"Making Men What They Should Be": Male Same-Sex Intimacy and Evangelical Religion in Early Nineteenth-Century New England

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> Perhaps Hiram felt a warm breath on his cheek before realizing that he was awake. The sensation of lips touching his flesh started his heart pounding. It was a kiss. From what dream had he been so abruptly interrupted? A faint glimpse of moonlight offered the only illumination in the dark garret room. Hiram tried to remain perfectly still. A second kiss. The sensation of flesh touching flesh convinced him it was not a dream. He felt a warm hand moving across the surface of his body. Hiram turned, looked up with surprise, feigned sudden wakefulness, and pulled away. His voice was the first to break the silent spell of the accelerated breath of two men. Conversation immediately ensued, with both laughter and invective displacing the moment of silence, sensation, and uncertainty.

THIS NOT ENTIRELY IMAGINED rendering of an encounter in the dark reconsiders a rare documented case of sexual contact between men in early America. Darkness usually shadows or completely obscures the sensory experiences, emotions, or conversations that historians might hope to discover in bedrooms shared by men in the past. Scandal and publicity have regularly exposed certain kinds of sexual encounters while bypassing others. By experimenting with prose that evokes lived experiences of bodies and feelings that are often silenced in the archives, scholars can engage

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not in a fictionalizing of the past but rather in a kind of "thick imagining" of the historically possible.[1]

This essay explores a little-known, yet richly revealing, episode of a sex scandal involving an evangelical preacher during the era of religious revivals and early industrialization in the nineteenth-century United States. In the summer of 1835 Eleazer Sherman, a well-known revivalist preacher associated with a small denomination called the Christian Connection, was accused of improper sexual conduct with the men with whom he lodged during his travels as an itinerant preacher. In the early American republic (the era between the American Revolution and Civil War) there were hundreds of documented sex scandals involving revivalist preachers. Sherman's case, however, is the only known instance of a clergyman having been accused and tried (in a religious tribunal) for same-sex sexual advances.[2]

Members of the growing number of evangelical sects during this period faced continual dilemmas when erotic spirituality crossed the line into erotic carnality, when clergymen and laypersons took metaphors too literally or slipped from religious passions into sexual passions. In this climate, sex scandals seem to have followed popular evangelical religion wherever it flourished.[3]

[1] For reflections in favor of and against experimental imagining in historical narratives, see Brook Thomas, "Ineluctable though Uneven: On Experimental Historical Narratives," *Common Knowledge* 5 (1996): 163–88; David Dante Troutt, *The Monkey Suit and Other Short Fiction on African Americans and Justice* (New York: New Press, 1998), 1–4, 311–17; Cushing Strout, "Border Crossings: History, Fiction, and Dead Certainties," *History and Theory* 31, no. 2 (1992): 153–62; Andrew R. L. Cayton, "Insufficient Woe: Sense and Sensibility in Writing Nineteenth-Century History," *Reviews in American History* 31, no. 3 (2003): 331–41; Philip Lopate, "Show and Tell: Imagination, Thin and Thick," *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 38 (Spring 2010): 64–65; Suzanne Lebsock, "Truth or Dare: On History and Fiction," *Common-Place* 5, no. 1 (2004), http://www.common-place.org/vol-05/no-01/author, accessed April 5, 2015. My phrasing borrows from Lopate's phrase "thick imagining" ("Show and Tell," 65) and Strout's reference to "the role of possibility in historical analysis" ("Border Crossings," 154).

[2] Caution is always advised when claiming no other instances of a phenomenon in the historical record. I found a cryptic one-sentence entry in the *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* (19 July 1828) that states: "CLERICAL MISCONDUCT: The Rev. Elias Vickers, of Franklin, (Ohio,) a preacher in the Christian Connexion, has been detected in a crime modesty forbids us to name, and has 'plead [*sic*] guilty and left the country.'" Although the phrase "a crime modesty forbids us to name" might suggest common parlance for accusations of sodomy or bestiality, I have found no other documentation for Vickers's case and cannot ascertain whether it involved sodomy or any illegal sexual activity. The phrase "pled guilty" is far too vague to know whether this case ever rose to the level of a criminal trial or an ecclesiastical tribunal. A century earlier in colonial Connecticut, a Baptist clergyman, Stephen Gorton, was accused of same-sex sexual behavior: see Richard Godbeer, "The Cry of Sodom: Discourse, Intercourse, and Desire in Colonial New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1995): 277–81.

[3] Susan Juster, "The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 334–61; Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Cynthia Lynn Lyerly, "Passion, Desire, Ecstasy: The Experiential Religion of Southern Methodist Women, 1770–1810," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997),

Countless scandals involving clergymen ruptured the veneer of harmony and respectability in local churches and towns and exposed how competitive was the marketplace of religious sects during the age of revivals. These social dramas almost always involved a clergyman and a female parishioner, or they arose from the imagined promiscuities of women who dared to ascend to the pulpit.[4] Eleazer Sherman's scandal played out on a much smaller scale than more notorious incidents of clergy misconduct, such as the adultery accusations leveled at Henry Ward Beecher, the most popular preacher in the nineteenth-century United States. It is precisely the intimate scale of this episode that exposes the rich and complicated intersection of religion and sexuality within revivalist Christianity in the early American republic.

This essay joins a growing body of scholarship that explores not merely the obvious conflicts between religion and sexuality but also the ways in which sex and religion were both embodied in the past. Both religion and sexuality are crucial to webs of meaning associated with feeling, emotion, bodies, communication, and the constitution of the self; both have also been central to discourses about freedom, power, commerce, and the configuration of "the political" in the United States since the eighteenth century.[5] Here I examine the relationship of religion and sexuality by investigating the ways in which early evangelical piety embodied desire and eroticism and the ways in which the scandalous can reveal quotidian expressions of love, intimacy, and desire in evangelicals' conversations, writings, relationships, and communities. I join those whose aim has been the queering of religion, especially the queering of evangelical religion.[6]

168–86; Craig D. Atwood, "Sleeping in the Arms of Christ: Sanctifying Sexuality in the Eighteenth-Century Moravian Church," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 1 (1997): 25–51; Paul Martin Peucker, "'Inspired by the Flames of Love': Homosexuality and Moravian Brothers around 1750," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 1 (2006): 30–64; Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus Is Female: Moravians and Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[4] Karin E. Gedge, *Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert E. Cray, Jr., "High Style and Low Morals: John Newland Maffitt and the Methodist Church, 1794–1850," *Methodist History* 45, no. 1 (2006): 31–42; Patricia Cline Cohen, "Ministerial Misdeeds: The Onderdonk Trial and Sexual Harassment in the 1840s," *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 34–57.

[5] Stephen Ellingson, introduction to *Religion and Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–18; Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Ann Taves, "Sexuality in American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27–56; H. G. Cocks, "Religion and Spirituality," in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157–79; Ruth H. Bloch, "Changing Conceptions of Sexuality and Romance in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 15–16.

[6] Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking, eds., *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Continuum, 1999); Ann G. Myles, "Border Crossings: The Queer

I will not dwell upon questions of typicality and representativeness, arguing instead that the historical developments that made possible the specific everyday practices (including scandal, gossip, and new modes of publicity) in Sherman's case shed light on the shadowy and uncertain knowledge of the past. I explore the multifaceted and overlapping meanings of this scandal, first telling the story of the publicity surrounding Sherman's trial, then peeling back the many layers of possible analysis and interpretation. At no point was the scandal surrounding Sherman (the actions of participants, the publicity, the conflict, or the anxiety it provoked) ever about only one thing—sex between men. At the same time, the controversies surrounding sex between and among men reveal a complex and multilayered moment of historical transition.

A close reading of the trial of Eleazer Sherman illuminates in three ways the fault lines of significant developments in the history of religion, gender, and sexuality in the early nineteenth century. First, the scandal points to the contested meanings of gender and gender transgression within revivalist religion at a time when evangelicals were wrestling with the advent of women and lay preachers and were clashing over the nature of Christian manliness in a competitive religious marketplace. Second, this episode exposes the significance of intimacy and homoerotic desire within evangelical religious communities. If we listen carefully to the voices of Sherman and his accusers, we can detect the everyday practices of men who worked, prayed, slept, and loved within a spiritual family. Finally, and most importantly, the controversy surrounding Sherman vividly highlights a conflict over changing expressions of male sexuality and sex reform in the antebellum decades; it reveals disputes about networks of male gossip and sex talk and about masturbation and moral reform in the public arena.

Sherman's scandal unfolded at an important transformative moment in antebellum America, when competing sexual and religious cultures intersected in dramatic fashion. This episode reveals how the lines between public and private were renegotiated in an era of new print media. As the scandal arising from Sherman's (at times) unwelcomed late-night advances illustrates, sexuality and evangelical religion in America were encountering a similar crucial shift: intimate, private, vernacular, and oral expressions of community and self were being eclipsed by the rise of new public print representations of spirituality, moral reform, and sexuality. Private bedtime pleasures, gossip, and rumors collided with the public

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Erotics of Quakerism in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Long before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Thomas A. Foster (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 114–43; Kathryn Lofton, "Queering Fundamentalism: John Balcom Shaw and the Sexuality of a Protestant Orthodoxy," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 3 (2008): 439–68; Ann Pellegrini, *Excess and Enchanted: Queer Performance between the Religious and the Secular* (forthcoming).

world of a rapidly expanding print culture, and this new publicity was key to the profound changes affecting both religion and sexuality in the early American republic.[7]

The Scandal

The scandal erupted when an article describing Sherman's behavior with young men appeared in *Light! or, the Two-Edged Sword*, an unusual New York City paper that combined gossip with moral reform, published by Joseph A. Whitmarsh. (Unfortunately, the issue of *Light!* in which the story about Sherman appears has not survived.) Copies of the paper circulated rapidly during the spring and summer of 1835 through factory towns in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, where Sherman did most of his preaching for the Christian Connection. Historian Nathan Hatch has characterized the members of this sect as innovative "entrepreneurs" in a democratizing religious culture. With the disestablishment of state churches and a postrevolutionary emphasis on equality in the early republic, New England witnessed a host of new religious groups that embraced a democratic (anti-Calvinist) theology of individual moral agency.[8] Sherman described his own sect as "a distinct branch of the church militant," a family of born-again believers whose public meetings "were held in groves, and barns, and private houses."[9] Perhaps a more radical revivalist than others, Sherman was known for his dreams and for falling into trances, as well as for a traveling ministry supported by sales of his published autobiography, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman*, which went through four expanding editions between 1828 and 1835.

By July 1835 a council of ministers from several different churches had convened in Providence to hear evidence against the forty-year-old

[7] There is voluminous recent scholarship on print culture and publicity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, describing their impact on the historical development of religion, sexuality, politics, and culture in the Anglo-American Atlantic. In addition to the sources cited elsewhere in this essay, for these broad developments in the culture of the early American republic, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *A History of the Book in America: Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790–1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 115–81.

[8] Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *Journal of American History* 67, no. 3 (1980): 545–67; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 68–81, 134–35, 170–72.

[9] Eleazer Sherman, *A Discourse, Addressed to Christians, of All Denominations*, 2nd ed. (Providence, RI: H. H. Brown, 1833), 25–26.

Sherman. Fortunately for historians, a Providence printer had a keen interest in publishing the testimony of the trial; otherwise, stories about Sherman (like countless other records of same-sex sexuality) might have disappeared as soon as local gossip shifted attention to another rumor or scandal.

Hiram Brooks, the first witness (whose testimony was imaginatively presented in this essay's opening paragraph), disclosed that he was the young man alluded to in the *Light!* article and that he was prepared to swear that "*every word of that statement was TRUE.*" Brooks, a Freewill Baptist minister in his midtwenties, testified that on the day he met Sherman he agreed to lodge with him. Late that night, Brooks was suddenly awakened and noticed Sherman leaning over and kissing him. Brooks remained silent while Sherman "repeated his strange manœuvre." When Brooks displayed signs that he was awake, "Sherman began to take liberties with his person." Brooks claimed he immediately stopped him, telling Sherman that this conduct "did not become any man, much less a minister of the gospel," at which point Sherman laughed and claimed he meant no harm. He told his younger counterpart that he could "learn him many things which it was necessary for him to know." It is not clear from the testimony whether Sherman was trying to educate young men in the arts of individual or same-sex acts (such as masturbation, hand stimulation, or anal or intercrural intercourse) or whether he was advocating role play in preparation for sex with women. Perhaps it was all of these. While Brooks averred that he tried to avoid all knowledge "of such subjects," Sherman tried to convince him that "man was formed for society, and he must acquaint himself with all its social, domestic and connubial relations, if he would be happy and useful." Sherman insisted that "it had been the business of priests and prophets to regulate the intercourse of the sexes" and that Brooks must become acquainted "with all of these connections."[10] Perhaps Sherman was simply alluding to a clergyman's authority to direct young people toward appropriate sexual behavior within the confines of marriage, but as the case unfolded it became apparent that Sherman believed that evangelical clergy should routinely introduce young men to a broad range of sexual intimacies, just as older preachers had initiated him.

Henry White, another young minister, was the next to testify; he reported that he had met Sherman at a factory village two years earlier and that they too had lodged together. Sherman had apparently invited White to join him in conducting a revival meeting in northern Rhode Island, and they put up for the night at the home of a fellow believer. After retiring to their shared bed, White recalled, Sherman began to pass "his hand over different parts of [White's] person." Thinking Sherman asleep, White gently removed his hand; only then did Sherman speak, repeating a conversation similar to the

[10] *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman, before an Ecclesiastical Council, Held at the Meeting-House of the Christian Society in Providence, July 20 and 21, 1835* (Providence, RI: H. H. Brown, 1835), 7–9.

one Brooks recounted. A third witness, James Allen (probably a laborer) from Fall River, also reported that he knew Sherman at about the same time and that he had once lodged with him in another nearby factory village. Allen testified that he was disturbed in bed in the same manner as Brooks and White and that "Sherman further attempted the accomplishment of his most diabolical purposes." At this point, the minister who was moderating the tribunal interjected, asking "if he attempted actual ——." The censoring in the text is undoubtedly a reference to sodomy, an act that moralists had for centuries called the sin "not to be named." While the omitted word or words prevent us from knowing with certainty the sexual act presumed by the query—the legal definition of sodomy included many forms of non-procreative sex—the question likely alluded to some form of penetrative sex between men. Allen's answer was: "He did."[11]

When the next witness, Silas Wood, from a different mill village, provided an account of similar late-night adventures and conversations with Sherman, Hiram Brooks interrupted to ask if Wood "*knew* Sherman to be guilty of actual ——?" (The emphasis placed on *knew* suggests the biblical meaning of "knowledge," which could be derived only from Wood's participation. Clearly, Brooks wished to take this from the realm of uncertain to certain knowledge, from rumor to factual evidence.) At this point, the members of the ministers' council halted the proceedings, declaring that "if it were true, they did not wish to have it proved"—meaning, according to the trial report, that they wanted to prevent the witnesses from incriminating themselves.[12] James Allen had already done so, but two eyewitnesses to sodomy might implicate them all in the discovery of a capital crime, since Rhode Island law still called for the death penalty for a second offense.[13] Clearly, these ministers wanted Sherman to stop preaching and repent of his sins, but they did not wish to see him punished as a criminal. Nor did they wish to see the young witnesses, some of whom were preachers, implicated in a crime. Although no one had been executed for the crime of sodomy in New England for more than a century, Sherman and his examiners likely shared local memories of severe sentences for other sexual offenses, such as two separate cases in Connecticut and Massachusetts in the 1790s in which the death penalty was handed out for the crime of bestiality.[14]

[11] Ibid., 9.

[12] Ibid.

[13] A first offense of sodomy was punishable in Rhode Island by being "carried to the gallows in a cart," and seated on the gallows not more than four hours, followed by a sentence of up to three years in the common jail. *The Public Laws of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence, RI: Miller & Hutchens, 1822), 339.

[14] Neither man was ultimately executed. See Richard D. Brown and Doron Ben-Atar, *Taming Lust: Crimes against Nature in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). I thank Professors Brown and Ben-Atar for their help in analyzing the criminal law on sexuality in New England.

From his strident performance as witness turned inquisitor, Hiram Brooks appeared less concerned with protecting Sherman and the other witnesses than the preachers sitting on the council. At that same moment, another member of the tribunal, Elder Curtis, interrupted the trial and declared that he saw no need to continue with Brooks's line of questioning, since as far as he was concerned, he had conversed with "a very creditable young man in his neighborhood, who said Sherman to be guilty of that most unnatural and abominable sin."[15]

This was an ecclesiastical tribunal, not a criminal trial. Confronted with the possibility of a clear division between the certain knowledge of eyewitnesses and the uncertainty of gossip and rumor, the trial privileged the language of hearsay. Members of the tribunal allowed additional testimony from witnesses who reported on Sherman's penchant for talking lustfully about women, his alleged visits to brothels, his twisting of scripture passages to justify adultery, and his habit of telling "the most vulgar and abominable stories." Gossip, it seemed, sufficed when trying a man's character. Several witnesses gave hearsay evidence of conversations they had heard second- or thirdhand.[16] Sherman had no witnesses to counter his accusers. All Sherman could do at that moment was to ask Hiram Brooks, his principal accuser: "If I were such a man as you represent, why did you not come to me as a Christian brother, instead of publishing me to the world?"[17] But Sherman's hopes of gaining the sympathies of the men presiding over the tribunal were soon dashed. The ministers quickly deliberated and declared him "guilty of gross immoral conduct." Sherman was declared no longer suitable to be "a Minister of the Gospel."[18]

The nine clergymen who conducted this hearing hoped that their verdict would settle the matter, that Sherman would voluntarily cease his traveling ministry and return to his home, and that the publicity surrounding the case would fade from memory. A Providence printer, Hugh H. Brown, thought otherwise and quickly brought his report of the trial to press. Sherman then self-published a twenty-eight-page *Reply*—a rambling appeal for sympathy mixed with bombastic denunciation of his accusers and their motives.[19] The damage of the scandal, however, proved irreversible. Congregants who had once been enamored of the itinerant preacher now closed their doors or stayed away when Sherman preached. Although he never relinquished the title of elder within the Christian Connection, the honorific that came with ordination, Sherman

[15] *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 9.
[16] Ibid., 10–11.
[17] Ibid., 12.
[18] Ibid., 14.
[19] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman, To certain charges against his moral character found in a paper called "The Light," printed by J. A. Whitmarsh & Co. Also—A Reply to Witnesses that came forward to support those charges found in a Pamphlet printed by H. H. Brown, Providence* (n.p., [1835]).

rarely preached again. Nor did he publish any writings for the nearly forty remaining years of his life.[20]

It would be easy to regard Eleazer Sherman, especially in light of present-day revelations about clergy sexual abuse of children, as merely another predatory clergyman: ministers or priests who have used their spiritual authority and power to exploit vulnerable parishioners. We cannot dismiss that possibility. I do, however, wish to break free from the interpretive restraints of such a speculative conclusion. (Keep in mind that the witnesses who testified about Sherman's actions were young men in their twenties, not children.)[21] We can learn far more about the history of sexual and religious desire if we do not immediately cast Sherman as a predator—that is, if we investigate this episode without assuming abuse. Sherman and his contemporaries, after all, wrote and spoke about Christian intimacy, manhood, and sexuality both before and after the public became aware of his late-night encounters. The scandal surrounding Sherman, then, needs to be understood in the context of pivotal transformations in the realms of gender, sexuality, and religion in early nineteenth-century America.

Gender

By framing Christian relationships not only in terms of love and intimacy but also in terms of gender ("if I were such a man"), Sherman disclosed what his contemporaries knew to be true—that this scandal revealed the tensions in the meaning and performance of gender within revivalist Christianity. Both Sherman's own religious identity as a visionary preacher and the egalitarian ethos of the Christian Connection exposed the latent potential for gender transgression that was common among dissenting religious groups of the period. Members of this revivalist group, who preferred to call themselves simply "Christians," expressed their radical egalitarianism in a nostalgic embrace of a primitive style of Christianity. They adhered to no creed but the New Testament, acknowledging no names, offices, or doctrines not found within that sacred text. Hence they were not Baptists or Methodists but "Christians," their ministers were elders, not reverends. The "Christians" outwardly embraced equality among believers by deliberately crafting the kinds of intimate

[20] During the Civil War, Sherman returned briefly to the public sphere; he published a broadside poem and delivered a sermon (apparently not in churches but at venues such as race tracks) about the conflict. *Middleborough Gazette*, 1 June 1861; Eleazer Sherman, *A Sermon on the War* (n.p., n.d.); Sherman, *Stanzas on the War* (Fall River, [1860s]), American Broadsides and Ephemera, American Antiquarian Society, Readex Corporation.

[21] I do not dismiss the possibility that Sherman's actions could be understood as abuse, nor do I wish to romanticize what might have been unwelcomed sexual advances. Scholars of same-sex sexuality recognize, however, that often the only records of same-sex sexual encounters that have survived were defined as criminal actions in the past.

communities that the market revolution had disrupted.[22] Like other revivalist sects (Methodists and Freewill Baptists), the "Christians" also encouraged anyone who felt the call of the Spirit to become a preacher, including women. Women preachers regularly traveled and spoke in the factory towns and market crossroads where these egalitarian, revivalist groups thrived.[23] Sherman himself adamantly defended the right of women to preach. "As respects females speaking in public meetings," he wrote, "I think they ought to be permitted to do it." Moreover, Sherman claimed, "If a woman has a gift, she has as good a right to improve that gift as a man."[24]

It is difficult to overestimate the gender and sexual disruption occasioned by women in the pulpit. For the previous century, opponents of preaching women had frequently associated them with dangerous sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and gender inversion. By the time of Sherman's trial, the backlash against female preachers had reached new heights. According to historian Catherine Brekus, they were being "locked out of meetinghouses, booed by angry spectators, and ordered to 'stay at home.'" Moreover, they were accused of "unsexing" themselves—assuming the appearance of men. Nancy Towle, a contemporary of Sherman, explained that a Presbyterian minister once took the occasion of her preaching to declare in a local newspaper that she was not a woman but a man "*in the costume of a female*." Radical evangelicalism, in other words, incited associations with gender transgression, even while evangelical men aspired to maintain gender hierarchies.[25] Sherman's identity as a religious visionary—a dreamer of dreams—paralleled the gender instability provoked by female preachers. Indeed, reading Sherman's statements in defense of preaching women elicits the uncanny suspicion that he was writing about himself. Like women preachers, Sherman had little education and formal training

[22] Hatch, "The Christian Movement"; Hatch, *Democratization*; Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 56–63. To avoid confusion, I will use "Christian" in quotation marks when specifically referring to this denomination and its members.

[23] See Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 117–231; Mark S. Schantz, *Piety in Providence: Class Dimensions of Religious Experience in Antebellum Rhode Island* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 68–78; and Hatch, *Democratization*, 57.

[24] Eleazer Sherman, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman, . . . Three Volumes in One* (Providence, RI: H. H. Brown, 1832), 2:68–70. See also Sherman, *Discourse*, 25; Sherman, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman* . . . (Providence, RI: Author, 1828), 29. Sherman stopped short of advocating full equality when it came to ruling authority within the church, from which he excluded women.

[25] Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 272. Jemima Wilkinson was perhaps the most notorious early example of a gender-transgressing female preacher in New England in the early republic. See Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 216–59; and Scott Larson, "'Indescribable Being': Theological Performances of Genderlessness in the Society of the Publick Universal Friend, 1776–1819," *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2014): 576–600.

for the ministry, spent years without being officially ordained or supported by a church, and acted as a visionary mystic who followed the voice in his dreams and fell into trances at revival meetings. Like many female preachers, with Sojourner Truth perhaps the best-known example, Sherman published and sold copies of his own self-narrative in order to support himself, his ministry, and his family.

Sherman's ability to develop his capacities as an evangelical Christian and preacher—visionary experiences, imagination, and the performative act of self-narration—was made possible by the democratic atmosphere of the early republic, which allowed for expressions of autonomy and new sources of personal and communal authority. While it has been well established that the common perception of these capacities as feminine helped marginalize women,[26] the Sherman scandal demonstrates that these concerns also produced a public contest over the meaning of Christian manliness. The five men who convened the tribunal—Harvey Sullings, Zalmon Tobey, Martin Cheney, James Taylor, and James McKenzie—had previously encountered Sherman in their personal and professional lives. They had all publicly endorsed Sherman's ministry as a preacher, and four of them had preached or prayed at a three-day revival meeting attended by three thousand people on the occasion of Sherman's ordination in August 1831. Now Sherman's conduct exposed the threat that Christian intimacy posed for manly respectability; after all, as he reminded his accusers and judges at the trial, "you have taken me by the hand in brotherly love and invited me to your house."[27] Sherman's openly intimate autobiography, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman*, mentioned by name nearly every one of the ministers trying him for the sin of sodomy. Although nothing explicitly sexual appeared in any of the four editions of Sherman's *Narrative*, Elder Martin Cheney, for instance, could not have been comfortable with the new implications of Sherman's brief remark that "I . . . had a very agreeable visit at his house." Even the dreams that Sherman chronicled in his *Narrative* could assume different meanings in light of the accusations leveled against him. In one dream Sherman invited a young sailor "to take refreshment and lodging with me; he evinced the most gratitude of any person I ever saw . . . for the kindness I had shown him."[28] Perhaps this explains why these clergymen, who had staked their own masculine reputation behind their support of Sherman's preaching and writing, were so eager to travel to Providence to preside over an investigation of the sodomy accusations.

[26] See, for example, Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 5; and Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 157.

[27] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 25.

[28] Sherman, *Narrative* (1828), 98, 95–97; Sherman, *Narrative* (1832), 3:51–55; *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 7.

Evidence of a contest over the meanings of Christian manliness appeared as well when Hugh H. Brown (who was also the publisher of Sherman's *Narrative*) revealed that he chose to publish the report of the tribunal because it was "our only hope of making men what they should be."[29] *Making men what they should be* was a phrase repeated endlessly by various reformers in the mid-1830s in reference to concerns about the rebellious slave Nat Turner, in the arguments of abolitionists, or in reformers' diatribes about dangerous young men in cities.[30]

A deeper look at Sherman's life and career and at the laymen and ministers who were so quick to either condemn or distance themselves from him reveals a controversy rooted in the transformation of gender conventions that accompanied industrialization and religious revivalism in early nineteenth-century New England. The elders who judged Sherman understood that he represented the masculine aspirations for upward mobility that they knew well from their own experiences. Nearly all these men were contemporaries in age and experience with the preacher they tried. Sherman, like them, had grown up amid the economic and demographic transformations besetting rural towns in southeastern New England. By the time Sherman was born as the fourth son in a family of ten children in 1795, the small communities of this region had long ceased to be places where men could support themselves and their families from the proceeds of landownership and agricultural self-sufficiency. The futures of many young men would instead include landlessness and wage labor, unavoidable geographical mobility, and risky dreams of advancement in a political and economic culture that valorized autonomy and independence.[31] Sherman's father, Nehemiah, was himself the youngest of ten children and had been excluded from his Quaker meeting after marrying a Congregationalist, Deborah Peirce. Nehemiah likely started his big family as a modest landowner in Middleborough, Massachusetts, but a long string of defaulted debts soon pushed him into

[29] *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, iv.

[30] On the contested nature of manhood, respectability, and sex among antebellum reformers, see April Rose Haynes, "Riotous Flesh: Gender, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009), chap. 1; Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), chaps. 3–5; Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America, 1780–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), chap. 5; Donald Yacovone, "Abolitionists and the 'Language of Fraternal Love,'" in *Meanings for Manhood*, ed. Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 85–95; Randolph Ferguson Scully, "'I Come Here before You Did and I Shall Not Go Away': Race, Gender, and Evangelical Community on the Eve of the Nat Turner Rebellion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27, no. 4 (2007): 661–84.

[31] Paul Johnson, "The Modernization of Mayo Greenleaf Patch," *New England Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1982): 488–516; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); Daniel P. Jones, *The Social and Economic Transformation of Rural Rhode Island, 1780–1850* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

the ranks of landless laborers, and he eventually suffered the ignominy of becoming an impoverished ward of the town. Nehemiah had bequeathed a legacy of limited opportunities to his sons.[32]

With the family in dire straits, Eleazer was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker. His *Narrative* recounts his continual ambivalence toward, and perhaps even personal sabotage of, his labor and business ventures in this trade. He learned that building furniture in towns where most residents survived hand to mouth offered little chance for upward mobility.[33] He began to realize, however, that masculine success and community esteem were possible if he followed God's call and became a preacher. Sherman always described his craft in terms of its pecuniary failures and his preaching in terms of its spiritual successes, a self-appraisal with which his peers on the council in Providence in 1835 would have been familiar. Many of them possessed little formal education but had risen in the new democratic culture of the early American republic to the new status of professionals. But like Sherman, many evangelical preachers struggled financially; thus the foundations of these masculine successes always remained precarious.

Sherman's wife, Hannah, experienced the precariousness of her husband's aspirations firsthand. By the time they married in 1821 (he was twenty-six, she twenty-three), Sherman had failed at his own furniture business and fallen into insolvency. Hannah watched while Eleazer spent limited time at cabinetmaking and devoted countless hours to religious work. (It would be hard for any man to build a steady income at his trade while attending as many as thirteen revival meetings a week.) Then one morning, after six years of marriage, Eleazer announced his decision to follow Jesus's call "to give up all, [his] wife and children and [himself]," for the Lord's work.[34] After that, Sherman was gone much of the time with his itinerant preaching. His family, which included three children, lived largely hand to mouth, relying on the largesse of kin and Christian friends along with the meager revenues gleaned from Sherman's preaching and book sales. Referring to

[32] For Nehemiah Sherman's family history, see Roy V. Sherman, *Some Descendants of Philip Sherman the First Secretary of Rhode Island* (n.p., 1968), 302, 320–21; Ebenezer W. Peirce, *The Peirce Family of the Old Colony: or the Lineal Descendants of Abraham Peirce, Who Came to America as Early as 1623* (Boston: Author, 1870), 150–51, 387. Evidence of Nehemiah's fall from landholding yeoman to landless laborer can be seen in the thirty times he appeared in court between 1798 and 1804 in *Plymouth County Court Records, 1686–1859*, ed. David Thomas Konig, 16 vols. (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1980), 11:80–81, 97, 167–68, 177, 179–81, 183, 195, 204–7, 211, 220, 231–32, 249, 251, 291–92, 295, 326, and 12:24–25.

[33] Sherman, *Narrative* (1828), 34, 54–75, 84–85, 106–7. Sherman even tried long-distance travels as an entrepreneurial effort to sell furniture in Georgia before devoting himself entirely to itinerant preaching, yet his heart was not in these business efforts. The chapter of his narrative about the Georgia trip is almost entirely about his preaching there (58–73).

[34] Ibid., 107. Sherman describes his years of business failures and the conflict between his call to preach and his efforts to support his family as a tradesman (ibid., 56–58, 73–75, 80, 84–85, 100, 106–8).

this unreliable income, Sherman once claimed that he had not received more than two dollars for six months, "and many times not one cent to help myself with." Still Sherman declared in his *Narrative*, "My wife has never been opposed to my travelling and preaching," but he quickly completed that thought with the telling phrase, "that I know of," adding "if she has, she has kept it to herself."[35] It is no wonder that Sherman faced rumors and accusations of abandoning his family and failing in his masculine duties as a provider both before and after the revelations of his sexual encounters.[36]

The elders who sat in judgment at Sherman's trial were likely influenced by the fact that they had themselves begun to move toward a settled (rather than an exclusively itinerant) ministry and thus had adopted different standards of respectable manhood. Their judgment of Sherman was interwoven with personal assessments and relationships. After all, the men who convened Sherman's trial had all previously publicly endorsed Sherman as a preacher, shared the pulpit with him at many revival meetings, participated in his ordination service four years earlier, and issued a signed certificate stating: "We recommend him to all the Christian communities as a worthy brother in Christ."[37] They had also welcomed him into their homes and probably shared bedrooms when traveling. This all meant that the scandal posed a significant threat to the elders' masculine self-presentation. The close relationships between beloved brothers meant that they had staked their own reputations on their judgment of the moral stature and Christian manliness of their fellow preachers. Just months before the scandal erupted, Zalmon Tobey published an article in the *Christian Palladium* heralding Eleazer Sherman as a devout and humble preacher, contrasting him with the "frivolous, foppish, pedantic, and conceited" men who generally achieved publicity and celebrity. He "visits the sick," Tobey wrote, "preaches from house to house, warns sinners, comforts and establishes the saints and appears to consecrate his time, his talents, and his all to the holy work of doing good to the bodies and the souls of his fellow men." It is not hard to imagine that those words haunted Tobey as he listened to the testimony at Sherman's trial.[38] That Sherman's *Narrative* was littered with the names of the elders also likely hurt his case, since these men were now wary of being associated with him.

[35] Sherman, *Narrative* (1832), 2:18.

[36] Evidence for Sherman's inability to support his family, the family's reliance on relatives for room and board, and numerous criticisms and rumors surrounding Sherman as a provider can be found in ibid., 2:5–6, 17–19, 72, and 3:8–9, 14, and in Eleazer Sherman, *The Narrative of Eleazer Sherman, Giving Some Statements of His Prosperity and Adversity in the Last Four Years of His Life* (Providence, RI: Author, 1835), 16–18.

[37] Quotation is from Sherman, *Narrative* (1832), 3:55. For the intersecting personal and professional lives of Sherman and the men who judged him at the tribunal, see ibid., 2:16, 28–39, 43, 46–47, 55–56, and 3:5, 9–10, 13, 16–17, 51–56, 63, 66, 73, 83–84, 100–101; Sherman, *Narrative* (1828), 89, 98, 104; *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 16.

[38] Zalmon Tobey, "Modesty," *Christian Palladium*, 15 October 1834.

The competitive religious marketplace in this era of evangelical revivals and democratic self-fashioning encouraged both intimacy and competition. Evangelical preachers could at once be both "brothers in Christ," regardless of their denominational affiliations, and rivals for converts, church members, and church properties produced by the spreading revivals. While the preachers who conducted Sherman's trial had published statements of their affection for Sherman and signed certificates attesting to God's blessing of Sherman's ministry, they also stood in competition with Sherman as promoters of institutions and academies for young men and as published authors of memoirs, hymnbooks, and other items in the religious marketplace.

Sherman was convinced that this scandal was not actually about his sexual indiscretions but instead represented a power grab intended to displace a rival preacher from gaining access to an expanding new congregation and meetinghouse in a prospering mill town. Sherman's suggestion that this was a struggle between rival sects within a competitive religious marketplace has merit if we place Sherman and his accusers in the context of the history of evangelical revivalism in the early republic. The marketplace of rival sects privileged the strivings of ambitious men and rewarded entrepreneurs who competed aggressively in the pulpit and in print.[39] Eleazer Sherman and Hiram Brooks, representing the "Christians" and the Freewill Baptists, respectively, both wished to establish a presence in Phenix Village on the outskirts of Warwick, Rhode Island. Sherman and his followers were sure that Brooks had trumped up the scandal to remove Sherman as a competitive rival for converts.[40] If the truth of this claim is difficult to confirm, the fact that Brooks was rewarded for his aggressive removal of a competitor makes it clear that his standing among the Freewill Baptists was undamaged by his role in the scandal. Despite his relationship with a fellow minister accused of sodomy and his close association with a publication (and publisher) that many people considered to be no better than an obscene gossip sheet, he was appointed as a delegate to the Freewill Baptist General Conference and nominated as assistant secretary not long after the scandal.[41] In the following year he was chosen to head the Committee on Moral Reform, whose report declared its approval of the "circulation of news prints and

[39] Moore, *Selling God*, 17–20, 36–39, 43–52; Hatch, *Democratization*, 49–58, 62–93.

[40] Elder James Taylor, a fellow "Christian," questioned Brooks at Sherman's trial about his motives as a Freewill Baptist, wondering if he was "not under the influences of prejudices, on a denominational account." Brooks admitted that he held to sentiments peculiar to his denomination but asserted that he had no other motive in this case other than "ridding the religious world of a man who was basely imposing upon it" (*Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 12). On the earlier cooperation between "Christians" and Freewill Baptists, followed by a competitive struggle to gain the pulpits of churches in Rhode Island, see Cyrus Walker, *The History of Scituate, R.I.* (Scituate: Scituate Bicentennial Committee, 1976), 115–18, 126–29; and Jones, *Economic and Social Transformation*, 140–54.

[41] "Minutes of the Eighth General Conference, Held at Byron, N.Y., October 7–14, 1835," in *Minutes of the General Conference of the Freewill Baptist Connection* (Dover: Freewill Baptist Printing, 1859), 109–11.

periodicals, devoted to the faithful and prudent exposure of public vices and the encouragement of morals," an explicit endorsement of publications such as the *Light!* that saw their purpose as "making men what they should be."[42]

INTIMACY

Eleazer Sherman's experiences and self-presentation provide evidence for a unique form of intimacy within evangelical Christian fellowship and for the homosocial and homoerotic dimensions of democratic evangelical groups in the early American republic. This rare historical record of same-sex sexual encounters begs two questions: How did intense spiritual experiences and deeply spiritual conceptions of love and intimacy shape and inform physical, emotional, and bodily experiences? And what constitutes the threshold by which historians can surmise the sexual from evidence that describes only the intimate? In other words, we must look at and beyond the trial testimony to investigate what Sherman understood about the meaning of desire, intimacy, and the erotic.[43] This episode thus suggests the usefulness of two conceptual frameworks for historians investigating the boundaries between intimacy and sexual desire in early America: Sebastian Jobs's "uncertain knowledge" and Anna Clark's "twilight moments." *Uncertain knowledge* refers to forms of questionable communication and information that surround rumors, gossip, deceptions, ambiguous identity, and scandals, where knowledge constitutes a process more than an entity and where "crisis," "doubt," and "certainty" are negotiated in everyday practices. An intentional oxymoron, the concept of uncertain knowledge allows us to investigate the agents, media, and institutions that broker information and understanding within a historical social drama, exposing the interrelationship between our uncertainty as historians and the uncertainty of the historical actors we investigate.[44] Anna Clark proposes the concept of *twilight moments* to encourage us to move beyond the Foucauldian framework that assumes that early modern people conceived of sex only in terms of acts rather than identity. Clark suggests "twilight" as "a metaphor for those sexual practices

[42] "Minutes of the Ninth General Conference, Held at Greenville, R.I., October 4–10, 1835," in *Minutes of the General Conference*, 143, 150–52.

[43] Like many other authors of histories of intimacy, I primarily define the meaning of that term contextually; but for clarity, I mean by intimacy the deeply loving and emotionally bonded relationships shared by two or more people, which the participants typically characterized as resembling familial, nuptial, or romantic love.

[44] Sebastian Jobs, "Uncertain Knowledge," *Rethinking History* 18, no. 1 (2014): 2–9. This essay is part of a symposium in *Rethinking History* and emerged from a conference, "Uncertain Knowledge: Practices, Media and Agents of (Non-)Affirmation in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American History," convened by Bruce Dorsey, Sebastian Jobs, and Olaf Steiglitz at the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, 21–22 October 2011. On the importance of uncertain knowledge of gossip and rumor for the history of sexuality, see Claire Bond Potter, "Queer Hoover: Sex, Lies, and Political History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, no. 3 (2006): 355–81.

that societies prohibit by law or custom but that people pursue anyhow, whether in secret or as an open secret," and for those transgressive sexual practices that might have existed or been tolerated only in the realm of gossip and rumors.[45] Sherman's scandal offers historians an opportunity to reveal the explanatory potential of exploring uncertain knowledge and twilight moments.

Sherman's exposure and disgrace signaled the contested meanings of Christian love and intimacy.[46] Evangelical traveling preachers, belonging to groups like the Methodists, Baptists, Freewill Baptists, and "Christians," were expected to develop intimate relationships with their flocks—they were all "brothers" and "sisters," equals in Christ, and preachers were expected, as one historian has noted, to live on their hospitality, sleep anywhere, eat anything, and kiss all the children.[47] As one "Christian" elder stated, these egalitarian evangelical communities encouraged the laity and preachers to develop "a feeling of reciprocal affection" toward one another.[48]

Male itinerant preachers also developed close, intimate, and loving relationships with their male comrades on the preaching circuit. Many chose not to marry, while others left their wives behind for months or years (as did Sherman), traveling and lodging with other male clergy or converts. In *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (2009), Richard Godbeer describes the "close and loving relationship" between two young Methodist itinerant preachers in Virginia in the 1790s. In their letters, Stith Mead and John Kolber expressed their deeply spiritual and physical love and longing for each other. On one occasion, Mead wrote: "I love you with a pure love fervently. . . . I dream of embracing you in the fond arms of nuptial love, I dream of kissing you

[45] Anna Clark, "Twilight Moments," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (2005): 139–60. Clark joins others who have questioned Foucault's acts-rather-than-identity paradigm; see David M. Halperin, "Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities, and the History of Sexuality," *Representations* 63 (1998): 93–120; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 85–90; Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 45–50, 112–15; Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), xii–xiv, 155–56, 178–79.

[46] My interpretation in this section is similar to the one that George Chauncey makes about clergy during the First World War and the tensions between Christian love and sexuality: George Chauncey, Jr., "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era," *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 2 (1985): 189–212.

[47] The quotation is from Charles Coleman Sellers, *Lorenzo Dow: The Bearer of the Word* (New York: Minton, Blach, 1928), 19–20. See also Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 86–104, 145–49; Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 156–78.

[48] Charles Morgridge, *A Discourse on the Reciprocal Duties of a Minister and His People; Delivered at the Opening of the Christian Church in Salem, Mass., May 1, 1828* (Boston: Wait, Greene & Co., 1828), 3.

with the kisses of my mouth."[49] In fact, Mead and Kolber spoke of their relationship as a deep familial bond, a ritual kinship, that resembled loving spouses. They had entered "into band" together, "united in faith and love."[50] Mead concluded the letter in which he dreamed of kissing Kolber with the pronouncement: "I am married to you; O that I could see you and spend a few moments in heavenly converse together." As Godbeer notes, this loving relationship "would not have struck their fellow itinerants as unusual or problematic," since evangelicals had encouraged these expressions of emotional intensity, loving speech, and physical embraces as the bonds of an egalitarian spiritual family.[51]

For years prior to the scandal, Sherman similarly filled his various writings with references to the tender feelings and deep love he had for his "beloved brethren" in the ministry. Describing his emotions after sadly departing from "brother Hollis," a fellow itinerant with whom he conducted several meetings and with whom he was often "put up for the night," Sherman wrote: "I never felt so unwilling before to part with a fellow laborer in the vineyard of the Lord. Our hearts were like those of David and Jonathan, and knit together with the strong ties of Christian love and friendship." After this invocation of King David and his close friend Jonathan, who for centuries stood as a biblical model for male intimacy, Sherman also described as "beloved brethren" the intimate relationships of early Christian men with the apostle Paul.[52] Sherman's understanding of male companionship and intimacy echoed that of Francis Asbury, the long-serving traveling Methodist bishop who died when Sherman was a young man. Asbury, who never married, developed several close relationships with male companions. After his death, one man recalled serving as Asbury's "help-meet" and described "the many times I slept with him; how often I had carried him in my arms."[53]

[49] Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 83–84, 109–10.

[50] Ibid., 83–84. On ritual kinship as a form of male betrothal, see Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). On the conceptualization of the idea of same-sex marriage in America at the time of Sherman's scandal, see Timothy Stewart-Winter and Simon Stern, "Picturing Same-Sex Marriage in the Antebellum United States: The Union of 'Two Most Excellent Men' in Longstreet's 'A Sage Conversation,'" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 2 (2010): 197–222; and Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 101–41.

[51] Godbeer, *Overflowing of Friendship*, 110, 84.

[52] Sherman, *Narrative* (1832), 3:6–7; Sherman, *Discourse*, 10. On David and Jonathan as biblical models of same-sex intimacy, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 238–39, 252; and Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 153–231.

[53] J. B. Wakeley, ed., *The Patriarch of One Hundred Years: Being Reminiscences, Historical and Biographical, of Rev. Henry Boehm* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1875), 414, 432. On Asbury and the intimacy of his fellow Methodist itinerant preachers, see Godbeer, *Overflowing of Friendship*, 105–13.

Men sharing a bed was a common practice in early America, especially for travelers and itinerant ministers. One itinerant preacher's journal revealed his sleeping arrangements through the story of being awakened in the middle of the night by a "horrid yell." Six men were lodged in one room in three beds, with two bed frames sandwiching a third mattress on the floor. When the men heard the shriek, they sprang up, seizing hold of one another; indeed, shirtsleeves were torn, since the men were lying in one another's embraces. One brother "who laid on the floor with another young man, rose up and found the young man clinging around him."[54] These forms of bodily intimacy were common among all male travelers, but evangelical preachers embraced the added dimension of spiritual intimacy. The terms of endearment or loving touches that these religious men might have shared as they drifted off to sleep, however, remain invariably absent from surviving historical records. (The phrase "sleeping together" did not come to mean sex until the twentieth century.)

Scholars of sexuality seem no closer to resolving a conundrum of uncertain knowledge—the problem of how to distinguish among love, intimacy, friendship, and sexual desire—than they were when Carroll Smith-Rosenberg first explored the "female world of love and ritual" nearly forty years ago.[55] While numerous scholars have revealed that deeply emotional and passionate same-sex relationships were quite common among both men and women across varying social experiences, classes, and age groups,[56] in the past decade, historians have repeatedly disagreed over whether one can definitively locate sexual desire in these relationships without evidence of sexual acts. Richard Godbeer, for example, has argued for restraint in conflating the categories of intimacy and sexuality. While provocatively placing bonds of intimate friendship between men at the foundation of the American republic, Godbeer adamantly rejects any arguments that directly correlate emotional intimacy with sexual desire.[57] By choosing not to pursue further an analysis of the connections between emotional longing and sexual desire, perhaps

[54] George Peck, *Early Methodism within the Bounds of the Old Genesee Conference, 1788 to 1828 . . .* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1860), 191–92.

[55] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1–29.

[56] Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), chap. 4; Donald Yacovone, "Surpassing the Love of Women: Victorian Manhood and the Language of Fraternal Love," in *A Shared Experience: Men, Women, and the History of Gender*, ed. Laura McCall and Donald Yacovone (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 195–221.

[57] Godbeer rejects William Benemann's arguments in *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2006), calling them an anachronistic projection of sexual relations into the past without supporting evidence. See Godbeer's review of Benemann's book in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (2009): 328–34, restated in Godbeer, *Overflowing of Friendship*, 200, 213.

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Godbeer misses the chance to advance a richer historical understanding of the interrelationship between intimacy and sexual desire. Yet his own sources call for a consideration of sexual desire. Quoting from a letter in which one New England man in 1800 recalled to his friend the nights they had slept together—"Sometimes I think I got hold of your doodle when in reality I have hold of the bedpost"—Godbeer asserts that "we can never know for certain" if this physical intimacy "had any sexual component to it." He then declines further interrogation with the comment "one cannot help but wonder"—this despite the obvious evidence of sexual arousal and the fact that the young man signed his letter "your cunt humble," followed by his name.[58]

A similar problem of uncertain knowledge surrounds the relationship between spiritual and sexual desire: To what degree did the erotic language of spirituality reflect the sexual desires of believers? Historian Susan Juster has cautioned scholars against automatically conflating spiritual desire with the sexual, enjoining us not to assume that "wherever there is an intensity of feeling, wherever there is passion, there is sexual desire." But in a telling statement, Juster also writes that "spiritual desire could be and was expressed in sexual metaphors and (perhaps, *though we have no real way of knowing*) in sexual feelings."[59]

In part, this is a dilemma of epistemology rather than of sexual politics. By focusing too heavily on standards of historical practice (requiring definitive empirical evidence of sexual acts) to avoid the charge that they are merely engaging in identity politics, historians have sidestepped a more intriguing question: What constitutes the subject to be investigated in the history of sexuality? The problem resides less in the uncertainty of knowledge than in the lack of attention to a broad understanding of the historically contingent meanings of desire. George Haggerty's formulation is helpful here; he maintains that "until we understand that emotional bonds can be as erotic as much of what qualifies as 'sodomy' (or often more erotic)," we will fail to appreciate the full range of male relationships in the early modern past.[60] What makes the Sherman scandal so illuminating for historians is not so much that we can know more certainly the inner emotional worlds of our historical actors but rather that the actions and language in Sherman's

[58] Godbeer, *Overflowing of Friendship*, 57–58. My criticisms were influenced by Jennifer Manion's review of *The Overflowing of Friendship* in the *Journal of the Early Republic* 30, no. 2 (2010): 345–47.

[59] Susan Juster, "Eros and Desire in Early Modern Spirituality," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 203–6, emphasis added.

[60] George E. Haggerty, "Male Love and Friendship in the Eighteenth Century," in *Love, Sex, Intimacy and Friendship between Men, 1550–1800*, ed. Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 70–81. Haggerty criticizes David Halperin's assertion that "avowals of reciprocal love between male friends" must be distinguished "from the world of sexual love" (David Halperin, "How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality," *GLQ* 6, no. 1 [2000]: 101).

case prompt us to investigate the combined physical, spiritual, and sexual dimensions of men's desire for, and relationships with, other men. After all, relationships of same-sex intimacy were common in evangelical settings, from eighteenth-century Moravians to nineteenth-century abolitionists, and revivalist churches and preachers were dogged, from the 1720s forward, by repeated rumors about same-sex sexual impropriety. Religious enthusiasm sometimes led spirit-filled believers to "mutual embraces" that were condemned by their opponents as "unclean and brutish lust."[61]

Sherman's scandal provides an opportunity to explore more deeply the relationship between intimacy and sexuality and between spirituality and sexual desire. Sherman never completely denied the physical intimacy of his relationships with other evangelical men, even as he emphatically denied the accusations that he had committed adultery with women. While questioning the character and testimony of the trial witnesses, he paused at the thought of "brother" Henry White, the young evangelist with whom he had shared both revival meetings and a bed. "I might have put my arm around Br. White and kissed him after we got in bed," he admitted. "I hope if I did, it was no more nor less than a holy kiss; if so, it was fulfilling the scriptures. I do not recollect, for a certainty, any thing further." Sherman claimed that he was not alone in sharing late-night caresses with bedmates; he recalled that during his twenty years of traveling "others have done the same to me."[62] Sherman's actions expose the indeterminate and porous boundaries between intimacy and sexual desire. After all, physical intimacy of both a spiritual and an erotic nature appears to have often accompanied the social intimacy of these religious men. Sherman's case might indeed reveal instances in which spiritual desire and intimacy converged with sexual encounters.

By investigating the trial testimony and Sherman's posttrial writings, we can begin to imagine Sherman as a desiring subject and thus better understand the physical embodiment of spiritual intimacy. This interpretation pivots on the practice of itinerancy, a fundamental feature of both early evangelical revivalism and industrial capitalism in America. Once industrialization took root in New England, men often needed to travel in search of wage work. (Although New England's textile industries employed mostly women, female employment remained tied to mill towns, whereas male laborers had to migrate constantly to follow the changing transportation and infrastructure jobs that offered steady wages.)[63] Sherman's itinerant

[61] Godbeer, *Overflowing of Friendship*, 102–3. See also Peucker, "'Inspired,'" 30–64; Fogleman, *Jesus Is Female*, 79–80; Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2000): 398, 414–15; Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*, 164; and Yacovone, "Abolitionists."

[62] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 8.

[63] Thomas Dublin has demonstrated that women from New England farm families typically migrated to mill towns like Lowell as a stage in their life cycle; they migrated to the same mill town within kin networks, and it was rare for young women to migrate to and

preaching was not so different from other men's migrations in search of livable wage labor. That the witnesses in Sherman's trial were either preachers or laborers illustrates that in nineteenth-century North America capitalism often demanded mobile populations.

Writing about the turn-of-the-twentieth-century American West, both Peter Boag and Nayan Shah have argued that migrant labor fostered same-sex sexual arrangements because it created new forms of intimate sociability—which Shah calls "stranger intimacy"—in same-sex boardinghouses, saloons, transportation hubs, and other places of "spatial proximity."[64] These forms of intimacy allowed itinerant men to navigate the vagaries of a migrant's life, offering domestic arrangements, emotional fulfillment, and sex. Sherman's itinerant encounters can be considered a variation of this pattern—a kind of "fraternal intimacy" that promised emotional, spiritual, and even physical gratification within a community of believers.

Like the migrant laborers that Boag and Shah examine, Sherman's nighttime words and actions reveal that itinerant men of this era operated under a set of codes to signal when sexual intimacy was being offered. Sherman's description of his physical touches—the squeezing of arms, the running of a hand across a man's body while feigning sleep, the holy kisses of believers—were remarkably similar to evidence given in sodomy trials later in the century. For example, Shah notes that men frequently used male banter and joking as codes to indicate sexual interest and that unwilling individuals sometimes interpreted these signals as "serious proposals, worthy of criminal complaint and prosecution."[65] Sherman's bedmates' memories of "vulgar and abominable stories" indicate that Sherman was speaking the codes of two cultures: a vernacular sexual culture (to be described further below) and a culture of spiritual intimacy marked by the holy kisses and tender embraces shared by Christian men.

Sherman appealed to the intimacy of Christian love and fellowship to defend his behavior. In his *Narrative* and his sermons, Sherman preached

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from different mill towns. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 23–57. Paul Johnson ("The Modernization") has shown how one family, the Patches, moved continuously as the father, Greenleaf, chased wage labor opportunities until the women acquired work in the textile mill town of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, at which point the Patch mother and daughters remained there, and Greenleaf abandoned the family to search for more wage work. For male laborers seeking wage work in the ever-changing locations of transportation industries, see Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54–56, 99–104.

[64] Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 21–45; and Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 53–89.

[65] Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 59–61, the quotation is on p. 61; and Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 21.

the intimate bonds of brotherly love. "The people of the world know but little of that true friendship which springs from Christian fellowship," he wrote; "and truly we may say this love is stronger than all earthly affections; and waves of death cannot separate our union, because it is spiritual."[66] About his preaching companion, Henry White, Sherman confessed: "I love him as a brother in Christ." Although we might be skeptical about whether this language of Christian love and brotherhood was a smoke screen to hide lust and unwelcome advances, many of Sherman's readers grasped what he meant by a "holy kiss" and Christian love from personal experience in evangelical religious communities.[67]

Not surprisingly, one of Sherman's only lines of defense was to ask his accusers whether they had not also expressed their Christian love and fellowship to him. Were they not obligated to correct his improprieties in a different manner than a scandal sheet or a courtroom? Recall that he asked Hiram Brooks, "If I were such a man as you represent, why did you not come to me as a Christian brother, instead of publishing me to the world?"[68] Sherman chafed at the choice of publicity over intimacy. The rejection of New Testament imperatives to resolve conflicts in private rather than in public signaled to Sherman that a new era of evangelical print media and moral reformers had supplanted an earlier community based on Christian intimacy and love.

Sexuality

The controversy that followed the public exposure of Eleazer Sherman's nighttime intimacies sheds light on a pivotal transformation in expressions of male sexuality, and the policing of those sexual expressions, in the early republic. Moreover, the Sherman scandal reveals two religious cultures and two sexual cultures on a collision course: Sherman represented both an older version of evangelicalism based on private intimacy and an older vernacular expression of sexual pleasure that clashed directly with a new version of evangelicalism based on public print media and the imperative of sexual restraint represented by the emergence of evangelical sex reformers in the 1830s.

Sherman's sexual behavior reveals common practices that took root in the mid-eighteenth century and expanded rapidly after the American Revolution. Recent scholarship on the history of early American sexuality has focused on the participation of Americans, beginning at the end of the

[66] Sherman, *Narrative* (1832), 2:23.

[67] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 8. For examples of similar language of Christian intimacy, love, and brotherhood among Sherman's peers, see "The Obligations of Christians to Love One Another," *Christian Herald*, 1 July 1818; Morgridge, *Discourse on the Reciprocal Duties,* 3–5.

[68] *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 11–12.

eighteenth century, in a transatlantic commercialized print culture of erotic texts.[69] This transatlantic exchange educated Americans about the changing sexual landscape of European cities, where self-identified sodomites ("mollies," as they called themselves in London coffeehouses) could assume homosexual identities through effeminate behavior, cross-dressing, and rituals of marriage and sex with other men.[70] These "twilight" sexual encounters in faraway cities were the subject of considerable interest in the expanding print culture of nineteenth-century America.

Following the American Revolution, both this commercialized print culture and new possibilities for sexual expression expanded exponentially. Increased geographic mobility encouraged men to pursue sexual pleasures outside of marriage, created demand for prostitution, and contributed to a pattern of aggressive male sexuality that continued into the early nineteenth century. These new forms of male sexual freedom were intertwined with male control over the public sphere and contributed to the marginalization of any woman who asserted a public presence in the new republic.[71] Readers in this era often gained an awareness of these developments from religious memoirs and self-narratives, since recently converted men were more likely to confess these patterns of sexual behavior. *The Narrative of the Life and Travels of John Robert Shaw* (1807), for example, describes Shaw's sexual escapades with "very agreeable" widows, "brisk lasses *de bonne humeur*," and "a fine parcel of ladies (all Mother Carey's chickens)"—a euphemism for prostitutes. Shaw was "determined to enjoy the pleasures of the night as well as the day," although he coyly wrote that the details could be "better imagined than here expressed." At the end of his account, Shaw described his conversion to Methodism and advised young people to avoid the vices, follies, and depravity into which he had ventured. This is just one of the many examples of how early republic texts blurred the lines between sinful confessions and the intentionally pornographic.[72]

[69] Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble*, 115–81; Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 119–54; Thomas A. Foster, "Antimasonic Satire, Sodomy, and Eighteenth-Century Masculinity in the *Boston Evening Post*," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 171–84.

[70] The voluminous literature on this topic begins with Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982), chap. 4; Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700–1830* (London: GMP, 1992), chap. 3; Michael Rey, "Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700–1750: The Police Archives," in *History of Homosexuality in Europe and America*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson (New York: Garland, 1992), 273–86.

[71] Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 23–27; see also Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble*, 186–307; Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution*, chap. 9.

[72] John Robert Shaw, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of John Robert Shaw* (Lexington: Daniel Bradford, 1807), 83–84, 108–17, 156–63. For other examples, see Robert Bailey, *The Life and Adventures of Robert Bailey* . . . (Richmond: Author, 1822), 49–50; and

One of the most widely disseminated erotic texts in the expansive print culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a book called *Aristotle's Master-piece*. Neither written by Aristotle nor a masterpiece, it was a bawdy popular medical text about reproduction that became a source of pornography and folk ideas about sexuality in Britain and America.[73] As early as the 1740s, Jonathan Edwards faced a crisis in his Massachusetts parish when he discovered that young men were laughing and taunting young women after reading this "bad book," which they euphemistically called the "young folk's bible."[74] The popular demand for the *Aristotle* text (it went through twenty different editions between 1790 and 1820) attests to the extensive proliferation of erotic print materials in the early republic.[75]

Although we will never know whether Eleazer Sherman read *Aristotle's Master-piece*, the book nonetheless demonstrates the existence of a popular vernacular culture of sexual pleasure prior to the mid-nineteenth century that is strikingly similar to Sherman's own sexual self-presentation.[76] "A note of Christian piety permeates the Aristotle manuals," writes one historian, and "Scripture is frequently cited."[77] The phrase "young folk's bible" echoes Sherman's sense of himself as a font of the folk knowledge about sex that young men might wish to acquire. He told bawdy stories in the bedrooms he shared with his male companions, and he spoke contemptuously of women's bodies in the spirit of aggressive male sexuality. As in *Aristotle's Master-piece*, there might have been no clear separation in Sherman's mind between spiritual and sexual pleasure and knowledge.

As part of this vernacular sexual culture, Sherman also insisted upon the sanctity of private conversations between men. Of his relationship with Hiram Brooks, he recalled: "There was conversation between us in confidence, but not as he has stated." Brooks, Sherman insisted, "was just as

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Sampson Maynard, *The Experience of Sampson Maynard, Local Preacher of the Methodist E. Church. (Written by Himself.)* (New York: Author, 1828), 143–45.

[73] Otho T. Beall, Jr., "*Aristotle's Master Piece* in America: A Landmark in the Folklore of Medicine," *William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1963): 207–22; Thomas H. Johnson, "Jonathan Edwards and the 'Young Folks' Bible,'" *New England Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1932): 37–54; Vern L. Bullough, "An American Sex Manual, or, Aristotle Who?," *Early American Literature* 7, no. 3 (1973): 236–46; Roy Porter, "'The Secrets of Generation Display'd': *Aristotle's Master-piece* in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 9, no. 3 (1985): 1–21; and Mary E. Fissell, "Hairy Women and Naked Truths: Gender and the Politics of Knowledge in Aristotle's Masterpiece," *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2003): 43–74.

[74] Johnson, "Jonathan Edwards," 41–51.

[75] *Aristotle's Master-piece* was first published under that title in London in 1684 and has gone through well over one hundred printed editions into the twentieth century. The Evans Digital Collection lists twenty editions between 1788 and 1814. See Early American Imprints, I & II, Archive of Americana, Readex Corporation.

[76] On this vernacular sexual culture, see Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 19–31.

[77] Beall, "*Aristotle's Master Piece* in America," 215.

free as I was at the time to ask questions and answer them."[78] Sherman's repeated emphasis on conversations he had with other men "in confidence" is worth investigating. What is the significance of men (sometimes social equals, sometimes differentiated by age) engaging in certain forms of sex talk "in confidence"? This was not gossip or rumor, which was usually directed at the reputations of individuals or the policing of social infractions.[79] Instead Sherman highlighted the homosocial bonds that men developed in private conversations about sex. From Sherman's perspective, these were acts of speech and intimacy that should have remained private. They were not meant to be revealed in public forums any more than personal confessions in religious conversation. In fact, we might safely surmise that Sherman prized the intimacy of these confidential conversations more than the physical intimacy he shared with other men. Sherman's insistence on the privacy of male sex talk did not mean that he was unaware of the public power that men garnered from these private conversations. It was precisely the interplay of public and private—their blurred boundaries—that reinforced men's place in the public. Like men who toasted "the fair sex" in taverns filled only with other men, private conversations about sex between and among men secured their exclusive access to all forms of the public in this new democracy. In contrast to women, men's talk about sex in private confidences forged a shared, privileged participation in a masculine public, whether for sexual pleasure or for its regulation. What was shared was not libertinism alone but rather a mutual masculine dominance of sexual knowledge, of sensual bodies, and of the privilege of intimacy surrounding these.[80]

This vernacular sexual culture also surfaced in Sherman's published *Reply* to the report of his trial. Remarkably, in vindicating his behavior, Sherman staunchly defended the practice of masturbation. Stating that he preferred the term "self-indulgence" to "self-pollution," Sherman described masturbation as "common among the human race and natural to all. I do not think there are many on earth," he declared, who were certain "whether it

[78] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 7. For Sherman's frequent description of conversations "in confidence," see *Trial of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 8–9; *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 7–8, 12–13; Sherman, *Narrative* (1835), 69.

[79] Historians have yet to explore the history of male cultures of gossip with the same rigor as women's gossip. See David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Karen V. Hansen, *A Very Social Time: Crafting Community in Antebellum New England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 114–36.

[80] Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble*, 244–48; and Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man*, 77–97. On male sexual and political privilege in the public sphere in postrevolutionary America, see Stansell, *City of Women*, 19–30; Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 11–22, 151–54.

be sinful or not."[81] We can glimpse here a rare statement of defiance and an even rarer defense of a sexual practice under severe assault.

Here, the collision of two religious cultures and two sexual cultures comes into view. Sherman understood that his accusers were not merely gossips or old-fashioned moralists; they were innovators, representing both the new version of evangelicalism and emerging attitudes about male sexuality. Joseph Whitmarsh, who published the *Light!*, the tabloid-like scandal sheet that exposed Sherman, could be counted among a new cadre of sex reformers in the 1830s: evangelical activists whose proselytizing skills were directed not at the salvation of wayward sinners but rather at winning over religious converts to a new gospel of self-denial, sexual restraint, and the policing of male pleasure. Whitmarsh and Hiram Brooks emulated the style of antiprostitution ("moral reform") and sex reformers like John McDowall and Sylvester Graham. In fact, the entire locus of the evangelical sex reform movement converged on the interconnected lives of a group of Rhode Island and New York City reformers during a four-year span between 1833 and 1837. Like Sylvester Graham, Whitmarsh began as a temperance reformer, publishing an antidrink magazine in Rhode Island before moving to New York. There Whitmarsh followed in the footsteps of John McDowall, the New York moral reformer who used his *Journal* to launch an attack on prostitution by publicizing the names of male clients who frequented brothels. Respectable New Yorkers were aghast; while McDowall was harassed to the point where he could no longer function as a minister or reformer, his female supporters formed the New York Female Moral Reform Society and took charge of his journal, renaming it the *Advocate of Moral Reform*.[82] McDowall had apparently made Whitmarsh and Brooks converts to the cause when McDowall and Brooks had been young itinerant agents together for the Rhode Island Sunday School Union and Tract Society in the early 1830s. This group of Providence moral reformers also included the Rev. T. T. Waterman and George B. Haswell (the agent responsible for distributing Whitmarsh's scandal papers). And fifteen months before Sherman's scandal and trial, Sylvester Graham accepted an invitation from these sex reformers to speak in Rhode Island. Graham nearly provoked a riot in Providence when a group of men threatened to tar and feather him for daring to lecture to an all-female audience about the dangers of masturbation.[83]

By the time Whitmarsh began publishing the *Light!* in New York in 1835, he had left his preoccupation with antiprostitution campaigns behind and

[81] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 12.

[82] *First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the New York Magdalen Society* ([New York], 1831); John R. McDowall, *Magdalen Facts* (New York: Author, 1832); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman: A Case Study of Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1971): 562–74; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, chaps. 5 and 7.

[83] Haynes, "Riotous Flesh," 23–80.

now sought to combat all forms of male sexual sin. The masthead on his paper read: "Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." *Light!* was thus a scandal sheet in religious garb, and only a few issues were printed before a New York City grand jury declared it a nuisance and ordered Whitmarsh to cease publication.[84]

From the sole surviving issue of the *Light!*, we can see that Whitmarsh was also fixated on the dangers of masturbation. Three of the first five articles were about the perils of so-called self-pollution. Immediately after the *Light!* was shut down in New York, Whitmarsh began publishing another paper called the *Illuminator* out of Boston, which continued until he again lost a lawsuit for libel a year later. The first ten issues of the *Illuminator* all prominently featured polemics against masturbation.[85] Eleazer Sherman had found himself reeling from the onslaught of an army of sex reformers who intended to silence the type of vernacular sex talk and behaviors that he both practiced and defended. Sherman was aware that the focus of evangelical activism was shifting with the labors of these young proselytizers of moral reform. As he noted in his *Reply*: "I never heard that this subject [masturbation] was on the carpet openly, till I heard that Mr. Graham was calling one sex and then the other together, in this city, and lecturing to them on these delicate subjects. A christian brother told me this was the case—and I expect that J. A. Whitmarsh & Co. are Graham's converts."[86]

Sherman fought back in defense of the older vernacular culture, defending men's sex talk and "self-gratification" in language reminiscent of the *Aristotle* texts. He recalled that a clergyman of "much piety and high esteem" once told him that masturbation was necessary for purifying one's blood and humors. "I was told in my younger days," he wrote, "that this thing was commanded by Moses to the Israelites in the wilderness." Clearly he relied on the intimate conversations he shared with beloved brothers for his defense of his sexual practices: "Many have told me," he claimed, referring to "men that fill high and holy callings," that "what is called self-pollution, they have thought no crime at all, if not carried to excess; and necessary with some to prevent whoredom."[87]

Sherman's scandal, and the publicity and conflict it provoked, thus exposes an important moment in the history of the discourse surrounding masturbation. As Thomas Laqueur has noted in *Solitary Sex: A Cultural*

[84] Minutes of the New York County Court of General Sessions, vols. 53–56 (August 1833–February 1836), reel 15, Court Records, 1684–1921, New York Municipal Archives.

[85] *Illuminator*, 23 September 1835–8 December 1835. For a summary of Whitmarsh's guilty verdict for libel, and his unsuccessful appeal, in *Commonwealth v. Joseph A. Whitmarsh*, see Horatio Woodman, ed., *Reports of Criminal Cases, Tried in the Municipal Court of the City of Boston, before Peter Oxenbridge Thacher, Judge of that Court from 1823 to 1843* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1845), 441–71.

[86] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 13.

[87] Ibid., 12–14, 16.

History of Masturbation (2003), masturbation emerged as the singular problem of modern sexuality, arriving at the same moment as the birth of the novel, the first stock market crash, the beginnings of evangelical revivalism, and the conceptualization of civil society. Masturbation, Laqueur contends, was "the first truly democratic sexuality" or "the sexuality of the modern self."[88] The antimasturbation consensus became so hegemonic by the mid-nineteenth century that no defenders could be found. As historian April Haynes puts it: "No late nineteenth-century person outside the walls of a prison or asylum entered the historical record as an unreformed, unashamed masturbator."[89] Still, as late as 1835, Eleazer Sherman was an "unashamed masturbator." The explanation for this lies in the fact that in the democratic culture of the early republic, the capacities that Sherman valued—imagination (he considered himself a dreamer), secrecy, privacy, and narrative—were, as Laqueur suggests, "the most necessary to the new political and social order" and at the same time equally "capable of bringing it to moral ruin."[90] The problem for moral reformers like Graham and Whitmarsh was that masturbation was secretive. It existed in that shadowy twilight of uncertain knowledge, and thus they tried to expose it to the public glare. (It is revealing that Whitmarsh's publications were named *Light!* and *Illuminator*.) Because self-pleasure knew no limits or bounds, they strove to impose rigid boundaries upon it.

Here Sherman presented his own experiences as typical and common, as part of a vernacular sexual culture that included not just masturbation but also bedroom encounters with other men. In his *Reply*, he defended his late-night caresses and kisses as something he had experienced as a young man. Referring to the accusations leveled against him, he wrote: "In my travels in the course of twenty years, the same thing that Brooks has stated in his charge against me, that I put my arm around him and waked him, so others have done the same to me."[91]

By defending his sexual experiences within the context of an intimate brotherhood of traveling preachers, Sherman believed that he was merely handing down a traditional culture of medical, sexual, and religious practices. He apparently saw no conflict between traditional beliefs in the balance of the humors that explained the need for masturbation and the religious justification for sexual pleasures learned from his pious elders. His mode of defense in this scandal demonstrates that he was unwilling to accept that these older medical ways of understanding the body and sex were being superseded by new religious and sexual cultures. It reveals that spiritual intimacies, body practices, and sexual expressions could be intertwined in

[88] Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 18, 210.

[89] Haynes, "Riotous Flesh," 6.

[90] Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 268.

[91] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 20.

the kind of early modern sensibilities to which Sherman still clung well into the nineteenth century.[92] His defense also illuminates a rarely documented example in early America of one variant of homosexuality, in which older men initiate younger men into the experiences and knowledge of same-sex intimacy and sexuality.[93]

All of these older practices of shared male intimacy were now threatened by the increasingly hegemonic discourse on health, moral reform, and anti-masturbation that Graham and Whitmarsh espoused in print and from the pulpit. Sherman scoffed at the new reformers' hyperbolic rhetoric about self-indulgence destroying a man's health. "If I was such an artful wretch, dripping in my filthy course," he wondered, "why have I not long before this destroyed my health? I have been well for eight years, [and] preached over four hundred times a year. . . . And now, J. A. Whitmarsh, Brooks, [and others] have come forward to gag me with carrion that they have puked up, and by this means stop me from preaching."[94]

Rather than considering Whitmarsh's efforts as the disciplining arm of an older morality, it is more instructive to consider his publications as early precursors to the flash press that emerged in northern cities in the early 1840s. These cheap newspapers of the urban male sporting culture popularized the underworld of erotic entertainment and commercial sex through gossip, satire, and a hint of feigned moral outrage. As Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz have argued, flash press publications were characterized by ambiguity and deceit.[95] They frequently brought the private and uncertain knowledge of gossip into the glaring eyes of the public not so much to expose immorality as to extort blackmail from prominent men. Although Whitmarsh's publications made no winking nod to readers about the pleasure and necessity of prostitution (and there is no evidence that Whitmarsh ever engaged in blackmail), his type of militant moral reform publications often served the same functions as the more playful flash press. While promising to expose "licentious" men, the authors of the flash press, like Whitmarsh, often accurately described the locations, appearance, and residences of prostitutes or titillated readers

[92] For examples of the lingering influence of early modern conceptions of medicine and the body in early America, see Janet Moore Lindman and Michele Lise Tarter, ed., *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Lindman, *Bodies of Belief*; Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[93] Halperin, "How to Do the History," 96–97. For examples at other times in US history, see Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 25–35; Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 67–74; and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of a Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 86–97.

[94] *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 14.

[95] Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 13.

with descriptions of masturbation.[96] Ironically, this new group of moralists produced the kinds of texts that could easily be mistaken for salacious pornography, leading one scholar to dub these writers "*immoral* reformers."[97]

Sherman was not alone in his criticisms of these new evangelical sex reformers. The *Providence Daily News* declared that there never existed "a more villainous scoundrel" than Joseph Whitmarsh and denounced the selfish and fanatical practice of prying into a neighbor's most private affairs to publicize his failings.[98] At the same time, Universalist minister Jacob Frieze even produced a satirical parody of Whitmarsh's paper entitled *More Light!, or the Cut and Thrust Sword*. Universalists were a competing Protestant denomination that adopted the older revivalist style of evangelical sects, but they criticized new evangelical reformers for promoting an antidemocratic union of church and state. Frieze called Whitmarsh a "young empty-pated fanatic" who had better fear the type of riotous violence that Sylvester Graham barely escaped when he lectured on masturbation in Providence. In Frieze's mind, when the "vulgar and disgusting details" of *McDowall's Journal* or the *Light!* "are pored over and over by delicate females, married and unmarried," it clearly proved that these new evangelical sex reformers' sordid behavior derived from "the power of priestly pretensions, aided by a few cant terms about religion!" "How long, at this rate," Frieze declared, "will it require for such clerical despots to reduce us to a nation of savages."[99] Critics of Whitmarsh and Graham thus added the acknowledgment and encouragement of female desire to the list of new dangers posed by these moral reformers' provocative strategies of publicity and reform. This was more than simply a matter of conflicting attitudes about sex. This was truly a collision between old and new visions of evangelical religion. Whitmarsh's critics interpreted these sex reformers as advocating both a provocative new strategy of publicity about sexual vice and an equally dangerous new style of religious activism in the public sphere.

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Eleazer Sherman's life and experiences affirmed the historical significance of the loving and intimate world of evangelical communities and bands of

[96] Ibid., 1–76; Donna Dennis, *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecutions in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), chaps. 1–2.

[97] David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (New York: Knopf, 1988), chaps. 2, 6, and 7. For examples of Whitmarsh's publications that resemble the flash press, see *Illuminator*, 8 December 1835, 38; 16 December 1835, 43.

[98] The issue of the *Providence Daily News* with this attack on Whitmarsh has not survived, but Sherman reprinted it in *Reply of Elder Eleazer Sherman*, 28; see also *Providence Daily News*, 23 May 1835, for a similar criticism of Whitmarsh's agent, George B. Haswell.

[99] [Jacob Frieze], *More Light!, or the Cut and Thrust Sword* (Providence, 1835), 3. Universalists adopted their name because of their defining theology of universal salvation, which maintained that everyone was destined to be saved.

itinerant preachers, as well as the privately shared sex talk, tender embraces, and "self-gratification" that sustained masculine privilege and dominance. Spiritual encounters, conversions, and mutual love were more highly prized in this older vision than moral discipline and a regime of self-denial. The new cadre of evangelical sex reformers (although only ten years younger than Sherman) were at the vanguard of both a new disciplinary regime of middle-class respectability built on temperance and abstinence and a flourishing sporting culture of flash presses, pornography, and a commercialized urban sexual underworld that, ironically, they unintentionally helped to produce and spread. Sherman lamented this transition as he watched his career as a preacher come crashing down around him. In the last edition of his *Narrative*, he bemoaned how, in this new religious climate, love had been sacrificed for the intemperate zeal of fanatical reformers. As he put it, "If one man, or a combination of men, expose a brother's faults, betray his confidence and slander his character, they are destitute of love and the spirit of Christ."[100] In Sherman's mind, love and intimacy were rapidly disappearing.

In the end, both sides of this public contest over male sexuality in the 1830s and 1840s laid the groundwork for a culture of compulsory heterosexuality. Both moral reformers and flash press publishers could agree that ideal and normative sex for a man should be with a woman—not sex by himself, and not sex with other men. For all the libertine encouragement of male sexual pleasure by the flash press, these writers combined incitement with a virulent homophobia, blasting effeminate men and homosexuals as "brutal sodomites," "lecherous villains," and "male monsters."[101] The world that Sherman had known closed down on two fronts: first, the world of male intimacy shared by men in Christian love, and second, the possibility of autonomous pleasure that men might teach one another in a traditional culture of sexual expression. This transformation was the project of "making men what they should be" that Sherman's moralistic accusers so thoroughly embraced.

"Making men what they should be"—but alas, wasn't that also the same thing that Sherman promised to his young Christian companions as they shared his bed in Christian fellowship?

About the Author

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[100] Sherman, *Narrative* (1835), 69, 79–81.

[101] Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 60–62; Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45–59.

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