TRANSATLANTIC FREETHINKER, FEMINIST, AND PACIFIST: ERNESTINE ROSE IN THE 1870s

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Ernestine (Potowska) Rose’s life developed transnationally. 1 Born the only child of a Polish rabbi in 1810, she defied her father’s choice of a fiancé for her and left her homeland, religion, and family in 1827. Never returning, she lived in Berlin and Paris before settling in London in 1831. There she joined the Owenite socialist movement, where she met her future husband, English silversmith William Rose. The couple emigrated to New York City in 1836 and lived there until 1869, visiting Europe in 1856. In the United States, Rose became a well-known female orator, more famous in the 1850s than either Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Susan B. Anthony. She lectured and campaigned for freethought, feminism, antislavery, and pacifism. Even before she returned to England in 1869, she made “bonds across borders,” always stressing the international aspects of her work. “We are not contending here for the rights of the women of New England, or of old England, but of the world,” she declared at the first National Woman’s Rights Convention in Worcester, 1850. 2 Ten years later, at the 1860 National Convention, she repeated this assertion:

Our movement is cosmopolitan. It claims the rights of woman wherever woman exists, and this claim makes itself felt wherever woman is wronged. In England, great efforts have been made of late years, and great accessions have been made to the rights and liberties of women. The same thing is taking place in France and Germany, and, in fact, everywhere. 3


Inevitably, however, national contexts necessitated that different tactics and approaches prevailed. In the United States, Rose worked hard for married women’s property rights, beginning by carrying a petition around lower Manhattan in 1836. She deferred discussion of divorce until Stanton raised the topic in 1860, believing correctly that any mention of the topic would tar her and the women’s movement with the charge of “free love.” In Great Britain, however, the two issues became intertwined. When Parliament received petitions for property rights amassed by the feminists Rose had met in London, its members refused to act on them. Instead they amended Britain’s stringent divorce law in 1857, changing each divorce from requiring a separate Act of Parliament to allowing divorce for men if their wives committed adultery while women had to prove adultery plus another crime. The all-male legislature reasoned that since wives could now extricate themselves from the worst situations, they no longer needed property rights within marriage. Rose responded furiously to this maneuver. “The vitiated taste, the unblushing shamelessness exhibited by these civil and ecclesiastical law-givers in thus shielding and fencing around the depravity and corruption of their own sex, to the detriment of ours,” she wrote, “far outdoes in impudence the Mormons themselves, and is a disgrace alike to the age, the country, and the sex.”4 While New Yorkers achieved married women’s property rights in 1860, Englishwomen did not obtain them until 1882.5

When the Roses returned to England to live in 1869, such national and cultural differences ensured that her actions had different impact and influence in their new home than in the United States. Initially settling in Bath, which they despised because it had “not one free-thinker,”6 Ernestine Rose soon became involved in local political life. Parliament had recently passed a law allowing women who owned or rented property and had paid taxes for a year to vote and stand for office in many local elections. While the United States then restricted the suffrage by gender and age, Great Britain added home ownership or rental and tax payments to those requirements. Under them only about one-third of adult men qualified to vote in national elections. The Roses went to the first meeting in Bath to nominate female candidates for the School Board. Although many women attended, none spoke to the audience. “A lady” asked the chairman to read a widely publicized letter by Angela Burdett-Coutts, the wealthiest woman in England and a major philanthropist. Burdett-Coutts argued forcefully that although women could serve on sub-committees, they should neither hold public office nor participate in politics. This roused Ernestine Rose to address the gathering.7

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5 On this subject, see Lee Holcombe, Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England (Toronto, 1983).

6 Ernestine L. Rose, Letter, Boston Investigator, February 8, 1871, 2.

7 Ibid.
In 1870, women spoke publicly far less often in Great Britain than in the United States. “It required considerable courage then for a woman to sit on a public platform and actually to speak from one was considered almost indecent,” writes an English historian. Rose began by explaining that “I have for all my life-time been interested in the education of all parties, particularly in the education of my own sex.” She then asserted: “Yes, the world moves. Woman is actually beginning to be considered as a human being...who has influences beyond the boudoir, the ballroom, and the theatre, for those, until very recently, have been the only places assigned to her except the kitchen and the cradle.” Supported by cheers, applause and approving laughter from the audience, Rose argued that the United States could educate Britain on this subject:

There it is almost a settled fact that woman is a human being; that she has a mind, and that that mind requires cultivation; that she has wants and needs, which wants and needs require assistance. Hence, we are over there — don’t be frightened at the name — a “woman’s rights” people...and remember that “woman’s rights” simply means “human rights”....

Rose swayed the meeting, which then nominated two women to run for positions on the board. Finding them “quite unprepared with any plan for future action,” Rose encouraged these candidates to hold another meeting where they would state their views. Overcoming their dislike of “the publicity of such a course,” Rose gave another “one of her stirring and eloquent addresses, which roused the meeting to a pitch of enthusiasm quite unusual for a decorous English audience.” The two women were then elected. A few weeks later, Rose spoke again at a Conference of the Women’s Suffrage Movement in London, receiving praise from the English atheist newspaper, the National Reformer:

The speech of the meeting was made by...Mrs. Ernestine L. Rose of New York. The good old lady, with her white curls, her erect, healthy looking body, her clear, distinct voice, her occasional quaint phrases, her stern determination, and her real genius as a speaker, won from those present a far more hearty and lengthy tribute of applause than was accorded to any one else.

These speeches launched Ernestine Rose as a lecturer in Great Britain, as well as introducing her to numerous new reformist friends. One of the female nominees in Bath was Ann Ashworth, a member of a large radical family. Her uncle, the Liberal M.P. Jacob Bright, succeeded

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10 Ibid.
11 National Reformer, May 7, 1871, reprinted in the Boston Investigator, May 24, 1871.
in getting the bill for women’s local suffrage passed, in addition to supporting married women’s property rights and women’s national suffrage. Her aunt was Priscilla Bright McLaren, head of the Edinburgh Women’s Suffrage Society. In the spring of 1871, Rose spoke in Bristol as well as again in Bath before she and William moved to London in April.

In London, the Roses were befriended by a number of members of the radical, feminist, and freethought communities. Among them were the Owenite editor, George Jacob Holyoake, whom they had met in 1856, his brother Austin, a printer and author, and Moncure D. Conway and his wife, Ellen. Conway was a reformist minister who invited Ernestine Rose to speak a number of times at his extremely liberal South Place Chapel. Raised in a slave-holding Virginia family, he rejected his heritage early on, converting to both antislavery and Unitarianism in his twenties. In 1864 he and his wife, who shared his views, moved to London, and in 1868 he was one of four speakers at the first British public meeting for female suffrage. In addition to women’s rights, Conway shared Rose’s devotion to Robert Owen and the freethinker, Thomas Paine, author of *The Age of Reason*. He moved his chapel away from Unitarianism to “the uttermost ends of Agnosticism,” dropping formal prayer and reading from a variety of works, including Hindu scriptures and the poems of William Blake. Conway invited Rose to speak to his congregation about Robert Owen on Sunday, May 14, 1871 and wrote the *Investigator* that she was “something of a lioness in London.” For her talk, the chapel “was crowded with a thousand people...and so completely did she charm the audience that three times applause began, and had to be checked.”

Rose’s lecture took place on the actual centenary of Owen’s birth; two days later a large “Festival” assembled to celebrate his life. Although many women attended, sang, and read poetry there, Ernestine Rose was the only female speaker. Owen was a “man of one idea, and that idea the happiness of the human race,” she declared. “The time will come when that one idea will be understood,” she continued, adding that “I have no doubt that he would have advocated the Woman’s Rights Bill had he lived.” After reminiscing about her years with Owen and praising his character and beliefs, she concluded by asserting that when the world followed Owen’s principles, “we shall have a race of really superior, rational, healthy, and happy human beings.” London liberal newspapers reported that “Mrs. Rose made the speech of the

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12 For a chart of this and other radical families, see Crawford, *Women’s Suffrage Movement*, 768; for Ashworth, 20-21.


14 Burtis, *Moncure Conway*, 178. For Conway’s openness to freethought, see Burtis, 132.

evening — the most appropriate one and the best delivered,” while Moncure Conway wrote that “the enthusiasm at her burning words, her fine sarcasm, her clear statement was so great that the people pressed nearer and nearer, and fairly stood up....In voice and manner she is one of the very few real orators I have ever heard.”

In addition to the Conways and the Holyoake brothers, Rose developed a close friendship with the atheist Charles Bradlaugh, editor of the National Reformer, and his two daughters, Alice and Hypatia, named for a female Greek philosopher stoned to death by Christians. Bradlaugh and Rose knew about each other before they met through the pages of the U.S. atheist newspaper, the Boston Investigator, which covered both their careers in detail. A generation younger than Rose, Bradlaugh became an atheist as a teenager and by the mid-1850s had achieved prominence among English radicals. He spoke and wrote widely, often under the pseudonym “Iconoclast.” Like Rose, Bradlaugh was a superb public speaker. “He was the most magnetic person I have ever known, and the greatest orator,” playwright George Bernard Shaw later wrote, “Bradlaugh was the heavy-weight champion of the platform.” He became editor of the weekly National Reformer in 1860 and helped found Britain’s National Secular Society in 1866. The government prosecuted him for blasphemy and sedition in 1868. Although he was acquitted, his reputation as an atheist, a republican, and an agitator placed him outside traditional Victorian values. “As a mere speculative freethinker, Mr. Bradlaugh might possibly have passed muster,” The Times of London wrote when he had been elected to the House of Commons in 1880, “but as a social reformer, with republican opinions and a very aggressive mode of displaying them he is thought to be deserving of Parliamentary ostracism.” These beliefs, which made him unacceptable to The Times, endeared him to Ernestine Rose. “She was greatly attached to Mr. Bradlaugh, who in turn felt a thorough admiration and reverence for her,” his daughter wrote.

Charles Bradlaugh introduced Ernestine Rose to the British freethought community, which grew dramatically under his leadership in the 1860s and 1870s. His National Secular Society came to have thousands of members meeting weekly in numerous Halls of Science. In 1872, the American reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a friend of Ernestine Rose, attended a London meeting of the Society where Bradlaugh spoke, followed briefly by Rose. He described a group of about fifteen hundred people “in the grasp of a born orator.... Nine-tenths were men; almost all were well-dressed.

16 Report of the Proceedings of the Festival in Commemoration of the Centenary Birthday of ROBERT OWEN, the Philanthropist, held at Freemasons Hall, London, May 16, 1871 (London, 1871), 20-21; Boston Investigator, July 5, 1871, 6; September 6, 1871, 6.

17 For one early piece championing Bradlaugh, see the Boston Investigator, December 7, 1864, 2; Smith, London Heretics, 38ff. Shaw cited in Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960 (London, 1977), 43.

They looked as if all classes might be represented there, and while the majority were plainly artisans, I was afterward told that a peer of the realm stood just behind me.” In addition, Bradlaugh’s National Reformer became Britain’s premier and longest-running freethought journal, achieving a position similar to that of the Boston Investigator in the United States. By the time Rose joined the British freethought movement, Biblical criticism and debates about Darwinism, churchly intransigence, and the growth of skepticism had created a congenial community of non-believers in England. 

In addition to championing freethought, Rose supported the related cause of opening secular institutions on Sundays. Early nineteenth-century British sabbath societies had succeeded in forcing museums, galleries, and post offices to close on that day, as well as banning public music, dancing, theater, horse-racing, sailing, and rowing. This produced the notoriously tedious English Sunday — “this lugubrious holiday,” as the Boston Investigator termed it. In 1873, both Ernestine Rose and Moncure Conway contributed “some able words toward the laudable object of opening a large Museum on Sundays”: the Bethnal Green Museum, located in a working-class area of London. The next year, Rose sent the Investigator remarks P. A. Taylor made on this subject to the House of Commons. “It is an excellent and unanswerable speech, which was listened to with great attention and warmly applauded, and yet lost by a great majority” she wrote, because “the power of the Church is very great here, and the members have not the moral courage to go against the theological Mr. Grundies.” Rose went on to praise Taylor as “an independent member of the most radical type,” and both he and his wife, the feminist Mentia Taylor, became her friends.

The Taylors had long been active in the same radical causes as the Roses. In his parliamentary campaign, P. A. Taylor advocated the separation of church and state and the abolition of mandatory taxes to support the Church of England. Both the Taylors actively opposed U.S. slavery. Wealthy and childless, the couple ran a school for working-class adults on the grounds of their home, Aubrey House, where they also hosted salons “open to all, friend and stranger, black and white, rich and poor,” as Louisa May Alcott wrote after she visited in 1873. George Jacob Holyoake attended their “open evenings” from 1861 on. Ernestine Rose met Mentia Taylor either through one of these mutual friends or in the English women’s suffrage movement, which Taylor had helped to found. Mentia Taylor organized the petition for the women’s vote, which John Stuart Mill, the writer


21 “Our London Letter,” Boston Investigator, written February 15, 1873, published April 2, 1873, 2; Ernestine L. Rose, Letter, Boston Investigator, October 21, 1874, 1. Taylor was always called “P. A.” His wife’s full first name was Clementia, but she only used “Mentia.” She attended Rose’s funeral; P. A. Taylor died in 1891, the year before Rose.


and philosopher, presented repeatedly and unsuccessfully to Parliament during his 1866–68 term as a member. Mill’s feminist prestige increased with the publication of his *Subjection of Women* in 1869; Ernestine Rose referred positively to him and P. A. Taylor in her 1871 Owen centenary speech. But Mill also caused problems within early feminism by insisting that the women’s rights movement proceed slowly and focus only on the single issue of suffrage.24

This stricture arose because of a British feminist campaign, which had no American equivalent. In the 1860s, Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Acts to protect the military from venereal disease. These acts gave police the power to subject any woman in towns near military bases whom they suspected of being a prostitute to a pelvic exam in the back of the station. If they found evidence of disease, the woman could be sent to a locked hospital; men were never inspected. Numerous English feminists, including Mentia Taylor, joined the Ladies’ National Campaign for the repeal of these acts, which did not happen until 1886. Even though Mill himself testified against these acts in Parliament, he and others insisted that this campaign, which necessarily raised sexual issues, would contaminate women’s bid for the vote. They succeeded in having Contagious Diseases activists removed as officers of the suffrage movement.25

Ernestine Rose never became involved in the Contagious Diseases campaign, in part because it invoked Christian beliefs and prayer even more than the U.S. antislavery movement had done. Nor did she participate in the simultaneous push for married women’s property rights in Britain. Instead, Rose focused on the ballot, as she had during her last years in the United States. American opposition to the woman’s vote came naturally from conservative opponents, but also from feminists’ allies — those abolitionists who prioritized “the black man’s vote” over female suffrage. A similar situation prevailed in Britain, where many liberals working to extend the franchise to male citizens refused to include women. William Gladstone, the long-time Liberal Party Prime Minister, consistently opposed woman’s suffrage on the grounds that it would “trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power.” U.S. feminists sometimes assumed that as a powerful female monarch, Queen Victoria would support their cause. The experience of Kate, Lady Amberley, among many others, proved this false. Amberley, who had visited the United States and remained in contact with women’s rights leaders there, argued for the

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24 Commemoration of the Centenary Birthday of ROBERT OWEN, 21. Rose also praised Thomas Henry Huxley, the freethinking biologist known as “Darwin’s bulldog.” Crawford, *Women’s Suffrage Movement,* 351. Thanks to Susan Pedersen for help with John Stuart Mill and the Contagious Diseases Acts.

vote on the same grounds as Ernestine Rose, asserting that the ballot would “make the life of a woman of the higher and lower classes more complete, less dependent...and give her the chance of leading an honest and happy life.” In a furious response, Victoria wrote that “The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write or join in checking this mad, wicked folly of ‘Women’s Rights’ with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady Amberley ought to get a good whipping.” Many Britons shared these feelings, especially members of Parliament. In 1871, the M.P. Alexander Beresford Hope argued at length against enfranchising women, concluding that if it were done, “Our legislation would develop hysterical and spasmodic features, partaking more of the French and American system than reproducing the tradition of the English Parliament.”

Ernestine Rose repeatedly challenged Beresford Hope, first at a large London women’s suffrage meeting in May, 1872 where she pursued “the subject in a vein of pleasant irony which would not have caused that Hon. Gentleman quite so much amusement as it did the audience,” the London Telegraph reported. She continued her attack during her time lecturing in Edinburgh in January of 1873 where she had been invited by Priscilla Bright McLaren, aunt of the candidate Rose had aided in Bath. Rose mentioned that Beresford Hope opposed women’s suffrage in part because it would “bring sympathy and consolation into parliament.” “Mr. Beresford Hope; alas! What was in a name! he was exceedingly hopeless,” Rose joked, before asserting that fearing sympathy in Parliament was “exceedingly illogical.” This comment was a reference to parliamentary arguments that women should not be allowed to vote because they were “not logical.” “I am not going to stand here and prove that I am logical,” Rose declared, “The franchise was never given for logic. Had it been based upon logic, I doubt whether that member of Parliament would ever have been in his place.” Her remarks occasioned “great laughter and applause.” Rose went on to make points she had frequently used in her American speeches, maintaining that men and women should have equal human rights. She concluded by tackling the widely accepted view that “woman, if she got the franchise, would cease to be womanly”:

She might become stronger in mind, more faithful in convictions; she might become more intellectual; she might take a greater and wider view of the duties and responsibilities


27 Cited in the Boston Investigator, June 5, 1872, 6.

28 Crawford, Women’s Suffrage Movement, 400-404.
of life; but would that unsex her? Would that change her nature? Would she be less a mother, less a sister, less a woman? No! Believe, trust in the right, do rightly, do justly, and leave all the consequences to themselves. (Loud applause.)

Rose repeated these points more briefly in speeches made over the next two days, asserting that she demanded justice for women “simply because she asked for it for men” and urging “those present to do all they could to elevate not women merely, but humanity at large.”

Ernestine Rose occasionally commented on the differences between the two nations she lived in, although she consistently maintained that “neither in America nor England are the obstacles to free thought and free speech removed, and Liberalism triumphant.” But in terms of government, Great Britain could not match the United States. Although royal power had diminished, a conservative monarch still reigned. The House of Lords held equal power with the House of Commons, and British class divisions carried far more weight than those in the United States. Rose consistently championed American democracy, writing on the centennial of the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1876 that “The glorious day upon which human equality was first proclaimed ought to be commemorated...until its grand principles are carried into practice.” Compared to the promise of the United States, Britain remained retrograde. “I see not much to admire in the English Government, though there are some very good people here,” she wrote later, “But, you know, I am a republican or a democrat all through, and so as I ‘put no faith in princes’ nor priests either, I am deeply interested in all the affairs of America..... may kings and tyrants soon learn from its grand example that the only true or legitimate power to rule is in the PEOPLE and not in any pretended ‘right Divine.’” Both nations continued to be extremely religious, but only Great Britain maintained a state church. “The Church of England would, if she could, stamp out every vestige of Free Thought rather than give up her strong hold on the State,” Rose wrote in 1877. The British government prosecuted both Holyoake and Bradlaugh for blasphemy and convicted G. W. Foote, the editor of the secular newspaper The Freethinker, for that crime in 1883. He served a year in prison.

From the mid-1870s, Ernestine Rose alternated complaints about her health with accounts of speeches she made, which implies that she periodically recovered. The couple spent the winter of 1874-75 in Edinburgh. She gave three speeches there, the longest one being on January 27 and published in The Daily Review (Edinburgh), January 28, 1873. The Review printed her remarks in the third person, but I have changed them back to the first person she would have used. Her second Edinburgh speech was made on January 29, the third on January 30. Both appeared in The Daily Review, January 31, 1873. Her first Edinburgh speech was reprinted in the Boston Investigator, February 26, 1873, 3.

Ernestine L. Rose, Letter, Boston Investigator, October 21, 1874, 4.
“Mrs. Ernestine L. Rose,” Boston Investigator, June 30, 1886, 4.
Ernestine L. Rose, Letter, Boston Investigator, August 8, 1877.
The Freethinker’s editor was G. W. Foote. Smith, London Heretics, 62-66.
Brighton, “a very healthy place,” but one they found “very dull, very religious, and very anti-progressive.” In November, they attended an “anti-Woman’s Rights lecture,” given by a minister. “The whole thing was made up of Biblical quotations, misrepresentations, downright falsehoods, insults, and flattery.” Rose wrote the *Investigator*. After the minister cited John Ruskin’s pronouncement that “woman is Queen in her husband’s house — Queen over the crockery, jewelry, china, etc.,” Rose added, she “spoke about fifteen minutes, and told him he made a mistake to think that not a Women’s Rights woman was present.”35 Two months later, in January 1875, she wrote that she was “too ill to...even” write a speech.36 She was still sick at the end of March 1875, describing herself as “a prisoner” of the London weather, “not yet well enough to go out in this wretched north east wind which has now lasted over six weeks, with hardly a gleam of sunshine, and the Lord only knows (if he knows anything) how much longer it will last — What an awful climate!”37 In October, her ill health was confirmed by Annie Besant in the London *National Reformer*: “Unfortunately, the party lost the services of one of its bravest and most eloquent platform advocates, the Mrs. Ernestine L. Rose, who worked with so much intrepidity and power. Now and then we notice an article from her pen in the *Investigator*, but ill health prevents her from using her tongue in the cause.”38

But Rose continued to rebound. She wrote that 1876 was “a very sick year throughout,” but also mentioned that she had given two speeches in Yorkshire, “notwithstanding all the scolding about my heresies, for the people there are very religious.” The Roses had gone north to recover in Ilkley and Harrogate, where William “was taken very sick from drinking a little of what was called sulphur water, but which was more like poison, for it nearly killed him.... The anxiety and exertion of taking care of him pulled me very much down again.” Rose added that when they returned to Brighton that fall, they both felt better.39 George Jacob Holyoake wrote about the same period that “Mention is made of her delicate health, which ‘prevented her from speaking with her wonted effect.’ It is pleasant to report that ... she is still a speaker of remarkable power.”40

Ernestine Rose’s last major recovery came in 1878, when she spoke at length in favor of atheism at the London Conference of Liberal Thinkers in June. Moncure Conway had organized this meeting “for the discussion of matters pertaining to the religious needs of our time, and the method of meeting them.”41 He cast his net widely,
inviting liberal clergymen and rabbis, Britons and foreigners, as well as freethinkers like Holyoake and Rose, resulting in “the most inclusive group of its kind ever assembled.”42 Speaking forcefully on the afternoon of the first day, Ernestine Rose began by declaring her militant disbelief: “I belong to no religious sect; I profess no religion; and I have long ago discarded even the name. It is too indefinite and misleading, and is only calculated to divide the human family instead of uniting it. Well may we exclaim, ‘Oh! religion what crimes have been perpetrated in thy name.’”43 Rose then criticized the U.S. Free Religious Association, touted by the previous speaker. Founded by liberal Unitarians, the FRA included Lucretia Mott, Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others. “Free is all right. But what is Religion?” Rose asked rhetorically, before proposing a name for the group, a gambit she had used many times before. Suggesting that this group “unite in a Society of Friends of Progress,” she maintained that then “the Christian, the Mahometan, the Jew, the Deist, and the Atheist” could “reform the laws so as to have perfect freedom of conscience, the right to think and to express our thoughts on all subjects. Progress opens as wide a field as the human race — it endeavors to remove the obstacles that prevent our growth.”44 Rose, however, had trouble being open-minded about clergymen, and she then turned on two ministers who had spoken before her, saying that if they were “not too fixed in their bigotry” they could “all unite with us to form a union which should give us strength, strength not to injure anyone, not even to prevent the irrational views that some of the religionists have of their god, but a strength to take care that as long as they have them they should have a perfect right to express them.....”45 One of the clergy she mentioned was the Rev. Charles Voysey, who had been expelled from the Church of England for his radical views. He did not return on the Conference’s second day.45

Rose steamed on, declaring that the strength provided by such a union

shall enable us to assist each other to improve the world, to obtain rational and consistent laws, laws that will not deprive a mother of her child — (loud and continued applause) as has been done to Mrs. Besant, simply because she thinks differently from the judge; laws that will not incarcerate an innocent, respectable man, simply because he sold something he conscientiously thought would benefit society.46

42 Smith, London Heretics, 115.
43 Liberal Thinkers, 26. Rose was echoing the French revolutionary Manon Roland’s comment just before she was guillotined: “O Liberty! What crimes are committed in thy name.”
44 Ernestine Rose, Liberal Thinkers, 27.
45 For Voysey, who then opened a “theistic church” in London and became a hero to both Conway and many liberal Anglicans, see Smith, London Heretics, 127–29; for his decision not to return the second day because of Rose’s remarks, Burtis, Moncure Conway, 171.
46 Ernestine Rose, Liberal Thinkers, 27.
Here, Ernestine Rose alluded to a cause célèbre of the previous year: the trial and conviction of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh for publishing on birth control. Annie Besant had become a prominent lecturer and journalist in British freethought — she had written the 1875 *National Reformer* article saying that Rose was now too ill to continue speaking in public.47 Almost forty years younger than Rose, she was married at twenty to an Anglican clergyman. Besant (who always used her married name) left her husband and son five years later, taking her daughter Mabel with her. She and Bradlaugh decided to bring a test case on contraception by reprinting the American Charles Knowlton’s 1832 book *The Fruits of Philosophy or the Private Companion for Young Married People* as a cheap pamphlet in 1876. Anglo-American freethinkers had often published birth control manuals, but they were in book form, which made them unaffordable to many. Hundreds of thousands of copies of Bradlaugh and Besant’s low-priced work sold, and the two were then tried and convicted of obscenity. The verdict was overturned on a technicality. Frank Besant sued for custody of his daughter Mabel and won. Rose’s American friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who attended this trial as well as the Conference of Liberal Thinkers, said the judge “damned” Besant “for her infidel opinions,” ruling that the girl could “not be brought up in opposition to the view of mankind generally as to what is moral, what is decent, what is womanly, or proper merely because her mother differs from these views...the child might even grow up to write such things herself!” Mabel was taken away just a few weeks before Rose referred to the case.48

At the conference, Rose used Besant’s ordeal to show why women needed equality. “I want that woman should have the same rights as a human being,” she declared, “Now when a judge says that if this woman had been the father instead of the mother, the child might have been left with her; I think that is one of the laws that should be altered.” Higginson, a longtime activist reformer in the United States, followed Rose. First praising “my dear old friend Mrs. Rose, whom we used to be proud for so many years to claim as an American, while her sonorous eloquence filled our halls, and whom you, I suppose, now try to claim as an English woman, though she is not,” he then criticized her proposal for a Society of Friends of Progress. Having been active in the U.S. Free Religious Association, he argued that “if our experience has proved anything, it has been this...limit your aims a little and not to expect to do everything at once, and with one organization.” Asserting that this was almost the only point “on

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47 See note 38 above.

which I should dissent from the position taken by my old friend Mrs. Rose,” he added that if they followed her strategy, in five years they would regret creating so broad a group. He closed by using the image of “Esquimaux” sled dogs pulling together. “I am not a Radical dog in the least.” Rose responded, “but it is just as well to know, in the cause of freedom and expression of opinion, that ‘we may aim at the sun, and at least hit the moon.’” “That was quite what I was afraid of,” Higginson replied.49

On the conference’s second day, Rose again spoke at length. Conway and others attempted to organize the group as the Association of Liberal Thinkers with its goals as both the “collection and diffusion of information concerning world-wide religious developments” and “the emancipation of mankind from superstition.”50 Johnston Russell of Limerick asserted that “What Mrs. Rose calls the service of humanity, and what others call the service of God are identical. The names are different, but the goodness is the same.”51 Rose disagreed. Declaring that she was “glad to see so good a meeting come together” and that she supported “all parts that...benefit the human family,” she invoked her familiar stance of preferring to be right than to unite with those whose views she could not support:

I am placed in a peculiar position, for there are some parts that I entirely differ from, and I fear that when it comes to a vote on such parts that I shall be a minority of one, and if it should be so, it would not be the first time, and I would much rather be in a minority even of one, for the right, than in a large majority for wrong and oppression.

Rose insisted that she could not support any mention of religion, because “in my convictions, in my conscience, I call all religions superstitions, and consider them merely as superstitions. I cannot vote for what appears to me the great curse of the human mind, the great standing block in the way of human progress.”52

Yet Rose was torn, as so many good friends — from Higginson to Conway, both extremely liberal Unitarians — supported the inclusion of religion. “If you will allow me with all my heart to aid and assist you, I can say, — I wanted to say, ‘God speed,’” she blurted. At this, “the audience burst into roars of laughter,” the male reporter for the English Unitarian Herald wrote, adding that “It was the most extraordinary speech I ever heard from a woman; and coming as it

49 Ernestine Rose, Liberal Thinkers, 27. For Higginson, The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823–1911), ed. Howard N. Meyer (New York, 2000); Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Liberal Thinkers, 28–31; Ernestine Rose and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Liberal Thinkers, 31. I have been unable to identify the quotation she used.
50 Liberal Thinkers, 49.
51 Ibid., 43.
52 Ibid., 62–63.
The good feelings aroused by this conference in June 1878 did not last, and the group disbanded the following year, unable to agree on a program.\textsuperscript{55} Ernestine Rose’s health continued to fluctuate. On July 4, she wrote Susan B. Anthony that “I should like to write to you of the future, as well as of the present and the past. But I am too feeble, having hardly recovered from a severe illness, to even do that.”\textsuperscript{56} She and William then “left London for the sea shore...which made us feel a little stronger.” In August they traveled to Paris, for the Exposition Universelle — the third Paris World’s Fair. “The whole ensemble was grand and magnificent beyond description,” Rose wrote the Investigator, “The whole world seemed to be represented in it.”\textsuperscript{57} The couple remained in Paris five weeks, attending a peace conference there at the end of September.

This 1878 International Congress of the Societies of the Friends of Peace was Ernestine Rose’s fifth peace conference.\textsuperscript{58} In the United States, she and William had been among “the first members of the Universal Peace Union,” going to meetings in both New York and Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{59} The UPU affiliated with various French peace groups in the late 1860s, among them the one directed by the Roses’s friend, Charles Lemonnier.\textsuperscript{60} He published a pamphlet advocating a United States of Europe, believing that a single, republican, federal nation would do away with war. The Roses went to a Congress he helped organize at Lausanne in the summer of 1871, where Victor Hugo presided. The next summer, Ernestine attended a Woman’s Peace Congress in London, organized by Julia Ward Howe, who also spoke at Conway’s South Place Chapel.\textsuperscript{61} Howe remained traditionally religious, and Conway criticized her for it. The Boston Investigator wrote that he “throws cold water” on Howe’s proposal to organize a “great prayer for peace” in London, adding that “He says that praying people generally believe the Lord is a man of war, a God of battles and all that sort of thing. Only Quakers and Infidels are in favor of peace.”\textsuperscript{62}
In Paris, both Howe and Rose represented the United States at the International Congress of the Friends of Peace. Thanking the group for “allowing her the honor of saying a few words on this subject of peace, which is very dear to my heart,” Rose apologized both for her poor French and for not being “strong enough to speak for long.” She then expressed feminist concerns. “I just want to say that women should be represented in these universal peace societies,” she stated, to shouts of “Very good, very good!” War is worse on women, she continued, “because if it is unfortunate to lose one’s life, it is even more unfortunate to lose one’s dear ones.” After expounding on war as “the crime of crimes,” Rose maintained that peace could not exist without justice, since “one cannot remain quiet when one is under the yoke of oppression. Let us then do everything that we can for freedom and against war, and everywhere men and women will unite for this goal! (Lively applause.)” Other women supported her position, which resulted in a proposal that every peace society must include a “Women’s Committee.” After reassuring the women present that they had the right to vote, the group passed this resolution unanimously. These brief remarks were Rose’s last public speech.63

Forced to retire from the platform because of her illnesses, Rose continued to write public letters to both U.S. and English newspapers. At the end of 1878 she began a long missive to the Investigator by congratulating them for working “for the repeal of bad laws,” referring to the Comstock Act. Passed to suppress “Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use,” the law was widely used to prevent any distribution of contraceptive information as well as pornography. She then discussed her visit to Paris and the peace conference before adding that although “I am against war...I am not a ‘non-resistant,’ for self-defence is the first law of nature and when Russia, or any other highway robber attacks us we must defend ourselves.” Rose remained focused on Russia because it still ruled Poland. She then praised the German scientist Carl Vogt’s Man, His Place in Creation and in the History of Earth and quoted at length from its freethought conclusion which excoriated the religious for attacking “Materialism and Darwinism.” She gave a brief anecdote from a German satirical journal and concluded with a short reminiscence of the English freethought publisher, Richard Carlile.64

One of her final letters was written in 1887, when she was seventy-seven. An English medical student urged her to convert to Christianity

63 Amis de la Paix, 36, 58, 89, 99, 142.
64 Ernestine Rose, Letter to the Boston Investigator, December 25, 1878, 2.
in a 15-page letter. In reply, Rose sent him her only book, *A Defence of Atheism*, and her 1851 lecture on women’s rights. He returned them, torn up, with an insulting letter, saying he would not read them and asking Mrs. Rose where her bravery would be on her death-bed. “A woman who ventured to speak against slavery in the slave States is little likely to quail on her death-bed before the bogey pictures of a Christian god or a Christian devil,” commented the London *Freethinker*, echoed by the *Boston Investigator*. Many Christians continued to assume that atheists could be converted when they were dying. Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner reported that “Mrs. Rose had greatly dreaded that during her last illness she would be invaded by religious persons who might make her unsay the convictions of her whole life when her brain was weakened by illness and she did not know what she was doing,” so she arranged for Hypatia to be with her “when she fell ill.” Hypatia arrived too late, but both her “kind and able doctor” and her “devoted attendant” protected Rose from religious interference. Her memorial service in Highgate Cemetery was completely non-religious, with George Jacob Holyoake delivering the eulogy to “many” mourners “who either knew and admired Mrs. Rose personally or honored her for the work she had done.”

Since her death, Rose has been rediscovered by women’s history scholars, who have emphasized her feminism. Yet, as I hope these pages have shown, there was far more to her than just that. In Rose’s day, the *Boston Investigator* periodically praised her contributions to the U.S. women’s movement while lamenting her exclusion from its tributes. “Certain it is that when the Woman’s Rights Party, of which she was almost or quite the originator, count up their jewels, she seldom if ever shines among them in their papers,” the paper wrote in 1870, criticizing Stanton and Anthony’s journal, *The Revolution*, “but to omit her name from the catalogue, is like playing Hamlet with the character of Hamlet left out.” The *Investigator* repeatedly argued that Rose was ignored because she was “not a Christian, and for this reason is not appreciated by her sex as her merits deserve.... At present, all bigotry is not confined to the masculine gender.” Whether or not her atheism is to blame for her exclusion from most history books, her rediscovery is to be welcomed. It is my hope that she will come to be remembered on both sides of the Atlantic for all three of the beliefs she consistently maintained throughout her life: pacifism, feminism, and freethought.