

"GODLIKE SYMMETRY":  
CHRISTIAN EUGENICS AT THE ONEIDA  
COMMUNITY

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## VITA

Nancy Ivy Grimes, daughter of Stephen and Carol Grimes, was born October 22, 1984, in Birmingham, Alabama. She graduated high school from Jefferson County International Baccalaureate high school in Irondale, Alabama in 2002. She enrolled in Auburn University in the fall of 2002 as a member of the University Honors Program. She graduated with Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Political Science on May 11, 2005.

THESIS ABSTRACT  
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## “Godlike Symmetry”: Christian Eugenics at the Oneida Community

John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the religious commune the Oneida Community, which was established in 1848 in a quiet valley beside Oneida Creek in New York, is perhaps most notorious for his unusual views of sexuality. Though he abhorred personal affection (he was quoted as saying that “involuntarily thinking about those we love is the same as nocturnal emission” (Fogarty 62)), he established a system of “free love,” a complex marriage among every male and female member of the community. Aside from his extremely liberal attitude towards sexuality, Noyes also distinguished himself as a radical by using his community to perform an experiment in eugenics. The success of the eugenics experiment is perhaps supported by the relative success of the Oneida Community among other American communes. Whereas communes like New Harmony and Brook Farm only lasted a few years, Oneida lasted over thirty years, from 1848 to 1879. Even when it disbanded as a commune, the descendants of the original community members held on to the group and the grounds. In addition, the Community’s corporation, Oneida Community, Ltd., was revitalized after the Community’s breakup by some of the descendants of the original community members and remains prosperous to this day.

Noyes, who viewed himself as both a religious revolutionary and scientific pioneer, established a community whose practices vacillated between reactionary religion and progressivism. His intellectual conflicts are reflections of the philosophical debates of his time between the claims of Christian Creationism and the newly-established theory of evolution. Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* (1859), demonstrated that

humanity could have been forged by natural forces instead of a conscious Creator. While many religious leaders rejected or ignored the claims of Darwinism, others, like Noyes, attempted to combine the contentions of both science and religion. Noyes, who studied at Yale Divinity School and was self-educated in science, became known as one of the most radical thinkers of his day by attempting to apply what he believed to be the implications of Darwinism and evangelical Christianity to social engineering. To counter the determinism inherent in the theory that nature selects its fittest members to survive and procreate, Noyes proposed that humans could advance themselves by selecting the fittest members of their own species for breeding purposes. Sir Francis Galton, cousin of Charles Darwin, was the first to write about the selective breeding of the human race and call it eugenics, but Noyes' methods, which proposed to abolish traditional sexual morality and the nuclear family, were even more radical. Noyes enacted his own version of eugenics as theocrat of the Oneida Community. In envisioning an ideal society, a heaven on earth, Noyes was influenced by popular scientists (such as phrenologists) of this intellectually tumultuous time as well as religious revivalists. To counteract the determinism inherent in Darwinism, Noyes' philosophies infused materialist science with religion and focused his energies towards the perfection of the human race. During the early nineteenth century, popular pseudoscientists like phrenologists were finding new ways of explaining the defects of human nature, for which they received both popular and intellectual attention. Instead of calling socially unacceptable personalities "sinful," phrenologists claimed that personality and character were determined by the shape, size, and indentations of a person's head. Phrenology gained credence at a time when spiritually-based explanations of the workings of the universe and human nature became

increasingly unpopular in favor of pure materialism. The notion of a personal essence or soul was discounted by phrenology's attribution of the human personality to physical properties of the anatomy of the brain as evidenced by the shape and size of the skull. Phrenology was widely embraced as scientific because it was a more material explanation for human nature than were religious accounts of the "soul" and "spirit." Phrenologists believed that their scientific understanding of personality enabled them to orchestrate (or interfere with) human relations. Before eugenicists attempted to scientifically improve the human race, phrenologists acted as social engineers who advised people as to whom they could mate with in order to produce superior offspring. Phrenologists even wanted their say in the dynamics of the familial relationships, which were held sacred by most religious groups. Whereas before couples might have consulted their priest before marriage, phrenologists wanted couples to consider their scientific recommendations for what made a healthy procreative relationship. In discussing Victorian American attitudes towards marriage in *Primer for Prudery*, Ronald Walters comments: [P]hrenologists brought their curious pseudo-science into play and calculated the compatibility of potential partners by skull shape and by analyzing what 'propensities' best got along with what other 'propensities'" (95). Phrenologists like Lorenzo Fowler discussed the possibility of the achievement of a perfection of the human race if people paid close attention to the principles of phrenology in choosing the most suitable partner for producing ideal offspring. As quoted in Charles E. Rosenberg's *No Other Gods: On Science and Social Thought in America*, Lorenzo Fowler wrote: "If mothers understood and obeyed the principles of heredity and the means it provided for ensuring a desirable assortment of qualities in one's children," the world would be populated by "generations

of men and women, having all that is great, and noble, and good in man, all that is pure, and virtuous, and beautiful, and angelic in woman... Then shall God be honored, and man be perfectly holy and inconceivably happy, and earth be paradise (41-42). When this understanding of human development is compared with Darwin's later description of evolution through natural selection, phrenologists were proposing an incredibly rapid human advancement through "compatible" marriages. Phrenologists were ostensibly proposing to advance humankind by scientifically selecting mates for their physical qualities. By envisioning the biological perfection of the human race as being the will of God and the realization of a heavenly perfection on earth, phrenologists like Lorenzo Fowler turned the "science" of phrenological mating into a sort of sanctification through proper breeding. According to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, author of *Rereading Sex*: "Despite its efforts to be a neutral science, the early years of phrenology show clear marks of its origins in New England. Its practitioners were children from an evangelical milieu trying to make an accommodation with science and its understanding of human reproduction" (115). The appeal of phrenologists to the middle class was the result of its combination of traditional spirituality and scientific discovery. The "evangelic milieu" of New England also produced Perfectionism, Noyes, and scientific propagation. As Christine Rosen points out in *Preaching Eugenics*, eugenics (like phrenology) gave the appearance of a legitimate science by theorizing about issues that had previously been under the domain of religion: "Eugenicists viewed the scourges of their age - pauperism, crime, disease, prostitution, alcoholism - not as evidence of individual moral failing, but as problems to be solved scientifically" (7). In his biography of Charles Darwin, Peter J. Bowler points out that while phrenology was eventually dismissed as an illegitimate

science, “in its early years it was a powerful factor in the promotion of materialist values” (24). He later uses the same sentiments to describe Darwin: “The M and N Notebooks also make it clear that he had adopted an essentially materialist and determinist view of human nature” (85). To support this statement, Bowler quotes Darwin’s private notes: “To avoid stating how far, I believe, in Materialism, say only that emotions, instincts degrees of talent, which are hereditary are so because brain of child resemble, parent stock. - (& phrenologists state that the brain alters)” (85). This indicates that Darwin’s materialist sympathies at least somewhat influenced by phrenologists who attributed intangible qualities like intelligence and talent to the shape of the physical brain.

Although phrenology was not a legitimate science in itself (given its nonexistent practice of the scientific method), its conclusions about something as complex as human emotion were so influential as to be noted by Darwin himself. In that sense, pseudosciences like phrenology were predecessors to evolution in their materialistic, deterministic outlook. The materialist drive behind science and pseudoscience leaked into social philosophy. Darwin theorized that the members of a species best suited to their environment survive and reproduce while unsuited members die before they have the opportunity to reproduce, and that entire species evolve as a result of this natural selection. Instead of applying this idea merely to the biological progression of species, some contemporary thinkers speculated that the society was subject to the same laws, that the fittest thrive, becoming financially and socially successful, while the weak fall into poverty and dissolution. The philosophy of Social Darwinism, as spearheaded by Herbert Spencer, was extremely influential in American political thought. As publisher Henry Holt described it, “Probably no other philosopher ever had such a vogue as Spencer had from

about 1870 to 1890"; his work appeared in installments in prestigious magazines, and the magazine *Popular Science Monthly*, which was begun as a platform for his ideas, attracted 11,000 readers in its first year (Bannister 59). Just as the masses were interested in the scientific-sounding theories of phrenology, they also favored science-derived recommendations for the progress of their nation. Social Darwinists favored allowing the fittest to harvest material goods unhindered by consideration for the weak. They reasoned that if resources were wasted on those who could not or would not contribute to society's growth, then the economy and intellectual life would be retarded and these "inferior" citizens would reproduce in great numbers to the cyclical detriment of the species.

Fundamentalist Christians like the founder of the Children's Aid Society, Charles Loring Brace, criticized the implications of Social Darwinism with regard to religion, saying that we might as well commit suicide if there is "[n]o God, no superior powers, only evolution working towards a benevolent society here, and perfection on earth" (Bannister 59). Other religious/ethical questions were raised by the fact that the "weak" would have to be eliminated before this social perfection could be realized. By discouraging charity and governmental assistance for those in poverty, Social Darwinists were attempting to forge their own scientific utopia wherein they were not only discounting religion, but they were also disregarding traditional ethical concerns for the socially and economically disadvantaged. Likewise, the theory of eugenics emerged from an urge to apply Darwinism to the synthetic evolution of society. The founder of the science of eugenics, Sir Francis Galton (cousin of Charles Darwin), believed he found a way to utilize Darwin's theories to encourage the progress of the human species. By studying his cousin's book *The Origin of the Species*, which quickly became extremely influential in

the intellectual community, Galton founded his own science and christened it "eugenics." He first named and established the science of eugenics in his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883) (Bajema 1). In order to arrive at the proposition that society could willfully produce better offspring by choosing its "fittest" citizens to mate, Galton used as proof Darwin's proposition that species were modified through natural and sexual selection wherein individuals with the most environmentally-efficient traits prospered and passed on their genes. Galton posited that the practical application of this discovery was for society to allow the state to choose its intellectually and physically superior citizens to mate (and prevent its subnormal citizens from doing so) in order to synthetically speed up evolution. Yet rather than envisioning a totalitarian state where couples were hand-picked and forced to breed, Galton had in mind a eugenics system that created a more democratic society. In his book *Hereditary Genius*, he said the most edifying civilization for humanity would be "not costly, where incomes were derived from professional sources, and not much through inheritance; where every lad had a chance of showing his abilities" (Bajema 12). Instead of recommending breeding based on class, Galton thought people should be judged on their natural ability. While later eugenicists like Margaret Sanger would recommend sterilizing members of society they found undesirable, Galton prefers a place "where the weak could find a welcome and a refuge in celibate monasteries or sisterhoods" (Bajema 12). This vision of a more democratic society serves to ameliorate Galton's elitism to some extent. At any rate, his ideal society is nothing like Noyes' Oneida, where total control was exercised over the lives of community members and those with certain blood lines (those related to Noyes) were preferred breeders. Darwin's reactions to Galton's eugenics theory were mixed. In

The Descent of Man, Darwin praises Galton: "We now know, through the admirable labors of Mr. Galton, that genius tends to be inherited" (Kevles 20). However, in a letter from Darwin to Galton, as cited in Peter J. Bowler's biography *Charles Darwin: The Man and His Influence*, Darwin says of eugenics: "the object seems a grand one; and you have pointed out the sole feasible, yet I fear utopian, plan of procedure in improving the human race. I should be inclined to trust more to disseminating and insisting on the importance of the all-important principle of inheritance" (200). Darwin feared a system like what Noyes' Oneida Community became: an ill-fated attempt to create a utopia. While Galton hoped that state institutions would be involved in the betterment of humankind through enforcing strategic mating, Darwin encouraged him to merely spread the word about eugenics and let people decide for themselves. Noyes, on the other hand, criticized Galton in his tract "Scientific Propagation" for being too timid in the promulgation of eugenics. Galton hoped to preserve traditional social institutions like marriage and the family, whereas Noyes saw them as destructive to heaven and earth alike and substitutes other methods of procreating and raising children. Noyes proposes to determine how humans might scientifically propagate by reviewing the history and methods of animal and plant breeding and to then decide to what extent human development can be considered analogous (59). Thus, instead of treating man's welfare as the sacred property of God, Noyes recommends that society treat men in the way that men treat plants and animals, breeding them for the best characteristics. Noyes states that the two tenants of animal-breeding are to "[b]reed from the best" and "[b]reed in and in" (63), but he recognizes that this system of breeding applied to humans would revolt against traditional societal structures. Breeding from the best means that "superior"

people are encouraged to breed as much as possible while “inferior” people’s reproductive rights are impinged upon. Also, Noyes himself recognizes that “breeding in and in means incest” (63). However, he explains that breeding for the improvement of an entire race must of course be different from breeding a “thorough-bred” type of animal where all breeding is done within the same family line. Yet in order to foster an improved human race: First there must be, in the early stages, mating between very near relatives, as there was in Adam’s family; and secondly, there must be, in all stages, mating between members of the same general stock who are all related more or less closely. This last kind of mating is properly called breeding in and in, though it may not be incest in the human sense of the word. It is even a matter of doubt and disputation among [animal breeders] whether there is any harm in the closest and longest breeding between relatives. (66) As incest is one of the most ubiquitous taboos, Noyes’ approach to improved human propagation was radical and unique by any standards. He names his brand of human breeding stirpiculture, which means “race culture.” Noyes supports his method of stirpiculture by citing impressive authorities as predecessors: “[t]he great law which Plato and Darwin and Galton are preaching, is pressing hard upon us, and will never cease to press till we do our duty under it” (77). He traces the origins of scientific propagation to Plato’s Republic, wherein Plato envisions a Utopia with specially-bred rulers. This ideal ruling class of “philosopher kings” would, according to Plato, be a hand-picked council of the most moral and intelligent citizens of the republic. These superior citizens would engineer the reproduction of more superior individuals. Plato said the rulers would “find a considerable dose of falsehood and deceit necessary for the good of their subjects in the regulation of marriages and birth,” going on to recommend that “the best of either sex

should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior, as seldom as possible; and that they should rear the offspring of the one sort of union, but not of the other" (150). These elitist sentiments are echoed in Noyes' own plans for breeding better people. By "breeding from the best" and "breeding in and in," Noyes seems to have had his own blood line in mind. Tirzah Miller, niece of Noyes and a member of the Oneida Community, had a sexually intimate relationship with John Humphrey Noyes (as well as other close male relatives) that she recorded in her journal. Although J. H. Noyes never actually produced offspring with her, he once told her that, with regard to procreating with her, "[h]e was just waking up to a full sense of his duty, which is to pursue stirpiculture in the consanguineous line. God willing, he intends to have a child by Helen, Constance, and me" (Fogarty 72). Helen was another niece of Noyes', whom he did eventually have a child with. Constance was very likely Noyes' biological daughter, and was also likely sexually intimate with him though she never actually had a child by him and later denied that he was her father (Fogarty 21). There were many incestuous sexual ties at Oneida: of 51 children consciously planned by the community's stirpiculture committee, 10 were fathered by Noyes himself, and 19 more were related to him (Richards 59). Noyes' conviction of his superiority to the rest of humankind can be traced to his upbringing as well as to his religious ties to Perfectionism. Noyes' mother was strictly religious, and she raised her children in her faith. She had high expectations for John Humphrey, her firstborn child, and she prayed that he would become a great minister. He was academically successful and could have potentially gone to more prestigious colleges, but his mother favored the stern, Christian atmosphere of Dartmouth (Thomas 4). After childhood and college years in which he was forced to observe

religious rituals, he viewed religion as “a sort of phrenzy” and wanted to avoid becoming emotionally involved with it. Yet at his mother’s prodding, Noyes attended a revivalist meeting in his hometown, and there he experienced a religious fervor that resulted in his dedication of his life to the ministry (Robertson 3). His mother’s insistent expectations for his future had a clear influence upon him; she believed she had given birth to a great man of the faith, and after some nagging, that is what John Humphrey Noyes became. Noyes was introduced to the doctrine of religious perfectionism as a result of revivals taking place in the Northeast where he was pursuing a seminary degree from Yale Divinity School. As explained by Noyes’ granddaughter Constance Noyes Robertson, Perfectionists asserted that humans should strive for as complete a holiness as possible, and Noyes’ even more radical claim that each individual has the moral imperative to achieve a complete state of sinlessness was the result of his “inflexible logic” (Robertson 5). His logic led him to take literally the words of 1 John 3:8: “[h]e that committeth sin is of the devil”; and since Noyes said he had reached a spiritual state where he was free from the devil, he also claimed to have personally achieved a state of sinlessness (Robertson 5). As a result of his extremist religious philosophy, local clergy prevented him from keeping his license to preach. Noyes later wrote that his response to this ostracism was: “I have taken away their license to sin and they keep on sinning. So, though they have taken away my license to preach, I shall keep on preaching” (Robertson 5). He continued to spread his doctrine though it was at odds with the vast majority of the Christian community. Noyes’ exposure to and participation in revivals were an important step towards the formation of his unusual religious beliefs and his inspiration to form a commune. Evangelical revivals were growing in number and fervor as religious devotion

throughout America, particularly in the skeptical Northeast, began to wane. As quoted in Ronald G. Watlers' *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America*, Noyes discussed the revival culture in a letter to English journalist William Hepworth Dixon in 1867: "Revival preachers and Revival converts are necessarily in the incipient stage of a theocratic revolution...if they stop at internal religious changes, it is because the influence that converted them is suppressed...And the theocratic tendency, if it goes beyond religion, naturally runs first into some form of Socialism. Religious love is very near neighbor to sexual love, and they always get mixed in the intimacies and social excitements of Revivals. The next thing a man wants, after he has found the salvation of his soul, is to find his Eve and his Paradise." (144) Noyes here indicates that truly inspired revivalists will take their destiny into their own hands. Instead of waiting for God to bring about a Paradise on earth, true evangelists will look towards socialism, a Biblical communism like the one formed by Christ's disciples. Man cannot save his own soul according to Christian theology, but is instead "saved" from punishment in the afterlife by the merciful intervention from God. Noyes' attempt to enact a heaven on earth would apparently contradict this doctrine as well as the Christian idea that God judges men for their sins at the end of their lives and then assigns them to an eternity in hell or heaven. In order to reconcile the Christian belief that God is in charge of man's fate with the desire to have control over one's own destiny, Noyes proposes a religious system whereby men are saved by God and inspired by his love, yet also responsible for enacting social change in the name of God. Noyes' way of enacting this change, of bringing about a heaven-like state on earth, is to use scientific principles to improve the human race. In this letter, he reasons that it is only natural for someone deeply committed

to God to do his work on earth, and for Noyes, this work was the perfection of humanity through both religious conversion and scientific propagation. As a result of his desire to perfect the human race (and thus the human condition), Noyes promoted a new social morality, particularly with regard to personal relationships. Noyes theorized that personal relationships were sinful because they incited a selfishness that conflicted with the absolute love for all that came from God. Under his idea of morality, a man who loves and values one wife above other women and men is acquisitive and idolatrous. Thus, Noyes held that the ideal social situation would be a system of “complex marriage” wherein every member of the community was sexually and emotionally available to every member of the opposite sex. However, because he strongly opposed “excessive random procreation” (Fogarty 8), Noyes endorsed coitus reservatus, or male continence, as a means of birth control. As he describes his sexual philosophy in his tract *Male Continence*, ideal intercourse entails: “to enjoy not only the simple presence, but also the reciprocal motion, and yet to stop short of the final crisis” (8). Noyes considered sexuality to be a positive, necessary force that could even be considered an art; he once confided in his niece Tirzah of his intentions for community members to have sex onstage, explaining “[w]e shall never have heaven till we can conquer shame, and make a beautiful exhibition on the stage” (Fogarty 60). Noyes’ views of sexuality caused widespread contention before he even mentioned his feelings on scientific propagation. Noyes first began to put his social theories into practice when he established the “Putney Society of Believers” in Putney, Vermont, during the early 1840s. His first disciples were his wife, brother, two sisters, and two brothers-in-law. A few other members came and left, as not everyone was suited for Noyes’ philosophies, particularly since by 1846, some

members of the group began participating in his system of "complex marriage" where every man and woman in the Community were married to each other. As described by Constance Noyes Robertson, the surrounding community was stirred up by a series of inflammatory remarks made by Noyes, including his using the word "sexuality" in a lecture in early 1847, which shocked Putney citizens to the extent that they immediately passed a resolution saying Noyes' perfectionism was "a dangerous heresy" (Community Profiles 6). As Noyes made more inflammatory statements on topics like the Second Coming of Christ and faith healing, the Putney community became increasingly concerned (7, 9). By late 1847, members of Noyes' Putney Association were quite afraid of the surrounding Putney citizens, believing them to be capable of mob violence against the radical Perfectionists. The Putney Association's worst critics had Noyes and another member of the Association, Mary Cragin, charged with adultery. The group resolved to disband and leave town, and Noyes and Mary Cragin and her husband had to escape to "parts unknown" in order to avoid prosecution (10). Noyes later wrote of the experience: "The main point is that we left not to escape the law but to prevent an outbreak of lynch law among the barbarians of Putney" (11). He wanted to make it clear that he was not purposely abandoning his fledgling Putney Association, but that the intolerance of the surrounding townspeople forced him to flee. Yet in spite of his doubters and detractors, Noyes had won some useful converts. Jonathan Burt, who had converted after hearing Noyes preach at a revival, invited Noyes to live on his property on Oneida Creek in New York to take charge of a group that he and a few other families had formed. Noyes and his Putney followers traveled to New York to establish the Oneida Association in 1848 (Noyes 7). Noyes eventually changed the name of the settlement to the Oneida

Community and embraced their status as a Bible Communism, modeled after the communal society of the disciples after the death of Christ where they held their possessions in common (Robertson 16). Once the group was in place at Oneida, spouses were also held in common as complex marriage was practiced by the entire community. The Handbook of the Oneida Community published in 1871 explains: We have left the simple form of marriage and advanced to the complex stage of it. The honor and faithfulness that constitute an ideal marriage, may exist between two hundred as well as two; while the guarantees for women and children are much greater in the Community than they can be in any private family. The results of the complex system we may sum up by saying, that men are rendered more courteous, women more winning, children are better born, and both sexes are personally free. (56-57) The Oneidians came to view the system of complex marriage not only as a moral imperative against selfishness, but also as the preferred method of creating an ideal family setting for breeding and raising children. Noyes' experiment in selective breeding was analyzed much later, in 1923, by his descendants Hilda Herrick Noyes, M.D., and George Wallingford Noyes with the article "The Oneida Community Experiment in Stirpiculture." They date Noyes' first statement of intent with regard to stirpiculture as being published in February, 1849, but explain that the experiment was not enacted on the commune for twenty-seven years because community members were busy "working out the immediate problems of its new order of society" (Noyes and Noyes 78). The community members found themselves in a position to practice scientific propagation beginning in 1868 as the community became financially stable. Selection of candidates was performed by a central group of community members who were closest to and most trusted by Noyes. The experimental

group they chose from consisted of fifty-three women and thirty-eight men who signed an oath agreeing to follow the requirements of scientific propagation in 1869. In the agreement signed by the women, they promise to simultaneously be “if necessary, martyrs to science” and “‘living sacrifices’ to God” (Special Love - Fogarty 25). As communicated and carried out by Noyes, the demands of God and science were entwined. The community members were expected to achieve moral perfection by subjecting their will to God’s appointed leader on earth, Noyes, and physical perfection for their species by deferring their personal preferences and passions to the findings of science. Noyes believed the return of Christ took place in 70 A.D. According to his interpretation of certain passages in the Bible, following the return of Christ, the Christian church would strengthen itself and eventually overtake the world, ushering in a state of heaven-on-earth. By his reasoning, the church had evolved for almost eighteen hundred years, and he clearly intended to assist its progress significantly. As explained in the 1871 Handbook of the Oneida Community, the understanding that the second coming had already occurred should cause believers to reexamine the beliefs and the goals of the communistic society established by Christ’s disciples after his death, resurrection and ascendance. Also, this knowledge “invites us all to a course of improvement such as will raise society to the present heavenly standard” (48). Noyes claimed that perfection was a moral imperative in the wake of Christ’s return, and his establishment of Oneida was a step in the direction of reestablishing the Garden of Eden. According to Noyes, a perfect society could not exist unless it was composed of perfect citizens. Hilda H. Noyes and George W. Noyes explain that, in his quest for perfecting humans, John Humphrey Noyes was targeting four “departments of human nature,” spiritual, intellectual, moral, and

physical in order from innermost to outermost. Noyes held that God would perfect these components beginning with the innermost, and that eventually this perfection would be displayed in the outermost physical level (377-378). Yet Noyes' interest in breeding was beyond these characteristics. As explained in the April 3, 1865 issue of *The Circular*, the Oneida Community newsletter: What special quality or qualities did the Lord breed to in selecting Abraham and his descendants? Evidently two: that is, receptivity to inspiration and obedience...But is this the end of improvement by selecting and laws of breeding? We think not. On the basis of the perfection which Christianity offers in its social unity and its exclusion of selfish fashion, we may force a superstructure to be reared of scientific procreating, tending to develop every child that is born into the godlike symmetry of an immortal." (343) The promise of perfection is claimed as essential to the Christian doctrine (and also implicitly to science), and thereby the Oneidans justify forcing societal structures to adjust to the breeding of a child with "godlike symmetry." These would have been strong and almost sacrilegious terms to more traditional Christian groups, but the Oneidans contended that they were attempting to fulfill the will of God with the instrument of science. Selection of "superior" community members for breeding had the potential to alienate members who were not chosen. Pierrepont Noyes, one of the products of the stirpiculture experiment and John Humphrey Noyes' own son, explains in his memoir *My Father's House* that one "socially poisonous feature of eugenics" is that while it involves the selection of a few superior males, the experiment necessitates considerably more females than males, and so selection of females to participate in scientific propagation is more lax. Aggressive sentiments could potentially arise from males not deemed qualified for propagation. John Humphrey Noyes handled this problem

by allowing all males to procreate, but limiting the number of their children to one. Pierrepont Noyes states that, to the best of his recollection, almost every male community member had one child, but unless they were specifically included in the stirpiculture experiment, they had no more than one (Noyes 10). In the beginning of the experiment in 1869, the "central members" at Oneida, the community members most intimate with Noyes, were in charge of selection of couples for stirpiculture. Then on January 25, 1875, Noyes appointed an official Stirpicultural Committee of six men and six women. This plan, as opposed to stirpiculture selection dominated by Noyes, would have not only been a less tyrannical way of choosing which couples should breed, but it would have also given female community members a voice in the proceedings. Yet according to Oneida Community biographer Constance Noyes Robertson, this "Stirpiculture Committee" was just a formality - "in reality John Noyes directed the mating, and in certain cases forbade it" (339). However, the power soon shifted from the nominal Stirpiculture Committee to again being in the hands of the central members of the Community in April 20, 1876 (Robertson 339). This coincided with John Humphrey Noyes stepping down as leader of the Oneida Community and passing control to his son Theodore. He was sixty-four when he decided to withdraw from the energy-consuming aspects of theocratic leadership of the community. Until he stepped down in this regard, Noyes was the final word in stirpiculture selection, and his influence was felt even after he had passed leadership of Oneida on to Theodore Noyes. Hilda Herrick Noyes and George Wallingford Noyes, the authors of the 1923 retrospective report "The Oneida Community Experiment" give the following facts about how stirpiculture selection took place: The death rate among the 81 selected parents was 22.5 percent less than that of the group as a whole. The fathers of

the stirpiculture children averaged 12.2 years older than the mothers. This indicated a certain amount of survival selection among the fathers, and accorded with the principle that the quality of offspring is more dependent upon the selection among fathers than mothers. During a typical period of about fifteen months, out of 51 applications from men and women desiring to become parents, 9 were vetoed on the grounds of unfitness, and 42 were approved. Exact statistics as to the number of combinations brought about by the initiative of the Committee are not available, but it is probable that about 25 percent of the births were of this character. Although nearly as many fathers as mothers were engaged in the experiment, 30 of the fathers had only 1 child each, while the remaining 10 had an average of 2.8 children each. (82-83) Although the health of the participants involved in the stirpiculture experiment was examined and the quality of the fathers especially emphasized, those in charge of selection were less intrusive than one might expect after reading Noyes' emphatic essay *Scientific Propagation*. After all, only twenty-five percent of the stirpiculture breeding pairs were hand-picked, while the rest were proposed by individuals who ostensibly already had each other in mind. Of the couples that applied to have children together, only nine out of fifty-one were rejected, which indicates that the committee does not seem to have been extremely critical in choosing among its committee members to procreate. Most couples' wishes to have children together were granted. However, personal memoirs of community members reveal the emotional turmoil experienced by couples who were not allowed to procreate. The diary of Victor Hawley reveals his personal heartache at not being allowed to have a child with Mary Jones, with whom he was in love. Love exclusively between two people was forbidden at Oneida on the grounds that it was selfish and immoral, so community

members already kept an eye on the couple for that reason. The couple's plans to have a child together were thwarted many times by those in charge of stirpiculture selection; the committee called the couple unfit because they worried that Mary was emotionally and physically weak (Fogarty 40). Their special affection for each other coupled with their perceived unfitness as a couple caused leading community members to enforce their separation. Mary is assigned another stirpiculture partner, but Victor writes in his diary that when they suggest other women for him to have a child by, his response is: "I was sick at heart & never want a child & death would be better than living as I am" (Fogarty 88). He experienced intense depression during his years at Oneida as a result of his forced separation from Mary and because those in charge of stirpiculture kept rejecting their request to have a child. Yet even if they had been allowed to have a child together, they would not have had the liberty of enjoying a relationship with him or her. The children born at Oneida were not considered to belong to their biological parents. Noyes sought to abolish the affection between parents and their children for the same reason that he opposed special love between married couples - they were considered sinful on the grounds that such exclusive, intimate relationships are idolatrous. Yet Noyes placed more importance on the relations between the sexes (of the general and not the exclusive variety) than on adult affection towards children. In the January 29, 1863 edition of *The Circular*, a special committee presented *General Principles for the care of infants and children*, the first of which was: "The love and care of children in parents should not supplant or interfere with their love as man and woman. Amativeness takes precedence of philoprogenitiveness, and parental feeling becomes a usurpation when it crowds out a passion which is relatively its superior" (Robertson 319). By placing the care of children

below sexual intimacy in the order of importance of relationships, the Oneidans seem to undervalue them as emotional beings even while they are emphasizing their importance as the results of the stirpiculture experiment. Community restrictions on parent-child relationships naturally caused emotional upheaval. According to Constance Noyes Robertson, when children turned two years old, they were separated from their mothers and placed under the care of nurses and teachers in "The Children's House," a building separate from the adult quarters (Autobiography 311). A first-hand account of the pain of mother-child separations is given by Pierrepont Noyes in his childhood memoir *My Father's House*. Pierrepont was the product of a stirpiculture union between John Humphrey Noyes and Harriet Worden. Worden, who moved to the community with her widowed father and sisters in 1849, was considered intelligent and talented enough by Noyes to serve for a time as editor of *The Circular*, the community newsletter (Fogarty 49). Her personal qualities also made her a prime candidate for participation in the stirpiculture experiment - even for producing offspring with John Humphrey Noyes himself. Yet her high status in the community and her commitment to Noyes' principles did not lessen the pain of separation from her children. Pierrepont Noyes was only allowed to visit his mother about once a week. While he relished the "petting and peppermints" his mother gave him, he dreaded the moment when he would be taken back to *The Children's House* (66). He describes being deprived of one of these visits as a small child as a punishment, and how after throwing an outraged tantrum, a worker at the *Children's House* "seized me and shook me and commanded... 'Be still, Pip, be still!'" Then firmly, 'You have evidently got sticky to your mother. You may stay away from her another week'" (66-67). This memory evidently left Pierrepont with a lasting painful

impression as it stuck with him even when he wrote the memoir as an adult. However, he focuses instead on his mother's emotional agitation at having to so often be apart from him. He notes that his mother so doted upon him that she was accused of idolatry (72). Whether maternal affection is natural or societal, it could not be drained from community women like Harriet Holten. The care of children born at Oneida (particularly of the children produced by stirpiculture) was of importance to the Community, and their meals, education, play, and Bible study were well-supervised and well-provided for. With regard to the children's education, the January 4, 1869 edition of *The Circular* as printed in *Oneida Community: An Autobiography* insists: "Now don't think we try to indoctrinate [the children] in some sectarian creed, or even in the Bible. No, we mean their principles of religion shall be based on positive science, so that they will never have to unsettle them" (Robertson 324). Those in charge of the upbringing of the Oneida children wanted to make it clear that they were not feeding them religious propaganda. In order for the children to have understood Noyes' take on Perfectionism, they would have to receive a more broad-based education (like the one Noyes himself pursued), including principles of modern science. If the children were taught to reconcile their religious beliefs with science, their faith would be impervious to attacks from materialists. After spending their childhoods being instructed and entertained by teachers in the Children's House, young adults at Oneida began to be initiated in the practices of the community. According to *Oneida Community: An Autobiography*, after the age of twelve and until seventeen, boys were sent to do odd jobs around the Community, while girls aged ten to twelve were sent to perform housework (Roberston 311). In addition to helping with the commune's upkeep, adulthood at Oneida meant joining Noyes' unusual social structure. By age

twelve, girls were already involved in the sexuality of the community. His niece Tirzah Miller's diary indicates that Noyes himself was engaged in sexual relationships with twelve-year old girls (Fogarty 19). According to Robert S. Fogarty who published Tirzah's diary along with commentary, Noyes countered the public accusation that he had engaged in sexual relationships with underage girls with a private paper explaining that he did not ask the ages of the girls he slept with. Noyes does not try to dispute having had sexual relations with young girls. Instead, he defends himself by saying: "I have never had sexual intercourse with anyone who did not give what I considered evident tokens of a mature state of passional and physical development" (Fogarty 43). Noyes' liberal definition of sexual maturity made the Oneida Community's experiment in "free love" even more problematic for outsiders. In spite of clear objections about the commune's sexual practices, community members and their descendants and supporters continued to claim that Noyes' stirpiculture theories had been a success. In "The Oneida Community Experiment," Hilda Herrick Noyes, M.D., and George Wallingford Noyes, A.B. conclude of the stirpiculture experiment that the children born under Noyes' plan were free of major deformity and illness. Of the fifty-eight stirpiculture births, only six had died by the time they wrote the report in September, 1921, and those were predominantly due to accidents and communicable illnesses. Also, only two of the remaining stirpiculture children had developed subnormally in any way: one grown stirpicult had physical coordination problems due to a cerebral hemorrhage at the time of his delivery, while the other had slight mental retardation as a result of a blow to the head. (380) However, the health of these Oneida children could be attributed to other factors. The children were obviously sheltered from the world at large, growing up in a community where they were

cared for and well-supervised. Maren Lockwood Carden, author of *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*, notes that the health and success of community members could “be attributed solely to environmental factors” such as the exercise and nutritious food that came along with the farm environment. Also, the children at Oneida, being born and raised in an isolated community, were kept away from epidemics that would affect the rest of the populous (65). Stirpiculture at Oneida has not been widely regarded as a valid scientific experiment or a victory for eugenics. Martin Richards, author of “Perfection people: the Oneida Community and the Eugenics Movement” examines why the Oneida experiment has not been taken more seriously. He states that even at the height of the eugenics movement during the 1920s, the paper “The Oneida Community Experiment” was “largely ignored” (66). Richards attributes the lack of scientific interest in Oneida among eugenicists to its deviant sexual practices and to the socially subversive practice of complex marriage (66). Also, the sample size of children born under the methods of stirpiculture at Oneida was small, and too many confounding factors (such as the environment of Oneida) interfere with viewing stirpiculture as a valid scientific experiment. The fact that it subverted traditional societal structures also keep it from being a victory for eugenics since, even though eugenics as a science won many converts in the coming years, Noyes’ philosophies were for the most part viewed as bizarre and dangerous. Despite its detractors, some of the children born under the principles of stirpiculture at Oneida were hugely successful. Yet the ultimate financial success of the Oneida Community perhaps rested more on good business choices and practices than on the superiority of its members. As described in *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*, Oneida initially became financially stable by

supporting the business of community member Sewell Newhouse. Before joining Oneida, Newhouse supported himself by building animal traps of his own design. As they were particularly effective (and since he had established his business in the neighboring village of Oneida Castle), he continued to receive orders even after he joined the Oneida Community. Other members helped manufacture the traps, and the profits went to the Community. This business had become successful by the mid-1850s, and members also participated in the more small-scale manufacturing of items such as suitcases, chains, and brooms to make extra money. Although other Community businesses were adopted and became somewhat prosperous, the prominent business remained the manufacture of animal traps. By the mid-1860s, the Community had grown wealthy enough for its members to hire outside workers to assist in Oneida's odd jobs and industry. In 1864, the Community's net worth was 185,000 dollars, and by 1880, it was 600,000 dollars.

(Carden 41-42) As the Oneida Community's worldly business was thriving, its religious ideals were dissolving. A number of factors contributed to the breakup of the Community, including dissatisfaction with the new leader, Theodore Noyes, tensions caused by the separation of special lovers and parents from children, dissension over certain sexual practices, etc. The Community also became divided over John Humphrey Noyes' practice of initiating virgins into complex marriage. As Community members began to question Noyes' right to initiate young girls sexually, the entirety of his status as a morally perfect theocrat was also called into question (101). Those who joined Oneida did so as disciples of John Humphrey Noyes, with the idea that he was a man who had achieved perfection and was called by God to bring about a heaven on earth. As his authority was questioned, the foundations of the Community began to crumble. As

detailed in *Oneida Community: The Breakup, 1876-1881*, Noyes left the Community on June 23, 1879, and fled for Niagara Falls in order to avoid an oncoming lawsuit for the practice of complex marriage and for the frank discussions of sex in Community publications that were deemed "obscene literature" by locals (Robertson 117). Noyes wrote from Niagara suggesting that the members of Oneida abandon complex marriage. On August 28, 1879, the Community officially ended their practice of complex marriage and began marrying, usually someone with whom they had procreated. As described by Pierrepont Noyes in *My Father's House*, the "final blow" to the commune came in June, 1880, when Community leaders decided that a true communism was not possible in a community with separate families: "They had discovered that family interests insidiously undermined attachment to group interests, and that family selfishness grew apace until it destroyed the spirit of self-abnegation so essential for communal living" (171). The desire to form "special attachments" and look out for one's own children overwhelmed the spirit Noyes had professedly tried to create of total selflessness and equal love for all. On August 18, 1880, a committee traveled to Noyes' new location at Niagara Falls to present plans to form a joint-stock company from the otherwise crumbling Community. Noyes approved, writing that if the committee continued to handle the proceedings with a fair spirit, "we shall achieve a victory more splendid than any that I dared to hope for" (In *My Father's House* 175-176). Pierrepont Noyes remarked about his father's behavior here: "...my father gave an impressive demonstration of that genius for interpreting misfortune or disaster as victory...Could anything be more dramatic - a man now in his seventieth year, standing amid the ruins of his lifework, shouting 'Victory!'" (176) In 1881, the Community was transformed into the "Oneida Community, Limited," wherein

) some of the old successful businesses of the Community's (like fur trapping, silver plating, and tableware) would be continued under the management of previous Community members. Although John Humphrey Noyes died in 1886, the company's president John R. Lord used what he believed were messages from Noyes' spirit to direct the company's business by 1889. Under his leadership, the company's finances deteriorated. The company had its first surge of success under the leadership of its younger generation. One of the leaders in this movement was Pierrepont Noyes, who "[w]ithin a few years...rose through the company's ranks; shortly before he became thirty, he was in effective, if not formal, control of the Oneida Community, Limited" (Carden 128). Pierrepont remained with the company until 1950, when he resigned as president. Under his guidance, the tableware business prospered, and it remains successful to this day. Pierrepont, son of John Humphrey Noyes and a product of stirpiculture, as well as his compatriots who grew up at Oneida and contributed to the prosperity of Oneida Community, Ltd., are perhaps some evidence that a measure of success came from the Oneida experiment. Yet John Humphrey Noyes' goals originally reached beyond worldly success. While some Christian sects believe that God will establish his kingdom in the afterlife, in a separate plane of being, Noyes preached a human-established "heaven on earth" for those willing to subject themselves to the rigors of achieving a Christ-like perfection. Noyes' social conscience, his desire to dissolve the evils of society, demonstrated itself through his promotion of stirpiculture. Noyes' ideas about stirpiculture most notably differed from Francis Galton's theory of eugenics in that he saw strategic breeding as a means to not only the physical improvement of the human race, but most importantly as a path to its spiritual perfection.

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