STUDY QUESTIONS FOR HOROWITZ, *ATTITUDES TOWARD SEX IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA*

These study questions are intended to encourage you to think about the readings carefully and to help you to prepare for in-class discussion and for your papers (the second writing assignment may or may not be on this book). I recommend that you examine the study questions before reading the text, and that you keep the study questions at hand while reading. You are not expected to turn in written answers to the study questions.

On Friday, October 31, we will discuss the two broad questions listed directly below this paragraph (questions A and B). The more specific questions that follow these should help you clarify important issues as you read and to draw comparisons between the documents; this is obviously relevant to thinking about the broad questions intelligently and with evidence. You are under no obligation to have an answer for each of the specific questions 1–27, but should keep them at hand as you read and try to formulate answers to at least a few. You should also take a look at the questions at the back of the book (pp. 164–165).

(Note: if you picked the Intro to this book as a job, you may pick either question 5 or question 7.)

**Questions for discussion on Oct 31**

A. In what ways can you see the impact of the Enlightenment in these writings? Can you also see that impact in the most religious of these writings? How?

*Note: Please consider the question broadly. When you think you have some answer, think some more—try to push beyond the obvious. Challenge yourself!* If you’re confused about the Enlightenment and what that meant, reread what your textbook says about it, and reread your lecture notes from 9/24.

B. How do these writings reflect the broad changes in American society in the early 19th century, as discussed in your textbook and in lecture (especially on Oct 27 and 29, though you are welcome to draw on previous lectures as well)? Consider aspects such as changes in the economy, changes in work, changes in the family, urbanization, the relationship of men and women, the rise of philanthropy, the Second Great Awakening, and whatever else you can think of. Try to a) find specific examples in the texts that you can relate to specific aspects of societal change and b) think broadly about how people reacted to change, and were instigators of that change, and how that shows in the philosophies presented in these documents.
The Introduction

1. In the Preface and in the Introduction, Horowitz explains that she has organized the documents under four different frameworks that can be seen as “four voices in a conversation” (p. vii) about sex in 19th-century America. What were these four frameworks? Why does H. think it is useful to view them as voices in conversation? Can you link these four frameworks to broader intellectual, cultural, or economic changes in 19th-century America?

2. On p. 1, Horowitz asserts that attitudes toward sex form an important historical topic, at least for antebellum (i.e., pre-Civil War 19th century) America. Does she ever explicitly explain why they are important? Why would they be important?

3. According to Horowitz, what explains that we generally think of the 19th century as “Victorian”—i.e., prudish, having a negative, suspicious, or condemning attitude toward sexuality?

4. Are the documents and issues discussed in this book characteristic of, or applicable to, the whole United States and everyone in it, or of particular regions or groups? How or why?

5. What limitations were there on women’s activities in the early 19th century? What was the “key legacy” that the American Revolution had left to white women? Why was this important?

6. Why did the birthrate fall in the United States in the 19th century?

7. How does Horowitz explain the sudden suspicion of youthful sexuality in general and masturbation in particular? (Can you find examples in the documents about masturbation (docs 9–12) to support her explanation(s)?)

8. What does Horowitz mean by saying that “most of the writers of reform physiology were medical irregulars” (18)? How does this tie in with broader political developments of the time?

9. What was phrenology?

10. How did the commercial availability of sexual information and entertainment change in the 1840s and 1850s? What various factors contributed to that change?

11. What was the Comstock Law? When was it passed? What did it say? What consequences did it have?
The Documents

12. Compare *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* (doc 1) and Lyman Beecher’s writings (docs 2 and 3). How do they show differing attitudes toward sex?

13. What does Frances Wright think of marriage? Why? (doc 4) Does her lecture on reason further illuminate her thoughts on marriage? If so, how? (doc 5)

14. How do the writings of Frances Wright (docs 4 and 5) and Robert Dale Owen (doc 6) illustrate new middle-class concerns in the early 19th century? Can you see some such concerns in Lyman Beecher’s writings as well (if from a different angle)?

15. Compare Charles Knowlton’s (docs 7 and 12) and Sylvester Graham’s writings (docs 8 and 9). What similarities do you find? What differences? What if you were to compare them to Beecher?

16. What assumptions regarding physical love and its relationship to a) positive social feelings and b) spiritual love (or at the least, a happy marriage) do you find in the writings of the Fowler brothers (docs 14, 15, and 16)?

17. Compare the writings of Nichols and Gove (docs 19 and 20) with those of Frances Wright (docs 4 and 5), and then with the writings of the Fowler brothers (docs 14–16) and of Hollick (doc 19). What similarities and differences do you find?

18. How does the piece that Mary S. Gove coauthored with Nichols (doc 20) compare to her earlier writings (doc 11)?

19. How would you characterized the story *Lives of the Nymphs no. 11* (doc 23)? Is it a morality tale? A piece of entertainment? An advertisement? What does Horowitz say (in the introduction) about pieces like this?

20. How did the “racy” publications in sporting magazines et cetera change over time? (docs 23–32)

Mulling over the material

21. In what perspectives does the issue of contraception appear in these writings? That is, which authors consider it a good thing, which authors consider it reprehensible, and why? How do religion, science, and moral philosophy or societal considerations influence the authors’ conclusions?

22. How do Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen, and Charles Knowlton define virtue, or goodness? How is this different from how Lyman Beecher (docs 2 and 3) or William Andrus Alcott (doc 13) seem to define good? How does it
compare to the definition of morality offered by Nichols and Gove (doc 20)?

How do the authors’ definitions of virtue appear to affect their conclusions
about the proper attitude toward, or control of, sexuality? What different
traditions do these authors draw upon, and how do they fit into the early
19th-century context in which they lived?

23. How is religion changing in the early 19th century U.S.? What evidence can
you see of this in the writings of the various authors in this collection?

24. How do the different authors in documents 1–20 (Wright, Owen, Knowlton,
Graham, Alcott, et cetera) view the need for sexual restraint (and of tem-
perance, i.e., enjoyment that stays within “bounds” and is not excessive,
in general)? In cases where the author does not explicitly state his or her
position on that question, can you guess what the position might be? On
what basis can you make the guess? How do the authors themselves jus-
tify their positions—i.e., what is their evidence for, or reason for believing,
that restraint is good (or bad, as the case may be)? Why do you think the
question of restraint was an issue? Can you relate it to broader historical
developments at the time?

25. What characterizations of or assumptions about women can be found in these
writings? What differences and similarities do you find in different authors’
characterizations/assumptions? How would you explain the differences and
similarities (note: this calls for some speculation, obviously)?

26. What evidence do you find in these texts that the relationship between the
sexes might be in a process of change? How is marriage characterized in
these various texts?

27. Consider the concepts of “natural” and “unnatural” as expressed or alluded
to in these texts. How do the various authors understand “naturalness”? How
does that show in their recommendations for social norms, sexual prac-
tices, or moral guidelines?