

³⁶ On 1930s cases and their impact, see Siegel and Ziegler, “Comstockery,” 53–60. On continued barriers and biases in reproductive healthcare, and on the emergence of the reproductive justice movement, see, for example, Zakiya Luna, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973*, rev. ed. (1996; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2017); Johanna Schoen, *Abortion after Roe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³⁷ For one example of how vice policing developed at the municipal level, see Anna Lvovsky, *Vice Patrol: Cops, Courts, and the Struggle over Urban Gay Life Before Stonewall* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). On the endurance of private-public partnerships, see, for example, Brian Balogh, *The Associational State: American Governance in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

Targeting Victoria Woodhull: The Visual Debates that Drove Anthony Comstock’s Pursuit of the First Woman to Run for United States President

Allison K. Lange

Wentworth Institute of Technology, Boston, MA, USA

Email: allisonklange@gmail.com

doi:[10.1017/S1537781424000318](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781424000318)

Victoria Woodhull was Mrs. Satan. Or at least that is what *Harper’s Weekly* wanted its readers to see. The popular New York City-based paper published a full-page engraving, by its most famous artist, of Woodhull as the biblical devil in February 1872 (Figure 2). Horns curl away from her skull and spiked wings stand almost as tall as she does. Anthony Comstock, an evangelical Christian who made it his mission to protect public morals, almost certainly imagined the woman who promoted free love as the personification of evil. He needed public support for his crusade, and this cartoon by Thomas Nast helped him win it. Comstock arrested Woodhull on November 2, 1872, for distributing her supposedly obscene newspaper.

By the time of her arrest, Woodhull was among the nation’s most famous and visible women. She was born in Ohio and performed as a child preacher and spiritualist before moving to New York City with her sister, Tennessee Claflin. By 1872, the pair had become the first female stockbrokers on Wall Street, the first female editors of a weekly newspaper, and Woodhull had announced her first presidential run. Woodhull cut her hair short and wore masculine clothes. She wanted women to vote *and* become elected officials in an era when most female activists focused on just casting a ballot.¹ Even more controversial, she advocated for free love. Comstock targeted Woodhull because of her ambitious and revolutionary perspectives on gender, sexuality, and politics and her growing power. To Comstock, she was dangerous.

Public images defined and reflected contemporary debates about Woodhull, Comstock, and the freedom of the press. Woodhull visually represented herself when she posed for the photographic portraits she sold to the public. Artists, editors, and publishers for illustrated newspapers had a far wider reach. They offered their own perspectives on Woodhull through engravings. Like many Americans, they might have disagreed with her

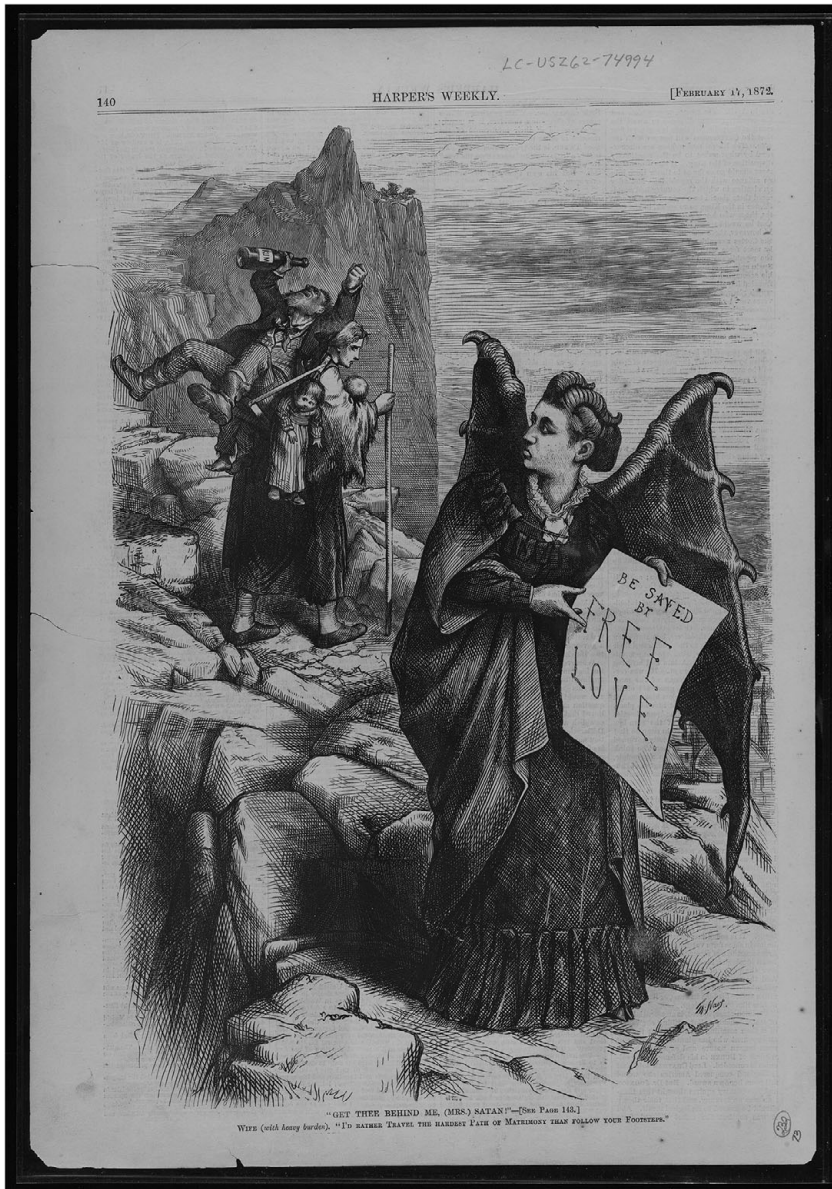


Figure 2. Thomas Nast, "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" *Harper's Weekly*, February 17, 1872, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Digital ID: [cph 3b22237](https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b22237) //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b22237.

views. However, they saw what happened to this famous newspaper editor, and they needed to ensure that Comstock did not arrest them next. Positive images of Woodhull might have caught his attention.

When Thomas Nast, one of the era's most popular artists, engraved his illustration of Mrs. Satan, he took on the task to "convey this great moral lesson" to dissuade viewers from

“accept[ing] the pernicious doctrines of the free-love school.”² The accompanying unsigned article in *Harper’s Weekly* does not name Woodhull, but it refers to a “leading advocate of women’s rights.” It also quotes from one of her recent public lectures, in which she declared herself a “free-lover” who had “an inalienable, constitutional, and natural right to love whom I may” and “to change that love every day if I please.” The illustration’s title, “(Mrs.) Satan,” even implied that Woodhull chose to marry evil. The writer quotes from the Bible that “what ... God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” So, the author concludes, “If this mischievous talk does not emanate from Satan, whence does it come?”³

While the article’s author emphasized that a woman should not leave her husband, Nast’s engraving recognized one wife’s terrible options. He portrayed a woman wearing rags who is climbing a rocky path and carrying a drunken husband strapped to her back along with two small children. He joyfully drinks from an open bottle, while she relies on her walking stick to take one more step. The article calls her “too wise” to listen to those advising her to divorce her husband. The look of “scorn” on her face is for Woodhull’s free love platform, not for the author’s insistence that she be a “true woman” and “travel the hardest path of matrimony.”⁴ Nast might have had some sympathy for this woman’s situation, but his picture argues that her alternative to marriage was Satanic.

Whether Nast knew it or not, the mother in rags represented the path Woodhull could have taken. In her thirty-three years, Woodhull had married, borne two children, divorced her first husband (an alcoholic nearly twice her age), and then married a second husband. If she had chosen to remain with the man she married at age fourteen, Canning Woodhull, she might have become as anonymous and bitter as the woman in this engraving.

Woodhull’s cousin, John Underwood, might have viewed Nast’s picture with this perspective. On the day of the issue’s publication, he wrote to Woodhull that the engraving actually supported her free love ideals. Not even Nast would really blame this woman for leaving her horrible husband, said Underwood. Her cousin even suggested the idea of “obtaining the cartoon & publishing it in your own paper,” because he felt “satisfied that its effect would be altogether favorable.”⁵

Nast’s work was part of a longer history. Anthony Comstock targeted women who fought to increase their control over their bodies and sexuality, including Madame Restell.⁶ Restell became a famous and wealthy New Yorker by offering abortions and birth control. In 1847, decades before Nast drew “Mrs. Satan,” the *National Police Gazette* printed an engraving of Madame Restell emerging from a devil (Figure 3). The picture of “The Female Abortionist” appeared on the front page of that newspaper at least twice.⁷ In this image, the woman representing Restell wears a modest shawl and shoulder-length hair, parted in the middle according to the day’s fashions. Her torso blooms from a smaller horned devil, its wings outstretched while an infant hangs limply from its fangs. Some Americans believed Restell prevented women from fulfilling their responsibilities as mothers. In 1878, Comstock arrested Restell for selling abortifacients, and she committed suicide (see Nicholas Syrett’s piece within this forum for more on Comstock and Restell).⁸

Nast’s *Harper’s Weekly* engraving was not Woodhull’s first unflattering portrayal. During the years before her arrest, she had honed her public image as a revolutionary woman who challenged gender norms. In response, illustrated publications often satirized her. For example, many flash press newspapers, aimed at men who preferred to read more about gambling and prostitutes than about temperance, represented her as a sexually available woman in a man’s job.⁹ In an era when few women distributed their photographs publicly or expected to see their face in a newspaper, even the existence of these engravings made her controversial.



Figure 3. "The Female Abortionist," *National Police Gazette*, March 13, 1847.

While Nast might have seen Woodhull himself, to make his engraving he most likely viewed or purchased a photographic portrait of her at a local gallery. By the 1870s, photographs of famous figures were widespread, and engravings of them needed to be recognizable. A portrait taken by William Howell might have inspired Nast (Figure 4). Woodhull visited the photographer's New York City studio around 1865 to pose for this relatively traditional portrait. Wearing an elaborately pleated cloak, she looks in the distance and appears to ponder the future, similar to portraits of the day's male leaders. In this near-profile view, her bulky hairstyle stands out, echoing the curve of her ear. If Nast saw this photograph, her centered pair of set curls might have inspired her similarly shaped horns in his cartoon.



Figure 4. William R. Howell, Victoria Claflin Woodhull, photograph, circa 1865, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Woodhull made conservative choices for her session with Howell in comparison to those she made when she posed for the famous Mathew Brady. Brady, a New York City photographer and gallery owner, took Woodhull's portrait between 1866 and 1873 (Figure 5). Woodhull stands, looking into the distance, as with the previous picture. However, the similarities stop there. Here she wears masculine-inspired clothing. A top hat with a large bow in the back is perched on her head. The top of her dress features a long row of buttons that, in combination with her loose jacket with lapels, almost looks like a military uniform. The jacket even features a visible exterior pocket with what might be a handkerchief inside – a utilitarian feature, rather than decorative or almost entirely hidden, that was not common in women's fashions. Eight buttons appear to be



Figure 5. Mathew Brady, Victoria Woodhull, photograph, 1865–1873. Image courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

open around her breasts, which seems to subtly suggest that she borrowed this item from a man's closet. A light-colored bow at her throat adds to the dress's suit-like appearance. Her chain might be linked to a pocket watch, suggesting that her time matters. Woodhull leans against a wooden desk to demonstrate her preference for work

over domesticity. By the time she took this portrait, she was a businesswoman supporting her family.

Woodhull's rejection of gendered expectations likely sparked even more hatred from Nast, Comstock, and anyone who opposed her controversial ideas. When contemporaries like Abraham Lincoln posed for portraits in a suit and professional setting, they aligned with expectations for pictures of leading public men. A woman in this setting was a different story. Brady's photograph was likely on view in his gallery and available for purchase there and through the mail. Although by this time more women – mostly presidential first ladies, authors, and actresses – were distributing their portraits, these public photographs still bucked feminine norms.

Woodhull knew all of this when she dressed and posed in Brady's studio. Her fashion choice prompted anxiety that women who adopted roles associated with men would become manly. Cartoons that represented female activists as masculine had been popular even in illustrations of female tea boycotters during the American Revolution. As women's rights activists organized in the mid-nineteenth century, these cartoons became more frequent. New weekly illustrated newspapers, like *Harper's Weekly*, often turned to this visual trope to entertain their like-minded readers. Women's rights activists openly challenged laws and gender norms. Quite a few formed so-called Boston marriages with other women. Popular periodicals reported on the rise of female husbands: women who acted as husbands in marriages to women.¹⁰ Even if these relationships were not always public, or romantic, they challenged traditional family structures.¹¹ Woodhull performed some of the duties of a female husband because she earned a living to support her husband, former husband, and children. Cartoons representing female leaders as masculine recognized widespread anxiety about changes in gender roles.¹²

By 1871, perhaps a few years after posing for these portraits, Woodhull won positive coverage in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, a competitor to *Harper's Weekly* (Figure 6). She had traveled to Washington, D.C., where she gave a speech advocating women's voting rights to the Judiciary Committees of the Senate and House of Representatives. *Frank Leslie's* guessed that its readers would want to know what it looked like for a woman to address Congress. In the engraving, Woodhull reads her speech to her audience, including her sister Tennessee Claflin (to Woodhull's left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (with the white curls, located behind Woodhull). She argued that the Fourteenth Amendment had already granted women the vote, an idea that won the support of Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and other prominent leaders.

Published over a year before Woodhull's arrest, this engraving provided a flattering portrayal of this newsworthy scene. Frank Leslie and his staff might not have been concerned about Comstock yet. Leslie also might have been influenced to support Woodhull by the married women's rights advocate with whom he was having an affair: Miriam Squier, the editor of two of Leslie's magazines. Or, perhaps Squier influenced her husband, Ephraim Squier, who had been the editor of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* since 1861. Almost two years after Woodhull's arrest, Comstock indicted Leslie for distributing obscene material, just like Woodhull, forcing Leslie to alter the content of his publications.¹³ Frank and Miriam divorced their spouses and married each other in 1874. Miriam Leslie shaped press coverage of women's rights activism and continued to do so after her death by leaving her estate to suffrage leaders.¹⁴

This moment of support from fellow women's rights leaders and the press led to Woodhull's choice to announce her 1872 presidential run as candidate for the Equal Rights Party. She named leading civil rights activist Frederick Douglass as her running



Figure 6. "Washington, D.C. The Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives receiving a deputation of female suffragists, January 11th – a lady delegate reading her argument in favor of woman's voting, on the basis of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 4, 1871, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. Digital ID: ppmsca 58145 //hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.58145

mate, albeit without his knowledge or consent. The pairing of a white woman with a Black man likely sparked popular anxiety about the rise of interracial relationships in the post-Civil War era, and Woodhull's promotion of free love likely only increased that fear. Though she was officially too young to be president, Woodhull's run won more fame for her free love ideology, women's rights activism, and nontraditional gender norms.

Comstock watched Woodhull as her power grew, but it was her publication of an account of the nineteenth century's most controversial sex scandal that prompted him to act. She and her sister, Tennessee, started *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* in 1870. On November 2, 1872, they used their paper to expose a respected and well-known Brooklyn minister, Henry Ward Beecher, for having an affair with Elizabeth Tilton, one of his parishioners who was married to his close friend Theodore Tilton.¹⁵ Woodhull argued that Beecher was practicing free love in private while denouncing it in public. She believed he should openly espouse the ideology by which he lived.

Beecher did not sue the sisters, but Comstock, working on behalf of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had Claflin and Woodhull arrested for distributing obscene materials through the mail. An engraving from a local newspaper that focused more on gossip and salacious news than on politics, *The Days' Doings*, depicts their arrest (Figure 7). A man hands an arrest warrant to the first sister to step out of the fine carriage. She looks like she is so focused that she improperly reveals her ankle, a symbol that she is sexually available. As in the Brady photograph, the two women wear masculine attire, including their hats, collars, and ties. They have stepped beyond the feminine sphere and are facing the consequences. The men are there to arrest – not protect – them.

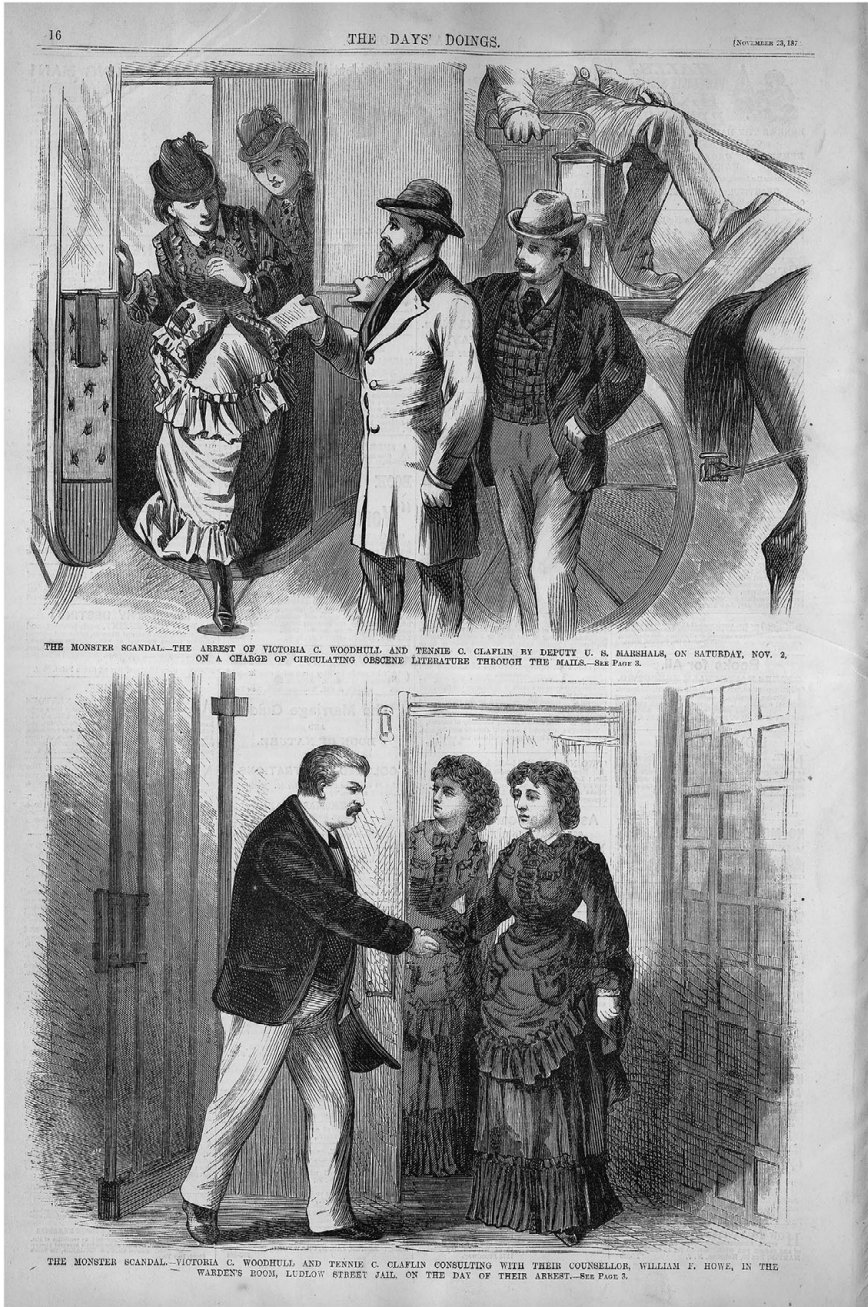


Figure 7. "The Monster Scandal," *The Days' Doings*, November 23, 1872, Library of Congress. <https://lcn.loc.gov/unk81056776>

This illustration probably pleased Comstock. Frank Leslie published the *Days' Doings*, and he likely recognized Comstock as a threat to his business. Nonetheless, he helped win Comstock widespread support for his moral crusade, perhaps as a deflection strategy.

However, Woodhull gradually won over those who saw the arrest as a form of censorship. She became a champion of free speech. Woodhull pointed out that other papers had published news of the scandal, but Comstock only attacked *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*.¹⁶ The sisters spent a month in jail, including election day, and were required to pay a high bail. They were released and then arrested again months later for sending copies of the Beecher-Tilton issue to Comstock, who had pseudonymously requested copies. Ultimately, on June 27, 1873, the jury pronounced the sisters were not guilty of obscenity according to the existing 1872 law.

Comstock lost this battle, but he recognized the weakness of New York's existing obscenity law. Even as he pursued Woodhull, he lobbied for the stricter, federal one, passed in March 1873, for which we remember him for today. For the next several decades, Comstock challenged any material that supported free love or women's sexual freedom.¹⁷

After her arrests, Woodhull lost allies and began to focus more on her legal issues than her ambitious ideas, but she ultimately won back many allies and reinvented herself. Woodhull used Comstock's pursuit to portray herself as a martyr, or as her sister called her, "a victim of a conspiracy between the church and state."¹⁸ In Claflin's telling, Woodhull "was shut up in prison to stop her paper and her pen; dragged from the rostrum to the dungeon to close her mouth; put under excessive bail to keep her there; paying thousands of dollars to extricate herself; her office, trunks, papers, in the meantime ransacked and rifled; new prisons opening to receive her as fast as old ones closed behind her; her bail tampered with." She even survived "schemes devised while in duress to take her life."¹⁹ In 1877, Woodhull wrote to a friend condemning people with "undeveloped brains ... [who] constantly keep me in a tumult" and made her "unable to concentrate my whole *will power*" on pursuing reforms.²⁰

Woodhull traveled the United States, giving talks to earn money until 1877, when she moved her work and family to England. In her second act, the twice-divorced Woodhull married a third time to wealthy Englishman John Biddulph Martin. The pair advocated for women's rights, eugenics, and other reforms in their periodical *The Humanitarian*, distributed on both sides of the Atlantic.²¹ As a wealthy, married woman with social status, Woodhull had more power to choose her own battles. She also shaped her public image, sending newspapers the most flattering illustrations to reprint from her time of firsts in New York City.²²

Woodhull and Comstock shaped the visual debate about women's rights and sexuality. The first female presidential candidate fueled interest in her ideas through her shocking photographic portraits and engravings that challenged gender norms. These images won attention for her and women's rights, but they also prompted Comstock to use legal and financial battles to stop Woodhull. Comstock's moral crusade and threat to the press likely influenced artists and editors to help him destroy her reputation. Comstock was not the only one critical of Woodhull, but he had unprecedented power to shape the way the press represented her to the public. Her legal battles prompted those who spoke openly about these issues to reconsider their tactics, and many leading women's rights activists came to prefer a more conservative public image in the years that followed. Woodhull's arrest dramatically altered her fortunes and, for decades, defined public conversations about women's sexuality.

Notes

¹ On Woodhull's life, see Mary Gabriel, *Notorious Victoria: The Uncensored Life of Victoria Woodhull: Visionary, Suffragist, and First Woman to Run for President* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1998); Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, "Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Conflict over Sex in the United States in the 1870s," *Journal of American History* 87 (Sept. 2000): 403–34; Owen Stinchcombe, *American Lady of the Manor, Bredon's Norton: The Late Life of Victoria Woodhull Martin, 1901–1927* (Cheltenham: O. Stinchcombe, 2000); Lois Beachy Underhill, *The Woman Who Ran for President: The Many Lives of Victoria Woodhull* (Bridghampton: Bridge Works Publishing Company, 1995).

² "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 17, 1872, 143.

³ "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" 143.

⁴ "Get Thee Behind Me, (Mrs.) Satan!" 143.

⁵ John C. Underwood to Victoria Woodhull, Feb. 17, 1872, Victoria Woodhull Martin Papers box 1, folder 7, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois (hereafter SIU).

⁶ For more on women who battled Comstock, see Amy Sohn, *The Man Who Hated Women: Sex, Censorship, and Civil Liberties in the Gilded Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021). For more on Woodhull and Comstock's different views on sexuality, see Horowitz, "Victoria Woodhull, Anthony Comstock, and Conflict over Sex"; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

⁷ See "The Female Abortionist" on the front page of the *National Police Gazette*, Mar. 13, 1847, and Nov. 6, 1847.

⁸ Nicholas L. Syrett, *The Trials of Madame Restell: Nineteenth-Century America's Most Infamous Female Physician and the Campaign to Make Abortion a Crime* (New York: New Press, 2023).

⁹ For more on the flash press and trends in the era's popular images, see Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Amanda Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution: Political Theater and the Popular Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Timothy J. Gilfoyle, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, and Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Allison K. Lange, *Picturing Political Power: Images in the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹¹ Wendy L. Rouse, *Public Faces, Secret Lives: A Queer History of the Women's Suffrage Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

¹² Lange, *Picturing Political Power*.

¹³ Joshua Brown, "'The Social and Sensational News of the Day': Frank Leslie, *The Days' Doings*, and Scandalous Pictorial News in Gilded Age New York," *New-York Journal of American History* 66 (Fall 2003).

¹⁴ Brown, *Beyond the Lines*, 150, 233–34.

¹⁵ For more on this scandal see Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Frisken, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, 85–116.

¹⁷ Few publications printed cartoons of Comstock during his lifetime. Rare examples caricaturing Comstock include "That Fertile Imagination," *Life*, Jan. 12, 1888, 18; "Browne's 'Dizzy' Pictures of Brooklyn Belles," *Illustrated Police News*, Oct. 18, 1888, 5; and "Comstock's Adventure," *National Police Gazette*, Mar. 8, 1879, 4. Thank you to Lauren MacIvor Thompson and Andrew Cohen for generously sharing their research.

¹⁸ Tennie C. Claflin, "What Was Her Crime?" Nov. 27, 1876, Victoria Woodhull Martin Papers box 1 folder 3, SIU.

¹⁹ Tennie C. Claflin, "What Was Her Crime?"

²⁰ Victoria Woodhull to Mrs. Townshend, July 26, 1877, Victoria Woodhull Martin Papers box 1 folder 2, SIU.

²¹ For more on her later years in England, see Stinchcombe, *American Lady of the Manor*.

²² Woodhull's papers include samples of images that might have been her favorites (like the one from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1871). Victoria Woodhull Martin Papers, box 3, folder 20, SIU.