
ONE

“THE END OF THE RAINBOW,
MY POT OF GOLD”

*The Queer Erotics of Purity Balls
and Christian Abstinence Culture*

As a gay man who has managed to skirt most of the weddings he’s been invited to—a boycott against not just marriage’s legal and political exclusion of queers but the economic inequities embodied and maintained by the purchase of wedding gifts—I was initially surprised to discover the extent of father-daughter fetishizing in and beyond the world of purity balls. Of course, I had little reason to be surprised. Certain reactionary heteronormative ideals are hypostatized in any wedding ceremony, though perhaps in religious ceremonies more so than in civil ones. The father giving away the bride, the father-daughter dance, and the now less common tradition of the bride’s family paying for the wedding (a modern version of the dowry)—all these features underscore the transition of a woman from her parents’ household to her own. To put it less nicely, what’s being enacted is the handing off of the bride, an exchange of the bride-as-property between two men—the father and the groom.¹ This late in the day, such observations are far from newsworthy. In the essays “Thinking Sex” (1984) and “The Traffic in Women” (1975), Gayle Rubin radicalized Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work on women’s historic status as property. Influenced by Rubin’s

work, innumerable historians, social scientists, and feminist, Marxist, and queer critics have mapped out these and corollary ideas. This chapter examines how the purity ball sexualizes the father-daughter “couple,” already a particular aspect of mainstream heterosexual marriage culture, and turns that pairing into the linchpin of conservative Christian marriage subculture. It also analyzes how the disproportionate cultural burden placed on this relationship produces a claustrophobic, incongruous marriage of giddy eroticism and ascetic zealotry. Having examined father-daughter purity balls, this chapter turns next to what appears to be a blind spot in such ceremonies but is amply addressed by Christian purity literature: the purity movement as it targets young men. Specifically, I discuss how Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker’s *Every Young Man’s Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* (2002), one of the more popular Christian purity advice manuals for young men, tries to corral male sexuality and how the forces it summons to accomplish that end—(homo)phobia and (homo)eroticism—alternately enforce and problematize that project.²

As merely one of the numerous Christian purity manuals published over the past decade or so, *Every Young Man’s Battle* is one book in a series created by Arterburn, founder of New Life Ministries (formerly New Life Treatment Centers) and host of the radio show *New Life Live*. The spate of companion volumes by Arterburn, Stoeker, and their purity-shepherding surrogates include *Every Man’s Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* and *Every Man’s Marriage: An Every Man’s Guide to Winning the Heart of a Woman*, both by Arterburn and Stoeker; *Every Heart Restored: A Woman’s Guide to Healing in the Wake of a Husband’s Sexual Sin*, by Stoeker and his wife Brenda; *Every Young Man, God’s Man: Confident, Courageous, and Completely His* and *Every Day for Every Man: 365 Readings for Those Engaged in the Battle*, both by Arterburn and Kenny Luck; *Every Woman’s Battle: Discovering God’s Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment*, by Shannon Ethridge; and *Every Young Woman’s Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World*, by Ethridge and Arterburn. Many of these titles come with companion workbooks and guides for talking to one’s children about sexual purity. For use as a lens to investigate Christian purity culture as it might be experienced by gay men, *Every Young Man’s Battle* seems optimal for a number of reasons: while a significant majority of purity manuals address a young female audience, *Every Young Man’s Battle* is exemplary of those that target

young men. Another factor is the mini-empire Arterburn has managed to build over the past twenty-two years, geared toward issues of sexual purity and fidelity for an evangelical constituency. In addition to offering workshops based on the *Battle* series, New Life Ministries oversees a network of 840 counselors nationwide, runs Christian drug and alcohol rehab programs and treatment centers for women and girls with eating disorders, and hosts conferences annually drawing attendees in the hundreds of thousands. Finally, Arterburn's series seems best to represent the religious content, ideological underpinnings, risible techniques, and—most importantly—the queer erotics that are my focus. By "queer erotics" I mean the unintentional eroticism of purity subculture, impulses both beyond its control and of its own creation that seem to undermine the declared ends of Christian purity culture and create spaces for queer desires (in the sense of gay and more generally nonnormative) to inhabit, stow away, burgeon, and perhaps obstruct hegemonic regimes of identity, desire, and personhood.

Composed in 1949 by Bobby Burke with lyrics by Horace Gerlach, the song "Daddy's Little Girl" was repeatedly recorded by various groups and artists throughout the 1950s and 1960s. After the Mills Brothers' initial recording in 1950, Al Martino's 1967 version proved the most popular, reaching #2 on the Billboard Adult Contemporary Chart. Michael Bolton released his own version as recently as 2005. A success in its own right, the song's longevity has been enhanced through its popularity as a song for the father-and-bride dance at wedding receptions. What makes the song and its association with this staple of heterosexual culture more disquieting is the barely veiled subtext of its lyrics. Even if mainstream wedding ceremonies do not feature the bride's father handing over a purity ring to the groom as proof of her virginity, any reception at which the bride and her father dance to "Daddy's Little Girl" says, or implies, much the same thing. The song's lyrics offer much for analysis, especially from the vantages of Marxist, feminist, and queer theory. The first line makes explicit how concerns typical of these perspectives are yoked together in this moment: "You're the end of the rainbow, my pot of gold, / You're daddy's little girl to have and hold." However one might describe conventional parent-child intimacy—as supportive, pedagogical, protective—here

it becomes claustrophobic, infantilizing, and sexualized. By mirroring the marriage vows between bride and groom, the phrase “to have and to hold” suggests that the bride has been married to her father till now. Referring to a daughter as “the end of the rainbow” both installs a frankly oedipalized heterosexuality as the cultural telos and locates that telos safely beyond the reach of homosexuality. The line also exposes heterosexuality’s simultaneously acquisitive and solipsistic nature, its drive for extension and replication. Further, the overdetermined desire for the bride, sexualized cynosure of both father and groom, daddy and darling, lends itself to a genocidal reading of the “*end of the rainbow.*” The fantasy embedded here of the symbolic erasure or actual destruction of gays and lesbians is what Eve Sedgwick describes as “the phobic . . . trajectory toward imagining a time *after the homosexual,*” “the hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it” (128, 127). Calling a daughter her father’s “pot of gold” and “a precious gem” underscores the centrality of marriage to capitalism and recalls the cross-cultural misogynist tradition by which women’s virginity possesses cultural and monetary value, even if such value accrues to her father and subsequently her husband rather than to herself. Furthermore, the song associates daughters with two American holidays that are at once Christian and capitalist (“you’re the spirit of Christmas,” “the Easter bunny to mommy and me”)—Christmas and Easter being occasions marked as much as by shopping and chocolate consumption as by rituals commemorating the birth and resurrection of Christ.

By comparison, the rituals enacted in purity balls state overtly the same core ideas, literalizing the commitment to virginity for the most part only symbolized in mainstream weddings by the white wedding dress. Cementing a conservative arc for female life, the purity ball amalgamates structural elements of proms with those of weddings. Nancy Gibbs, writing for *Time* in 2008, describes one such event held by Randy and Lisa Wilson in Colorado Springs and attended by father-daughter “couples” with the daughters “rang[ing] in age from college down to . . . 4-year[s]-old” (par. 1). “Kneeling beneath raised swords” meant to symbolize the father’s pledge to protect his daughter’s chastity, the girl vows to abstain from premarital sex and accepts a purity ring representing this pledge. This is the same ring that her father will take off and hand to her groom at her wedding, crudely literalizing the “traffic in women.” The fathers recite a promise “before

God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the areas of purity,' to practice fidelity, shun pornography and walk with honor through a 'culture of chaos' and by doing so guide their daughters as well" (par. 5). Though written in 1998 at the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, the vows remain relevant for the Wilsons as well as for others, like Stephen Arterburn, who view mainstream culture as a morass of pornography and permissiveness that potentially threatens all youth and all marriages. Along with the obvious phallicism of the raised sword, such ceremonies typically include a "21st century version of a chastity belt": the girls receive a locket, and their fathers get the key to that locket (Gibbs and Johnson par. 3). Next to the wedding-like vows, the purity ball's prom-inspired elements may seem comparatively harmless. Father-daughter dances have existed for quite some time as an element of wedding receptions and as middle school social activities. Yet whether the Wilsons' innovation has been to introduce a chastity pledge into such events or, rather, to make explicit a subtext that had long been lurking there, father-daughter dances become irredeemably creepy when promises surrounding the integrity of a girl's hymen are involved.

According to Gibbs, purity balls are a growing phenomenon: "The Abstinence Clearinghouse estimates there were more than 4,000 purity events across the country [in 2007], with programs aimed at boys now growing even faster" (par. 6).³ Purity balls focus almost exclusively on young women, their fathers, and an atavistic estimation for virginity.⁴ Comparable events for young men and boys are less common but usually involve a pledge to help young women remain pure by not pressuring them to have sex. This is scarcely the same promise female attendees are making. An industry that *does* focus on both male and female teenagers, if still not quite equally, is the abstinence movement, a necessary apparatus for keeping the ideal of purity within reach. First federally funded in 1999 under President Clinton, abstinence-only programming received increased spending under George W. Bush. After an initial budget of \$50 million under Clinton in 1999, President Bush sought to award these programs over five times as much in 2005, or \$270 million, an amount Congress cut back to \$168 million. This brought the running total of expenditures to \$900 million in five years. At the same time, abstinence initiatives have met some roadblocks despite support from political and evangelical conservatives. Early on, three states turned down the funds because of the strings

attached: not discussing safe sex or homosexuality.⁵ By 2008 more than half the states refused federal funds. The same period saw a cycle of actual or attempted cuts and increases. Although the federal budget reduced abstinence education funding by \$14.2 million in 2009, a measure in the House proposed restoring \$50 million to such programs the following year. President Obama's 2011 budget proposed eliminating abstinence-only educational spending and redirecting it to "a pregnancy-prevention initiative [to] finance programs that have been shown in scientific studies to be effective"—the implication being that abstinence-only programs, despite protests from abstinence advocates who cite their own favored studies, have not been scientifically proven to be effective (Lewin par. 6).⁶

The moment of abstinence education's greatest public prominence, however, may have been the congressional reports and hearings in 2004 and 2008 unmasking the wealth of misinformation and bald-faced lies that such programs presented to children and teenagers as facts.⁷ Some of the more outlandish mistruths revealed in the 2004 report by Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-CA) were that "HIV . . . can be spread via sweat or tears," that "condoms fail to prevent HIV transmission as often as 31 percent of the time," that "abortion can lead to sterility and suicide," and that "half the gay male teenagers in the United States have already tested positive for the AIDS virus" (Connolly pars. 6, 1). These falsehoods aim to scare gay, protogay, and curious children and teens away from same-sex bodies, terrifying them into remaining in the erotic, psychological, and social closet. Eleven out of thirteen abstinence programs investigated grossly inflated condom failure rates and mentioned gay sex solely as a surefire path to HIV infection. The lies were thus homophobic and increased the likelihood that, when abstinent teens eventually did have sex, it would inevitably be unsafe. More striking than the six years and repeated debunkings it took to curtail federal funding of such manifest nonsense is the way abstinence-only curricula marginalize gay sexuality by discouraging condom use and the discussion of safer sex practices. As Abbie Kopf writes on *Change.org*, the abstinence-only mantra of no sex before marriage ignores the fact that "some youth are not allowed to get married. For adolescent gays, these sex-ed classes aren't only a complete waste of time but a tacit acknowledgment that gay relationships aren't valid or acceptable. . . . [T]he ACLU reports that most [programs] 'address same-sex behavior

only within the context of promiscuity and disease.' In fact, some curricula go as far as to say that HIV and AIDS are simply the results of the (sinful and dirty!) homosexual 'lifestyle'" (par. 3). While certainly guilty of misleading teens in general, abstinence-only classes enact the erasure of queer teens in particular.⁸ This erasure goes deeper, however, than repression; as this chapter suggests, purity culture may also have, despite itself, protective or generative repercussions that shield queers in ways at ideological odds with the official homophobic, heteronormative project.

Purity culture easily embraces abstinence education, invisible or pathologized queers, and quasi-romantic father-daughter coupling. Pledging to purity may backfire in any number of ways, of course. Straight teens coddled in the purity movement may lapse, have sex, get pregnant, or contract sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. Purity culture thus *needs* compulsive masturbating straights and over-sexed, disease-ridden fags as much as, if not more than, it needs abstinence education for its catalyst and propulsive nucleus. Yet to pin these fixations on conservatives alone is unfair; they saturate the culture at large. What abstinence programs and queer exclusion do, and what the purity ball crystallizes in the fetish of the daddy-daughter "couple," is subtend and nourish that cynosure of heteronormative culture across the political and religious spectrum: the married couple. The religious Right's notable addition has been to position fathers as *sexual* guardians. Theirs is not a generic, prefeminist model of fathers shielding their daughters from young male libidos but a frantic eroticizing of the father-daughter relationship, placing filial affection and eroticism in such close proximity. When filial eroticism threatens to become a substitute for parent-child affection, the fervor of embattled fundamentalism, fueled by McCarthy-era gender roles, creates a volatile mixture of puritanical zeal and patriarchal consolidation. The ultimate and most tragic victims are not simply the daughters and the fathers but the sons and mothers, as well as young gays and lesbians, who have been excluded from the picture. All are held in thrall to the wounding agenda of purity and abstinence culture, although it is difficult to know whether they will ultimately be more damaged by the mandated, misdirected erotic energies or by the dehumanizing interdiction of the elemental, healthy human desire for sex. Here, abstinence culture exemplifies Tim Dean's assertion that "purity may be considered as an

enemy of the intellect” (5). “Sexual adventurousness,” Dean continues, “gives birth to other forms of adventurousness—political, cultural, intellectual,” and it’s precisely this sort of adventurousness, autonomy, and self-nourishment that the stifling parameters of purity balls and abstinence education seem designed to extinguish (5).⁹

If purity balls focus on controlling female sexuality, purity culture seeks to co-opt human sexuality as a whole. The tactics for corralling young *male* sexuality in particular, however, fail to erase straight or gay eroticism entirely and tend to engage both in surprisingly visceral ways. One of the more popular male abstinence guides is Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker’s *Every Young Man’s Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* (2002). With his wife Shannon Etheridge, Arterburn has spawned an entire line of books for young and adult men and women along with workbooks for church group discussion. Before turning to how Arterburn and Stoeker address homosexuality, it’s worth noting some of the rhetoric used in counseling male teens on purity. While enraging, ridiculous, and infuriatingly backward to anyone with a marginally realistic attitude toward sex, Arterburn and Stoeker’s advice seems counterproductively erotic in both content and style. Although it would be next to impossible for *Every Young Man’s Battle* to extol sexual purity *without* talking about sex, one is likely to be surprised at just *how much* sex gets talked about. Erotic accounts of spirituality are nothing new; think Donne’s Holy Sonnet XIV, “Batter My Heart, Three Person’d God,” Edward Taylor’s *Preparatory Meditations*, or the vision of St. Teresa of Ávila immortalized in marble by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Yet when sex migrates from metaphor to sweaty, throbbing reality as it has for present-day abstinence advocates, the relationship between eros and spirituality, between body and mind, appears radically less stable. The technologies of mediation and management *Battle* assembles in its fight against sexual desire are calculated to extinguish human happiness and fulfillment under any auspices other than church and spouse, the prescribed outlets of proper social interaction and sexual pleasure. More striking, and more relevant to my project, is *Battle’s* attempt, on the one hand, to corral all sex that is not vaginal-insertive, heterosexual intercourse with an opposite-sex spouse and, on the other hand, its sexualizing of God, spirituality, and purity itself. Even though much of the time Arterburn and Stoeker seem to target a putatively straight male audience, their

ideal for heterosexuality both obliquely and directly invokes a world that gay teens—or anyone with a less than truncated view of sexuality—are likely to find inhospitable.

There are both practical as well as ideological reasons for *Battle's* attempt to enclose human sexuality rather than exclude it. Practically speaking, young men are naturally sexual (read: sinful) beings, so it would be unrealistic to act as if sex and sexual desire can be escaped altogether. The ideological motivation, which also turns out to also be a practical one, is institutional sustenance. If either abstinence education or the conservative church is to survive, it requires an enemy. In addressing young men, *Battle* portrays sex as a monster that must be tamed early, lest one carry adolescence's enslaving habits of masturbation and lustful fantasy over into the sanitary preserve of married adulthood.

One of the chief weapons in *Battle's* arsenal against "sexual bondage" (38)—a phrase the authors use without apparent irony—is deflating the raging male libido by "starving" it of stimuli (143). "Bouncing the eyes," or looking away from arousing sights, supposedly deprives the male libido of the excess excitement that leads to impure thoughts and impure actions, to fantasy and pre- or extramarital sex (145). Arterburn and Stoeker's examples of what their young male audience is likely to find stimulating reveal a somewhat dated sensibility. A man's eyes, they write, are

ravenous heat-seekers searching the horizon, locking on any target with sensual heat [such as:] Young mothers in shorts, leaning over to pull children out of car seats . . . Foxy babes wearing tank tops . . . reveal[ing] skimpy bras . . . Joggers in spandex, jiggling merrily down the sidewalk . . . [and] Smiling secretaries in low-cut blouses . . . (42)

Even if Arterburn and Stoeker, the authors of this passage, are writing about their own erotic touchstones, the references seem a bit mature for a teenage audience. As a telling miscalculation, this failure to connect with the audience is indicative of other tensions within the abstinence project. Averting teenage eyes is meant to starve the male libido of visual stimulation's "sexual chemical highs" (63). In yet another inadvertent nod to the unexamined Freudian underpinnings of their own

(dis)engagement with sexuality, Arterburn and Stoeker imply that “kill[ing] every hint of immorality” effectively requires blinding oneself, like a Christianized Oedipus (53).

As a substitute or perhaps a consolation for proscribed sexual contact with other people, *Battle* consciously eroticizes the relationship with God. Reflecting on his own struggle with impurity, Stoeker declares that “in order to get closer to Him, I had to be not so close to the women in my life” (20). If it remains unclear how to resolve this apparent conflict *after* marriage, Arterburn and Stoeker present sexual impurity, which creates “distance from God,” to their teen audience as antithetical to “intimacy with God” (109, 169). As one girl confesses to her youth pastor, “I’m really in love with Jesus, but I have to admit that sexual temptation is still a struggle for me with my boyfriend” (48). Remarkably, the language employed by *Battle* to describe a relationship with God partakes of the lustful or erotic: “I’d ignored [God’s] voice repeatedly as He prodded me in these areas” (43). That an erotic reading of such a line might feel strained is entirely to the point and lends weight precisely to that kind of reading. The somatic intensity of the abstinence movement, its fervid clasp of the body, guarantees that a determination to repudiate the pleasures of the body, to suppress much of what is *bodily* about our bodies, is accompanied by a vigilance for lustful eruptions and excretions. Even when *Battle* does not speak directly about sex, sexuality courses throughout the text. This is not a simple return of the repressed, since sex, here, has not been repressed. To the contrary, it has been enshrined—demonized, yes, but barely contained. If the demon of lust, the beast that pulses within our loins, were not liable at any moment to break out, to overtake and destroy us, the conservative Christian abstinence movement would lack an essential engine or at least would have to discover some other fuel. One particular phrase *Battle* uses more than once to describe the cost of sexual impurity is viscerally sexual: “God is aching for you to be one with Him”; “God is aching for you to be one with Him, that He might use you. He wants to give you a voice in His kingdom. He wants to show you His power” (22, 80). Expressive of unsatisfied sexual longing, the word “aching” in conjunction with “to be one with” someone evokes the accrued tension of blood-engorged genitals and of undischarged fluids and foreshadows their release through orgasm. But in this case those organs and climax are attributed to God. Historically speaking,

sexualizing divine possession is far from an innovation, but one gets the sense from Arterburn and Stoeker that this is not what they're aiming for.

In an autobiographical passage where Stoeker, Arterburn's coauthor, relates his own struggle with pornography and premarital sex, he casts God in the role of jealous lover. In a quest to steel one *against* sexual desire, the somatic pungency of Stoeker's language would seem counterintuitive: "When I . . . couldn't put my porn magazines down, He still loved me. When I lay in the arms of another Saturday-night date, He still loved me. When I continued to ignore him, He chased me desperately, aching to reach me before it was too late and my heart was hardened" (20). Besides the tone-deaf sublimation of a "hardened" heart for the foresworn tumescent penis, what strikes one as novel is not so much the analogy between sexual and spiritual ecstasy but the resurgence of erotic feeling's darker embodiments, in this case sado-masochism, in the midst of sexual suppression. Stoeker's sinful premarital sex life is put on hiatus when "the [Holy] Spirit" prevents him from getting an erection during a date. From romantic rival, God the Father turns into controlling Daddy: the Spirit "whispered into my heart, 'By the way, I did that to you. I know it hurt you, but this practice can't be tolerated anymore in your life. You are Christ's now, and He loves you'" (14). *Battle* grounds its sexophobic mandate squarely in scripture: "You are not your own; you have no right [to have sex as you wish]" is anchored to "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" from 1 Corinthians (160, 60). In the highly sexualized content of *Every Young Man's Battle*, God's persona as dominating Daddy unites gay and straight sensibilities of the capital-D term: Freud meets Plath meets Folsom Street. Rather than make the patently false claim that gay sex and S&M are coextensive, or that sado-masochism forms gay men's exclusive province, I mean simply to convey the queer or nonheteronormative coloring of S&M and how this cognitive dissonance with so-called Christ-built heterosexuality inches *Battle* closer than one would think it wanted to be to homosexuality, how it increases rather than diminishes its propinquity to queerness.

If the engrossing objective of *Battle's* project is "How do I get God to fill this desire in me?" the greatest obstacle to that goal is masturbation (131). Given the amount of time Arterburn and Stoeker devote to

masturbation—and they devote *a lot* of time to it—a more appropriate title for the book would be *Every Young Man's Battle with His Erection*. It might seem counterproductive to talk so much about the very same activity one is attempting to dissuade one's audience from, but that appears not to concern these authors. Unmarried adult or teenage men should not masturbate, since masturbation and its adjuncts of fantasy and visual stimulation lead one, to judge from the personal stories *Battle* compiles, into an abysmal spiral of addiction, isolation, shame. For single men, purity is defined as abstinence not just from sex with others but even sex with oneself: "When you're sexually pure, it means you're not seeking sexual gratification" (140). One wonders whether desire can be annihilated as thoroughly as intended here. One also has to wonder how a *married* individual is supposed to recuperate, much less reignite, the erotic life he has worked so hard to kill under the tutelage of abstinence culture. In being clear about the gauntlet that they're throwing down before young men ("to live without premarital sex . . . [and] without masturbation"), Arterburn and Stoeker portray masturbation and pornography as so ubiquitous as to be inescapable. "To put it bluntly," they write, "you're living in the era of masturbation. There's more masturbation today and more things to masturbate over than ever before. There are entire industries centered on the practice of masturbation. The porn industry wants you to masturbate compulsively so it can sell you products" (219). The passage is as unwittingly titillating as it is dourly naïve. While it's unlikely that, given the prevalence of internet access, *Battle's* teen readership is only now learning about the wealth of porn the internet contains, a passage like this manages to render porn's omnipresence and masturbation's ubiquity attractive rather than horrifying. Aside from the expected rehashing of nineteenth-century antimasturbation clichés of guilt, remorse, and addiction, *Battle's* authors seek to inculcate their audience with assertions about autoeroticism so risibly untenable that one finds it hard to imagine any reader taking any of this seriously, especially a teenager just embarking on the joys of self-stimulation. Arterburn and Stoeker proclaim flat-out that "masturbation . . . is not a real sexual encounter" (124). If readers are thinking "you must doing something wrong, then," the authors' more subtle, though equally bemusing point is that masturbation consists of "*false intimacy*" (120; emphasis added). In their lexicon, real intimacy comprises "sexual gratification . . . only from your wife" (140). And they do mean "*only*": ideally, they say, men

should not masturbate before *or* after marriage. Sex with their wives should implicitly meet all their erotic needs, at least those that the authors see as valid.

There's an even more consequential separation supposedly produced by self-pleasuring, however. "Habitual masturbation consistently creates distance from God," whereas a "close relationship with God will make [it] unnecessary" (109, 120). This theory goes further than the swapping of material pleasure for an emotional or intellectual one, a common move for spiritual asceticism. In the culminating chapter of a lengthy section devoted entirely to self-abuse, Arterburn and Stoeker go so far as to contend that the compensatory powers of spirituality are as capable as masturbation of providing tangible satisfaction. Men

have a baseline sex drive, there's no question. Dr. James Dobson stated in *What Wives Wished Their Husbands Knew About Women* that the human male, because of sperm production and other factors, naturally desires a sexual release every seventy-two hours or so. You're probably wondering what can be done about that. Is there a way to release that stuff [without sin]?

Thankfully, yes. While our body has this natural physical pressure for sexual release, God Himself has provided a built-in "relief valve," something with which you're familiar. Clinically it's called a "nocturnal emission," but long ago, in a dank, smelly football locker room, some kid decided to call it a "wet dream," and that name stuck.

The good news is that nocturnal emissions *can* work for you in your quest for purity. . . . [Y]ou might wonder how such dreams can work toward purity since some of these semiconscious flights of fancy can get pretty hot and heavy! But don't forget that those hot and heavy aspects arise from what you've been feeding your mind. . . . The same pure eyes and mind that keep you from actively seeking release during the day will limit the impurity that your mind can use in your dreams at night. These dreams will be dramatically purer in scope and content than you now realize.

Nocturnal emissions kick in naturally in response to your normal, natural sperm buildup. This means that the fixed part of your sex drive will be more or less taken care of by God's natural relief valve. (130)

Without explicitly invoking John Locke, *Battle's* authors nonetheless rely on their own version of the *tabula rasa*. Even though an unquantified baseline level of desire comes as standard equipment with the male mind (because of sperm production? God-given temptation?), they contend that anything beyond this comes from the outside. In a model that gives little credit to the generative faculties of the individual libido even without external stimuli, sexual fantasy is experienced only if one allows it inside the mind or actively seeks it out. Impurity in, impurity out. This scenario also fails to explain how, having joined the purity brigade, one is to rid oneself of *remembered* fantasies, those that have already been let in and that, no doubt, have helped one achieve more than one solo orgasm. It's Arterburn and Stoeker's reliance on the "relief valve," however, that's most troubling. As a guard against masturbation, this idea is useless and illogical: refraining from masturbation does not of itself guarantee a wet dream; further, it would seem difficult to distinguish self-stimulation during a wet dream from masturbation. Odder still is the notion of relying on an immaterial being for sexual pleasure. This is the point to which sexualizing purity, eroticizing abstinence, has led us: nocturnal emission elevated to divine ministration, a hand job from the Holy Spirit. Even if impossible, the idea seems calculated to inflict psychological damage, not so much by its sacrilegious character as by the retrenchment of human desire, the inhumane curtailment of a significant and natural portion of what it means to be human. This abridgement—this insistence that, on pain of damnation, one obtain sexual pleasure from a single, severely restricted outlet and nowhere else—paints the world as a largely frightening place. Other human beings, even those committed to purity, present possible threats and temptations. After years of fearing the corrupting touch of other people, one wonders how adequately sexuality within the sanitizing bonds of marriage is going to measure up. Will the pleasure have grown stale from lying so long fallow? It's disheartening enough that, as constructed here, the future of a young man who has abstained from masturbation promises a large dose of dullness in the form of safe, boring wet dreams that are unstimulated by even the blandest of fantasies and that relieve "pressure" without bringing much pleasure. What's worse—and, as the rest of this chapter discusses, what's pointedly burdensome for gay, protogay, and questioning youth—is these purity authors' treatment of homosexuality. Certainly, Arterburn and Stoeker deal with homosexuality in far less vitriolic terms than figures

like Fred Phelps or Jerry Falwell. Yet if we're to judge from their insulting, minimal attention to it, their view of homosexuality is that of something equally beyond the pale of the desirable, the imaginable, and the human. What may surprise us, however, are the possibilities purity culture affords for queer exploits *within* its confines, the fissures it might afford for living under and perhaps *through* its carceral strictures, if not advancing their erasure.

When purity advocates target homosexuality directly (and here *Battle* is fairly representative, perhaps even milder than some purity manuals¹⁰), homosexuality is alternately baited and pathologized. Sometimes, however, they end up courting it in spite of their best efforts, providing an occasional safeguarding recess. Even if these niches are far from hospitable and do little to undermine the larger hetero-Christian venture, any foothold capable of sheltering gay teens buys them time, space, and intimacy—affords them survival if not growth—even within the homophobic pressures of religious captivity. Such niches should trouble heteronormative as well as queer notions of the juncture and noncoincidence of the two identities, suggesting a disparity of ways such identities can be conceived and lived. While *Battle's* homophobic sorties are sometimes oblique, its authors are not above some old-fashioned gay baiting. Like most of their ilk, Arterburn and Stoeker fixate on polarized gender roles harking back to some bygone era conservatives tend to idealize, contrary to all evidence of memory or history. Without raising the topic of homosexuality directly, *Battle's* discussion of "manhood" versus "maleness" implies what they find wrong with it. *Battle* urges young Christian men to reject mere maleness in favor of "manhood," which they equate with being "*more than male*" (65). Manhood initially seems tied to stereotypical Western masculine traits; achieving sexual purity requires stoic self-control over one's desires and resistance to temptations. But at least one paradigmatic "manly" trait soon rears its head: obedience. "Acts of obedience often seem strange," the authors admit, "even illogical." What might appear a questioning of the commandment to purity turns out to be a rhetorical feint to make a decree reminiscent of boot camp. Regardless of whether a purity regimen strikes one as "illogical" by thwarting the body's natural appetites, one should man up, shut up, and accept the divine mandate. Those who question or waver are accused of a "lack of manhood" similar to that of Zedekiah, Arterburn and Stoeker's biblical gay-bashing proof text. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah before

its sixth-century BCE fall to Babylon, is described unblinkingly by *Battle's* authors as “the greatest sissy in the Bible” (74). The subheading of the section in which this appears reads “Don’t Follow This Sissy.” Supposedly, the authors are targeting only those young men who are “indecisive and fearful” in obeying God’s “standards” as sissies, but the homophobic resonance is about as subtle as a brick wall. While homosexuality’s relative invisibility in *Battle*, as well as the solipsism typical of heterosexuality, indicates that *Battle's* presumed audience consists of *straight* young Christian men, the unacknowledged gay teens among them are sure to receive the message with redoubled strength even though not explicitly addressed.

When Arterburn and Stoeker get around to addressing homosexuality head on, they do so almost as an afterthought, with a brief chapter just before the conclusion. Concomitant with a partiality for gender polarity is their pathologizing approach to nonnormative sexuality. Granted, their pathologizing partakes of a gentler style, free of fire and brimstone and characteristic of Focus on the Family’s mitigated approach since 1994.¹¹ Thus even if *Battle* dresses its discussion of homosexuality in the garb of pastoral care, the advice remains uncompromisingly intolerant:

We’re fairly confident there haven’t been many people for you to talk to regarding . . . same-sex attraction. And the fear of being discovered or rejected has no doubt kept you silent.

But the attraction is there. You didn’t choose to be attracted to men, but you are. You may have been molested when you were younger, and that started the feelings. . . . There are many theories about why you have the feelings you do. . . . We want to help you understand why you feel [that] way . . . and provide some hope for you. (224)

In short: we understand that you have these feelings. They are not your fault; they are the fault, rather, of someone else who failed you, took advantage of you somehow. (Note the staggering omission of the emotional and physical damage religious inculcation inflicts on its own prey.) But head straight to Exodus, and you can change.

It perhaps goes without saying that within such a narrative the impetus to change one’s sexuality—personally felt but responding to ideological and cultural pressures—suspiciously moves in one direction

only: from queer to straight. Regardless of reparative therapists' protestations that they are simply easing their clients' emotional distress by giving them what they want, the very offer of therapy to eradicate homosexuality would seem to violate an ethical standard of care. Far from an impartial course of treatment, reparative therapy, like ex-gay ministries, is beholden to a distinctly malicious homophobic agenda. And at base that homophobia is irreducibly religious. The therapy's very terminology ("reparative," "conversion") implies that homosexuality constitutes some damage or disease that necessitates repair and that homosexuals should and can be converted to heterosexuality. The latter notion is somewhat ironic, given the phobic stereotype that homosexuals recruit heterosexuals with unabating predatory fervor. If the notion of homosexuality's abnormality and destructiveness was not still validated by religious beliefs, and if religious beliefs were not largely exempt from criticism and rational debate, then gays and lesbians would be significantly less likely to see their homosexuality as a source of distress and view themselves as deviants in need of correction.¹²

Explanations for the origins of homosexuality have changed little in the United States since the gross psychiatric misapprehension of Freudian sexual theory following World War II: one is made gay by being molested by someone of the same sex or having an overbearing mother or a weak, absent father. No matter how many reputable studies produce findings to the contrary, religious conservatives harp on the myth that pedophiles are predominantly homosexual and seek to create more homosexuals by converting heterosexuals through molestation. A mother who is not the biblically prescribed doormat generates in her sons a "repulsion to women" and makes them "easy target[s] if they [are] approached by another man" (225, 226). And—contrary, one suspects, to the experience of any straight man raised by a single and/or lesbian mother—the boy's yearning for a strong male father figure somehow morphs into wanting to have sex with another man, in a misguided attempt to get "a feeling of maleness and connection to other men" (225). Is *that* what I'm supposed to be getting out of giving a blow job? It may enrich my sense of my own maleness or my own sense of gender performance, but I doubt the maleness I experience during this act is the maleness *Battle* depicts young men as ineptly searching for in the arms of other males. The abstraction of what many of us might understand or think we understand by "maleness" stands in tension with *Battle's* deployment of the term. Without defining it,

Arterburn and Stoeker silently legislate maleness as heterosexual. Likewise, proceeding as if the only modality of “connection to other men” is a nonsexual one attempts to invalidate the galvanic connection that protogay or experimenting Christian youth might derive from sex with another man. *Battle’s* gay teen readers, or victims, will find their queer sexual experiences at once appropriated and expunged and themselves characterized as “confused and searching men who long to know what’s normal and how to experience it” (226). Surely the “change” narrative’s most damaging lie is that, despite any environmental origins for homosexuality, the blame is laid squarely on one’s own shoulders, on a less than manly lack of willpower: “This is where your choices come in, because there’s much hope for you, if you choose it” (226). The bottom line is to accept one’s same-sex attractions but not to act on them. The choice is celibacy or heterosexuality, with no middle ground allowed.¹³

Reminding gays that they can change—more pointedly, that they must change because it’s what God wants—preserves the conservative Christian notion that homosexuals don’t really exist. There are no true homosexuals, that is, just ex-gays who haven’t been saved yet. It deserves note that the ex-gay gospel is simply another version of what queer theorist Eve Sedgwick calls the “overarching, relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture’s desire that gay people *not be*” (43). The message of “change” may be less superficially hateful than outright condemnation, but this more benevolent version of religious homophobia still seeks to deprive queers of rights enjoyed by their straight compeers. If gays and lesbians change, then they won’t exist anymore as a special interest group or a protected class. The bare idea that homosexuals *can* change—which edges, in eugenic fantasy, toward the potentiality of *all* homosexuals changing, no matter how ludicrous the scenario—erodes the rationale of having to argue about something as ridiculous as gay rights or as unsavory as gay sex.

Given the depiction of the purity battle as equally apocalyptic and insurmountable, *Battle* offers incredibly little in the way of concrete advice. Aside from arming oneself with “sword” and “shield” (respectively, a key Bible verse or two and a perimeter of purity created by “bouncing the eyes”), their only other substantial recommendation to deter heterosexually inspired lust is the company of other men. To be more exact, they instruct young men to find an “accountability group,” a church-based group of like-minded young men committed to purity. Such groups are effective, we’re told, only if participants are completely

honest. And even though sharing every impulse, every slip, is meant to guard *against* sexual lapses, this kind of "talking cure" seems just as liable to excite as it is to emancipate. Better yet, as if sensing the pitfalls of "a sympathy gathering where each person admits his failure again and again," the authors suggest an alternative that, especially if one is worried about "slips," sounds more worrisome still:

You may prefer a one-on-one, direct accountability partner, a male friend, someone older and well respected in the church—a person who can encourage you in the heat of battle and ask probing questions like, "What are you feeling when you're most tempted to masturbate?"

. . . Nearly any committed man can be your accountability partner. Let us caution you, however, from enlisting your girlfriend as one. That's a recipe for getting into more trouble. (126)

Because reputedly inept or absent male role models engender homosexuality as well as self-abuse, young men need someone to look up to. Yet it requires little imagination to envision accountability pairings as a recipe for disaster of another, homoerotic kind, the result of grouping together young men who, whether they're straight or gay, are all trying not to have sex or masturbate. Ideally, one would pick an accountability partner who is stronger in his purity than oneself (although, subconsciously, maybe not). Still, isn't *everyone* susceptible to sexual backsliding? Even while struggling to be pure, isn't a male accountability partner as likely as oneself to experience, and possibly yield to, the horniness buffeting the male teenage body, especially under the pressure of "probing" questions about one's masturbation habits? Apparently the danger of succumbing to *heterosexual* temptation, invoked in the caveat against choosing a *female* accountability partner, produces sufficient anxiety to create this rather obvious blind spot. I'm hardly suggesting that accountability groups or pairings will turn young men gay (as salacious as the notion might be; a gay porn film to that effect may already be in production somewhere). Rather, the accountability group exemplifies the claustrophobically homosocial world of abstinence—a *cordon sanitaire* closeted gay teens might find not only oppressive but also titillating. This model raises yet another specter for the abstinence crusade: duplicity. *Battle* acknowledges this

threat only in passing, recounting the admission of one young woman that “our youth group is filled with kids faking their Christian walk. They’re actually taking drugs, drinking, partying, having sex. . . . They pressure my values at every turn” (19). Yet what’s more problematic for purity advocates than covert peer pressure is the question of inauthenticity. It’s not just a matter of gays hiding out, or straight teens “slipping” sexually. Unless this anecdote reveals an anomaly, abstinence groups may be rife with teens who are indulging a host of sensual impulses and who are using the cover of Christian purity to do so.

It’s the *effects* of purity culture on gay teens, however, that concern me from this point, the more obvious effects of enclosure and distress as well as the unexpected effects of sustenance and defilement. This chapter attempts to substantiate some of the ways in which purity and abstinence culture veils, elides, distorts, and often simply erases gay teens’ existence. While abstinence culture’s exclusion of gay sexuality, except as a source of disease and unhappiness and a subject for conversion, might seem a wholly negative development, gay teen invisibility also provides a potential haven for exploring, off the radar, officially repudiated desires, fragments of selves, even new hybrid identities. Whether or not these impulses and cobbled-together selves prove durable or reliably pleasurable, they show the tenacity of queerness, its ability to find, if only provisionally, some fissure within an unforgiving landscape, its capability of forging an unanticipated, transformative amalgam of Christianity and queerness.

The lyrics of “Daddy’s Little Girl,” especially the line “You’re the end of the rainbow, my pot of gold,” can be usefully overlaid on the lives of closeted gay teens. (The position of openly gay Christians, teenage or otherwise, is addressed in chapter 3.) Most revealingly symptomatic of the relative absence of queer teens from abstinence curricula is what the lyrics miss, what they get wrong. The “pot of gold” for pure Christian male teens, in the official narrative of not masturbating, cultivating an anorectic libido and marrying a pure female may turn out to be less the “end of the rainbow” than a beginning of one. One sense in which this might occur stems from the *queerness* of all abstinent Christian young men. Barred from sexual contact with women until marriage, they are queer in the sense of not having gained entry to heterosexuality, to adulthood. Held as they are in a prolonged latency period, their heterosexuality is unachieved and uninhabited until the honeymoon. Quarantine among similarly deprived young men means