their faith, he grew violent.⁸⁸ “I knew [Hiram’s] temper,” she explained, “and I bowed myself before it. He was obstinate, ignorant, and opinionated to the last degree.”⁸⁹ Increasingly paranoid, he destroyed the letters that she received from acquaintances and from her beloved brother, effectively shuttering her from the outside world.⁹⁰ Their young daughter, and the small group of pupils that Gove allowed her to teach, constituted her only sources of respite. The lazy Quaker was perennially out of work, and allowed his wife to labor in his place. Any money that Mary collected from her students went directly to his pocket, which consequently forced her to beg him for it in order to buy classroom supplies. “I often thought that it was possible that [he] might engage in some useful occupation if I left him,” she wrote. “If he had been usefully employed, he would not have been the perpetual torment to me that he was. All my hours of study and rest were invaded, and as it were haunted by him.”⁹¹

Often confined to bed and left to her own thoughts, Mary began to more fully explore her ideas around marriage and partnership as she endured the vow that she had made to Hiram Gove. “A conviction had long been growing within me that marriage

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸⁸ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 27.

⁸⁹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 126.

⁹⁰ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 26.

⁹¹ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*,

without love was legalized adultery,” she mused in her autobiography.⁹² This early thought would reappear throughout her later writings on marriage and relationships. In her first publication, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology*, she cautioned young women that marriage was not always the sacred partnership described to them throughout their adolescence. Her warnings sounded familiar, much like the suffering that she herself had endured. “Females...surrounded by all the disadvantages that custom heaps upon them, grow up feeble and frail,” she asserted. Young women follow such customs to the letter, allowing themselves to be “led to the altar, a white robed vision of loveliness,” as God intended. Did God, Mary asked of her readers, “intend that the marriage relation, his own divine institution, should be the prelude to sufferings that no pen can describe?”⁹³ She believed, from her own encounters, that an institution ensconced within religion did not guarantee a woman’s safety, happiness, or wellness, and she was sure to make sure that young women would understand this as well, when she eventually embarked on her first lecture tour.

Hiram Gove’s cruelty was well documented in Mary’s later publications. “My earnings went into his hands, and he would not allow me six cents unless the purpose for which I wanted it pleased him,” she explained. “I was allowed to work, to lecture for the education and elevation of woman, on condition that I render into the hands of this man whom the law called my husband, every penny that I earned.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, she

⁹² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹³ *Lectures to Ladies*, 271

⁹⁴ T.L. Nichols and Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities, and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, as A Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race* (New York: Published by T.L. Nichols, 1854), 193-194.

expounded on how her interactions with others were limited: “I could not leave the house, or call on a neighbor for fifteen minutes, without his consent, and I was enjoined and expected to ‘love, honor, and obey’ a man who was mean enough to require...this,” she wrote. “I could obey him, and I did...” she added. “But what woman, who is worthy the name, can love or honor disease, stupidity, and a blind arrogance of authority? Yet the Church and the World said this man’s will has to be my law.”⁹⁵ It was this very law that formed the root of the problem, in her estimation, “There is a conservative principle in the human mind,” she explicated, “which makes people cling to institutions, even after all vitality and use have departed from them. This has been seen in the destruction of monarchy, and in the repudiation of the authority of the church.” The next institution that needed destroying, she proclaimed, was that of marriage. “Woman must be an appendage of man, really a slave, till she can sustain herself. We have to make our way out of a wilderness of falsehood.”⁹⁶ This belief initially surfaced in Mary’s desire to educate women in the ways of health and wellness. Yet, later in her career, she claimed that the only way to achieve female wellness was by dismantling the traditional ways of marriage.

Mary secured a separation from Hiram Gove in 1842, although they remained legally married. “A Divorce will be my *last resort*,” she wrote to a cousin, begging for advice as how to best leave the man, “but I must do some thing for life, for his horrible malady is wearing me into the grave.” In the same letter, she plainly connected her illness to his cruelty: “When I am with him nervous fits, terrible convulsions are immediately bro’t on, and his letters shake me in every nerve and fibre,” she described. “I have not

⁹⁵ Ibid., 195.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 195.

been able to sit up but very little for the last two months,” she lamented. “I am satisfied that the dreadful hectic fever and cough *etc* with which I have been afflicted...might be relieved immediately could I be assured of two things—” she wrote, “that my chil[d] would be spared me, and that the vultures of o[ur] corrupt press would not prey upon my vitals.”⁹⁷ She feared that a divorce, especially a public one, might harm her promising career as a reform lecturer. With the help of her father, Mary convinced Hiram to grant her a separation. While living with her parents, once again, she prepared her first manuscript for publication.

With the success of *Lectures to Ladies*, Mary traveled across New England, promoting her work. The ways of the water cure were not the only experiences that she desired. Physically free from her husband, she sought new relationships and friendships that never would have developed under the thumb of Hiram Gove. In 1843, she made the acquaintance of one of her most ardent fans, Henry Gardner Wright. Wright is credited by scholars as introducing Mary to the water cure, but it was their torrid affair that says more about Mary’s blossoming interest in free love ideology. Her autobiographical description of their meeting reads like a romance novel. “His face was fair and beautiful...his broad brow spoke an ample intellect, his deep-blue eyes had a brilliant light...His hair was of a rich golden hue, and fell in massive curls,” she illustrated lovingly. Hiram Gove never received this sort of description from his wife. “There was a quiet and graceful dignity,” she described of Wright, “that stamped him unmistakably a gentleman...So noble and beautiful was his countenance, that one forgot that he was only

⁹⁷ Mary Gove to John Neal, February 1, 1842, quoted in Irving T. Richards, “Mary Gove Nichols and John Neal,” *The New England Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (June 1934): 335-355.

of medium size.”⁹⁸ They met at a picnic filled with fellow reformers, and as Wright’s association with his colleagues became strained, he took a room in the Massachusetts dwelling of Mary’s father. As he and Mary grew ever closer, she felt herself falling for the Englishman. “A flood of delicious feeling was poured through every nerve and vein and artery as he held my hand between both his,” she remembered, narrating one late night in which their conversation lasted long past sundown. But she was initially careful. “It might be a precious life to me to sit by my friend, with my hand clasped in his...but it would be death to my reviving usefulness if...he were suspected of varying from the popular standard of marriage morality.”⁹⁹

Mary’s moral code was still steeped in tradition, but her sense of morality nonetheless shifted. She believed that she loved Henry Wright and, slowly, any shame she may have felt toward her feelings vanished, as she realized that this love did not necessitate the institution of marriage. “I had thought that all love was sinful that was not according to law,” she explained, “that had not the stamp of property, the ‘ear-mark’ of ownership upon it.” As a married woman, especially to as jealous a man as Hiram Gove, she learned to keep her distance from other men. “I lived for a long time under a solemn vow to allow no pleasant friend of the opposite sex to hold my hand.”¹⁰⁰ She wondered what good there was in a life in which she did not allow herself what she truly wanted. “I had begun to be somewhat conscious that, as a human being, I had ‘a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,’” she considered. Along with this shift in her moral code, she felt a shift in her health as well. “How strangely different was life on this night,” she

⁹⁸ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 179-180.

⁹⁹ [Mary Gove Nichols], 209.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 210-211.

remembered, “from a few short weeks ago, when I had been held to life by the frailest thread, when I had poured out my blood til my very heart seemed collapsed in my bosom.” She truly believed that the love she carried for her child had kept alive through her illness, and now she had even more affection in her life that she knew would only strengthen her more. “I sat, and thought that the earth had yet another love for me besides my Eva. How sweet and living the repose of love!”¹⁰¹

When Wright returned to the Neal home after a week away from Mary, they consummated the relationship. “I forgot everything on earth but him,” she recounted, “and found myself leaning against his heart.” As she meditated on her actions, she sensed that her love for Wright would not subside, and she believed herself forever changed. “I went back to my friend, drawn by an attraction as irresistible as the desire to breathe. He smiled kindly...I wept and knelt by his side, and laid my face into his soft palms, and wept many tears.”¹⁰² She never looked back; the love that she carried for others would never be clouded by traditional notions of propriety again. By choosing to carry on an affair with Henry Gardner Wright, Mary not only entered the world of water cure reform, but of free love and marriage reform. She instantly connected her openness to loving a man to whom she was not married, with her own wellness, and that of others. This connection between love and wellness would fuel her career to the end.

Leaving her daughter with her mother, Rebecca Neal, Mary traveled to Ohio to meet with other reformers that Wright recommended to her. Before she could continue her education, Hiram Gove’s reentrance into her life cut her work short. The old Quaker

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 212.

¹⁰² Ibid., 214.

kidnapped a 13-year old Elma Gove from her grandmother's care, insisting on his right to his own daughter. Mary returned to Massachusetts at once, knowing not where Gove could have taken Elma. A perfect stranger wrote to Mary after having interacted with a grieving young girl on a train who begged her to write to her mother at once. She alerted Mary to her daughter's intended location at the home of Hiram's brother in New England. Mary traveled there in a panic, though she knew that she had no legal basis with which to take Elma back from her scheming father. She exhausted her income on litigation and a custody battle that took months to outline, further frustrated by the cruelty of Gove and the lack of legal rights that a wife had in her own marriage.¹⁰³ As is noted in Jean Silver-Isenstadt's *Shameless*, no evidence of this kidnapping has been found anywhere outside of Mary's semi-fictional autobiography. Whether true or fabricated, this great pause in Mary's career further allowed her to paint Hiram Gove as the heartless villain in her life story, propelling her work toward one that promoted anti-marriage sentiments and the rights of wives.

Although she won the custody of her daughter in 1845 with the help of a sympathetic lawyer, Mary found herself drained completely of her savings. She returned to the world of reform, establishing connections with others within the reform community who could assist and further her knowledge, with the hope of gaining employment as a hydropathic attendant at a cure center. A wealthy twenty-one-year-old medical student, named Marx Lazarus, represented one such individual who proved beneficial to both her

¹⁰³ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 68-71; [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 238-263; Though she does not formally cite the text, Patricia Cline Cohen notes that Elma Penn Gove, Hiram and Mary's daughter, wrote about the kidnapping in her own personal memoirs. Patricia Cline Cohen, "The 'Anti-Marriage Theory' of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 1 (2014).

learning and her pocketbook. Mary described him as a “dreamer, the queerest fellow in the world,” with long black hair and “dark, dreamy, and beautiful eyes.” Upon their meeting, Lazarus awkwardly proclaimed that the two shared “affinity.”¹⁰⁴ They worked together to open a boardinghouse in New York City where they both would live, along with Mary’s daughter, Lazarus’s sister, and a handful of friends that included artists, reformers, and writers.¹⁰⁵ The young medical student, more than a decade younger than Mary, often left flowers in his companion’s bedroom, showered her with monetary gifts, and took her young daughter to the theatre. Whether or not they actually had an affair is still open to interpretation, as Mary was not nearly as forward about her time spent with Marx Lazarus as she was with Henry Gardner Wright.¹⁰⁶ She had already transcended the boundaries of conventional relationships; despite her affair with Wright, as well as what she may or may not have carried on with Lazarus, she remained legally married to Hiram Gove. Her autobiography expressed feelings for both Wright and Lazarus in ways that she had never felt for her husband, and allowed her fully to formulate ideas that would make her a strong advocate against what she believed to be the suffocating bonds of legal marriage.

The timing of Lazarus’s grand entrance into Mary’s life was impeccable, as he was the proponent of an ideology that seemingly provided Mary with exactly what she was looking for. Lazarus, along with many other utopian reformers, favored socialist thinker Charles Fourier’s idea that “false institutions” imposed too many restraints on

¹⁰⁴ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 284-285.

¹⁰⁵ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 79-80.

¹⁰⁶ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 285-303; For more on Lazarus’s relationship with Mary, see Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 79-80.

society. One of the restraints that Fourier condemned was the institution of marriage, and many free love proponents believed that the bonds of matrimony were an extension of slavery and prostitution.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, many believed that individuals should, rather than conform to institutional bonds, be free to love whomever they choose.

In 1852, Lazarus published *Love Vs. Marriage pt. 1*, in which he indicated that marriage was “totally incompatible with social harmony,” and caused impairments of both the body and mind.¹⁰⁸ “The greatest pity is to see in married life two...persons, on whom nature and fortune seem to have lavished their gifts...dragged along in forced decency and self-control...growing every day colder to each other,” Lazarus wrote. “A few charming infidelities, not very serious, on either side, would restore them all fresh and ardent to each other as at first.”¹⁰⁹ To Mary, who endured a loveless marriage and was no stranger to amorous infidelities, Lazarus’s words were enticing. Her young friend was also a follower of health reform protocols, such as vegetarianism, and was a strong proponent of the water cure. He believed in a direct correlation between love and wellness. Women were “systematically victimized by education and custom from her childhood, and [given] fewer chances than man for health, vigor, and independence.” They were subjected to the cruelty of men, “whose sense of their wife’s superiority only intensified the tyranny of a narrow and jealous exclusiveness.”¹¹⁰ He asserted, “The

¹⁰⁷ For more on Charles Fourier, see Steven Mintz, *Moralists & Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore, MD.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 149-150; John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁸ Marx Edgeworth Lazarus, *Love Vs. Marriage* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1852), 236.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

essential falsehood of marriage causes the stronger nature to crush the weaker, instead of assisting it to develop its powers.” Women, being the weaker sex, according to Lazarus, lost their individuality and talents at the hands of selfish husbands. They were ultimately “slaves; the soil is upon them, and the law has irrevocably fastened them in the clutch of a yahoo...whose character now reveals itself.”¹¹¹

Having nearly succumbed to illness at the hand of her husband’s suspicion and distrust, Mary found herself drawn to these sentiments intimately. As she grew closer to Lazarus, Mary adopted his ideas of free love as her own. She believed that a marriage without love and security was a bond not worth her time, and that an institution that lacks such feelings contributed to both physical and mental illness. “Whoso marries for a home, or a position, or [on] a whim or a pseudo sentiment, is doomed forever to live without love,” she explained. “A denial of the affections makes everybody sick, the world over.”¹¹² As she narrated in her autobiography, her close companionship with Lazarus and other boardinghouse friends left her constantly elated, rather than depressed and ill. She noticed that her symptoms were subsiding, and she left the boardinghouse often, to partake in social activities such as dinner parties and the theatre.

By the time that she met her future husband, Mary’s ideas on marriage were as radicalized as any other free love advocate of the day. Living in New York, she recalled that she “had not been long in my new sphere before I was arrested by the bold words of a thoughtful man.” She found this anonymous voice in the pages of health reform tracts and local newspapers, but she could not place the it with a name within her social circle.

¹¹¹ Ibid.,121-122.

¹¹² [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 259.

“I soon had the power to detect him in any article,” she wrote, as she all but fell in love with the ideas and words of an unidentifiable figure. She scoured her periodicals for his presence, and in the meantime, as she described in *Mary Lyndon*, she practiced the water cure, and planned a Christmas party. She invited everyone from her social circles, and bade them invite all of their friends, as well. The latter suggestion was one that she soon regretted making, though, as strangers who challenged her anxious nature quickly filled her home.¹¹³ Thomas Low Nichols, in particular, was an unexpected guest who thoroughly tested her nerves.

She described Nichols as “a mere dandy” who did not fit in among the relaxed group of reformers and educators with whom she had so purposefully surrounded herself.¹¹⁴ She found him “walking about under a white waistcoat and white kid gloves, a coat of faultless Parisian fit, with a figure graceful as a gymnast, and yet with a manner so formally genteel, that one felt that he never committed a breach of etiquette in his life.”¹¹⁵ Nichols, known around New York City as both a fop and flash journalist, thoroughly agitated her sensibilities. That is, until she learned that he was the anonymous author whose words she had grown to love and long for in the pages of the press. She found herself utterly confused, caught between loathing and longing. “I was in a curiously contradictory state during the week between Christmas and New Year’s,” she remembered. “I was determined not to have any interest in [Nichols]—I was quite sure I did not like him; and yet I thought little of any one but him.” She slowly found herself growing ever more fascinated by a man she considered to be an artist, so different from

¹¹³ Ibid., 337-338.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 339.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 338.

the reformers with whom she was so familiar. “I could not believe that one so entirely contrasted with myself could be so much pleased with me,” she mused. At a New Year’s Eve party, she found herself fighting her own feelings as he “sung songs, improvised waltzes...outstayed everybody, and went home at two o’clock in the morning, leaving me dizzy with delight and wonder, still fully believing...he was one of the last men in the world whom I could love.”¹¹⁶ The two soon began a silent, handwritten courtship, and Mary found herself unable to resist the allure of his words once again.

It was clear to Mary that Nichols admired her work ethic and career. “You and I were born to precisely the same destiny, and we shall both do our work,” he wrote to her. “...we are school-masters—teachers—nothing more. You will teach the women, I the men.”¹¹⁷ Their fate was sealed. Mary devoted a chapter of *Mary Lyndon* to recounting the long series of correspondence between the two, and by the end, each wasted no time in proclaiming their love for the other, and their gratitude for having stumbled upon such a worthy partner. Mary had found a man who did not envy her success or keep her from achieving her goals. With Thomas Nichols, she could continue on the path that she had already laid for herself, without fear of being stifled. “You are directing your efforts in the best manner,” he wrote to her. “Follow your profession; it is noble, useful, honorable, and will command the world’s respect. The active work...[is] just what you require. It has dignity and independence.”¹¹⁸ Finally, Mary experienced “the conception, growth, and maturity of a divine passion—the love of two human souls,” she described, “whose union was to produce a heaven of happiness for them, and an outflowing of uses to the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 344.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 350.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 363.

world.” After all she learned of free love from her companions, she knew that it was this bond with Nichols, filled with “love, so sacred, so full of goods and truths,” rather than one arranged “for a home, or a position, or [on] a whim or a pseudo sentiment,” that could safely be bound by marriage.¹¹⁹ Of course, at the time of their courtship, it was not yet legal for them to marry. “In the State of Massachusetts, where I parted from [Gove], and repudiated his ownership,” she was still legally married to the cruel old Quaker. “My union with [Nichols] would have been a state’s prison offence,” she explained, “to be punished by years of incarceration and hard labor.”¹²⁰

Despite harboring frustrations with the institution itself, yet she still felt morally obligated to marrying, rather than carrying on a lifelong relationship that remained legally unbound. “See how much freedom there is for a true love and a true life in America—the boasted ‘land of the free and home of the brave,’” she mused.¹²¹ Mary had not particularly cared that she stayed legally bound to Gove, until she wished to marry Nichols. She also knew that to stay unmarried might harm her career. According to historian Patricia Cline Cohen, Mary believed that a marriage certificate worked in the same way as “a pass for a slave in the South functioned for a black man on the road: It authorized his legitimate mobility.”¹²² In other words, the married couple could not be stopped for crimes of lewdness. “Both slavery and marriage were bad institutions,” Cohen explained, “but while they existed, it was prudent to have a pass.”¹²³ Mary

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 259

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 383.

¹²² Patricia Cline Cohen, “The ‘Anti-Marriage Theory’ of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols,” 4-5.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

understood the weight of a marriage certificate in her day and age. “Though I was fully convinced of the truth and holiness of my passion for [Nichols], for the sake of my profession and my great usefulness to woman,” she wrote, “I did not wish to incur disgrace by living with him without a legal marriage.”

By great providence, at this time she received word that Hiram Gove desired a divorce. “Fortunately for my work, [Gove], wishing himself to marry, and being unopposed, obtained a divorce within the year.”¹²⁴ Despite the detestation of marriage that she had harbored alongside her free-loving friends, she knew that she could trust Thomas to create a bond so unlike anything remotely resembling the first time that she had consented to marry. “No man on the broad earth could more fully sympathize with me in the holy fear I felt of bonds,” she shared, “I knew that he would give his life to guard mine in the most full and sacred outflowing of all my love—my duty to myself, and, consequently, my usefulness to others.”¹²⁵ Even the wedding vows she shared with Thomas provided the antithesis to her first marriage:

I said: “In a marriage with you, I re-sign no right of my soul, I enter into no compact to be faithful to you. I only promise to be faithful to the deepest love of my heart. If that love is yours, it will bear fruit for you, and enrich your life—our life. If my love leads me from you, I must go.”

¹²⁴ [Mary Gove Nichols], *Mary Lyndon*, 384.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

He said, “You are free. I ask only what is mine, through your love, and I ask that you give to all what is sacredly theirs. I am content to trust. I shall have my own—I ask only that.”

I said, “I must keep my name—the name I have made for myself, through labor and suffering.” He smiled and said, “I do not ask you to take mine.”¹²⁶

These could only be the marriage vows of two unyielding followers of free love. Mary entered into a relationship in which she was not beholden to her husband. She would never be required to deny herself her own hard-earned wages, or be barred from reading what she desired, or from associating with persons outside her designated social circle.

If she was going to be a married woman again, this was the only that she would allow it, and she made sure that her readers were privy to her requirements. “When will woman cease to be an appendage, a parasite of man; a thing, a creature having no independent existence, but subject to the will of an owner-husband?” she asked, “When will woman stand before the universe an individual being, faithful to her own life-law, fully sensible of her God-given dower of love, and her right to bestow it according to the divine law of her attraction?”¹²⁷ These very questions would form the cornerstone of her new marriage, as she and Nichols immediately began work to unravel traditional definitions of the institution. In 1850, they had a daughter, Mary Wilhelmina, whose

¹²⁶ Ibid., 385.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 386.

successful birth the couple used to promote the efficacy of the water cure. After all of Mary's misfortune in childbearing during her first marriage, years of strict adherence to the cure, they believed, rendered her once again healthy enough to procreate.

When they were not teaching at the Water Cure Institute, they were writing. Six years into their marriage, they published their joint seminal project, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, as A Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race*. "The Civilized Marriage demands the light of free discussion more than any existing institution," they wrote, "because it is more intimately and more vitally connected with the problems of our future destiny."¹²⁸ *Marriage*, aside from calling the institution outdated and unnecessary, argued that the absence of pleasure itself caused illness and disease. For Mary, wellness was no longer the effect of an absence of a woman's knowledge about her body, but an absence of the knowledge of her freedom. "One of the hideous evils of our marriage system is the unnatural celibacy that it forces upon vast numbers," they argued with fervor. "Love, with its ultimations, enjoyments, and results, is the right, as it is the function, of every human being. Physical and mental diseases and miseries are the consequences of a deprivation of this right."¹²⁹ They likened marriage to disease itself: when a child becomes ill, "a doctor comes with blisters, bleedings, and deadly poisons," to administer a cure, when in fact, "all that was needed for the infant was freedom...from all poisons

¹²⁸ T.L. Nichols and Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results; Its Sanctities, and Its Profanities; Its Science and Its Facts. Demonstrating Its Influence, as A Civilized Institution, on the Happiness of the Individual and the Progress of the Race* (New York: Published by T.L. Nichols, 1854), 10.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

and other unhealthy conditions.” In much the same way, women were subjected to “the allopathy of prisons and the surgery of the gallows” for harboring the desire to step outside of the traditional bonds of marriage, to pursue love and pleasure without the interference of the state. They, too, only required freedom from unhealthy conditions.¹³⁰

In her own chapters, Mary argued especially on behalf of wives and wives-to-be. She emphasized that the healthiest women understood their freedom and independence, especially as far as choosing one’s own sexual partners. These self-reliant women, she argued, knew that their virtue and purity did not stem from remaining abstinent, but from recognizing one’s ability to choose her lovers. “The woman who is truly emancipate,” she wrote, “needs no human law for the protection of her chastity; virtue is to her something more than a name and a regulation.” Furthermore, this virtuous independency extended to motherhood: “Such a woman,” she reasoned, “has a Heaven conferred right to choose the father of her babe.”¹³¹

Additionally, Mary informed women that a dispassionate marriage, devoid of sexual pleasure, was just as unhealthy as a violent marriage. Wives, she asserted, rightfully earned such pleasure. “Would it not be great injustice in our Heavenly Father,” she asked, “to so constitute woman as to suffer the pangs of childbirth with no enjoyment of the union that gives her a babe?” she asked. For all the natural pains of womanhood that they endured, wives deserved to enjoy sex just as their husbands did. To deprive them of that pleasure, to treat them only as vessels of offspring, would leave them unhappy and, most importantly, unwell. “The apathy of the sexual instinct in woman is

¹³⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹³¹ Ibid., 205.

caused by the enslaved and unhealthy condition in which she lives,” Mary proclaimed. “Healthy and loving women are destroyed by being made bond-women, having no spontaneity, and bearing children more rapidly than they ought, and in unhealthy condition.”¹³² As biographer Jean Silver-Isenstadt notes, these statements were radical; in the same moment, William Alcott wrote that woman, “in a natural state—unperverted, unsexed, and healthy—seldom, if ever, makes any of those advances which clearly indicate sexual desire; and for this very plain reason that she does not feel them.”¹³³ Mary argued the opposite: if a woman was, in fact, unfeeling of sexual desire, it was not because she was healthy, but rather unhealthy. After all, she believed that it was her separation from Hiram Gove that caused a resurgence in her health, allowing her to engage in an affair with Henry Gardner Wright.

To assert ownership over another was the greatest sin in a marriage, she continued to assert. “If I pluck a single flower it is mine, but it withers in my keeping,” she explained. “All who attempt to hold property in a lover, a husband, or wife, will find blasting and death come to their possessions.” Mary gave several examples of her own patients whose health suffered as the result of a marriage in which one took possession over the other. She highlighted the story of a young woman married to a wealthy and educated man whose cruelty overshadowed the financial security awarded to her. “The young wife bore her heavy burden in silence,” Mary narrated, “til her health failed.” She begged to be allowed to be placed under Mary’s care, but was disallowed. “Six times she miscarried or aborted...Her peerless beauty faded, and her glorious life became nearly

¹³² Ibid., 202.

¹³³ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 183.

insanity at times.” At long last, “after twelve years of agony and resignation, a human soul was blotted out, and the lifeless clay, beautiful to the last, was alone left to him who never had a thought but that she was his property, as much as his horses, or his house.”¹³⁴ Mary urged her readers to understand not only the dangers of a possessive marriage, but also the benefits of her practice: if the young wife had been allowed to practice the water cure under the reformer’s guidance, she might have survived.

Marriage contained multitudes of anecdotes just like this one, in which Mary warned women young and old of the importance of equality in the home and in the bedroom. She also warned them to think of their children. She believed that unhappy marriages afforded “hereditary evils” to children, including “sensuality, sickness, suffering, weakness, imbecility, or outrageous crime.” Perhaps worst of all, she asserted, “masturbation in children, and every evil of sensuality, spring from the polluted hot-bed” of unloving marriage and non-consensual sex between husbands and wives. Masturbation, or solitary vice, remained unforgivable to Mary, despite her openness to free love. She gave the example of a pious woman who came to her for the cure, due to her inability to carry out a full pregnancy, despite a loving and healthy marriage. Mary eventually compelled the woman to admit to the unforgivable habit in which she engaged as a child, which, Mary believed, doomed her into adulthood until she became barren. Perhaps, if she could not convince women to think of themselves, they would at least think of their children.

¹³⁴ T.L. Nichols and Mrs. Mary S. Gove Nichols, *Marriage: Its History, Character, and Results*, 238-39.

The stories found within the pages of *Marriage* boasted the success of Mary's work. As she continued to serve the population, she and Thomas published a monthly journal, wherein she documented her cases and invited her colleagues to do the same. She emphasized the freedom that could be awarded to women through both marriage equality and health reform. Above all, Mary stressed her belief that taking care of themselves, asserting their independence over their health and their relationships, would allow women to live the lives of wellness that they deserved.

CONCLUSION

Although Mary originally garnered great fame for her ideas and work in health and hygiene, her contemporaries did not readily accept her ideas on free love. Besides Harriot Hunt, Lucy Stone, for example, in an 1855 letter to Susan B. Anthony, expressed her relief that Mary did not make an appearance at the National Women's Rights Convention in Cincinnati.¹³⁵ As Patricia Cline Cohen notes, the Convention attempted to take up the cause of marriage rights in later years, but when Mary F. Davis referred to marriage as "legalized prostitution," the New York *Herald* called it an affirmation of free love ideology, and Davis was forced to recant her speech. Such ideas were no longer welcome within the movement; when Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave a speech on the benefits of divorce in 1860, leaders of the Convention threatened her with "a motion to strike her whole statement from the record."¹³⁶ Although her intent was to educate and free American women from the shackles of marriage, ensuring their health and safety, Mary's ideas were evidently far too radical to be included as a tenet of the formal women's rights movement. Still, Mary associated with fellow proponents of free love into the 1850s, and she carried her ideas all the way from New York City to a commune in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Mary and Thomas purchased a three-story building on the site

¹³⁵ Patricia Cline Cohen, "The 'Anti-Marriage Theory' of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols," 10.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

of a former water cure center, and opened Memnonia, “a school of health, progress, and harmony.”¹³⁷

At Memnonia, the couple’s ideas began to shift even further. They circled back on previous notions of free love and, instead, focused on the subject of chastity, believing that the ultimate sexual freedom was that of personal control. The healthiest sexuality was that which was saved for the utmost loving relationship, one that would create a child. This was not the chastity of repressed Victorians, but, instead, that of self-governed health reformers. “We ask the far purer chastity of a higher law,” they explained, “[which] commands us to garner our lives, and avoid the waste and all the evils of sensuality.”¹³⁸ Word of Mr. and Mrs. Nichols’s radical cause spread quickly, and relationships with colleagues and friends grew strained. No one would associate with their new neighbors in Ohio: as one local recorded, “they would drive into town for business or for mail, then drive back to the Cure.” Mary’s health deteriorated again, and she returned to the strict regimen of her once beloved water cure.¹³⁹

Mary’s free love radicalism, however, only lasted about five years before she converted to Catholicism. Perhaps she understood the unrealistic radicalism of her cause, or was frustrated by the failure of Memnonia, which saw only twenty patients in its short period of existence. It is also said that she was visited by the ghost of St. Ignatius of Loyola, who persuaded her toward the Catholic church during a seance.¹⁴⁰ She began

¹³⁷ Thomas Low Nichols, *Memnonia Institute: A School of Health, Progress and Harmony* (Yellow Springs, OH.: Antioch College, 1856), 1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³⁹ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 208.

¹⁴⁰ As Patricia Cline Cohen discovered, it was during a séance at Yellow Springs that Mary was allegedly instructed in Catholic theology by St. Ignatius of Loyola himself. Soon afterward, Mary and Thomas sought an audience with the Archbishop of Cincinnati, where they

once again to practice her original passion, the water cure, out of her home in England, where she and Thomas moved in objection to the U.S. Civil War. Though softened by the church, her cause remained focused on the health and education of women throughout the rest of her career.

When her second child, Mary Wilhelmina, died of bronchitis at the age of fourteen, Mary's health declined once again, and she developed cataracts that left her completely blind. In 1867 Mr. and Mrs. Nichols moved to Malvern, England, the site of James Gully's hydropathy spa, and set up a clinic of their own. A year later, Mary underwent surgery to remove her cataracts, and she quickly returned to work. She traveled across the region to provide medical consultations, and donated her time to charity on behalf of the poor. In 1877, the couple moved to London, where Mary practiced the cure out of their home. In 1881, she fell and broke her thigh bone; while it eventually healed, the damage caused lasting nerve pain, which limited her mobility. Still, she continued to work all but the last twelve days leading up to her death in 1884.¹⁴¹

Despite spending her life searching for wellness, Mary both entered and left the world in pain. As a young woman suffering at the hands of allopathic physicians, she grew to distrust the medical profession, and, while trapped in an abusive marriage, she dreamed of the days that she spent recovering in the outdoors, a memory that hinted at the causes she would gravitate toward during her career. Sylvester Graham entered her

asked to be baptized. Cohen's theory is that Mary "finally cracked" under the pressure of public life, and the failure of many of the ideas that she put forth in the latter half of her career. The two traveled to various Catholic schools and convents "from Michigan to New Orleans" for months, before finally moving overseas at the outbreak of the war. "The 'Anti-Marriage Theory' of Thomas and Mary Gove Nichols," 16-17.

¹⁴¹ Jean Silver-Isenstadt, *Shameless*, 242.

life at just the right time. Through his diet and exercise protocol, she began to find relief, enough to fuel her desire to become an educator, warning the public of the dangers of allopathy and promoting the benefits of clean air and water. She felt particularly drawn to teach women, as she knew that they suffered from the least amount of knowledge about their own bodies. Mary believed that it was not enough to be treated by competent doctors; women should have the tools to take care of themselves. This belief would carry through the rest of her career, and she rose to fame as a women's lecturer across New England and in New York. When exposed to the good of the water cure, she found her life's calling. She began to not only treat women through these methods, but teach them how to practice the cure themselves. This culminated in the opening of her own water cure school, which boasted nine women graduates in its first year.

Simply teaching women about the water cure was not enough for Mary. She found the cure to, but not the cause, of women's suffering. She believed that it was her husband's cruelty that contributed to the illness that she suffered while under his roof. She began to formulate this idea as she engaged in an extramarital affair with Henry Gardner Wright, who first taught her about the water cure. By the time that she met Marx Lazarus, a socialist thinker who promoted ideas of free love, she endorsed the idea that marriage was a stifling institution in which women were nothing but the property of men and the vessels of procreation. Women, she believed, deserved more. With her second husband, Thomas Low Nichols, she began to publish on free love and ideas of marital reform. Unfortunately, these free love ideals were too radical for her followers to continue to support her. She and Thomas lost friends and colleagues who would not be seen associating with such radicals, and her fame finally began to wane.

Scholars refer to Mary as a feminist before feminism itself. She argued for rights not yet argued for in the antebellum years. She dedicated her life and work to the education of her sex during an era in which women were not admitted to medical schools, and could not formally practice medicine. Yet she was the first woman to lecture publicly on the workings of human anatomy. She sought to create female stewards of the water cure, and praised its efficacy her entire life. Despite the failure of her career as a free love reformer, she continued to write and publish on women's equality in marriage, arguing that a home in which women were treated as equals was one in which women remained healthy.

Mary Gove Nichols' quiet death in obscurity says as much about her legacy as it does the goal of her endeavors. Even on her death bed she continued correspondence with patients, dispensing advice to her faithful following. When *The Dietetic Reformer and Vegetarian Messenger* printed her obituary in 1884, it quoted her as saying, at the age of seventy, "Now I am ready to go at any time, for I shall not disgrace my principles."¹⁴² She did not seek lasting fame or fortune for her work, simply the knowledge that those who came after her would practice and share the good of homeopathic medicine with future generations. Although she is characterized by scholars of reform as an atypical female reformer, she still represents the spirit of an age in which American women worked tirelessly to better their spheres not only for themselves, but for others.

¹⁴² "Death of Mrs. Nichols," *The Dietetic Reformer and Vegetarian Messenger* (July 1884): 207.

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