

## True Womanhood and the “Cult of Domesticity”

HST/WMS 286  
Professor Lavender  
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## Cult of Domesticity

- Between 1820 and Civil War (1860)
  - growth of new industries, businesses, and professions
  - helped to create in America a new middle class.
- Middle class defined:
  - Families whose husbands worked as lawyers, office workers, factory managers, merchants, teachers, physicians and other professions for which education was necessary.

## Middle Class Family

- Grew out of Preindustrial family (think of Martha Ballard's family here)
- But differed in important ways



## Middle-Class Family 1

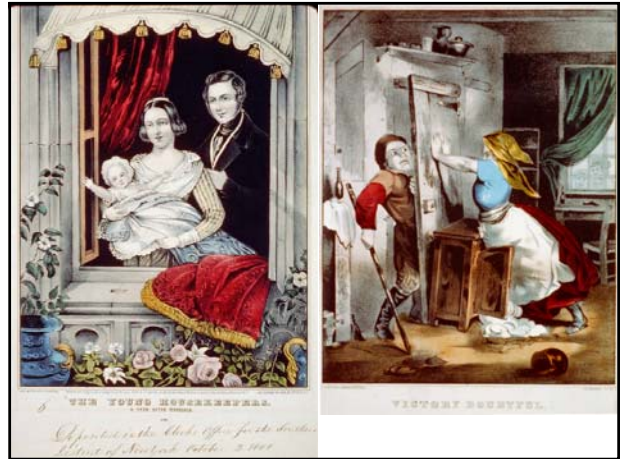
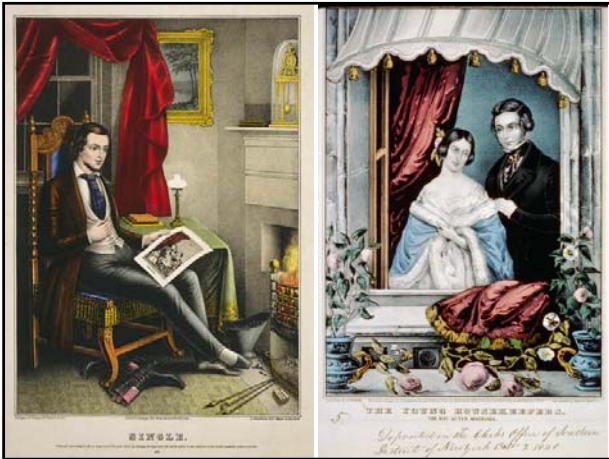
- A nineteenth-century middle-class family did not have to make what it needed in order to survive.
  - Men could work in jobs that produced goods or services (for a wage)
  - while their wives and children stayed at home
  - Domestic production could be replaced by servants (scullery maids) or store-bought products

## Middle-Class Family 2

- When husbands went off to work,
  - they helped create the view that men alone should support the family.
- This belief held that the world of work, the public sphere, was a rough world, where a man did what he had to in order to succeed, that it was full of temptations, violence, and trouble.
  - A woman who ventured out into such a world could easily fall prey to it, for women were weak and delicate creatures.
- A woman's place was therefore in the private sphere, in the home, where she took charge of all that went on.

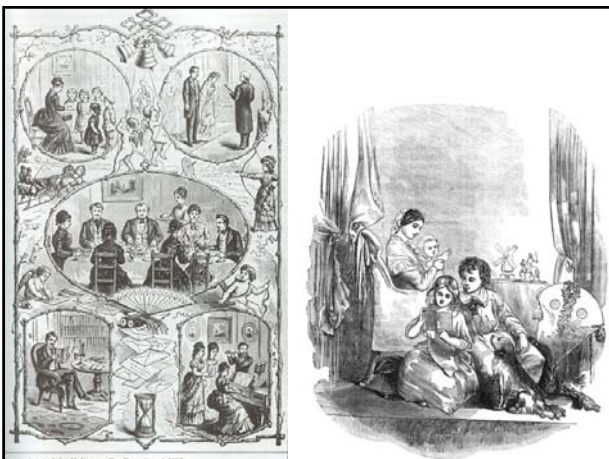
## Middle-Class Family 3

- The middle-class family came to look at itself, and at the nuclear family in general, as the backbone of society.
- Kin and community remained important, but not nearly so much as they had once been.



## Cult of Domesticity and Middle-Class Family

- A new ideal of womanhood and a new ideology about the home arose out of the new attitudes about work and family.
- Called the "cult of domesticity"
- Found in women's magazines, advice books, religious journals, newspapers, fiction--everywhere in popular culture.
- Provided a new view of women's duty and role while cataloging the cardinal virtues of true womanhood for a new age.



## Ideal Womanhood

- Ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts – four characteristics any good and proper young woman or “true woman” should cultivate:
  - Piety
  - Purity
  - Submissiveness
  - Domesticity

## Ideal Womanhood: Piety

- In the nineteenth century it was believed that women had a particular propensity for religion.
- The modern young woman of the 1820s and 30s was thought of as a new Eve working with God to bring the world out of sin through her suffering, through her pure, and passionless love.



## Ideal Womanhood: Piety

- But this was a specific variety of piety
- The piety of the Second Great Awakening
  - Focused on the Protestant American experience
- NOT Catholic or Jewish piety, which was equated with paganism
  - Simply ritual and cant



## Piety

- Irreligion in females was considered "the most revolting human characteristic".
- Indeed, it was said that "godless, no woman, mother tho she be."



## Ideal Womanhood: Purity

- Female purity was also highly revered.
- Without sexual purity, a woman was no woman, but rather a lower form of being, a "fallen woman", unworthy of the love of her sex and unfit for their company.



## Ideal Womanhood: Purity

- To contemplate the loss of one's purity brought tears and hysteria to young women.
- This made it a little difficult, and certainly a bit confusing to contemplate one's marriage, for in popular literature, the marriage night was advertised as the greatest night in a woman's life,
  - the night when she bestowed upon her husband her greatest treasure, her virginity.

## Ideal Womanhood: Purity

- A woman must guard her "treasure" with her life. Despite any male attempt to assault her, she must remain pure and chaste. She must not give in, must not give her treasure into the wrong hands.
- Following is advice on how to protect oneself and one's treasure from Mrs. Eliza Farrar, author of The Young Woman's Friend:
  - "sit not with another in a place that is too narrow; read not out of the same book; let not your eagerness to see anything induce you to place your head close to another person's."

## Ideal Womanhood: Purity

- American culture of the early nineteenth century underwent a purity fetish, such that it touched even the language of the day, popular decorating, and myths.



## Purity Culture

- There develops an American “language of repression”
  - This when we began to talk about limbs for legs (even of chairs)
  - and white meat instead of breast meat (in fowl)
- This when women began to decorate limbs chairs, pianos, tables
  - to cover with fabric so that one would not be reminded of legs.

## Purity Culture

- Separate male and female authors on bookcases, unless, of course, they were married to each other.
- Also when myth of stork bringing babies emerges.



Mr. Stork bringing a baby.



And cabbage patch babies.

## Ideal Womanhood: Submissiveness

- This perhaps the most feminine of virtues.
- Men were supposed to be religious, although not generally. Men were supposed to be pure, although one could really not expect it. But men never supposed to be submissive.
- Men were to be movers, and doers--the actors in life.
- Women were to be passive bystanders, submitting to fate, to duty, to God, and to men.

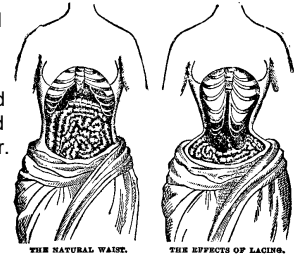
### Ideal Womanhood: Submissiveness

- Women were warned that this was the order of things. The Young Ladies Book summarized: "It is certain that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed from her cradle to her grave, a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind are required of her."



### Ideal Womanhood: Submissiveness

- Female submissiveness and passivity guaranteed by clothing she was required to wear.
- Tight corset lacing closed off her lungs and pinched her inner organs together.
- Large numbers of undergarments and the weight of over dresses limited her physical mobility.



### Hoop Skirts and Bustles



### Ideal Womanhood: Submissiveness

- A true woman knew her place, and knew what qualities were wanted in her opposite.
- George Burnap, The Sphere and Duties of Woman: "She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector. She is in a measure dependent. She asks for wisdom, constancy, firmness, perseveredness, and she is willing to repay it all by the surrender of the full treasure of her affection. Women despise in men everything like themselves except a tender heart. It is enough that she is effeminate and weak; she does not want another like herself."

### Ideal Womanhood: Submissiveness

- A number of popular sayings reiterate this:
- "A woman has a head almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love."
- "True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood."



### Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Woman's place was in the home.
- Woman's role was to be busy at those morally uplifting tasks aimed at maintaining and fulfilling her piety and purity.
  - Housework, childcare, decorative sewing and embroidery



## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Housework was deemed such an uplifting task.
- Godey's Lady's Book: "There is more to be learned about pouring out tea and coffee than most young ladies are willing to believe."



## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Needlework and crafts were also approved activities which kept women in the home, busy about her tasks of wifely duties and childcare, keeping the home a cheerful, peaceful place which would attract men away from the evils of the outer world.



## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

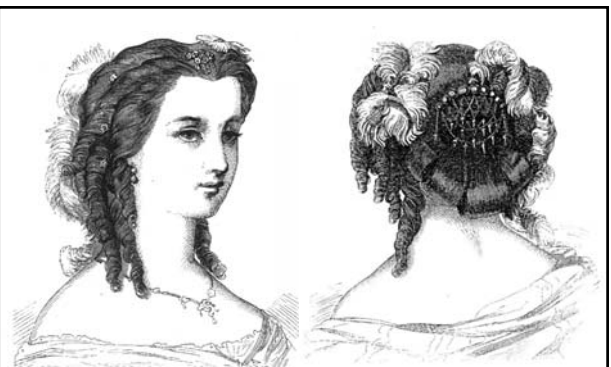
- Much of women's domestic labor focused on decoration – of both the home and of the self
- Victorian interiors and fashions were elaborate, labor-intensive, and costly – Women from the middle classes had to institute economies in order to have a well appointed wardrobe and home, learning to make the items themselves



Nineteenth-Century Fashions



Godey's Lady's Book, January 1854



Coiffure for Ball Costume, (Godey's Lady's Book, July 1860)

## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- For the true woman, a woman's rights were as follows:

The right to love whom others scorn,  
 The right to comfort and to mourn,  
 The right to shed new joy on earth,  
 The right to feel the soul's high worth,  
 Such woman's rights a God will bless  
 And crown their champions with success.



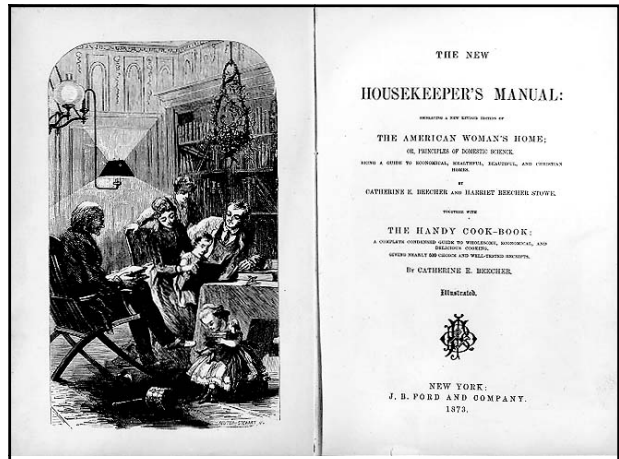
## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Cult of domesticity developed as the family lost its function as economic unit (with emergence of wage economy)
- Many of links between family and community closed off as work left home.
- Women's domestic work was reconfigured as non-productive work.



## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- A new tradition of "domestic experts" emerged to teach women the "fine art" of keeping house.
- The culture of this domestic artistry was in fact the "cult of domesticity" at its highest point
- The doyenne of domesticity was Catharine Beecher (the Martha Stewart of her day)



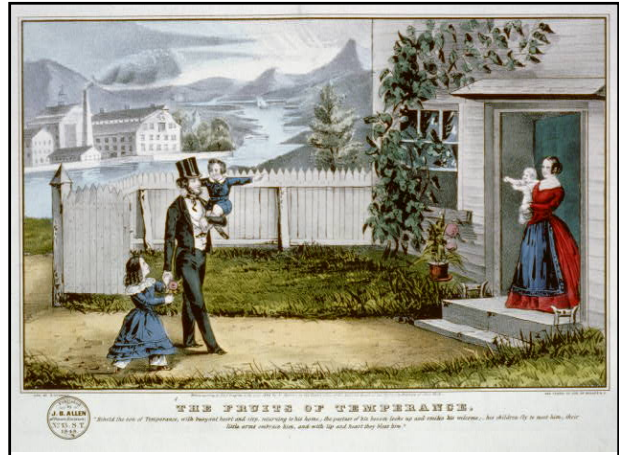
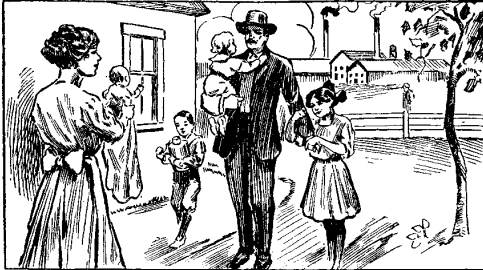
What made "domestic arts" possible was the availability of servants (or slaves) who would do the dirty work of housework.



Domestic work – like child care – was romanticized into "fun" and "art" as the age of sentimental childhood came into being.

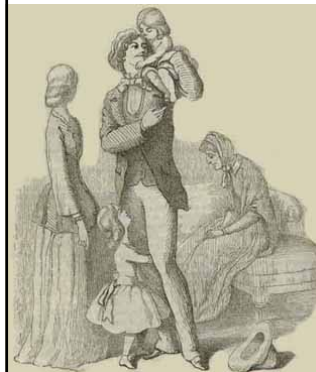
### Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Women were expected to uphold the values of stability, morality, democracy by making the home a special place, a refuge from the world where her husband could escape from the highly competitive, unstable, immoral world of business and industry.



### Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- It was widely expected that in order to succeed in the world of work, men had to adopt certain values and behaviors: materialism, aggression, vulgarity, hardness, rationality. But men also needed to develop another side to their nature, a human side, an anticompetitive side.



### Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- The home was to be the place where they could do this, where they could express their humanistic values, aesthetic values, love, honor, loyalty and faithfulness.



### Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

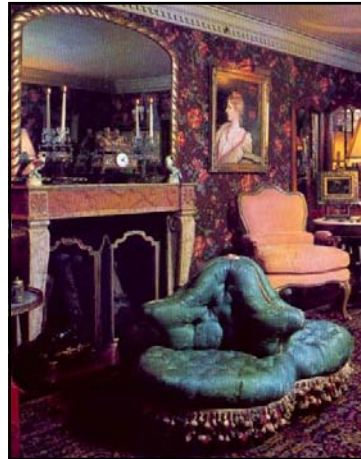
- The home was no longer a unit valued for its function in the community, but rather for its isolation from the community and its service to its members.





## Ideal Womanhood: Domesticity

- Because the world of work was defined as male, the world of the home was defined as female. Part of its value lay in its leisurely aspects. Women increasingly became a complement to leisure, a kind of useless but beautiful object, set off by her special setting.



The nineteenth century household was cluttered with beautiful, ornate objects – elaborate patterns in cloth covering walls, ornate furniture, pianos, paintings, brick-a-brack.

Colors were muted – dark and velvety – all to surround, darken, and deepen the quiet of the home, to accentuate the softness, submissiveness, and leisure of the woman within it, the angel of the house.



H O P T O N  
H O U S E  
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### Ideal Womanhood & Separate Spheres

- Contemporary ramifications for this definition of womanhood
  - We are still dealing with nineteenth century prescriptions of femininity and masculinity as opposites despite all intervening studies of biology, culture, anthropology, etc.
  - We are still coping with definition woman's place as in the home, despite transformation economy from early industrial capitalism to post-industrial capitalism, and majority women in labor force outside home for past couple decades.

### Ideal Womanhood & Separate Spheres

- The characteristics of true manhood and womanhood – and the separate spheres of male and female activity – were believed to have a biological basis.

### Ideal Womanhood & Separate Spheres

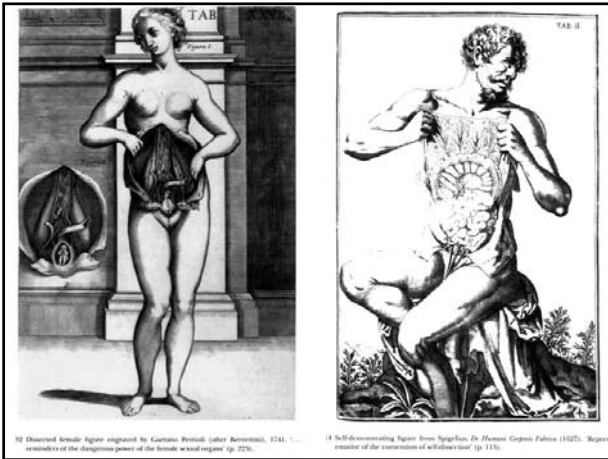
- This "scientific view" stated that
  - female
    - nurturance,
    - intuitive morality,
    - domesticity,
    - passivity,
    - and delicacy,
  - and male
    - rationality,
    - aggressiveness,
    - independence,
    - and toughness
- were all due to their physical makeup and biological differences between men and women.

## Ideal Womanhood & Separate Spheres

- 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Science assumed that women were different from men.
- This difference was that women were both physically and mentally inferior.
- They built on 18<sup>th</sup>-Century science ideas about women (as disorderly, as governed by wet and cold humors, etc.)

## Ideal Womanhood & Separate Spheres

- But they also added new information about sexual and reproductive function and other 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas like the study of electricity to create a new science of sex difference that posited women's inferiority.
- This "sexual science" is commonly referred to as "scientific sexism," very similar to "scientific racism"
- Women were represented entirely by their reproductive function and organs



## Scientific Sexism

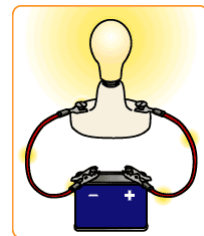
- Scientists believed women were inferior because:
  - 1) Scientists argued that women were generally physically smaller than men.
  - 2) Scientists believed that women had less physical stamina than men because they seemed to faint so much more
  - 3) Scientists knew that women menstruated, and therefore were believed to be physically incapacitated every month.

## Scientific Sexism and Menstruation

- Scientists had no understanding about the function of menstruation
  - Indeed, many scientists still don't understand it
- Menstruation was regarded as a periodic illness inflicted upon women. It was believed that menstruation could bring on temporary insanity in women.

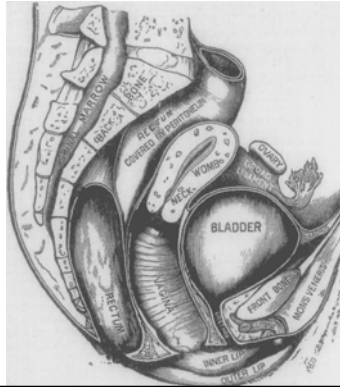
## Scientific Sexism and Menstruation

- Furthermore, it marked a "leak" in the circulatory system where energy drained away and was wasted.
- Clearly women were inferior to men who were not interrupted or incapacitated every month by illness.



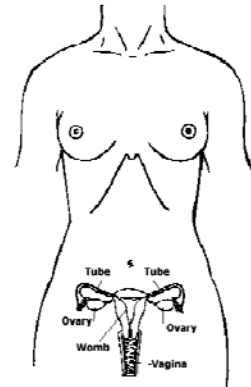
## Scientific Sexism and Delicate Women

- Women were deemed more delicate and weak than men because scientists believed that the female nervous system was
  - finer,
  - more irritable, and
  - more prone to overstimulation and fatigue
- than the male nervous system.



## Scientific Sexism and Female Complaints

- Physicians saw women as both the product and the prisoner of her reproductive system.
- The female uterus and ovaries provided the basis for her social role and her behavioral characteristics.
- Physician William Clarke: "It was as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it."



## Scientific Sexism and Female Inferiority

- Scientists posited that women had smaller brains than men.
  - Natural scientists measured cranial capacity and brain weight and correlated these with intelligence.
    - At first scientists developed ratios based on size of brain to body weight.
    - But they discovered that comparing female brain size to female body weight yielded a higher ratio than did comparing male brain size to male body weight.
  - So they changed the correlation, and related brain weight to body height.
  - This time they found that
    - the male brain produced .73 ounces of weight for each inch of height,
    - while the female brain produced only .70 ounces of weight for each inch of height.

## Scientific Sexism and Female Inferiority

- There are two obvious problems with these assumptions:
  - 1) In humans, brain size does not appear to correlate with either body weight or height.
    - Over time, the human brain has become smaller although people are both taller and weigh more than in early times.
  - 2) There is no evidence that size, either relative or absolute correlates with intelligence.

## Scientific Sexism and Female Inferiority

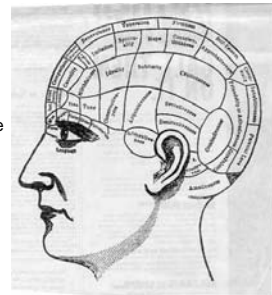
- By the way, the same type of study was used in the nineteenth century to show racial superiority and inferiority.
- One of the world's foremost authorities, Carl Vogt, professor of natural history at University of Geneva said: "The grown up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female, and the senile white."



The 1874 edition of Ernst Haeckel's *Anthropogenie* contains this racist illustration of evolution. (Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History)

## Scientific Sexism and Female Inferiority

- It was also said that the female brain was of an inferior and more primitive type than the male brain.
- Much of this kind of interpretation came out of a pseudo science called phrenology.
  - Phrenology was the art of reading the bumps and curves and shape of the skull.
  - It was thought that the skull provided evidence of personality and character, because different parts of the skull housed different characteristics.
- It was clear to phrenologists who studied cranium that "woman is a constantly growing child, and in the brain, as in so many other parts of her body, she conforms to her childish type."



### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- In addition to beliefs about physical and mental inferiority, there were certain "scientific" views of human sexuality which governed nineteenth century men and women. Essentially three ideas:
  - 1) Human body has only a limited amount of energy. It is a closed system.
    - Expenditure of energy must, therefore, be closely regulated, because one activity would drain energy from another.
  - 2) The sexual instinct is the most primitive instinct.
    - Phrenologists located it at the base of the brain.
  - 3) Sexual feelings were strong in men, but absent in women (certainly in "ladies").

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- Did women have sexuality? Or did "ladies" just suppress it?
- Actually there were conflicting opinions about female sexuality.
  - Women were either voracious consumers of male energy, or they were passionless and sexless.
  - The job of society was to make sure that women learned to be the latter.

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- Passion in women was feared, because the demands it would make on men were insatiable and, like a vampire, it was feared she would drain him of his life force.
- Men were seen in a continual struggle with their passions. In the interests of their own health, they must control them – but they were not expected always to succeed.



### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- Given attitudes about sexuality, puberty was considered critical period for both men and women, and therefore the subject of much advice.
- This was the time that men became strong and vigorous and women became timid and weak.

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- Control over the female pubescent body was critical for women and the future of the human race,
  - because if women did not develop some equilibrium in their body, they would not only damage themselves, causing untold pain, cancer, disease, a difficult menopause, and early death, but they would also damage their children.

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

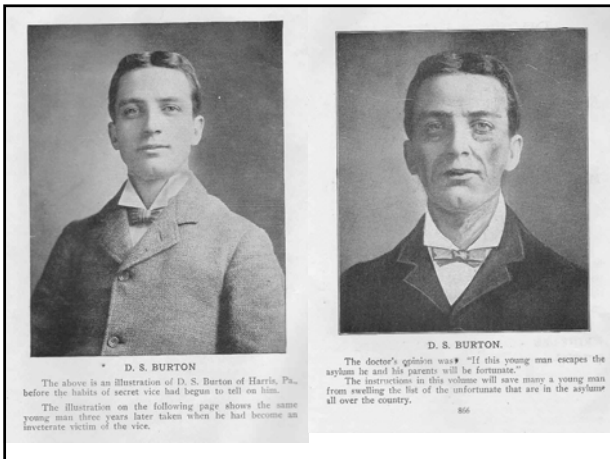
- 19<sup>th</sup>-Century science believed that the traits of a child were inherited from his or her parents,
  - but the laws of heredity differed from those we now recognize.
    - They believed that men passed on to their children
      - their outer frame,
      - their musculature,
      - and their intellect.
    - Women passed on
      - the condition of their internal organs,
      - and their emotional stability or instability.

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- It was assumed that women had a lesser amount of energy, or "life force" than men.
- Bodily fluids like blood were one measure of "life forces." (menstruation!)
- Because the female reproductive system was more complex than the male, it was considered important for women to channel all energies into reproduction.
- Therefore, women were discouraged from intellectual activity; that blood was needed for the development of the reproductive organs.

### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- Men, too, risked their health and the health of society through wasting of their life force.
- Tremendous social pressure for men to find a balance between exhausting "spermatorrhea" and damaging abstinence
- Women's indifference to sex served to protect men from themselves
- But men were also encouraged to find "acceptable" outlets to their sexual energies
  - Physical exertion or prostitutes, NOT masturbation



### Scientific Sexism and Sexuality

- "The indulgence of illicit pleasures, says Dr. S. Pancoast, sooner or later is sure to entail the most loathsome diseases on their votaries. Among these diseases are Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Spermatorrhoea..., Satyriasis (a species of sexual madness, or a sexual diabolism, causing men to commit rape and other beastly acts and outrages, not only on women and children, but men and animals, as sodomy, pederasty, etc.), Nymphomania (causing women to assail every man they meet, and supplicate and excite him to gratify their lustful passions, or who resort to means of sexual pollutions, which is impossible to describe without shuddering), together with spinal diseases and many disorders of the most distressing and disgusting character filling the bones with rotteness, and eating away the flesh by gangrenous ulcers, until the patient dies, a horrible mass of putridity and corruption." -- from *Searchlights on Health - The Science of Eugenics* (1920)

### Children's Sexuality

- The way to control adult sexuality was to nip in the bud the emergence of children's sexual awakenings
- There emerged a mass of literature – including that of W.S. Graham – focused on preventing masturbation in children
  - Through bland, high-fiber foods
  - Harsh punishments for children who masturbated (including clitoridectomies)
  - And mechanical devices to prevent masturbation



MASTURBATION  
CAUSES  
BLINDNESS

## The Best Outlet = Marriage

- The best outlet for male sexual energy was the marriage bed
- Thus men and women were encouraged to marry in order to save the nation from the twin threats of male masturbatory dissipation and female hysteria.

The Health Benefits of Marriage Illustrated



## Gender, Sexuality and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

- The nineteenth century developed a whole vocabulary which demonstrates how closely sexual and economic metaphors overlapped in their minds.
- Mining, railroad building, canal digging, all held sexual overtones of male mastery over female nature.

## Gender, Sexuality and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

- Economic development was valued as an outlet for sexual needs (kept men busy and outside the home).
- The language of the time:
  - "ejaculation" = "expenditure"
  - "semen" = "thrift"
  - "intercourse" = "connubial commerce"
  - "womb" and "virginity" = "treasure"
  - "child birth" = "labor"

