

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

3-1-2001

Tangled Webs (And Stories) Of Love: Review Of "Trials Of Intimacy: Love And Loss In The Beecher-Tilton Scandal" By R. Wightman Fox

Bruce Dorsey

Swarthmore College, bdorsey1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruce Dorsey. (2001). "Tangled Webs (And Stories) Of Love: Review Of "Trials Of Intimacy: Love And Loss In The Beecher-Tilton Scandal" By R. Wightman Fox". *Reviews In American History*. Volume 29, Issue 1. 78-84. DOI: 10.1353/rah.2001.0005
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/64>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



PROJECT MUSE®

Tangled Webs (and Stories) of Love

Bruce Allen Dorsey

Reviews in American History, Volume 29, Number 1, March 2001, pp. 78-84 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rah.2001.0005



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rah/summary/v029/29.1dorsey.html>

TANGLED WEBS (AND STORIES) OF LOVE

Bruce Dorsey

Richard Wightman Fox. *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. xii + 419 pp. Illustrations, appendixes, notes, bibliography, and index. \$30.00.

"I would like to tell my whole sad story truthfully." Elizabeth Tilton, 1875.

Since the earliest years of the nation, Americans have held a voyeuristic fascination with the peccadillos and foibles (whether real or imagined) of their clergymen. At one time or another, scandals have erupted over the reputed "free love" practices of Matthias the Prophet and John Humphrey Noyes, the plural marriages of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the pederasty accusations that ended Horatio Alger's brief ministry, the extra-marital children born to Elijah Muhammad, and the affairs of televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert, to name only some of the more famous examples. If real-life scandals were not enough, Americans could read the lurid imaginings of lascivious priests in the *Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, and tales of lust and ruin in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, and Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*.

Yet no clerical scandal before or since can match the drama and attention generated by the trial of Henry Ward Beecher. The nation's most famous and popular preacher stood accused of committing adultery with Elizabeth Tilton, wife of his friend and protégé Theodore Tilton. Between 1872, when rumors first circulated in Brooklyn and Victoria Woodhull publicly exposed Beecher's illicit affair, and July 1875, when the civil trial ended in a deadlocked jury, newspapers throughout the country feasted on the tales of moral hypocrisy, marital love gone awry, and mutual accusations of "free love" and infidelities among the nation's elite liberal Protestant reformers. The *Chicago Tribune* once devoted thirty-two full columns of the paper to reprinting the personal correspondence between Elizabeth and Theodore Tilton, while the *New York Times* ran more than one hundred stories and nearly forty editorials about the scandal during the six months leading up to the trial. The trial itself lasted another six months, including 112 days in the courtroom, producing a

transcript that exceeded a million words. Henry Ward Beecher and Theodore Tilton each spent over two weeks on the witness stand. In the end, the trial ended without a verdict, and the press and populace alike were left to determine for themselves whose side of the controversy they believed.

Richard Wightman Fox turns our attention again to the scandal that symbolized for most of the twentieth century the hypocrisy of a Victorian bourgeois culture. There are many reasons for historians to remain fascinated with this episode. It spills over with topics like streams criss-crossing on their way to the sea: the displacement of Calvinism by a new gospel of sentimental love; the height of bourgeois pretensions to moral purity exposed; leading figures in the woman's rights movement (Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony) as principals in the lives and stories of the Tiltons and Beecher; spiritualist Victoria Woodhull's role in exposing the affair and using it to confirm her free-love philosophy, while Beecher's friends induced Anthony Comstock to have her arrested on obscenity charges; and finally, the meanings of love, marriage, and infidelity in an age that glorified and spiritualized matrimony.

This charmingly inventive book will not close the case or solve the mysteries behind the Beecher-Tilton scandal. From the beginning, Fox admits that he has no new insights to offer his readers into the "whodunit" mystery surrounding the scandal, confessing that he discovered no new evidence, no "smoking-gun letter or diary" that would confirm beyond question that Beecher was guilty or innocent of the adultery accusation (p. 4). Instead, Fox sets his gaze upon the stories told and retold by the persons involved in the scandal over the course of several decades in which their lives intersected and collided. It is these tales—presented in letters, poems, novels, sermons, lectures, and gossip—and not some "truthful" recreation of a notorious affair that Fox wishes to reveal. In his words, "The most basic facts of the Beecher-Tilton Scandal, and of the loving that preceded it, are not to be searched for *in* the stories. They *are* the stories" (p. 9).

Trials of Intimacy offers its readers a chance to listen carefully to stories that appeared in countless different forms and venues, at various times and with disparate plots. Through this close reading of stories, presented as a forward- and backward-moving collage of voices (although Elizabeth, Theodore, and Henry's are always central), Fox unveils the cultural meanings behind the words, images, and ideas of the white, urban middle-class. It is the way these bourgeois Protestants speak of love that remains the central theme in what Fox styles their "kaleidoscope of stories" (p. 310). Love, after all, gave Beecher the spiritual instrument to loosen the chains binding American Protestants to Calvinism. His fundamental doctrine was what Fox calls "proliferating loves," a spiritual love that knows no bounds and grows exponentially with

each expression and companion. Both Theodore and Elizabeth Tilton absorbed this ideal of love while raptly attentive at Beecher's weekly sermons, then each aspired to achieve the true meaning of this sentimentalized love in the very real and physical love that they shared with Beecher, and with each other. In a bygone era where writing, especially writing letters, was the preeminent form of lovemaking, it is not surprising that these consumers and purveyors of sentimental prose turned to storytelling to provide meaning for the loves they desired and the loves they lost.

Attention to stories that emanated from the scandal's protagonists also leads Fox to analyze the interaction between fiction and the meanings that Beecher, the Tiltons, and their contemporaries attributed to this affair. Both Henry and Theodore penned sentimental novels, with Beecher reading drafts of his *Norwood* (1868) to Elizabeth at the beginning of their intimacy, and Theodore using his *Tempest-Tossed* (1874) to tell everyone of Elizabeth's blameless purity. But it was novels about love, ministers, and adultery that provided a framework by which most observers interpreted the scandal. It was Elizabeth's reading of Charles Reade's best-selling novel, *Griffith Gaunt* (1866), that convinced her to confess the sin of her relationship with Beecher to Theodore, and Theodore's misreading of that novel that led him to assume that Catherine Gaunt's sin (and hence Elizabeth's) was adultery, when in fact it had been only an excessive devotion to her priest. Theodore's attorney insisted in his closing arguments that "Hawthorne had described the actual experience of Henry Ward Beecher" when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* (p. 312). Fox is not the first historian to stress the connection between fiction and the Beecher-Tilton affair. Ann Douglas first suggested in 1977 that the scandal "was from start to finish a literary affair."¹ However, in contrast to Douglas who understands the Tiltons and Beecher as essentially confused and deluded by the fictions they read (and hence fictions themselves), Fox entertains the notion that sentimental fiction comprised a part of their reality, a means of making sense of love, God, and the everyday world, and therefore constituted part of a lost culture as much as lost loves.

Trials of Intimacy can be situated alongside a growing body of historical literature directing an attentive ear to the stories people tell, and to the relationship between those stories and historical events and social dramas that might otherwise be told only through the voice of the historian. The now nearly dormant debate about a "revival of narrative" has been replaced by the powerful examples of a handful of intrepid scholars who have chosen to experiment with forms of historical writing and find creative ways to allow stories to teach readers about the past alongside social and cultural interpretation. The recent work of James Goodman, John Demos, David Farber, Richard Price, Simon Schama, and Robert Rosenstone suggest just a few of

those models.² Critical to these works are diverse voices and multiple points of view within each book's narrative. Fox contributes to that agenda, recognizing from the outset that the scandal cannot be told as merely the story of the two male protagonists, or even crudely as "add Elizabeth and stir." His work primarily concerns the stories of the Tiltons and Beecher, yet Fox continually incorporates numerous other voices, both inside and outside the courtroom, who made this scandal such compelling drama. Certainly, there are other stories and other voices to be heard beyond those selected by Fox. Readers will find in Laura Hanft Korobkin's recent work, for example, a complementary analysis of the storytelling (and sentimentalism) that pervaded the Beecher-Tilton courtroom, through the voices of the principals' attorneys.³

Significantly, Fox also experiments with conventions of narrative himself, producing a work that is not a forward-moving history. He jumps from story to story and from year to year throughout much of the book. The first five chapters progress in roughly reverse chronological order from 1907 back to 1870, unearthing the public and private tellings and retellings of love, betrayal, and loss, while the last two narrative chapters start at the beginning of this love-triangle, and disclose the earliest stories of friendship and love. "The irony of a largely backward-moving narrative like mine," Fox confesses, "is that it is actually, much more than we realize, the way life is lived" (p. 7). Honestly, this strategy makes the book more difficult to read than, say, Paxton Hibben's biography of Beecher or Barbara Goldsmith's recent history of the episode from Victoria Woodhull's perspective.⁴ Yet it is well worth the extra effort. By jettisoning a conventional narrative, Fox lets the scandal unfold as the principals actually experienced it, in the self-reflection and retelling of personal stories before a public audience. Korobkin confirms Fox's strategy, suggesting that neither party's version of what really happened in the Beecher-Tilton affair "could be presented or can now be read as if, like a Victorian novel, it were a linear, sequential narrative of fictional 'truth.'"⁵

Fox's choice of subverting narrative conventions allows him to tell stories without moral lessons and to sidestep issues of whether Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton ever engaged in sexual intimacy. For instance, where previous biographers have latched onto Beecher's defense of Grover Cleveland, accused of fathering an illegitimate child, as either proof of Beecher's adultery or evidence of his vindication, Fox sees this as Beecher's final story, as a process of narrative self-creation that artfully elides the issue of Beecher's actual conduct. Beecher presents himself as a persecuted innocent, heroically battling the serpents and "infamous lies" that "seek to crush him" (p. 48).

Within this pastiche of stories, *Trials of Intimacy* invites its readers to see the gendered behavior of Victorian middle-class northerners through a more

complex lens, with special attention to white bourgeois men and manhood. Beecher appears not as the catalyst for a "feminization" of evangelical Protestantism, but as the inspiration for masculine enterprise and fellowship in the business of churches and religious publications. Theodore Tilton and Henry Bowen (who single-handedly funded both Plymouth Church and Beecher's meteoric rise to fame) lived for years with apparent knowledge of Beecher's adultery with their wives, only to let their anger eventually seep out through the networks of gossip and rumors that supposedly characterized a woman's social sphere. And men like Beecher and Tilton developed passionate, physically intimate, and loving relationships with each other. Theodore testified, "I loved that man [Beecher] as well as I ever loved a woman" (p. 66), and "he was the most charming man I ever saw. . . . Mr. Beecher was my man of all men" (p. 108). Henry insisted in court that he not only frequently kissed Theodore, but that "I kissed him on his mouth" (p. 118). And after the trial Beecher affirmed that he would still go on trusting and loving men. As Fox concludes: "The difference between the love-friendship Henry had with Theodore in the early 1860s and the one he had with Elizabeth in the late 1860s may be less than we imagine" (p. 186).

Fox also argues that bourgeois sentimental culture encouraged a form of spiritual androgyny. The challenge becomes more difficult when Fox tries to situate Elizabeth Tilton as a character as central to this drama as the two male protagonists. She was the silent party throughout much of the trial, muted by a legal fiction that defined a civil trial for adultery as a property dispute between one man and another. Nearly four months into the trial, she rose and tried to read a statement to the court and was summarily denied by the judge. A historian's explanatory powers are severely tested when confronted by such silences, since speculation often outweighs certainty. For instance, Fox claims that Theodore's decision to publish all of Elizabeth's letters to him "was to her an unspeakable act" that piqued "her feelings of anger and abhorrence" toward him (p. 102). Yet there is no evidence to confirm this supposition, or to surmise with certainty any emotion on her part, whether it be anger, hatred, or sadness. But Elizabeth's silences did not keep others silent about her. Newspaper reporters were enamored of her. For both Beecher and Theodore Tilton, she came to be all that they symbolically attributed to the meaning of the word "woman." She was pious and saintly, yet also sensually powerful; she was at once childlike and matronly. Beecher described her as "the strangest combination I ever saw. You see her one time and you would think her a saint on earth; at another time she is a weak, irresponsible being and anything but a saint" (pp. 40-41). Theodore wrote to Elizabeth, "If you should ever appear to me anything less than the ideal woman, the Christian saint that I know you to be, I shall not care to live a day longer" (p. 257).

Will the history of this scandal be written again soon? Perhaps not, but Fox's own highlighting of stories and their significance in this case intimates that many other stories remain to be told, stories that emanate from diverse points of view and different voices. Fox has no desire for this book to be the last word on the Beecher-Tilton affair, hoping instead that future authors will find it "a useful stepping stone for further exploration" (p. 7). Indeed, despite Fox's skillful retelling of the scandal, many questions still beg for answers. The triangulation of relationships in Victorian friendships, loves, and even enmities is an unmistakable, and yet unexplained, feature of white middle-class life revealed in this book. Not only did Beecher and Theodore and Elizabeth Tilton all experience intimate loving relationships with one another, but triangles of love, hate, gossip, and dependence were legion in the social world of mid-nineteenth-century Brooklyn. Henry Bowen, Theodore Tilton, and Beecher formed a triumvirate of jealousy and ambition within the new big business of religion, publishing, and reform. Bowen bitterly seethed over his late wife's deathbed confession of her love affair with Beecher. The Beecher-Tilton scandal (as well as Fox's book) is filled with triangular relationships: Elizabeth Tilton, her mother (Mrs. Morse), and Beecher; Frank and Emma Moulton and Beecher; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Theodore Tilton—the list could go on. In other words, the trilateral relationship that existed between the Tiltons and Beecher was neither exceptional nor unusual. Those relationships beg the question: What was it about the volatility of emotions, or the sociability of intimacy, in this Victorian culture that demanded this playing off one person against another, or filtering one intimate relationship through the mill of another? Was it a reflection of the highly reified and constricted gender expectations of the Victorian era that left no opportunity for intimate love, whether between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and a man, to stand on its own?

One minor problem that is easily overlooked in this otherwise excellent book is Fox's penchant for hyperbole when describing the extent of popular engagement with the scandal. His claims that "every sentient American had followed" the scandal and trial, or that "everyone" fixed upon the scandal some prescience of future developments, are certainly untenable (pp. 1, 25). Even Fox admits that nearly half of Brooklyn's population at that moment was foreign born, leading one to wonder what recent immigrant workers had vested in the outcome of the Beecher-Tilton conflict. Nevertheless, this is a superbly crafted cultural history of the mid-nineteenth-century middle class, and it is a superb example for historians contemplating an experiment with forms of historical narrative. The Beecher-Tilton scandal remains a compelling story, especially now that we begin to listen to the many interwoven stories that comprise it.

Bruce Dorsey, assistant professor of history, Swarthmore College, is the author of "A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States," *Journal of Social History* 34 (Fall 2000), and is completing *Gender in the City: Antebellum Reformers in the Urban North* (forthcoming from Cornell University Press).

1. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), 290.

2. James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (1994); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (1994); David Farber, *Chicago '68* (1988); Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (1990); Simon Schama, *Dead Uncertainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (1991); Robert A. Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters in Meiji Japan* (1988). See also James Goodman, "For the Love of Stories," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 255-74; James Goodman, "Telling the Stories of Narrative History," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 44 (August 14, 1998): B4; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347-76; and the early issues of the journal, *Rethinking History*.

3. Laura Hanft Korobkin, *Criminal Conversations: Sentimentality and Nineteenth-Century Legal Stories of Adultery* (1998).

4. Paxton Hibben, *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait* (1927); Barbara Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (1998).

5. Korobkin, *Criminal Conversations*, 25.