



Shameless: The Visionary Life of Mary Gove Nichols

Jean L. Silver-Isenstadt

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Though little known today, Mary Gove Nichols (1810-84) was once one of the most infamous and influential women in America, a radical social reformer and pioneering feminist who preached equality in marriage, free love, spiritualism, the health risks of corsets and masturbation, the benefits of the cold-water cure, and, above all, the importance of happiness. A victim of emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her first husband, she made it her life's work to ensure that other women were better informed about their bodies and their opportunities than she had been. After leaving her first husband, she became a national figure in the 1840s and '50s by giving anatomy lectures around the country, attended by thousands of women, in which she openly discussed the needs, details, and desires of the female body. With her second husband, medical writer and social reformer Thomas Low Nichols, she embarked on an unprecedented intellectual and professional collaboration, and together they challenged the inequities of conventional marriage, demanded the right of every woman to have control over her body, and advocated universal good health.

Considered too radical and mercurial even by their fellow reformers, especially after their conversion to Catholicism, Mary and her husband were often excluded from the very social causes they had helped to found—just as they have been from the histories of their era. In *Shameless*, Jean Silver-Isenstadt offers the first biography of this remarkable woman who paved the way for such activists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Sanger. Drawing on the extensive public and private writings of the Nicholises and their peers, Silver-Isenstadt vividly portrays Mary Gove Nichols' courageous life and visionary intellect, revealing the rich diversity of opinion within nineteenth-century America's social reform movements and uncovering the inspiring story of a woman who dared to live by the utopian principles she advocated.

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