Chapter 2

The History of Female Sexuality in the United States

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The course of sexuality for the American female has gone through remarkable changes, from the variety of sexual customs found in early colonial days to the repressions of the 19th century and the liberalization of attitudes and behavior in the 20th century. Some of what has happened has been done to women—through cultural training, medical influences (e.g., 19th-century physicians’ attributing a number of female medical problems to sexual “excess”), and the impact of male expectation and interpretation of female sexuality. But at least a share of female sexual behavior has been determined by females themselves, acting in what they felt were their best interests considering the choices available at the time. This is especially clear in the 19th century, as we shall see.

Colonial Women

When females began arriving as colonists in North America, as many as 1 million American Indian females were already here. The sexual customs of Indian women varied tremendously, but in general, unmarried girls had considerable sexual freedom, while married women were expected to remain faithful to their husbands. As Indian women were joined by European colonial women, both bond servants and free, and by African women brought as slaves, North America represented a mixture of sexual customs for women that was fascinating in its diversity. But European cultural values were soon imposed...
legally and socially wherever possible, with these values, in turn, dominated by the New England Puritans in the northern colonies. Gradually an "American" point of view toward female sexuality evolved.

The New England Colonies. Marital sex for the Puritan Calvinists was a necessary evil, tolerated in order to conceive children and avoid nonmarital sexual temptations. Early marriage for girls, at age 17 or 18 was common, providing a practical method of limiting fornication and illegitimate pregnancies. Like any other human pleasure that the Puritans allowed themselves, sex within marriage was to be conducted with restraint, and care was taken that it did not interfere with religious duties. One minister warned, "... sometimes a man hath a good affection to Religion, but the love of his wife carried him away. ... This is an inordinate love" (Cotton, 1658).

Puritan clergymen fought a desperate fight against "inordinate" sexuality, presenting women as dangerous embodiments of Eve, the temptress. Frequently these warnings took on hysterical tones, as in the exhortations of Cotton Mather's father to colonists to avoid the perils of "gynecandrical" dancing (unmarried men and women dancing together): "This we affirm to be utterly unlawful, and ... it cannot be tolerated in such a place as New England without great Sin" (Mather, 1684). Any sexual practices between unmarried persons were strictly forbidden. In seeming contradiction, until we remember that marital sex was taken for granted, a man could be stripped of church membership because he "denied Conjugal fellowship unto his wife," refusing sex for two years (Records, Boston, n.d.). A woman could also obtain annulment or, more rarely, divorce if her husband was impotent or withheld sex from her.

Many Puritans were unable to meet their own exacting sexual standards. Premarital sex, adultery, illegitimacy, rape, and, to a lesser extent, homosexuality were widespread, and only prostitution, identified with the later gradual change from a rural to an urban culture, was absent from the roster of common illegal sexual practices. The Puritans were one of the few cultural groups that expected equal sexual abstinence outside of marriage for both men and women. Women generally received the more severe punishments for disobeying. In a few communities, like early Plymouth, female adulterers were sentenced to wear the scarlet letter A on their dresses for the rest of their lives; more often they were severely whipped, fined, or imprisoned. Males, on the other hand, were more likely to be fined or sentenced to standing locked in the pillory. If a child was conceived and the father could be identified, he was required to support it.

The Middle Colonies. A much more relaxed sexual standard prevailed in the middle colonies, particularly New York and Pennsyl-