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The Sovereign Body:
Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and the Fight for Women's Autonomy

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Introduction

*“When the history of the struggle of women for freedom and opportunity in this country is written, no name will stand higher than that of Mrs. Wolstenholme-Elmy.”*¹

-Margaret Sibthorp, 1899

*“Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy was a tiny Jenny Wren of a woman...she was an instrument in the grasp of progress.”*²

-Sylvia Pankhurst, 1931

Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy was one of the most prolific feminist theorists and activists of her generation. While she participated heavily in the early suffrage campaign, she was unique in locating the suffrage within a larger struggle for female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. In 1888 Wolstenholme-Elmy became the first woman to speak on a public platform for the right of married women to refuse consent to sexual intercourse with their husbands. She denounced a socio-cultural system, codified into law, that forced women repeatedly into the hard labor of motherhood and childcare, with few rights to determine the logistics of that care. With no legal rights to their bodies, no personal choice in reproduction, no control over property or wages within marriage, and limited opportunities for education and employment outside of marriage, Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that women had no access to true liberty. With the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1843, Wolstenholme-Elmy believed that women were the last demographic held in state-sanctioned bondage.³ Emancipation could only begin when women were given the same opportunities and liberties afforded to men, primarily that of bodily autonomy and the right to a full education.

¹ Anon. [Margaret Sibthorp], ‘Women’s Emancipation Union’, *Shafts*, July–September 1899, p. 47.

² Sylvia E. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette: The History of the Women’s Militant Suffrage Movement 1905–1910* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1911), pg. 31.

³ Slavery was outlawed in 1833 everywhere in Britain except territories in the possession of the East India Company.

Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that in addition to the doctrine of coverture, the government engendered a system through which women were forced to depend on men for their survival by limiting educational, and therefore occupational opportunities.⁴ She wrote and organized tirelessly to expand opportunities for women's education, work that included publishing a sexual education textbook, intent on providing women and girls with the information they needed to prevent unwanted pregnancy and abuse within marriage. While the early campaign for suffrage was most visibly of and for the middle classes, Wolstenholme-Elmy was a strong advocate for the rights of working-class women. She recognized that unmarried women had few occupational opportunities, and that women in dire circumstances often found that prostitution was their only means of making a living. She argued that through the legal regulation of prostitution, the government set up a system to control the female body that mirrored the subjugation of married women. Today, we would call her an intersectionalist.⁵

Elizabeth Wolstenholme was born in 1833 in Eccles, Manchester, the third child, and only daughter of a Methodist minister. Orphaned by the age of twelve, she came under the care of her grandfather Richard Clarke. Clarke was a textile mill owner, whose political beliefs were rooted in non-conformist, northern-radical liberalism.⁶ Although Clarke had a successful textile business, the family was never particularly wealthy, a situation that impacted Wolstenholme's perception of herself particularly in later years, when she would reject class hierarchy as an impediment to women's liberation. Her early education in the Methodist principles of pacifism

⁵ "intersectionality, n." The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/429843. Accessed 16 April 2018.

⁶ Maureen Wright, *Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and The Victorian Feminist Movement: The Biography of an Insurgent Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 18.

and universal rights helped to engender her early engagement with movements for social equality. A thirteen-year-old Elizabeth cheered on the paraders celebrating the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws, inspired by the first political group to encourage middle class women to participate in the political process; she later singled out this event as the moment her political consciousness was awakened.⁷ Additionally, she recalled that her secularism began with an early questioning of religious doctrine, noting that on more than one occasion she was punished by her guardian for asking what were perceived as sacrilegious questions.⁸

School records from Elizabeth's tenure at the Fulneck school show her tremendous academic prowess, a talent supported monetarily by her family who spent upwards of 63 shillings a week for Wolstenholme to study languages—the most of any of the 55 girls attending her school.⁹ However, by the time she was fourteen, her uncle decided that she had “learned as much as a woman needed to know.”¹⁰ Instead of allowing Wolstenholme to continue her studies at an institution of higher learning, her family used all the Wolstenholme children's educational funds to afford schooling for her eldest brother Joseph, who was sent to pursue an academic career at Cambridge.¹¹ Wolstenholme reflected years later in a letter to her friend Emily Davies, that she “had been sacrificed to [her] brother's needs without compunction.”¹² Young Elizabeth did not bend to this injustice, instead undertaking an arduous course of independent study between the years 1850 and 1852, where she read political economy and case law and became

⁷ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Movement* (London: Routledge, 1996), 11.

⁸ Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Harriet McIlquham, 5 December 1903, 47453, fol. 119. Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy Papers, British Library, London. (Hereafter EWE to HM)

⁹ Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 18.

¹⁰ Ethelmer, Ellis, “A Woman Emancipator: A Biographical Sketch”, *Westminster Review*, Vol. CXLV, 1896, 425.

¹¹ Quoted in Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent woman*, 37.

¹² Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 38.

proficient in Latin.¹³ In 1852, Wolstenholme applied for a position as a governess, a typical profession for unmarried women of the middle class, and was employed by a family in Bedfordshire. From there, Wolstenholme went on to open her own boarding school for the daughters of the upper-middle class in Manchester, where she was astonished by the poor quality of her students' prior education. Recalling the hurdles she too had faced as a woman seeking an education, Wolstenholme took her first steps as a political organizer.

Her early actions alone should have cemented her legacy as a champion for women's education: In 1865, Wolstenholme founded the Manchester Schoolmistresses Association; in 1866, she subscribed to the Enfranchisement of Women Committee; in 1867, Wolstenholme started the North of England Council for Promoting the Education of Women. As a leader and representative of these movements and organizations, she began to travel the country to give speeches, provide evidence before judiciary bodies, and attend meetings of likeminded organizations where she educated herself in the causes of the suffrage campaign and other groups devoted to the welfare of women. As a campaigner, Wolstenholme was guided by a deeply held set of egalitarian beliefs, influenced most prominently by the works of the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill and his partner the prominent feminist Harriet Taylor, the feminist theorist Mary Wollstonecraft, the socialist thinker Charles Fourier and the 'utopian-socialist' Robert Owen. Her staunch secularism led her to turn down various headmistress positions at notable schools because she refused to teach the religious doctrine required. Wolstenholme wrote in a letter, "I might have had my choice as to the head-mistress-ship of any of the schools on the enclosed list.

¹³ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866-1928* (London: UCL Press, 1999).

A conscience is the most-costly of all possessions, but the most priceless.”¹⁴ Wolstenholme was still teaching when she became the secretary for the Married Women’s Property Committee and established the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1868. She also became a member of the General Committee for Medical Education, and was a regular attendant at meetings for the Social Science Association. By the time she formed the Committee for Amending the Law in Points Injurious to Women in 1871, she had given up her post as headmistress and became the first paid employee of a woman’s rights organization.¹⁵

It was during this time that Wolstenholme became acquainted with Ben Elmy. Ben had also been a teacher before changing careers to become a manufacturer of silk-crêpe in 1869. He was briefly successful in his entrepreneurship, but business quickly stagnated as the fabric went out of fashion. Elizabeth and Ben most likely began their relationship while they were both members of the Ladies’ Education Society in Congleton, a group whose lectures were open to both men and women.¹⁶ Their decision to forgo legal marriage and enter into a free union, or non-legal partnership, was in line with their secular principles and disdain for the legal position of the wife within marriage. Within a year, Wolstenholme became pregnant with the couple’s only child, a son named Frank, whom they were prepared to raise out of legal wedlock. This conscious decision to flout Victorian convention was truly radical, and placed Elizabeth and Ben in the company of other notable couples such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor. As her pregnancy began to show, Wolstenholme’s immediate peers in the campaign pushed her and Ben to become legally married lest they disgrace the Movement. Under the looming threat of unemployment, Elizabeth and Ben

¹⁴ Elizabeth Crawford, *A Reference Guide 1866-1928*, 19.

¹⁵ Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 72.

¹⁶ Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 73.

reluctantly agreed to a civil ceremony; however, they refused to yield to the conventions of Victorian wedding etiquette, choosing as their witness a cigar-smoking divorcee, Emilie Venturi.¹⁷ Their quick legal marriage did nothing to diminish the scandal of Wolstenholme's advanced pregnancy, and she found herself ousted from the very organizations and campaigns that she had spearheaded. Wolstenholme's exclusion caused her intense emotional pain. The setback, however, did not deter Wolstenholme-Elmy (she had now coupled her last name with Ben's) in her campaigns for women's rights. Her ostracizing can be read as a turning point in her career: no longer part of the mainstream movement, an emboldened and uninhibited Wolstenholme-Elmy would buckle down in promoting her more radical positions.

What was radical by Victorian standards was Wolstenholme-Elmy's inclusionary approach to the suffrage, that advocated for the rights of all women, regardless of their class or marital state. This position put her at odds with national leadership, who increasingly favored a narrow approach that simply advocated for voting rights for single women of means, or as she would put it, for "scraps and shreds of liberty."¹⁸ Her primary commitment was to the larger struggle for female bodily autonomy and for ending the sexual subordination of women of all classes. She felt great contempt towards campaigners who would compromise on these issues for the sake of respectability or pragmatism. Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that a lack of educational opportunities for women forcibly upheld the class system by limiting a person's ability to choose their occupation; the Contagious Diseases Acts not only transformed a woman's body into a tool for male sexual use, but also blamed her for the spread of disease and stripped her of the choice to consent to medical treatment and inspection. Wolstenholme-Elmy remained steadfast in her

¹⁷ Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 98.

¹⁸ Anon. [EWE], "The Emancipation of Women", *Cambrian News*, October 1885, 4.

approach and conviction throughout the rest of her long career, which culminated in her forming of the Women's Emancipation Union, and the publishing of a sexual education textbook-cum-manifesto called *The Human Flower*.

To project an appearance of unanimity within the suffrage campaign, Wolstenholme-Elmy's contemporaries would downplay her role, if not erase her name completely, from their histories of the Movement.¹⁹ Most notably, Sylvia Pankhurst painted a picture of Wolstenholme-Elmy in her much referenced book *The Suffragette Movement* as hardworking, yet frail and diminutive—with a sad fate and an abusive husband.²⁰ In *From a Victorian to a Modern*, Wolstenholme's friend, Dora Montefiore describes Wolstenholme as having “intense spiritual enthusiasm,” however describes her work as being only moderately influential in the conversation of women's rights. Few twentieth or twenty-first century historians have grappled with Wolstenholme's contributions to the women's movement, with only one published full-length biography, and a handful of articles detailing her experiences and work.

Despite her fifty-year legacy of organizing for women's legal equality, trailblazing a truly intersectional ideology in her prolific writing, and her traceable influence on organizations well beyond her lifetime, Wolstenholme's name has been relegated to a historical footnote in the records of great feminist and social achievement. The ideas she developed and espoused in countless newspaper articles, papers, speeches, and pamphlets, have never been analyzed as forming a comprehensive and singular political ideology. This thesis attempts to correct this historical oversight, to show how one of the most dedicated suffragists of the British movement

¹⁹ According to Sandra Stanley Holton, this was typical treatment for many dissenting suffragists. See Caine, 'John Stuart Mill' and "Feminism"; Robson; and Holton, "Educating Women" and "From Anti-slavery"

²⁰ Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, 31–34.

innovated a modern feminist philosophy before the word "feminist" had truly entered the lexicon.

The history of “first-wave feminism” has largely been written by twentieth-century historians of the “second-wave” who relied on the narratives provided by the contemporary accounts of upper middle-class women. These narratives often left out or significantly decreased the contributions of radical and dissenting activists like Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy. Within the last three decades, many scholars have worked to re-evaluate the accepted conditions of the British suffrage movement. Through the process of returning radical individuals to the narrative, modern historians have helped to broaden the history beyond the scope of middle-class activism. These scholars recognized that the suffrage campaign did not take place in isolation, but rather in conjunction with other radical campaigns, including political and labor movements. Cataloging the experiences, work and theories of individuals whose lives did not fit into a typical Victorian construction has contributed to a discourse on sexuality and sexual politics that had previously been under developed. This thesis hopes to contribute to this work.

Historian Lucy Bland’s intellectual history, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and The Early Feminists* published in 1995, shows how individuals from the 1880s-1920s both created and challenged dominant notions of sexuality and sexual deviance. Bland does not force her subjects into rigid categories according to accepted Victorian ideals. Instead she analyzes their complexities and contradictions in order to present a broader and more nuanced perspective on Victorian lives. Marriage was at the center of many of the discussions that Bland analyzes, and she pays special attention to the myriad of ways that activists fought against the legal standing of the wife. Bland introduces Wolstenholme-Elmy as a pioneer of the discussion of marital rape and a staunch opponent to the more repressive aspects of campaigns for social purity.

Historian Sandra Stanley Holton also analyzes the life of Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy in order to complicate the histories of the early British suffrage campaign. Her book *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* analyzes the daily lives of several radical suffragists in order to illuminate “stories that have become largely hidden in the patterns formed by previous-history making.”²¹ Holton places Wolstenholme-Elmy in the center of the early Suffrage campaign, arguing that her work as a radical suffragist in the nineteenth century put into place the practical means for the militant suffragists of the twentieth century.

This thesis owes a great deal to the work of historian Maureen Wright, whose chronological biography published in 2011 was the first and remains the only book-length work devoted to Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy. *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman* locates Wolstenholme-Elmy within the early suffrage campaign in an attempt to restore her to a prominent position in suffrage history. She argues that Wolstenholme-Elmy's radicalism was a force for change, with tangible consequences in the British Suffrage campaign. Wright pays particular attention to the fact that Wolstenholme-Elmy's fight for women's suffrage was based on her desire to eliminate women's position as sexual slaves within British society. However, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman* is—as it purports to be—a biography, and Wright's chronological structure prevents a thorough analysis of Wolstenholme-Elmy's intellectual work. This thesis utilizes many of the same sources to illustrate the personal, daily life of the suffragist. I also argue that Wolstenholme-Elmy's contributions to the Suffrage campaign were undervalued both by her contemporaries and by modern historians. In contrast to Wright's biographical focus, I have attempted to analyze Wolstenholme-Elmy's work for its theoretical and intellectual content. This thesis contends that Wolstenholme-Elmy's feminist theory, manifest in her writing

²¹ Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days*, 2.

and through her lived activism, has contemporary value to current discourses on intersectional feminism.

Wolstenholme-Elmy wrote prolifically; in these pages, I have focused on a mere sampling of her work. I have drawn heavily from the only remaining collection of Wolstenholme-Elmy's private correspondence, housed in the Manuscript Archive at the British Library in London. The letters between Wolstenholme-Elmy and her friend and fellow suffragist Harriet McIlquham span the years 1881-1914, and provide key insights into her personal feelings while she worked against the return of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and built the Women's Emancipation Union. These letters are a window into the life of the suffragist and demonstrate how her tireless efforts affected her personal well-being. Additionally, Wolstenholme-Elmy's published writings in newspapers and periodicals such as the suffrage magazine *Shafts*, *The Westminster Review* and the *Englishwoman's Journal*, in addition to works published by the press of the Women's Emancipation Union were fundamental to this work.

The first three sections of this thesis focus on specific campaigns that Wolstenholme-Elmy took part in and how her experiences with her peers influenced her feminist theory. Section I addresses Wolstenholme-Elmy's ideas about educational reform for women, with a particular focus on her 1869 speech "The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future". Section II illustrates Wolstenholme's professional entrance into the world of women's rights activism, with her work for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Section III delves into the scandal of Wolstenholme's free union with Ben Elmy, showing how the conservative reaction to her lived politics propelled her into a new phase of activism. Section IV discusses Wolstenholme-Elmy's pioneering speech on marital rape, and her views on the position of the wife and mother within British law. The last sections of the thesis address two key moments where Wolstenholme-

Elmy's feminist theory can be seen in its fully developed form. Section V details Elizabeth and Ben Wolstenholme-Elmy's manifesto and sexual education textbook *The Human Flower*.

Section VI details Wolstenholme-Elmy's creation of the radical Women's Emancipation Union, aimed at galvanizing her peers into a class-inclusive "women's army" to fight for female bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.

I. The Education of Girls

*“Give us knowledge, power and life. We will repay the gift a hundred-fold. Set free the women who sigh in the dark prison-houses, the captives of ignorance and folly. Cruel tyrants are these; slay them!”*²²

-Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, 1869

In 1869, Wolstenholme delivered a paper entitled “The Education of Girls, its Present and its Future” in which she articulated how, in her view, the education system proliferated systems of oppression. Where some reformers led with caution and pragmatism, Wolstenholme was loath to endorse reforms that only benefited a certain class or sect of society at the continued degradation of all others. Her writings on education set the stage for her later activism, demonstrating her commitment to inclusivity. Wolstenholme articulated that educational reform for women was a matter of emancipation, needed to set women free.

By the mid-1860s, the Schools Enquiry Commission was beginning to investigate educational provisions for the middle classes. Many individuals were calling for educational reform, drawing on three separate ideologies. The first, that education was necessary to “fit a *man* to earn his own living.”²³ The second, that education would eradicate “dissenting” behavior within society. The third, that education enabled a man to know himself and the world. Wolstenholme dismissed all three points: instead she argued that the purpose of education was to provide individuals with the tools necessary to make a choice about their occupation and role in society. She stipulated that all individuals should have access to a full education regardless of their class or position in life, as: “Nothing else can secure for us that wise use of special aptitudes

²² Elizabeth Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls, Its Present and Its Future”, in Josephine Butler (ed.), *Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1869) 167.

²³ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 147.

which shall give to each man access by his own particular gateway to intellectual life and vital knowledge.”²⁴ Still, Wolstenholme notes, while rationalizations for the extension and rehabilitation of the British education system were daily being published, little to nothing was being said regarding education for women. She noted that reports and manifestos sometimes mentioned schools for women, but as off-hand remarks, or shadowy inferences suggesting that they were outside of the scope of the current conversation. Wolstenholme stated emphatically that on the cause for women’s education,

the time for decisive action has come, as it must come very soon, it should be remembered that we are not one nation of Englishmen and another nation of Englishwomen, but one nation of English men and women, and that, as a matter of soundest national policy and a means of the highest social well-being, it is imperative that Englishwomen should be as well instructed as Englishmen.²⁵

In Victorian England, the education system acted as an agent for the reinforcement of the class hierarchy and gender roles, which in turn served as the unwavering tenets of the social order. This is reflected in the nineteenth century hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, which concludes with the lines,

The rich man at his castle
The poor man at his gate
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.²⁶

Class in Victorian society was defined not only by income, but by a subtle combination of income and the social values ascribed to the occupation of the male provider, which designated what educational opportunities were presented to women.²⁷

²⁴ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 147.

²⁵ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 148.

²⁶ Quoted in June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education In England* (Bristol: Open University Press, 1991), 1.

²⁷ Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (Totowa: Barnes & Nobles Books, 1980), 12.

While these opportunities were class-contingent, Wolstenholme detected similarities in their shared inadequacies. Among the wealthy “frivolity and fashion rule... fashion has stamped its approval upon certain external accomplishments and graces... these accomplishments and graces, right enough and beautiful enough in their own place, must be purchased at the sacrifice of all else.”²⁸ In the middle classes, Wolstenholme argued that there is a similar adherence to commodifiable traits, as a cultivated female mind had no intrinsic value. As educated middle-class women could not work outside the home, education was seen as having no value whatsoever. If it were not a trait that would help a woman secure a wealthier and higher classed husband, it was not considered worthy of attention, time or resources. This engendered a vicious cycle to the direct detriment of society, as Wolstenholme stated: “a woman must remain ignorant, because, to her, knowledge has no practical, that is commercial value... for how much of the misery of the world idle hands and wasted brains are responsible, it would be hard to say.”²⁹ Wolstenholme was not optimistic about the prospect of changing the prevailing mindset, instead she focused on more concrete and localized reforms.

Generally, Victorian women received education in the home, or in small mixed age classrooms. Middle class society took particular care to provide distinct educational opportunities to middle class girls, in order to engender a segregation that noted the ‘superiority’ and ‘prestige’ of their class. Boys and girls often received instruction together in the home until the boys were old enough to attend boarding school, where they received a traditional “public school” education consisting of discipline, academics (with a focus on the classics), athletics and

²⁸ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 149.

²⁹ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 150.

training for leadership roles.³⁰ At home, girls were instructed by amateur teachers, such as mothers, older sisters and family friends. Upper class girls were sometimes sent to fashionable boarding schools in London, or other resort destinations such as Brighton, Clifton or Bath. In these schools, instruction was slightly more varied, although equally inconsistent, covering some history and languages, but also deportment, drawing and calisthenics. Working-class women were primarily educated in small schools run by single woman out of private homes, called “dame” schools, modeled after the middle-class ideal. However, they also had varied access to Sunday schools, charity schools, factory schools or ragged schools.³¹ These schools often acted as a form of child-care, providing working mothers with a place to leave their children at irregular intervals. Dame school participants were instructed in reading and spelling, sewing and knitting. In addition to these skills, children were taught social decorum, such as the importance of ‘bowing and curtsying to their betters’.³² Sewing was a skill that was deemed particularly important for working-class girls, as it could be utilized both professionally and domestically. Disparate and inconsistent educational institutions provided women with the skills necessary to uphold the class system and provide decent company to their husbands.

In her paper, Wolstenholme called for the reform of these scattered educational institutions, particularly seeking a more systematic pedagogy, a proper standardized training for teachers, and the creation of large mixed-gendered public schools. In a criticism of the condition of female education, Wolstenholme quotes a Mr. Bryson in stating that the defects of female teachers are accidental, a result of their own idiosyncratic education, ultimately noting that there was no reason this slight issue could not be remedied. Wolstenholme agreed that the deficit could

³⁰ June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England*, 11.

³¹ June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England*, 11. Charity organizations established to educate the poorest classes who were considered too “dirty” to be accepted into other institutions.

³² Quoted in June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England*, 14.

be remedied, although she did not view the issue as slight: “the charge against teachers could not well be graver than that they are ignorant and incompetent, and yet it is quite true that these defects are ‘accidental and may be remedied’. It is not their fault that they had no right training in teaching as an art, and have never been led to look upon education as the practical application of the highest science.”³³ She implores young teachers to seek out proper training, urging them to attend the courses of instruction being made available to women in most major British towns. Despite the best efforts of teachers, Wolstenholme argued that it was absurd to believe that a single teacher would be able to gain proficiency in all the subjects necessary for a student’s education. Instead, Wolstenholme turns to the idea of public schools, in which the resources of a town or county are pooled together in order to provide all children with standardized and equal educational opportunities, and teachers with an opportunity to work with and among other educators.

Lawmakers often insisted that women did not need equal access to education, and therefore training for skilled occupations, because they were supported by their husbands. Wolstenholme argued that a lack of access to industrial training and higher education targeted working-class and single women, using poverty to sanction those who dared to remain outside the institution of marriage,

The practical exclusion of women from the highest educational advantages offered to this class is in very many cases equivalent to a sentence of lifelong pauperism and dependence. It is to the last degree indecent that women should be dependent on marriage for a professional maintenance. It is highly inexpedient that they should be restricted to a few avocations for which it is presumed that the slightest possible education—or none at all—is adequate. Yet such is the practical result of the exclusion of girls from the higher education.³⁴

³³ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 151.

³⁴ Wolstenholme, “The Education of Girls”, 162.

Even within marriage, middle class and working-class women found it necessary to find paid work in order to support their families. Wolstenholme-Elmy wrote in a letter in 1896, that nineteenth century labor practices maintained the belief that women had no need for paid labor, partially out of a fear, Wolstenholme claimed, that women workers would oust men from their positions and overwhelm the workforce. “To the masculine mind the question how without this [paid] employment these women are to subsist does not seem to have suggested itself. Still less does it seem to have occurred to our law-makers that it is quite possible to substitute a better system for this fierce and relentless competition.”³⁵ She concludes with a call for women’s political emancipation, not only to rectify the wrongs women had suffered under the current legal system, but also to change the system entirely: “women are weary of watching men bring about destruction and disaster...they [women] claim to take, at last, their true part in the building of that great social fabric, resting upon love, truth and justice.”³⁶

Wolstenholme argued that it was an absolute necessity that women be given free access to the same professional and industrial training offered to men. She believed that the necessity for education was not only economic but also moral. Pandering to the Victorian conception of women as the standard-bearers within the home and society, Wolstenholme argues that if morality were to be rational and religion free from bigotry—an idealized conception of both morality and religion, which are rarely rational or free from bigotry—women would need access to a proper and complete education. Wolstenholme concluded her speech on women’s education with a call to arms, stating:

We plead the cause of women. We ask that the gifts of God may not be wasted,
that women themselves may not be robbed of some of the purest joys of life, those

³⁵ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Women and the Law* (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union Press, 1895), 5.

³⁶ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Women and the Law*, 5.

of intellectual effort and achievement, and that society which needs their help so much may not be defrauded of their best and worthiest service.³⁷

³⁷ Elizabeth Wolstenholme, "The Education of Girls", 167.

II. The Fight Against the Contagious Diseases Act

*“We own no legal right which masculine prerogative may not withdraw against our will. Such so-called rights are mere privileges, which our rulers can and do take away at pleasure”.*³⁸

—Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, 1903

In March of 1864 an article appeared in the medical journal the *Lancet* detailing the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among the men of the Queen’s Army. Quoted in the article, the Director General of the Medical Department made a pointed remark to governmental figures, “the only sure means of mitigating the ravages of syphilis, and probably causing its entire disappearance, is to superintend, by compulsory examination and cure, the health of the public women who propagate it.”³⁹ Lawmakers were more than happy to heed the call, and quickly set out to regulate the bodies of the women they blamed for the spread of disease. The subject of prostitution did not make for easy conversation in nineteenth century Victorian England, where ignorance of sexuality and sexual activity were considered feminine virtues. Nevertheless, Wolstenholme felt little compunction in stating her firm opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, laws that forcibly regulated the bodies of prostitutes and women suspected of being prostitutes in order to prevent the spread of sexual disease. She and her peers in the repeal movement were met with general disgust by those who viewed their willingness to discuss sexuality to be morally repugnant. Wolstenholme had a different view, labelling the fight for the repeal, “The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century.”⁴⁰

In order to keep the sensitive nature of the bill a secret, in case a whisper of its true intentions corrupted the innocence of the wives and daughters of parliamentary members,

³⁸ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy to John Morley 11 of August 1903, Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy Papers, British Library, London.

³⁹ Fisher, Trevor, *Prostitution And The Victorians* (Phoenix Mills: Sutton, 2001), 81.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, ‘The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century’, *Shafts*, March 1897, 85–88.

members introduced the bill under the ambiguous title of the “Contagious Diseases Act”, a label used generally for bills aimed at curbing disease in animals.⁴¹ This led to some confusion in Parliament, and the title of the act was appended with clarifying monikers, such as “Contagious Diseases (Women) Act” and “Contagious Diseases Act (Not Concerned with Animals)”.⁴² This version of the Contagious Diseases Act stipulated that any women suspected of being a prostitute could be taken into police custody at any time and forcibly examined for venereal disease. Presented with unverified statistics on the success of the Acts in the curbing of disease, and by “proofs of the moral and religious effects upon the unfortunate young women themselves”, the British government decided to extend the influence of the CDA legislation beyond garrison towns and seaports in 1866 and 1869.⁴³ If a woman arrested under suspicion of being a prostitute refused to be examined, she could be held until she submitted, or her name was cleared through a costly and public hearing in front of a magistrate.

The fight against the Acts became one of the most important in Wolstenholme’s career. In addition to her extensive writing on the subject, Wolstenholme helped to form the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1869. She stressed the need for the repeal of the Acts, not just for women working as prostitutes, but for all women whose economic status determined whether they could be seen as ‘angel-wives’ or simply ‘objects’ for male use. She recruited her upper-class friend Josephine Butler to lead the Association, recognizing that such a controversial campaign would benefit from a leader with gentility.⁴⁴ Wolstenholme also served on the executive board of the mixed-gendered National

⁴¹ Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 241.

⁴² Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980), 70.

⁴³ Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman*, 242.

⁴⁴ Duncan Crow, *The Victorian Woman*, 243.

Association for the Promotion of Social Science. Speaking on behalf of both organizations, she travelled the country urging individuals to contribute time and energy to the repeal effort.⁴⁵ In the House of Commons, where the bill had been passed, Member Osborne Morgan stated that the repeal campaign, “was a disgrace to the country, as it flooded gentlemen’s breakfast tables with abominable literature, not addressed to themselves only, but also to their wives and daughters.”⁴⁶

The Ladies National Association published a pamphlet that outlined the social consequences of the expansion of the Contagious Diseases Act. The pamphlet highlights the ways the Act harms all women, stipulating that the legislation had implications beyond simply targeting prostitution:

The law is ostensibly framed for a certain class of women, but in order to reach these, all the women residing within the district where it is in force are brought under the revisions of the Acts. Any woman can be dragged into court, and required to prove that she is not a common prostitute. The magistrate can condemn her, if a policeman swears only that he “has good cause to believe” her to be one. The accused has to rebut, not positive evidence, but the state of mind of her accuser.⁴⁷

The letter concludes with a plea to join the organization, “we earnestly entreat our countrywomen of every class and party, to help us in the difficult and painful task which only a deep sense of duty could have forced us to undertake... we believe that in its attainment are involved, not only the person rights of our sex, but the morality of the nation.”⁴⁸ The letter is signed by the 125 odd women comprising the Association, including Mrs. Jacob Bright and Mrs. George Butler.

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 84.

⁴⁶ Speech of Osborne Morgan against the Women’s Disability Removal Bill, 1 May 1872, *Hansard*, Vol. 211, p. 56

⁴⁷ “The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease’s Acts”, undated, MS 47451 Vol III Folio 73, Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy Papers, British Library, London.

⁴⁸ “The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Disease’s Acts” MS 47451 Vol III Folio 73.

These women came from disparate political backgrounds, including middle-class evangelicals who argued for the “purification of society” as well as middle-class radicals, like Wolstenholme. While they worked towards a common goal, their collective activism blurred the line between social liberty and anti-vice activism. Campaigners like Wolstenholme argued that the CDA was unjust because it stigmatized prostitution and misidentified working-class women as prostitutes. She stated that imprisoning women without cause and subjecting them to brutalizing medical inspections at the mercy of the police was unconstitutional. However, others in the organization took a different approach, arguing that the Acts needed to be repealed because they sanctioned ‘vice’, and sought to make prostitution safe for men. The Association was celebrated as an opportunity for females to demonstrate that they were able to organize themselves politically. As Mary Priestman wrote in 1907, “It has been often said that women are not loyal to women and that they do not work well together—the experience of the LNA is contrary to this...”⁴⁹

While Wolstenholme disagreed with the popular anti-vice angle, she also believed that the government was supporting immoral behavior that actively harmed women. In *Shafts*, Wolstenholme argued against the state sanctioned and propagated double-standard of sexual morality, in which men’s sexual activities were deemed necessary, while women’s bodies were regulated in order to fulfill and protect male desire. Victorians commonly believed that male sexual desire was a need, like breathing, that required satiation. Wolstenholme referred to this belief multiple times in her private correspondence, labelling it “male sex bias”. The Royal Commission embedded this belief in their official doctrine, stating in a justification for the expanded Acts in 1871 that, “There is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the

⁴⁹ Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 113.

men who consort with them. With the one sex the offense is committed as a matter of gain; with the other it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse.”⁵⁰ Yet, despite this condemnation, prostitutes were still deemed necessary for society, as “the indulgence of a natural impulse” could not be conducted without them. A special utility, these women were not only servicing “male appetites” but were also seen as the protectors of ‘respectable’ women. In the 1869 *History of European Morals*, William Lecky argues that the prostitute was the true guardian of feminine virtue, stating “but for her the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted...”⁵¹ The CDA helped the government establish an explicit code of female sexual servility for working class women, engendering ideas that extended beyond class. This was an expertly laid trap, as lower-class women were punished for ‘transgressions’ they were, Wolstenholme opined, all but required to commit. Wolstenholme argued that the only solution for this problem was the destruction of the double standard, stating that the “profligacy of men [must] be regarded as equally degrading with profligacy in women.”⁵² However, Wolstenholme stated emphatically that this could not be solved until *all* women were given an equal opportunity in life: “economic independence, freedom to choose and determine the conditions of her own life, fullness of education, freedom of culture...”⁵³ The first Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed in 1886. While the campaign helped to create a movement for the civil rights of prostitutes, it also increased the public’s focus on prostitution, resulting in calls for further criminalization and repression.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 71.

⁵¹ Quoted in Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex And Suffrage In Britain 1860-1914* (Princeton: Princeton Univ Press, 2004), 62.

⁵² Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, “The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century”, *Shafts*, March 1897, pp. 85–8, p. 87.

⁵³ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century”, 87.

Despite participating in the repeal of the regulatory CDA, anti-vice and purity activists formed the National Vigilance Association in order to support the regulatory Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which sought to raise the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, and outlawed brothels and the procurement of women for prostitution. The amendment was widely supported by middle class activists, who saw the new legislation as a key step in the “civilizing” of the social world. Wolstenholme condemned this new campaign, which she saw as a middle class attempt to purify society by repression. She reflected, “those with whom for 17 years I have worked for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts”, who, “by a strange perversion, now sanction and command the means and the methods of a cruel repression”. After the acts, an average of 1,200 suspected brothels were closed every year, with brothel owners prosecuted and sent to prison. Wary of being accused of letting a brothel, landlords refused to rent rooms to ‘suspect’ women: namely any single woman.⁵⁴ In response, Wolstenholme took up the helm of the Personal Rights Association, becoming the first paid employee of a women’s rights organization. In her position, Wolstenholme argued that the closure of brothels, which really only affected lower-class brothels and left upper class institutions untouched, actually forced women into even more dangerous positions. Without the structure of the brothel, women fell under the control of pimps, or were pushed into homelessness where they could be prosecuted for vagrancy. Brothels, Wolstenholme argued, often “are the only ‘homes’ known to many hapless women’, and ‘the very first step [when they are closed] will be that she is ‘taken up’ by some policeman as an ‘idle and disorderly person.’”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885–1914* (London: Penguin, 1995), 101.

⁵⁵ Bland, Lucy, *Banishing the Beast*, 103.

Wolstenholme also predicted that the return to legislating social purity would bring about a resurgence of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Her predictions were correct, as the government sought to instate identical legislation in India in the 1890s. Unlike many of her fellows, Wolstenholme saw no distinction between the Anglo-Saxon women regulated by the Acts, and their Indian counterparts under British rule, and so returned to the fight some 30 years later with equal urgency. In a letter to the editor of *Shafts* in March of 1897, Wolstenholme angrily derided the expansion of the CDA as “sex legislation of the basest kind [and] class legislation of the cruelest character.”⁵⁶ In her private correspondence, Wolstenholme noted to her friend Harriet McIlquham,

For my own part I believe, as I have always believed, that the seizing [of] the present occasion to put forward the C.D.A question has been a flank movement against Women’s Suffrage. I fear now that we have a terrible fight before us in which many pretend friends will prove to be our worst enemies. All the more we must work and hope, and put forward just and true ideas such as you did at your lecture at the Women's International Progressive Union last week. It is the fear of men that women will cease to be any longer their sexual slaves either in or out of marriage that is at the root of the whole opposition to our just claim. *No doubt their fear is justified for that is precisely what we do mean.*⁵⁷

Wolstenholme argued that the spread and continued propagation of the Acts in India was a reflection of degeneracy within the government as well as a sign of the state sanctioned “Masculine Vice” that had corrupted English servicemen.⁵⁸ She argued that prostitution was an occupation that women of a low economic status were driven into because of a financial imperative, rather than the lack of morality so often ascribed to them by their Victorian critics. In a letter arguing against the CDA, Wolstenholme states: “I can regard these poor women as no more “inhuman” than the men who consort with them, nor do I regard any prostitute as one with

⁵⁶ Wolstenholme-Elmy, ‘The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century’, 86.

⁵⁷ EWE to HM, 21 of May 1897, MS 47451 Vol III, Folio 100. My emphasis.

⁵⁸ Wolstenholme-Elmy, ‘The Moral Crusade of the Nineteenth Century’, 87.

baser than the richer and more cultured women who sell themselves into marriage for the sake of a title, wealth or position.”⁵⁹ She therefore saw no difference between prostitution and the

“sexual slavery” inherent in marriages made between upper class women for property or titles.

Wolstenholme argued that the class system was a tool in this oppression,

The building up of a false social system on the basis of *class* (for be it remembered, it is practically only poor women whom this wicked system assails) and sex injustice is the endeavor, here openly avowed, of the men who deny to women the right to help govern themselves.⁶⁰

This distinction is a critical one for Wolstenholme who continuously pointed out the myriad ways that the class hierarchy diminished the efficacy of activism around women’s rights. She believed that legislation that regulated the rights of specific women actually stripped rights from all women of any social class or creed. In a letter to an unnamed legislature, Wolstenholme wrote that if the British government refused to extend rights to women in England and in India, “then the rule of England in India is a curse and not a blessing to that country.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy to Lady Henry Somerset, undated, MS 47451 Vol III Folio 208-209, British Library, London.

⁶⁰ Sheila Jefferys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex Press, 2010), 34.

⁶¹ EWE to Lady Henry Somerset, undated, MS 47451 Vol III Folio 208-209.

III. Free Love and Disillusion

“To me personally it has been the deepest disappointment of my life that women should have divided into hostile political groups before securing their own enfranchisement. I hold that the question of justice to the mother-half of the human race transcends in importance any and all of those which divide political parties.”⁶²

-Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, 1903

When Elizabeth Wolstenholme began her free union, or non-legally sanctioned marriage, with Ben Elmy, she was aware that her actions would draw disapproval from some of her peers in the Movement. She had a deep understanding of the politics and demands of middle class respectability, having demonstrated her awareness by choosing the upper-class Josephine Butler to head up the already contentious fight against the Contagious Diseases Acts. Wolstenholme’s belief in “free love” and free unions was essential to her views on women’s bodily rights. She was uncompromising not out of a sense of stubbornness, but out of a commitment to her own political, social and bodily autonomy. Her thoughts on marriage were not influenced by her new partner, as some of her peers suggested, but were deeply held life-long beliefs. In a letter to Harriet McIlquham, Wolstenholme reflected that when she was seventeen, it was hearing a bride make an “immoral pledge” to “honor and obey” her husband that had caused her to fully understand women’s position as a sexual slave for the first time, and set her on a path to fight for female emancipation.⁶³ Two of Wolstenholme’s greatest influences, Mary Wollstencraft and John Stuart Mill, had also engaged in free unions. It is easy to assume that she felt vindicated by their example. In addition, her views on marriage also stemmed from utopian-socialist ideals inspired by the Owenites, a radical organization of the 17th century that believed in the abolishment of institutions like marriage and the construction of communities organized around

⁶² EWE to HM, 14 August 1903, MS 47453 Folio 157.

⁶³ EWE to HM undated 1897, MS 47451, Folio 129–30.

communitarian and cooperative principles. Additionally, secularists debated various ideas of marriage, including the place of free unions within English society. In 1855, George Jacob Holyoake, a prominent secularist, published an article in *The Reasoner* that stated that while marriage itself may have been respectable, “the legal restrictions which marriage imposes upon women are so disrespectful...marriage itself is not entitled to much respect.”⁶⁴ He argued that love was best left free and spontaneous, rather than a result of coercion and legal interference.

The British activist Annie Besant wrote in her article *Marriage*, that, “The English marriage law sweeps away all the tenderness, all the grace, all the generosity of love, and transforms conjugal affection into a hard and brutal legal right.”⁶⁵ Due to the deleterious position of women in wedlock, even some Victorians who were not secularists protested the institution. These women refused to wear wedding rings or take a husband’s surname, and many couples chose to be married in registry office ceremonies, in which the woman was not required to promise to obey her husband.⁶⁶ Most feminists, however, did not support the ideal of free union. In fact, some even believed that a woman would be dangerously positioned in an unfettered union that required no legal responsibilities on the part of the man. The Moral Reform Union, which stated that they advocated for women’s rights, took an uncompromising stand against free unions, “Against the practice of self-styled “free love” –which really means the substitution of lust for love—we shall wage an unremitting war.”⁶⁷ While this was often the stated reason that Suffragists did not support the concept of free unions, historian Lucy Bland

⁶⁴ Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation 1830-1914* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press 2013).

⁶⁵ Annie Besant, *A selection of the Social and Political Pamphlets of Annie Besant* (New York: A.M Kelly 1970), 13.

⁶⁶ Lesley A Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (New York: St Martin’s Press 2000), 14.

⁶⁷ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 155.

argues that middle class adherence to bourgeois respectability caused many activists to espouse disdain for things they may have otherwise supported. As with education, middle class Victorians constructed their identity through a careful separation from those things they saw as lower class: “the bourgeoisie had historically consolidated itself and constructed a class identity through the disavowal of the non-respectable, the ‘low’.”⁶⁸ The middle class equated with respectability. A “lowering” of respectability inevitably implied a lack of virtue, or a level of sexuality that was unacceptable within Victorian society.

Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy’s union was not informal, and their choice to forgo legal marriage did not mean that their relationship was any less structured or sincere. Writing in 1875, Josephine Butler told of their unpretentious, but ‘most solemn’ ceremony, and their ‘simple, equal and mutual’ pledge of fidelity. She also made sure to note that the ceremony would have been considered legally binding if it had occurred in Scotland.⁶⁹ Their “free union” reflected a combination of their anti-statist, anti-clericalism, and opposition to existing laws and sexual values. It was also a stand against the implications of religious and official sanctions in personal life, and preserved Wolstenholme from demotion to the civil status of a ‘wife’.⁷⁰ At forty Wolstenholme was visibly pregnant, much to the dismay of her peers, who insisted that Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy become legally married in order to continue as public figures in the Movement. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, it was Ursula Bright, Wolstenholme’s ‘friend’, who forced the marriage, citing a concern that Wolstenholme’s pregnancy was a liability to all the causes that she held dear.⁷¹ Her acceptance of a legal union did not represent a retreat from her

⁶⁸ Lucy Bland. *Banishing the Beast*, 155.

⁶⁹ Enclosure by Josephine Butler in a letter from Isabella Tod to Helen Priestman Bright Clark, 16th of November 1875, MP. Quoted in Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Women*, 99.

⁷⁰ Holton, Sandra Stanley, ‘Free Love and Victorian Feminism: The Divers Matrimonials of Elizabeth Wolstenholme and Ben Elmy’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 36, 1994, pp. 199–222. 205

⁷¹ Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, 31.

radical principles. Instead it shows the power of group pressure in politics. It is important to note that Wolstenholme was only able to leave teaching and turn to activism full time because she was offered a paid position within the Movement. With no independent wealth, her peers' threats against her continued public association were not made passively, but with her financial independence held in the balance.

On the 12th of October, a marriage was arranged at the Kensington Registry to appease and silence Ben Elmy and Elizabeth Wolstenholme's detractors. After their marriage, Ben coupled his wife's surname with his own. Wolstenholme, now Wolstenholme-Elmy, reflected on her legal wedding in a letter to Harriet Mcllquham, stating, "much as we disliked the most solemn promises of our lives to be given and taken in the...surroundings of a Registrar's office...we preferred that distasteful condition to the acceptance of an *immoral* obligation [of ownership] which ought never to be imposed on any human soul."⁷²

In spite of her legal marriage, Wolstenholme-Elmy faced immediate censure for her pregnancy. On December 10th, Millicent Garret Fawcett of the London Suffrage society wrote privately to Wolstenholme-Elmy to urge her to give up her public position in the women's movement.

To retire from the secretaryship of the M.W.P *Comee*...my reasons for doing so are to be found in the circumstances connected with your marriage and what took place previous to it...at the present moment more than half the life and energy of the M.W.P *Comee* is suspended, and a large section of workers feel they must disassociate themselves from it as long as you are the secretary. By retiring you could in some measure repair the injury which the circumstances connected with your marriage have inflicted on the women's movement.⁷³

⁷² EWE to HM 3 of June 1904, MS 47454, folio. 251. (Emphasis in original.)

⁷³ Quoted in Holton, "Free Love and Victorian Feminism", 115.

By the end of 1875, the Wolstenholme-Elmys were at the center of an orchestrated attack against their continued public association with the Movement. Isabella Todd, one of the leaders of the Irish Suffrage campaign even questioned Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy's sanity, writing in a letter to a colleague,

I do not for a moment forget the great services Mrs. Elmy has in times past rendered to the cause of women. On the contrary, I look upon her to some extent as a victim, for I feel convinced that when she took this fatal step her mind had given way, and that that alienation was produced by too constant and exclusive attention to the painful subject of the Contagious Diseases Act and the cognate matters that fall into the department of the Vigilance Society.⁷⁴

The controversy surrounding Wolstenholme-Elmy's continued association with the Movement became emblematic for the larger struggle between moderates and radicals for public control of organizations in the women's movement. Wolstenholme-Elmy's identity as a working woman was essential to her engagement in suffrage politics. Her insistence on the inclusion of the rights of not only married women, but also single and working women (including prostitutes) had already pushed her to the limits of her radical circles. In 1874 a conservative government took office in Britain. Lydia Becker, the then leader of the Manchester suffrage organization, decided to work with conservative suffragists within the House of Commons, agreeing to roll back the organizations demands, and espouse support for a limited suffrage that only applied to unmarried women.⁷⁵ Before the election, Becker had already turned against single-issue campaigns. She wrote to Wolstenholme-Elmy in 1868 that women's suffrage was "the *roots* of the matter" while issues of married women were simply a "branch" issue that would ultimately detract from the common struggle.⁷⁶ However, Wolstenholme-Elmy had always stated that the vote was

⁷⁴ Quoted in Holton, "Free Love and Victorian Feminism", 212.

⁷⁵ Holton, "Free Love and Victorian Feminism", 207.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Women*, 105.

meaningless if it did not include married women. In her view, women must be considered equal in society because of their status as citizens, not because of their status in relation to men. She had pursued campaigns that would destroy coverture for all women, not just the wealthy who could circumvent the legislation. Between 1868 and the passage of the Guardianship of Children Act of 1870, Wolstenholme-Elmy had collected over 100,000 signatures for parliamentary petitions and issued over 350,000 pamphlets to create a comprehensive law extending custody of children to their mothers. She saw issues like the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act and married women's rights to their property and guardianship of their children, as essential aspects of the larger fight to secure bodily rights for women, without which women could never truly be considered emancipated citizens on equal footing with men. Wolstenholme-Elmy's arguments were all premised on the same principle: that women, no matter their class or status, should have a fundamental control over their own beings.

The national suffrage organization's willingness to abandon these ideals came as a shock to Wolstenholme-Elmy, who objected both privately and publically. Her public protests came to be considered as insubordination. In July of 1874, Lilas Ashworth wrote to Anna Marie Priestman: "We have been much annoyed with her. She has been far too busy stirring up ill feeling against the Suffrage Bill owing to the proviso [excluding married women]." Ashworth suggested that Wolstenholme-Elmy had been trying to "spread around the rumor that there are divisions in the suffrage camp" and that in so doing, "she injures all our women's questions."⁷⁷ At the annual meeting in Liverpool, Wolstenholme-Elmy withdrew her name from consideration for her previous post as Secretary to the Vigilance Association. Josephine Butler reported to

⁷⁷ Quoted in Holton, "Free Love and Victorian Feminism", 204.

Millicent Garret Fawcett that Wolstenholme-Elmy had expressed a desire to live quietly in Congleton, and “cease to be spoken of.”⁷⁸

This moment was a turning point for Wolstenholme-Elmy, as she felt herself abandoned by her colleagues and employers. Their condemnation pushed her to disassociate herself from the Movements she had helped to originate. After taking a brief respite to raise her newborn son, Wolstenholme-Elmy returned to the Movement ready to air her grievances with the conservative politics of her peers and a government that she viewed as actively working to keep women in a state of subjugation.

⁷⁸ Josephine Butler to Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 12 August 1875, Women’s Library, London School of Economics, London.

IV. Married Life, Marital Rape and Forced Maternity

*“It is the fear of men that women will cease to be any longer their sexual slaves either in or out of marriage that is at the root of the whole opposition to our just claim. No doubt their fear is justified for that is precisely what we do mean.”*⁷⁹

-Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, 1897

In 1880, Wolstenholme-Elmy began to publically attack the legislative curbs that held married women in “sexual slavery,” openly criticizing the laws that she had been quietly fighting against for years.⁸⁰ In an article published in *Shafts* in 1899 entitled “The Marriage Law of England” Wolstenholme-Elmy recalled how John Stuart Mill had written to urge her to seek the “overthrow of sex dominion of the husband in marriage” as a key aspect of the fight for women’s property rights. In 1867, when Wolstenholme-Elmy was still firmly a member of mainstream suffrage organizations, she had replied that it was too early to publically express such a radical notion. Following her significant fall out with certain branches of the Suffrage leadership, Wolstenholme-Elmy did not feel compelled to protect the conservative sensibilities of her fellow suffragists. She began to publically espouse abhorrence for laws that made women’s bodies and children the property of men. In her article *Emancipation of Women*, Wolstenholme-Elmy wrote anonymously, “The emancipation of women is a question which strikes down to the roots of social, political and religious life... to secure true freedom, women of all classes need to actively acknowledge the necessity of ‘uniting themselves into one federation to fight’ against male tyranny.”⁸¹ For Wolstenholme-Elmy, this issue stood at the heart of the women’s movement: “foremost of all wrongs from which women suffer” she declared, “is the inequality and injustice of their position in the marriage relation, and the legal denial to wives of that personal freedom,

⁷⁹ EWE to HM, 21 of May 1897, MS 47451 Vol III, Folio 100.

⁸⁰ Ignota [Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy], “The Present Legal Position of Women in the United Kingdom”, *Westminster Review*, vol 163, 524.

⁸¹ Anon. [EWE], *Emancipation of Women*, p. 4. Emphasis in original.

which is the most sacred right of humanity.”⁸² In her article on Marriage Law, she wrote emphatically that the time had come for society to condemn the sexual slavery of women. She quoted Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* in order to fully articulate this point:

A female slave has an admitted right, and is considered under a moral obligation, to refuse her master the last familiarity. Not so the wife: however brutal a tyrant she may unfortunately be chained to—though she may know that he hates her, though it may be his daily pleasure to torment her, and though she may feel it impossible not to loath him—he can claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations.⁸³

The Mills’ rhetoric emphasized that even people who were morally opposed to the ‘masters’ ability to make a slave his mistress, still considered it the duty of a married woman never to reject her husband.

On the 3rd of March in 1880, Wolstenholme-Elmy took the stage at the London Dialectical Society and delivered a speech entitled *The Criminal Code in its Relation to Women*, in which she responded in detail to the Criminal Code Bill set before Parliament. In her speech Wolstenholme-Elmy stipulated the various ways the Code stripped females of autonomy, specifically addressing the section that accounts for the wife’s inability to consent to sexual intercourse with her husband. In so doing, she became the first female to ever speak from a public platform about the subject of marital rape. She acknowledged that this was not a casual occurrence, stating “It is difficult for a woman to speak [on this matter] without giving offence”, and “impossible ... to speak at all without expressing strong feeling.”⁸⁴ She brought to the

⁸² Quoted in Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 92.

⁸³ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, in *Essays on Sex Equality* Chicago university Press, 1970, 160. John Stuart Mill attributed the majority of his ideas in *The Subjection of Women* to his wife Harriet Taylor Mill.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *The Criminal Code in its Relation to Women* (Manchester: A. Ireland, 1880), 8.

society's attention a legal decision handed down by a Judge Hale, whose ruling on rape within marriage was the legal basis for the bill. She explained that Hale had ruled that, "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their *mutual matrimonial consent and contract* the wife hath give up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract."⁸⁵ Section 200 of the Criminal Code attempted to enshrine in law the definition that "rape is the act of a man, not under the age of 14, having carnal knowledge of a woman, who is not his wife, *without her consent*,"⁸⁶ explicitly leaving out 'the wife' in legislation.

Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that "rape" should exist as an act of violence independent "from any legal or other artificially created relationship between the parties."⁸⁷ Laws that encouraged men to regard women as their property perpetuated "outrages upon women, especially against wives."⁸⁸ She asserted that the ramifications of this statement was not a partisan or class issue, rather:

To prevent this degradation of our law, and the inevitable consequent degradation of morals, I ask the help of every man who respects his wife, of every woman who loves her husband, of all men and women alike, who believe that the marriage union, above all other human relationships, should rest upon free, spontaneous, and equal mutual affection.⁸⁹

Wolstenholme-Elmy's condemnation of the marital rape exemption was grounded in a deep sense of outrage against state-condoned domestic violence. However, she also viewed the rape exemption as implicitly condoning another linked form of violence against the bodies of women: forced maternity. In a letter to Harriet McIlquham, Wolstenholme-Elmy reflected that

⁸⁵ Quoted in Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 92.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Criminal Code*, 9.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Criminal Code*, 9.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 92.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Criminal Code*, 9.

while she did not believe that women should have any rights beyond the male citizen, “The only absolute right I should claim for a woman as against a man is that she should never be made a mother against her will.”⁹⁰ She stipulated that this evil was compounded by laws that removed parental rights from mothers, while simultaneously holding them accountable for the welfare of their child.

Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that society, with the help of the government, forced women into motherhood by keeping them ignorant of the processes of the human body, and by removing their right to refuse consent to sexual intercourse in marriage. She also decried a system that criminalized a woman’s inability to adequately care for her child, while providing no support for the expensive burden of childcare.

In section 205 the law states:

Everyone is guilty of a crime and liable to penal servitude for life, who causes the death of any child who has not become a human being, in such a manner that he would have been guilty of a murder if such child had been born.”⁹¹

Section 181 further declares that:

Every woman is guilty of a crime who, being with child, and being about to be delivered, neglects to provide reasonable assistance in her delivery, if the child is permanently injured thereby, or dies either just before or during or shortly after birth, unless she proves that such a death was not caused by such neglect, or by any wrongful act to which was a party”

The law criminalized abortion, but also targeted women who could not afford to seek support for childbirth. Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that this crime was impossible to mitigate, opening the door to false accusations and the demonization of any woman whose child died of any cause before or after childbirth. Beyond this common-sense argument, she stipulated that the only way

⁹⁰ EWE to HM, 13 of December 1896, Add MS 47451 Vol III, Folio 35.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, *Criminal Code*, 500.

to truly lower rates of infanticide was to create equality in parental responsibility, and pass laws to hold a father responsible for the desertion of a child.

While a mother remained criminally responsible for the welfare of her child, the state only recognized one parent as the legal guardian of a child born within marriage. Outside of marriage, the mother was solely responsible for the child, and the law “imposes duties, liabilities, and penalties, while it concedes to her only the most shadowy of rights.”⁹² Wolstenholme-Elmy argued that this arrangement was harmful for both mother and child. She did not contend that the mother was a more suitable guardian because of the innate purity of her sex, as some of her peers insisted. However, she did exalt the motivations of the mother over that of the father, “the mother who does more, suffers more, and most frequently loves more, is nothing. The Father is exalted by a selfish and stupid prerogative into a mimic deity, and the severe effects of his supreme power are made to outlast life itself.”⁹³ For example, a husband’s right to sexual intercourse with his wife superseded the right of a woman to protect herself and her child from disease. In the case *Regina v. Clarence* in 1888, the state reaffirmed the marital rape exemption by concluding that a husband could not be found guilty of raping his wife, even if she had refused intercourse because he had a known case of venereal disease.⁹⁴ Yet, if a child died in its infancy because of a disease contracted through its father, its mother could still be tried for neglect, especially if she was working class and without the financial support required to prove that the disease had come from her husband and not from prostitution.

Additionally, while a father had the legal right to remove a child from a mother’s care almost with impunity, a wife had to take her abusive or violent husband through an extensive

⁹² Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, “Art. I.--The custody and guardianship of children; The Englishwoman's review of social and industrial questions”. Vol. 15, Iss. 139, 1884, 491-503. 495.

⁹³ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “Custody and Guardianship of Children”, 500.

⁹⁴ Kent, *Sex and Suffrage*, 93.

court procedure in order to secure custody or a legal separation—a costly process that often backfired. As Wolstenholme-Elmy angrily pointed out: “[mothers] in no case have any means of redress against the caprice or malice of the sole parent whom the law invests with authority, unless the mother be rich enough to appeal to the superior Courts; and then she must be able to prove such gross and scandalous misconduct on the part of the father towards the children.”⁹⁵ If the father was convicted, the mother in this case could receive custody of her children under the age of sixteen years old. If a mother did not have the funds to file a court case, she could file for custody of her children only if her husband was *convicted* of aggravated assault upon her person and she could provide evidence that he was liable to repeat his crime. Wolstenholme-Elmy pointed out the inequities of the law between poor women and women of means:

let it be carefully noted that the mother in this case only obtains the custody of her children under *ten* years of age. Why this difference should be made between her and her richer sister, who can afford the expense of an appeal to the Superior Courts and *may* through their intervention obtain the custody of her children under age of sixteen, is not easy to understand.⁹⁶

With limited rights to end their marriages, wives were forced to co-habit with abusive partners, who had every legal right to use their bodies for their own pleasures. Wolstenholme-Elmy had been working to secure women the right to divorce their husbands since 1886. In 1889, she had managed to convince a Dr. Hunter to propose a bill which equalized divorce and proposed the inclusion of desertion, as well as adultery, as viable grounds for separation. Dr. Hunter made little effort to see the bill passed. She quickly found a new sponsor to introduce the bill, but he too made no effort to secure the reform, causing Wolstenholme-Elmy to wryly

⁹⁵ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “Custody and Guardianship of Children”, 495. (Italics in the original)

⁹⁶ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “Custody and Guardianship of Children”, 496.

comment, “it has been often said of Sir Frank ‘that he never breaks a promise.’ I suppose this refers to promises made to men...”⁹⁷

Wolstenholme-Elmy connected her struggle for a mother’s right to divorce her husband, and a right to custody of her children, with a woman’s right to the control of her own body, “Nor can I here refrain from adverting to the foulest wrongs still sanctioned by our law...the actual legal status of every wife in these three kingdoms in her most intimate personal relations is *solely* and *strictly* that of a *slave*.”⁹⁸ She appeals to those women who objected to her claim that all married women existed in this condition, regardless of the benevolence of their husbands, “the fact that a majority of husbands would loath to exercise their strict legal prerogative, is no excuse for the maintenance of so atrociously wicked a law.”⁹⁹

Wolstenholme-Elmy sought to fix the injustice of parental custody with the Guardianship of Infants bill, which spent two and a half years in parliament beginning in the Spring of 1884. Wolstenholme-Elmy’s labors on the bill were tireless: by the time the bill had passed the Common in August, Wolstenholme-Elmy had personally sent 280 petitions to parliament with a collection of 28,272 signatures.¹⁰⁰ Over the course of the agitation, Wolstenholme-Elmy had also written 6,000 personal letters on the issue with the assistance of her husband Ben, spending a total of £238.14s.10d on postage, a large expense for the lower middle class couple.¹⁰¹ She stated that she hoped that the Guardianship of Infants bill, which restored some parental rights to mothers, albeit fewer than Wolstenholme-Elmy had hoped, would alter public perceptions of women as merely, “instruments for replenishing the earth with heroes [or] codhoppers.”¹⁰² Her

⁹⁷ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 151.

⁹⁸ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “Custody and Guardianship of Children”, 500. Authors italics.

⁹⁹ Wolstenholme-Elmy, “Custody and Guardianship of Children”, 496.

¹⁰⁰ Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 128.

¹⁰¹ Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 128.

¹⁰² Quoted in Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 129.

disappointment at the limited final form of the bill led her to protest lawmaker's consistent preference for providing remedies for the consequences of legal injustices, rather than remedying the injustice itself—a condition that could be rectified if women gained the right to vote.

One small victory came for Wolstenholme-Elmy's crusade for women's sexual liberation in the form of an 1891 court decision. Following their marriage in 1887, Edmund Jackson returned to England after a tenure abroad to find that his wife, Emily, refused to see him. In 1891, after a four-year separation, Edmund and two accomplices abducted Emily as she was leaving church in Clitheroe, and forcibly removed her to his uncle's home in Blackburn where he locked her in. In court, her husband claimed that he was entitled to his wife's custody. While the lower courts agreed, the Court of Appeal ruled that a husband was not entitled to keep his wife in confinement in order to enforce restitution of his conjugal rights.¹⁰³ Reporting the decision of the Clithero Case or *Regina v. Jackson*, *The Times* dramatically proclaimed that: "one fine morning last month marriage in England was abolished."¹⁰⁴

Wolstenholme-Elmy rejoiced at the decision of the Court. She knew that *Regina v. Jackson* did not guarantee the right for a wife to refuse her husband sexual access. However, she believed that it would be a short leap between a wife's legal right to leave her husband, to a wife's legal right to refuse consent. Wolstenholme-Elmy quickly penned four letters to the *Manchester Guardian*, detailing the future implications of the case, as well as a summation of her past efforts to create legal equality for women. This publication was met with enthusiasm, and Wolstenholme-Elmy was flooded with letters from likeminded men and women across the country, urging her to start a new campaign group to push for the fulfillment of the legal change they now saw as a real possibility. Emboldened by this positive support, Wolstenholme-Elmy

¹⁰³ Quoted in Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 136.

directed her energies in two directions she saw as enabling the freedom of women: The first, providing women with the practical knowledge they needed to protect themselves against enforced pregnancy through sexual education; the second, the creation of an organization that would push for a women's right to sexual autonomy.

V. *The Human Flower*

*“No hope for the race but through its mothers; no hope of a worthy motherhood but through perfect freedom of full education—personal, social and political—with that of manhood.”*¹⁰⁵

-Ethelmer Ellis 1897

In 1897, Elizabeth and Ben Wolstenholme-Elmy published *The Human Flower*, the first sexual education textbook addressed to children under the pseudonym Ethelmer Ellis.¹⁰⁶ Up until this point, girls’ sexual innocence-cum ignorance had been widely believed to provide for their protection. Instead, *The Human Flower* was written with the belief that an early knowledge of sexuality and sexual health would help prevent violence and trauma in adult relationships: “In these vital matters knowledge is, at any rate, less hazardous than ignorance.”¹⁰⁷ The text attempted to present a comprehensive view of sex and maternity, explaining the processes of the human body using analogies in botany. In the introduction to the book, Ellis states that “when it is borne in mind how frequently ignorance or garbled teaching (accepted surreptitiously from unworthy sources, for want of access to a pure one) has left its victims to disaster and irretrievable misery.”¹⁰⁸ The text contains a few medical inaccuracies, although even these inaccuracies serve to highlight the concerns of the authors. After explaining the process of menstruation, which “to a girl who has had no instruction or forewarning on the subject... is often

¹⁰⁵ Ellis Ethelmer, *The Human Flower* (Congleton, Women’s Emancipation Union Press 1894), 43.

¹⁰⁶ The pseudonym “Ethelmer Ellis” has been accredited by scholars to both Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and to Ben Wolstenholme-Elmy. Sheila Jefferies unequivocally attributes the pseudonym to Elizabeth. After Ben’s death, Elizabeth stated that the pseudonym belonged to Ben, prompting Maureen Wright to conclude that Elizabeth had not contributed to the work of Ethelmer Ellis. In her book *the Suffragette Movement*, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that Ethelmer Ellis was Ben’s “habitual pseudonym” but followed up her statement with the claim that Elizabeth and Ben “co-operated with his wife in efforts to advance the study of sex and maternity... Together and severally they produced works on sex education.” In accordance with Historian Lucy Bland, I believe that it is most probable that the pseudonym belongs jointly to Elizabeth and Ben.

¹⁰⁷ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 5.

a terrible nervous shock, and a cause of wild and shamefaced alarm.”¹⁰⁹, Ellis argued that menstruation was not a natural process, but a symptom of chronic abuse, “the menstrual habit seems to have been gradually induced and evolved by long ages of ancient and unwise and savage enforcement of sexual functions and maternity upon girls while still immature: under more rational procedure it should again gradually disappear.”¹¹⁰ Additionally, Ellis advocated abstinence during certain periods. The authors promoted contraception through use of the “safe period”, stating that women should regulate sexual activity according to their cycles in order to prevent pregnancy. However, they erroneously stated that a woman was least likely to become pregnant in the middle of the menstrual cycle.

Although the book provides a variety of medical information, both factual and nonfactual, it also warns the young reader of the social evils inherent in sexual activity under the patriarchal system. These warnings and guidelines adhere to Wolstenholme-Elmy’s previously espoused campaigns to transform the law where it blindly punished women for the “transgressions” of both sexes. In Chapter 6, *The Human Flower* warns women against engaging in premarital sex, not for fear of a loss of virtue, but because of the social and legal repercussions of a child born out of wedlock. By withholding knowledge about the process of reproduction, the writers assert that women are held in a state of bondage, where they are duped into maternity. Sexual education would not only prevent the degradation of women, but would also elevate the morality of men, whose “voice of lower passion will be overcome by the higher pleadings of justice.”¹¹¹ Yet, Ellis articulates, a “lack of morality” on the part of the male is not met with equal condemnation by the law or by society. “While ruthlessly punishing the unmarried mother

¹⁰⁹ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 27.

¹¹⁰ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 28.

¹¹¹ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 33.

and the innocent infant, [society] still receives with open arms, and with scarcely a pretense of reproval, the male wrongdoer; whether he be the author or the perpetrator of a woman's life of shame."¹¹²

With no resources made available to her, and limited fields of employment, Ellis stipulates that single mothers are often pushed into prostitution, where wealthy men continue to take advantage of their situation and where they are regulated or imprisoned by the government. When discussing the plight of married women, Wolstenholme-Elmy repeats many of her previously espoused arguments about the inherent evil of the law that removes the rights of wives to consent to sexual intercourse with their husbands. Although the text is geared towards children, the authors do not hedge their words, stating that while men are tempered by some societal norms while out in society, in marriage, all restraints and decorum are removed: "the wife was at the husband's unthinkable disposal, to bear as many children as he chose to impose upon her, no matter at what peril or cost to her own health; or that of her offspring."¹¹³ Without proper education and preparedness, Ellis argues that women enter marriage without the ability to protect themselves from bodily and mental harm. Women, *equally* with men, hold a duty to their own beings. Therefore, Ellis argues that it would be "prudent" to limit offspring, considering the repercussions and maternal suffering of a woman forced repeatedly into pregnancy. They conclude, "a coming age will find it difficult to credit how utterly man ignored and excluded any regard for woman's choice or feelings or welfare in the most vital of functions."¹¹⁴ The "functions" of wifehood and motherhood, must remain solely to the discretion of the wife.

¹¹² Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 44.

¹¹³ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 37.

¹¹⁴ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 38.

The *Human Flower* argues that humans have a duty to each other and to their offspring, engendered in large part because of their capacity for “psychic love”. “Psychic love”, as described by Ellis in another work titled *Phases of Love*, is the only true and consensual form of a relationship between men and women, built on a mental and emotional connection. It is possible to read “psychic love” as a condition of abstinence—however Ellis never explicitly states that this form of love was devoid of the physical. Unlike many of the Wolstenholme-Elmys’ contemporaries, they did not espouse the Judeo-Christian belief that sex was solely for reproduction. Additionally, references to ‘temperance’, ‘foresight’ and ‘marital prudence’ in the *Human Flower* echoes the phraseology used in contemporary discussions of contraceptives. As pointed out by historian Lucy Bland, this language also aligns with the language used by the Malthusian League, a group that advocated for ‘population decrease’ by educating the public about contraceptives—of which Ben Elmy was a member.¹¹⁵ Instead, the authors wrote that “psychic love”, a concept perhaps left purposefully vague, is best found under conditions of mutual support. In these conditions, a woman would be afforded the same opportunities as her partner, and reproduction would be a choice, curtailed by the standards which disavow excess in other forms of consumption and activity. Ellis argues that a lack of sexual understanding makes all sexual activity an act of coercion; “Coercion, like excess, is in itself a contravention and annihilation of the sexual relation; since no true affection or love would either prompt or permit

¹¹⁵ The Malthusian League was formed in 1877, taking their name from the Reverend Thomas Malthus, who argued in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1778 that in order to prevent over population and poverty, married couples should practice ‘preventative checks’ to reduce the number of births. Malthus was vehemently opposed to contraceptives, and would have been shocked and appalled that a league created in order to promote their use, bore his name. The Malthusian League counted individuals like John Stuart Mill and his father James Mill amongst their members. It is important to note that implicit in Malthusian beliefs was the idea that poverty among working class families was a product of ‘over-breeding’ rather than a construction of the Capitalist system.

to inflict a grief or injustice on a reluctant partner.”¹¹⁶ Ellis stipulates that marriages based on “psychic love” were only of recent evolution, as so many marriages had been formed under laws that justified marital excess and coercion.

Sexual liberation could not be accomplished in a vacuum. In the *Human Flower*, the Wolstenholme-Elmy’s write that liberation could only occur when women were afforded all the opportunities considered inherent to men. As a safeguard against violence and ignorance, they argued that children must be provided with a good education, suggesting that the mother should serve in the role of the child’s earliest educator, “whence shall the child gain and assimilate the needful teaching so well as from the mother’s lips...are the mothers not yet educated and strong to impart the needful knowledge? So must we strengthen and instruct coming womanhood.”¹¹⁷ The final chapter of *The Human Flower* argues that men as well as women should bear the responsibility of parenting. Elizabeth and Ben Wolstenholme-Elmy state that it was high time that men recognize, “how identical, rather than separate are the natures and duties of either sex”¹¹⁸ The manifesto concludes by stating that humanity would be advanced by the reciprocal union of male and female intelligences and qualities, rather than the forced control of one by the other.

¹¹⁶ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 40.

¹¹⁷ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 43.

¹¹⁸ Ethelmer Ellis, *The Human Flower*, 47.

VI. The Women's Emancipation Union

*"Surely it is time that women should be recognized as the other half of humanity, equally entitled with men to every human right, and equally needful with men in the great household of the State, as in the lesser groups of the family; for only by the co-operation of women with men can the true ideal of humanity be evolved, and the fair social fabric, founded upon justice, truth, and love, be brought into existence"*¹¹⁹

-Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, 1896

In 1891 Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy formed the Women's Emancipation Union (WEU), an association of workers to secure the political, social, and economic independence of women. The organization eschewed pragmatism to fight for the legal rights of *all* women, combining the ideologies Wolstenholme-Elmy had grappled with and disseminated throughout her career as a feminist campaigner. The WEU was to be a pioneer feminist forum, giving equal weight to the issues of employment, education, parental rights, divorce and sexuality.¹²⁰ In that regard, the WEU presented the four points on which their work would be premised: "equality of right and duty with men in *all* matters affecting the service of the community and the state; equality of opportunity for self-development by the education of schools and of life; equality in industry by equal freedom of choice of career and equality in marriage and in parental rights."¹²¹

At the center of the WEU's social and political activism was the idea that John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill put forward in their 1869 *Subjugation of Women*, and the one that Wolstenholme-Elmy so publically espoused in 1880—that by denying married women the right to refuse sexual consent, the state was denying all women a right to bodily autonomy, maintaining a state of subordination through enforced maternity. The Women's Emancipation Union explicitly linked a woman's right to control their sexuality and choose pregnancy, to

¹¹⁹ Ethelmer, Ellis, 'A Woman Emancipator: A Biographical Sketch', *Westminster Review*, Vol. CXLV, 1896, 425.

¹²⁰ Women's Emancipation Union "Women's Emancipation Union: It's Origins and it's Work" 24th of October 1892, Report Presented at the Inaugural Meeting of the Women's Emancipation Union, 2.

¹²¹ WEU "Women's Emancipation Union: It's Origins and it's Work", 2.

enfranchisement, a claim that Wolstenholme-Elmy made in 1883 when she stated that the ending of this marital clause was “the *true* meaning of women’s suffrage”. The individuals in the Union believed that the primary way to see this “evil” retracted was the election of women into legislative positions and their ascension onto town boards and councils. An official leaflet of the WEU noted that, “no member of Parliament has ever yet been found brave enough to do it. Nor is the brave man ever likely to arise to attack this, the most brutal wrongs from which women suffer, till women themselves, as makers of Parliament, have at least an indirect voice as to the framing of the laws imposed upon them.”¹²²

Adhering to Wolstenholme-Elmy’s desire to “fight against male tyranny”, the members of the WEU adopted the muckraking tactics of Progressive thinkers, using investigative journalism and stump speeches to target and shame those in legislative positions to pick up the mantle of reform. Forming a “Women’s Army”, the WEU worked to recruit women of all classes to the Movement. Acknowledging the specific challenges faced by working class women, the WEU published pamphlets highlighting the plight of those who faced the “continual fear of starvation and the gutter of the workhouse,” bringing issues of poverty to the forefront of the struggle for suffrage.¹²³ Wolstenholme-Elmy and the WEU sought to prove that women of all classes did not need to continue to toil under the heel of patriarchy. They urged their members to seek the emancipation of women whose lives did not reflect the privilege of their own, as Wolstenholme-Elmy had lamented in her letters to Harriet McIlquham: “The selfish women who seek their own advantage at the [negligence of] their sisters are the greatest curse of the present day.” Although she was quick to assert that this was not a women’s issue: “The Women’s

¹²² Women’s Emancipation Union, *Final Report*, 1899, 4.

¹²³ Amy Hurlston, *The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands*, (Congleton: Women’s Emancipation Union Press 1893), 8.

Suffrage cause is not the only one which suffers in this manner. It is the fortune of every great cause, when approaching success to find such as these attempting to control the Movement for their own advantage. Nor is the mischief confined to women, but is a failing of selfish human nature generally.”¹²⁴

Standing at the podium of the 1892 inaugural conference of the WEU, board member Mary Cozens suggested that the use of dynamite might expedite their journey to the vote, arguing that “if they had a regiment of women who could shoot, they would have the franchise in a week,”¹²⁵ to the general indignation of the audience. However, it is safe to assume that Mary believed her audience would be receptive to her ideas, as Wolstenholme-Elmy, in the formation of her council, had gathered around her those who adhered to the most radical and advanced interpretation of feminist ideals. She especially favored the company of those impervious to the accusation that their adherence to these principles would destabilize an otherwise stable society.¹²⁶ The *Glasgow Herald* stated that Mary Cozens had spoken in the manner of Thomas Paine: her direct, abrasive tone signified that the altruistic, liberal tone of previous suffrage work was being laid aside, as women, “restless with convulsive energy” took up the cause in earnest.¹²⁷

The inaugural report of the WEU further articulated the organization’s manifesto and feminist vision that summarized Wolstenholme-Elmy’s previously espoused beliefs on marriage and the legal disabilities of women. The pamphlet highlighted the ways the fight for female suffrage and ‘emancipation’ were a cross-class struggle, a revolutionary idea meant to galvanize

¹²⁴ EWE to HM, 13th December, 1896, MS 47451 Vol III Folio 35.

¹²⁵ ‘The Emancipation of Women’, 27 October 1892, *Birmingham Daily Post*.

¹²⁶ Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 382.

¹²⁷ Anon. [Editorial], *Glasgow Herald*, 27 October 1892; Amy Hurlston, *The Factory Work of Women in the Midlands*, 1893, 8.

the largest group of women to the fight. In 1896 Charlotte Stopes declared at a WEU conference that the modern women's movement should align itself with Francis Bacon's 1620 *Novum Organum* which called for the overthrow of all existing customs and traditions, and that reform should come from the hands of the mothers of the "laboring classes".¹²⁸ Not all members of the WEU were so radically minded, however the organization as a whole pledged to fight for legislation that would create equal opportunity for all women, so that sex was "no longer a barrier to the exercise of individual capacity, that the community shall no longer be defrauded of the services of half of its capable members."¹²⁹ In order to accomplish these goals, Wolstenholme-Elmy laid out guidelines for the Union's membership. Rich members were asked to donate funds to the cause in order to cover the financial burdens of working-class women within the Movement who "are contributing lavishly of their time, their labor, their very lives."¹³⁰ From each member she required tangible service to the cause, and not just statements of support. The 'laggards' were directed to quicken their pace, and join their peers with "active sympathy and practical support."¹³¹ Their efforts would contribute to the "uplifting of humanity" a cause worthier than any that fell behind party lines.¹³² Instead the Union declared,

That women, equally with men, are human beings, and as such are entitled and resolved to take their part in public duty, and to have an effective voice in determining the conditions under which they live. This is their [the Union's] abiding principle. Their policy as a Union is to stand aloof from party trammels, believing as they do that justice to half the human race involves considerations larger and deeper than any questions which divide contending political partisans...When the slavery of sex shall have been abolished, and the reign of

¹²⁸ Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, *The Woman's Protest*, 1896, 1; Mayhall, *Citizenship and Resistance*, 23.

¹²⁹ WEU "Women's Emancipation Union: It's Origins and it's Work", 24th of October 1892, 9.

¹³⁰ WEU "Women's Emancipation Union: It's Origins and it's Work", 24th of October 1892, 9.

¹³¹ WEU "Women's Emancipation Union: It's Origins and it's Work", 24th of October 1892, 9.

¹³² Wright, Maureen, 'The Women's Emancipation Union and Radical-feminist Politics in Britain, 1891–99', *Gender and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2010, 382–406, 387.

justice and freedom shall have been inaugurated, then, and not till then, will their work be accomplished.¹³³

To this end, the Union worked to establish the right of women to elect and be elected into local administrative bodies, leading to the introduction of the Local Government Bill (England and Wales) by Sir Henry Fowler in 1893. The Bill included a statement that called for the enfranchisement of “all those women, whether married or unmarried, who would be entitled to be on the Local Government Register of Electors, or on the Parliamentary Register of Electors, if they were men.”¹³⁴ In addition to seeking a legislative amendment allowing women to have the suffrage, the Union fought to end restrictions on women’s career opportunities and the right to choose their occupations.

Although the Union never reached the large fighting force that Wolstenholme-Elmy envisioned for it at its outset, she noted with pride in a letter to Harriet McIlquham in 1898 that her position as the leader of the WEU had established her as a feminist leader in “the revolt,” pointing to her encouragement of women to apply the tools *men* had utilized in order to secure their own freedom as justification for her claim.¹³⁵ Although Wolstenholme-Elmy was an able and passionate leader, her inability to be conciliatory perhaps got in the way of the continued success of the Union. For example, when the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies sought to pool their resources with the WEU and similar organizations, Wolstenholme-Elmy kept her organization aloof, claiming that the National organization’s conception of Suffrage was too narrow.¹³⁶ The Wolstenholme-Elmys’ personal finances had made up a large portion of the WEU’s budget. As a result, they were now dependent on the charity of their peers, who had

¹³³ WEU “Women’s Emancipation Union: It’s Origins and it’s Work”, 24th of October 1892, 9.

¹³⁴ WEU “Women’s Emancipation Union: It’s Origins and it’s Work”, 6.

¹³⁵ EWE to HM, 30th of May 1898, MS 47449 Vol I, folio 215.

¹³⁶ Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 169.

created a collection called “the Grateful Fund” in order to support The Wolstenholme-Elmys’ well-being.¹³⁷

By the time the WEU disbanded in 1899 they had held over 150 meetings aimed at preparing women to engage in activism, and maintained correspondence with over 7,000 individuals. Although they never advocated for physical violence, the Women’s Emancipation Union laid the groundwork for the active militancy of the coming generation of suffragists. Particularly influential was the Union’s clearly articulated claim that the right to give and refuse consent was the true guiding principle behind the fight for the franchise. The universality of this claim drew individuals of all classes and creeds to the Movement, clearly outlining how all women under the law were subjected to the same forms of oppression, even though they manifested differently for every woman.

¹³⁷ Julia Smith to HM, 20th of July 1896, MS 47450, fol. 307.

Conclusion



Source: Women's Library at the London School of Economics

On June 21, 1908, Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and Emmeline Pankhurst marched at the front of a procession of 40,000 people.¹³⁸ She recalled the event joyfully: “It was beyond beautiful, and when one thought of all it expressed and signified!!! It was an hour of glorious life.”¹³⁹ A few years later, in 1911, Elizabeth stood on a balcony watching the Women's Coronation Procession over a banner that declared, “England's Oldest Militant Suffragist Greet's her Sisters.”¹⁴⁰ In the coming years, the Suffragettes would become famous for their militant activism. They would throw rocks, blow up mailboxes, be arrested by police, and go on hunger

¹³⁸ Women's Sunday was the first grand-scale meeting organized by the Women's Social and Political Union. Supporters travelled from all over Britain to attend the march, with trains specially chartered to bring supporters to London. Individuals wore white, purple and green, which were to become the colors of the suffragettes.

¹³⁹ EWE to HM, 26th of June 1908, MS 47455, folio 186.

¹⁴⁰ The Women's Coronation Procession organized by the WSPU included 60,000 individuals, including contingents from India as well as other groups from around the empire, who marched from Westminster to Albert Hall in London to demand the suffrage for women.

strikes, to fight for their recognition as equal citizens. Wolstenholme-Elmy, in her dotage, would cheer on these “insurgent women” with enthusiasm and pleasure.

Determined in her path, and fearless in her calls for reform, Wolstenholme-Elmy had left behind a feminist manifesto of contemporary relevance. She claimed for women total freedom over their bodies and reproductive potentials, and argued for the destruction of state-sanctioned control, which she recognized in systems of governance all around her. Her calls for educational reform, women’s property and parental rights, were all for the liberation of subjugated women, whose freedom was limited by their inability to find employment or leave abusive households. With a right to free higher and professional education, women would no longer be confined only to the occupations open to their class and gender. With access to their own property and professions, women would no longer be forced to rely on husbands for their basic needs. The Wolstenholme-Elmys’ sexual education textbook sought to provide women with the knowledge to avoid unwanted pregnancy. More than a medical treatise, Elizabeth and Ben Wolstenholme-Elmy attempted to inform women of the consequences of their sexual subordination. This was intended to be a galvanizing call for those whose ignorance of sexuality may have prevented them from understanding the implications of their legal positions.

In her radical conceptualization of women’s rights, Wolstenholme-Elmy consistently advocated for an inclusionary approach to reform. She spoke out against the regulation of the bodies of prostitutes because she understood that very little separated those who turned to prostitution out of an economic necessity and those who married men out of an economic necessity. She did not designate a specific pathway for higher attainment for womanhood. Instead she argued for women to have the choice and the opportunity to determine their own paths to attainment.

On July 17, 1910, Wolstenholme-Elmy wrote to Sylvia Pankhurst that she was steadily going through the vast collection of letters she had preserved in her archive,

...for use in the book of recollections which I intend to finish before I die and to call, *Some Memories of a Happy Life*; for my life has been one of steadfast happiness, every day bringing something to work for, something to hope for and many to love.¹⁴¹

This work was never to be published, as the manuscript was destroyed in 1917, along with the entirety of Wolstenholme-Elmy's library and archive. Eyewitnesses recall wheelbarrows of documents leaving the Wolstenholme-Elmy household during a community collection of waste-paper.¹⁴² By this point, Wolstenholme-Elmy was suffering from both physical and mental ailments, prompting Frances Rowe to write to Mary McIlquham that she had, "practically give up her life."¹⁴³ It is hard to imagine that Wolstenholme-Elmy would have consented to the destruction of her collection, often writing that she believed her efforts were historically significant. She had carefully selected hundreds of her letters and pamphlets to donate to the archives of the Women's Social and Political Union. In 1900, she also donated the records of the WEU and the Guardianship of Infants efforts to the British Museum. In a single day, fifty years of correspondences and papers vanished. It is unclear who ordered the destruction of Wolstenholme-Elmy's collections. Was the destruction of her written legacy done out of ignorance, malice, or an effort to silence her?

However, enough material was left behind to make the fact of Wolstenholme-Elmy's continued exclusion from the histories of the Suffrage movement a puzzling reality. In her review of Maureen Wright's biography, Susie Steinbach writes, "the near impossibility of remaining on good terms with Wolstenholme-Elmy helps explain her absence from the

¹⁴¹ Sylvia Pankhurst *The Suffragette Movement*, 45.

¹⁴² Maureen Wright, *Biography of an Insurgent Woman*, 226.

¹⁴³ Frances Rowe to Mary McIlquham, 22nd of April 1913, 47455, folio 313.

historiography.”¹⁴⁴ It is true that Wolstenholme-Elmy frequently broke with her peers in the Women’s Movement. She was quick to criticize what she perceived as lazy activism, and disdainful of her peers who believed that a partial commitment to women’s liberation was enough to generate meaningful progress. However, her peers in the Movement did not write Wolstenholme-Elmy out only because they found her mannerisms irksome: they wrote her out because her activism provided a fierce rebuke to their ideology. “Second Wave” feminists would follow suit, desirous, perhaps, to present this women’s movement as a model for future campaigns for women’s rights. Whom else has been purged from the record through deliberate historical amnesia? Whom else has been written out of the history to create a simplified and cohesive narrative of progress? As Wolstenholme-Elmy wrote in a letter to Harriet McIlquham in 1900, “I believe it will prove when the links are brought together and the chain complete that there has been no time for some six centuries past without the uplifting of some voice or other for justice to women.”¹⁴⁵

Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy lived to see the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918, which granted women over the age of 30 the right to vote. She passed away that very year at the age of 84, never having the opportunity to cast a ballot for herself. Only three obituaries were published in her honor, the longest and most heartfelt from Sylvia

Pankhurst in the *Workers Dreadnought*,

When others faltered because the cause was unpopular and the goal seemed far away Mrs. Elmy remained constant and steadfast, and accomplished an immensity of work ... The women of to-day and tomorrow will never know how much they owe to her; but those of the younger generation who have been privileged to know her and work with her will not forget the inspiration which they derived from her

¹⁴⁴ Susie Steinbach, review of: *Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy and the Victorian Feminist Movement: The Biography of an Insurgent Woman* by Maureen Wright, *Victorian Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 202-205.

¹⁴⁵ EWE to HM 2nd of February 1900, 47449, Folio 5.

selfless devotion to principle and keen, vigorous, and never-pausing industry in the cause.¹⁴⁶

In 1923, The Matrimonial Causes Act equalized access to divorce between men and women.

Following the limited bill of 1918, women gained full suffrage in 1928. The 1975 Sex

Discrimination Act made it illegal to discriminate against women in employment, education and

training. In 1994 the British government passed an amendment removing the “wife” exception

from rape law. More than a hundred years had passed since Wolstenholme-Elmy publically

decried the exception in 1880.

¹⁴⁶ Sylvia Pankhurst, ‘A Suffrage Pioneer’, 23 March 1918, *The Workers’ Dreadnought*.

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