

The forgetfulness of sex: devotion and desire in the courtship Letters of Angelina Grimke and Theodore Dwight Weld.

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"The Forgetfulness of Sex": Devotion and Desire in the Courtship Letters of Angelina Grimke and Theodore Dwight Weld

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Abstract

In his love letters to Angelina Grimke in 1838, Theodore Dwight Weld did something one would not expect from a man courting a woman: he repeatedly desexed his fiancée in his rhetoric (and at moments even imaginatively remade her into a man) by conflating her with a male friend of his, Charles Stuart. Lacking contemporary examples of egalitarian marriages to emulate, the abolitionist couple repeatedly invoked their close homosocial friendships as models for the heterosexual marriage they hoped to build. This essay

argues that this surprising feature of the abolitionist couple's courtship letters was a central element of their effort to radically reform marriage and sex. Considering conventional practices of marriage and sex foundational to male power over women in antebellum America, Weld and Grimke saw their personal romance as a site of social engineering where they might redeem both; their courtship was an opportunity to remake marriage into an feminist institution and sex into an egalitarian act they shared and enjoyed as equals. In their love letters, the spiritually minded couple labored to "forget sex" (which for them encompassed by both the inextricably connected categories of gender and sexuality) and see each other only as unsexed souls and not as sexed bodies.



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