

The Brothel on the Page
Print, Prostitution, and Blame in Antebellum America

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INTRODUCTION

The Mary Ackerly Case

In a thesis about stories, it seems appropriate to begin with one.



Late in the evening on Friday, December 12, 1845, the *Croton* dropped anchor at a dock on the west side of Lower Manhattan. Almost immediately, passengers poured from the boat, eager to escape the winter wind that had swirled across the steamer's deck during its two-hour voyage down the Hudson River from Sing Sing, a Westchester County village thirty-three miles north of the city.¹ As a small man in a large overcoat disembarked, however, he took his time to search through the crowds. After a few moments, he found his quarry: a young couple that had beaten him off of the boat, who stood huddled together along the side of the water, waiting.²

John Cocks, owner of the *Croton*, did not realize that the man searching through the crowd was one Dr. Shove, a prominent physician from the Westchester town of Bedford, for the collar of the doctor's overcoat was drawn high to shield his face from the night chill and his identity from prying eyes. Cocks did, however, recognize the young man waiting on shore as Henry Nelson, the son of a wealthy and influential family in

¹ Reports from 1828 state that steamboats travelled downriver from Albany to New York City at speeds of up to 16.55 miles per hour. I have estimated the time it would take for a boat travelling at approximately this speed to reach New York City from Ossining, which prior to 1901 was known as the village of Sing Sing. "Speed and Safety on Early Hudson River Steamboats," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society (Pre-1986)* 4, no. 1 (January 1930): 15-17.

² The account that follows hereafter is adapted from court records at the trial of Dr. Shove, which took place in the court of Oyer and Terminer in Westchester County and was reported by the *National Police Gazette*. I have attempted to construct a narrative of Mary Ackerly's story from the contradictory testimonies provided at the trial that reasonably combines the various accounts of the case, and have inferred details about Mary's mental and emotional state from her own testimony and the descriptions of others. "Horrible Disclosures of Seduction, Abortion, and Murder, in a House of Ill-Fame in New York," *National Police Gazette (New York)*, October 24, 1846, the *National Police Gazette* collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

nearby Somers. His travelling companion, unknown to Cocks, was nineteen-year-old Mary Ackerly, whose thick layers of outerwear, paired with her sturdy, healthy build, concealed that she was four-and-a-half months pregnant with Henry's child.

Dr. Shove crossed the shore to the couple. The group, whose apparent lack of contact during the boat ride suggests a desire to remain inconspicuous, stood apart from the passengers making their way into the city. They might have seemed an odd trio to anyone who stopped to look closely at them—Shove was more than a decade older than the couple, and Mary was of a considerably lower social class than either of the men in her company—but the three were familiar. Mary had previously been employed by Shove, probably as a domestic servant—it was common practice in antebellum America for poor parents to send their daughters to live and work in prosperous households in order to contribute to the family wage.³ Shove and Henry likely knew one another socially, as both were members of respectable Westchester society.

It is unknown how exactly Mary and Henry became acquainted. The two might have met through some genteel gathering at which Shove's help waited on his friends, or while Mary ran an errand to the Nelson household. Innocent though their initial contact likely was, at some point Mary and Henry's relationship took on a more clandestine and scandalous character. The two boarded the *Croton* under circumstances that allude to the true nature of their connection: Henry owed Mary \$27, which he claimed he would only be able to acquire if she accompanied him to Manhattan. There, he told Mary he “expected to get [the money] for his pork”—a crude way of stating that once in the city,

³ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 52-54.

he would be able to get the funds to pay for his previous sexual encounters with her.⁴

During this period, it was not uncommon for domestic servants, anxious to gain additional wages for either their families or themselves, to become prostitutes. Selling sex was often lucrative, and would be a tempting opportunity for a poor, uneducated young woman living away from parental supervision like Mary Ackerly. She certainly would not have been the first domestic servant to become entangled in a paid tryst with a local young man of means—Helen Jewett, whose 1836 murder had made national headlines, began her prostitution career while working as a servant for a prominent family in Maine.⁵ If Mary had considered selling sex for extra wages before meeting Henry, becoming familiar with him likely strengthened her resolve. A Nelson would make an ideal client: his social standing meant that he would keep their affair (and Mary's profession) quiet, and his family's wealth meant he would pay well. A relationship with him would be discreet and profitable.

Henry's desire to go to New York, then, might have been a portent to Mary that something was amiss: it must have been a mystery to her why he would risk venturing all the way to the city in her company when the money he owed her was presumably available at home. She must already have also considered what was to come when she gave birth to Henry's child, revealing their affair to their families and the community in Westchester, and she might have wondered if this visit had anything to do with her pregnancy. If Mary felt any alarm at her situation, however, she did not act on it; after

⁴ "Horrible Disclosures of Seduction, Abortion, and Murder," *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

⁵ Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, Historical Studies of Urban America Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 6-7; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), Chapter 10: Tracing Seduction.

Henry conversed with Shove for a few minutes, the couple left the doctor and together made their way into the city's Eighth Ward. Mary had never been to Manhattan before, and she was unsure of their destination. She had the vague idea that they were going to either her uncle or Henry's cousin's home for the night. She must have assumed she arrived at one of these locations when, at eleven o'clock, Henry knocked on the door of a two-story, brick house at 474 Broome Street.

The house had six inhabitants, all women: a mistress, Mrs. Brewster; a chambermaid, Sarah Canine; a cook, Mary Ann Murray; and three boarders, Mary Kearney, Josephine Lee, and Emma Lee. Though the market revolution of the early nineteenth century made gender-exclusive boarding houses relatively common in large cities, where young, single men and women flocked for work from their provincial birthplaces, Mrs. Brewster's house took on a character different than that of a respectable establishment.⁶ The boarders there would host boisterous, champagne-filled dinner parties with both men and women present, violating respectable society's tenets against imbibing in alcohol and unstructured sociability between genders. Additionally, when testifying at a trial as a witness, boarder Mary Kearney was told by a judge that she "was not obligated to answer any questions which would tend to disgrace her" when the nature of her occupation arose during cross-examination.⁷

474 Broome Street was a brothel, and Mary Kearney and her fellow boarders prostitutes. That judges and lawyers at trial knew Kearney's profession suggests the house was well known, and perhaps had a reputation that would reach the ears of people

⁶ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 97-98.

⁷ "Horrible Disclosures of Seduction, Abortion, and Murder," *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

in places as far as Westchester County.

With apparent familiarity, Henry and Mrs. Brewster spoke momentarily before Mary Ackerly was passed into the mistress's care. The nineteen-year-old could not have felt altogether comfortable when she was shown into a room at the back of the house's first floor; she was left alone there, wondering if and when Henry might return. Though Mary shared a profession with the boarders at 474 Broome, those women likely had a great deal more experience in prostitution than she did, having the large client base and anonymity that working in a city with a population of almost half a million people afforded.⁸ Mary did not advertise herself or her job as these women did, and her affair was with just one man, rather than many. A brothel was not what she bargained for upon beginning her relationship with the now vanished Henry, and her night alone there must have been a restless one.

By the next day, any hope Mary had of Henry returning with a boat ticket back to Sing Sing and the money he owed her had evaporated. She waited, but nothing happened until late on Saturday evening, when one of the women of the house called to her that she was wanted upstairs. She proceeded to the attic, hopeful that her brother or father had miraculously arrived to take her home. Instead, at the door, she found Henry. He held a candle that illuminated the depths of the attic, inside which there was a bed and a small man lurking near the shadowy back of the room. "There is a doctor going to operate on you," Henry said before extinguishing the candle and forcing Mary into the attic,

⁸ Census reports show New York's population was 312,710 in 1840 and 515,547 in 1850, meaning the population in 1845 likely surpassed 400,000. U.S. Census Bureau, "New York - Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Large Cities and Other Places: Earliest Census to 1990," <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/NYtab.pdf> (accessed September 17, 2016).

slamming the door behind him as he left.⁹

A chaotic situation followed. Dr. Shove forced Mary onto the bed in the now darkened attic, holding her down with one hand while using the other to perform an abortion with a metal instrument. Mary struggled and screamed, but to no avail; she could not overpower the doctor, and no one—not Henry, not Mrs. Brewster, not one of the prostitutes living at the brothel—came to save her from the pain she endured as Shove proceeded in his operation.

Abortions were a relatively common, if contentious, occurrence in antebellum America. Women had long passed knowledge from generation to generation of how pregnancies could be prevented or terminated, if desired. Though migration patterns and social geography changes of the market revolution began to limit the abilities of mothers to pass this knowledge onto their daughters, new strategies developed to ensure that women knew their options when pregnant.¹⁰ Advertisements were helpful to those who lived away from their mothers and aunts; one, for the so-called Portuguese Female Pill, claimed the pills were “the wonder and admiration of the world...that [have] always proved invariably certain in producing the monthly turns.”¹¹ Advertisements for abortionists, such as Madams Costello and Restell, often accompanied those for pills and powders.

While advertisements provided women away from home with knowledge of how to control their pregnancy, they also made abortion a public concern. Men that read

⁹ “Horrible Disclosures of Seduction, Abortion, and Murder,” *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

¹⁰ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 194-197.

¹¹ “Portuguese Female Pills” advertisement, *New York Herald*, January 20, 1842, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers digital database, University of Michigan Library, <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ncnp/start.do?prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=umuser> (accessed September 30, 2016).

papers in which these advertisements appeared were exposed, likely for the first time, to procedures and opportunities they previously did not realize existed for women. Many were outraged by women's ability to control their pregnancies and refuse to become mothers.¹² Others, however, saw possibility in these procedures. Henry Nelson, for one, seemed to realize the opportunities that an abortion opened to him. Going to New York so Dr. Shove could perform an abortion on Mary away from the surveillance of their Westchester community meant that he was freed from both the unwanted responsibility of being a father and from public knowledge of his entanglement with Mary.

Between seven and eight o'clock in the morning on Tuesday, December 16, Mary gave birth to a baby in the back room of 474 Broome's first floor, to which she was moved following the procedure. Mary Kearney and a physician, Dr. Conning, were in the room with her while she was in labor; following the delivery, Kearney cradled the infant near the hearth in hopes that the fire would warm it. Drastically underdeveloped, the baby lived for only half an hour.

Business as usual resumed almost immediately at 474 Broome—that night, one of the house's regular parties was held in the kitchen, which was adjacent to Mary's room. Mary, however, languished in solitude, her only visitor the physician who attended to her daily. She continually vomited and discharged a deep red, odorous matter, and showed no signs of improvement in the new year. By mid-January, Mary had left her room only once. It was then decided that Sarah Canine, the chambermaid, would take Mary back to Sing Sing by boat.

At home, Mary's parents received her with welcome, if also great concern for her failing health. They called on Dr. William M. Belcher, a local physician, to attend to

¹² Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 205-207.

Mary's physical wellbeing. At their daughter's request, they also called on Buckley C. Morse, a local Baptist clergyman, for her spiritual unease. Together, these men impressed on Mary that she was to die shortly. While Morse primarily prayed with Mary, Belcher convinced the girl that she must confess, to him, to her family, and to God, how she came to such ill health. Her tears run dry and her resolve strengthened, Mary told them of her pregnancy, her trip to Manhattan with Henry, and the abortion Dr. Shove performed on her. Once, she even requested that Shove come to her bedside, for she felt confident that he would be more capable than anyone else of undoing the harm that was causing her sickness. Shove never came, though he did send the Ackerly family a bill requesting payment for the operation he performed.

Mary died on January 20. Her story was not well known until nine months later, when the *National Police Gazette* began coverage of the trial for her murder in a Westchester County court.

The prosecution made its case for the majority of the three-day trial, advancing the argument that Dr. Shove forced a poorly performed abortion on Mary Ackerly, resulting in a tragic and unnecessary death. The district attorney did his best to appeal to the sentiments of the jury. The first of his star witnesses was Martha Ackerly, Mary's grieving mother who testified to her daughter's youth, innocence, and helplessness—a wise choice in the prosecution's attempt to depict Mary as anything but a prostitute. The second key testimony came from Dr. Belcher, who had been willing to believe Mary despite knowing Dr. Shove's seemingly unimpeachable reputation. In some ways, Belcher's testimony was most useful to the prosecution's case. For one, he was a man of considerable wealth and reputation, meaning his words carried more weight than those of

Mary's poor and uneducated mother. Moreover, Belcher explained that Mary told her story when only inches from death; in antebellum America, it was a commonly held belief that only "the most alien" people were capable of lying while on their deathbeds.¹³ Mary's account, therefore, was presented as being truthful beyond doubt. By the time the prosecution rested their case, they had painted Mary as an entirely sympathetic figure—any sin that she might have committed was far outweighed by the tragic end that both Henry Nelson and Dr. Shove had forced upon her.

Where the prosecution fell short, however, was in offering concrete and dispassionate explanations as to how Dr. Shove was responsible for Mary's death. A number of Shove's medical contemporaries, even Belcher, attested to his prodigious skill as a physician. Rather than suggest that even the most talented doctor would be hard-pressed to perform an operation without complications in an unlit attic, the prosecution merely left these statements unanswered. When the same medical contemporaries claimed that Mary must have been complicit in the abortion, for Shove would be unable to operate effectively while restraining an unwilling patient, the prosecution failed to point out that Shove had *not* operated effectively at all. Mary was, after all, dead because of his procedure. In these moments, the district attorney left his case vulnerable, making it possible for Shove's well-paid and well-practiced lawyers to advance their own version of events as being true.

In that account, Mary was not the helpless girl the prosecution made her out to be. Instead, she was "a thief, a common prostitute; she was said to have committed arson"—a disreputable character, in short. Though the defense did not deny Shove performed an

¹³ Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 66-67.

abortion on Mary, fault for her death was not with the doctor. He was a respectable man whose practiced hand could never perform such a botched surgery. Blame fell instead to the woman who had chosen to become a prostitute because of her general immorality. “[I] would believe neither Mary Ackerly nor her mother under oath,” commented witness David McCord when questioned of Mary’s character.¹⁴ Even Mary’s deathbed confession, which the prosecution probably banked on being above suspicion, was called into question—if anyone could be perverse enough to lie immediately before meeting her maker, it was a prostitute. Social and economic considerations for why Mary decided to sell sex were given no consideration in the defense’s narrative—all that mattered was that Mary was a prostitute, and that she therefore was responsible for any misfortunes, including death, that came her way.

When Judge Barculo explained to the jury their responsibility in determining the outcome of this case, more than just Dr. Shove’s innocence or guilt was at stake. Throughout the antebellum period, stories about prostitutes, both true or fictional, were common, and were generally presented as following the same trajectory: a girl from the countryside met a young man of means; he took her virginity, then abandoned her to a brothel in the city; she lived a life of degradation for some time before dying alone.¹⁵ In single accounts, blame was often static, something dictated by an author and meant to vilify a particular character to the public. What makes the Ackerly story exemplary is the way in which blame shifts from character to character depending on whose version of the case is being told. The prosecution blamed Henry Nelson and Dr. Shove for Mary’s death; the defense blamed Mary herself; David McCord levied an attack against Mary’s

¹⁴ McCord is also the witness who describes Ackerly as a thief, prostitute, and arsonist. “Horrible Disclosures Seduction, Abortion, and Murder,” *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

¹⁵ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 146-148.

mother, suggesting her poor parenting might be the cause of her daughter's occupation and death; Dr. Belcher questioned why the madam and prostitutes at 474 Broome did not come to Mary's aid. The jury, then, was tasked with deciding which version of these competing prostitution narratives to uphold. Who could the public blame for one of society's great maladies?

To this jury, that decision was evidently not a difficult one. They consulted for only a few moments, remaining in their seats, before declaring that they found Dr. Shove not guilty. Their verdict was met with "a perfect 'thunder of applause'" from the men who filled the courtroom.¹⁶ To this public, it was Mary's own fault she had died.

Yet, it is not unreasonable to imagine that the outcome of this case might have changed under different circumstances. The *National Police Gazette*, for one, was entirely convinced of Shove and Nelson's guilt—a sentiment others likely shared. If women had been eligible to serve on juries at this time, or if the defense lawyers had not been the best money could buy, or if the abortionist in question were a woman and not a man, which narrative would have prevailed?



These are questions that this thesis aims to address. Though prostitution narratives of the late antebellum era were remarkably consistent in their plots and in their cast of characters, the nuances of individual stories created an opportunity for blame to shift between texts. Furthermore, these stories, and their placement of blame for prostitution, are dependent upon the people who tell them and the audiences to whom writers appealed for support. In the following chapters, I will examine each of these

¹⁶ "Horrible Disclosures Seduction, Abortion, and Murder," *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

components—characters, narrators, and audiences—individually, in order to make sense of how and why allocations of blame shifted across popular narratives about prostitution. In doing this, I aim to provide an explanation for the reasons disparate groups, from evangelical, female moral reformers to sensationalist novelists, were compelled to uphold particular arguments about who was responsible for prostitution, and also to explore how segments of the American public felt prostitution affected their lives and communities.

My efforts are situated amongst the small but growing body of scholarly work dedicated to understanding 19th century prostitution. For much of this work, however, understanding the responses that the public had to cultural representations of prostitution is peripheral to making sense of prostitution as it existed in reality. While historians such as Timothy Gilfoyle and Patricia Cline Cohen have touched on notions of cultural representation, their research focuses primarily on the working and living conditions of prostitutes; it draws largely from municipal documents, property contracts, police reports, and letters.¹⁷

My work, alternatively, is based almost entirely in documents that were available to the public. Any literate American might have read the sources I assess here. I consult the *National Police Gazette*, a working class weekly newspaper, the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, an evangelical periodical created for middle class Americans, and sensationalist literature marketed towards men seeking to explore places they never knew they could. As distinct as these sources are from one another are the stories they tell, each assigning blame for prostitution in ways that are unique and telling.

¹⁷ I refer here to Gilfoyle's *City of Eros* (1992) and Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (1999), both of which are social, rather than cultural, histories examining prostitution in the antebellum period. Gilfoyle and Cohen have also worked together with Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz on *The Flash Press* (2008), which relies on print culture of the 1840s, but is focused only in part on prostitution and examines only flash press documents.

By examining a variety of widely circulated print sources, I aim to contribute to the relatively sparse understanding of how prostitution was presented to and consumed by the antebellum public. Drawing from the insights of journalism historians, especially Andie Tucher, I argue that these accounts were both created with public ideologies in mind and were influential in shaping popular perceptions about prostitution.¹⁸

Accordingly, they are crucial to understanding what values Americans felt were threatened by commercial sex's existence. Blame, in particular, is a useful framework for understanding the ways in which these values varied for different segments of society, as it was a designation that shifted depending on the author and reader of an account. It was to be determined by those who engaged with the text, something that an audience or author dictated in accordance with their own principles and ideals.

As scholars have noted, the truthfulness of prostitution narratives is suspect; fiction and fact often merged together in stories with invented plots that used real names and places in order to appear authentic.¹⁹ Yet these documents remain worthy of study precisely because they maintained a façade of truth, and were presented as being real to thousands of American readers. Even if their details were fabricated, the effect they created on the world around them was genuine, and reveals a great deal about what interested and frightened Americans during the antebellum era.

When Mary Ackerly's trial closed, only two results were certain: Mary was dead, and Dr. Shove and Henry Nelson continued on with their lives as they had been.

¹⁸ Throughout this project, the arguments Andie Tucher puts forward in her book, *Froth & Scum*, serve as a guide for considering the relationship between popular media and public ideology. Though Tucher discusses the murder of prostitute Helen Jewett extensively in her work, she does not use blame specifically as a framework for understanding prostitution narratives, as I do herein. Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 144, 149.

Whether this outcome was a tragedy, a triumph, or something in between was for the public to decide. With their plural motivations and interests rested the power to determine how Mary's life and death would be remembered; it was up to them to say who was at fault for prostitution.

CHAPTER ONE

The Characters

A story would be nothing without its characters, and without characters, there would be no one to blame in a prostitution narrative. It is crucial, therefore, to evaluate those actors that reappear across print culture's coverage of prostitution and the ways in which blame could be shifted onto each of them.

A remarkably consistent cast of characters recurs throughout prostitution narratives of the antebellum era. At the center of most stories is a pair of young lovers, the girl typically of provincial origins, her beau of a wealthy background. Their families lurk on the periphery of stories, often unaware or negligent of the lovers' romance. Brothel madams and prostitutes join the mix the moment the rural girl falls from sexual grace at the hands of the moneyed young man. And all around them is a society composed of people either complicit in or unknowingly perpetuating commercial sex.

Scholars have commented on the existence of two distinct narrative patterns in prostitution stories of the antebellum period. Historian Andie Tucher distinguishes between the Poor Unfortunate narrative, in which girls seduced into prostitution are regarded by authors as victims ruined by deceit and trickery, and the Siren narrative, in which these girls are considered prostitutes by choice, who purposely disregard values of virtue and restraint.¹ Both narratives assign blame to a single actor; in Poor Unfortunate stories, at fault are the wealthy young men who lure naïve girls into prostitution, and in Siren stories, prostitutes themselves are to blame for their own wretched behavior.

While it is indeed true that some accounts of prostitution subscribe to either the

¹ Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 63.

Poor Unfortunate or Siren narrative—and thus put either the seducer or the seduced entirely at fault—many escape the dualism of this paradigm. This often occurs in a story’s subtext, which allows authors to overtly blame one party while covertly faulting others for a girl’s decline to prostitution. Moreover, it is not only the seduced girls and seducer boys of prostitution narratives who are placed at fault; a host of other characters can be blamed as well. By exploiting assumptions about propriety and respectability common among middling classes during the antebellum era, narratives inspire fear about culpability for prostitution in all segments of society.

This chapter provides an overview of the roles that each character could play in antebellum narratives, with particular attention paid to how these depictions tapped into popular ideologies and anxieties in order to allocate blame. In describing how various characters were shown to perpetuate prostitution, the shifting nature of blame in these stories becomes apparent. After expanding on existing scholarly analyses of seduced girls and seducer boys, the chapter will explore the little discussed roles that family, brothel madams, and the public each played in narratives.

Rural Girls

“Lured from home, kept for a time, and turned to perish in a brothel,” girls like Mary Ackerly are central to stories about prostitution.² Without these so-called “fallen women,” a story would have no vehicle for explaining how prostitutes came to their unfortunate end, or for exploring who could be put at fault for their condition.

Despite her title, the archetypal “fallen woman” of antebellum narratives begins

² “The Anniversary of the Female Moral Reform Society,--Sad Condition of the 8th Ward,” *The New York Herald*, May 12, 1842, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* digital database, Library of Congress, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> (accessed May 17, 2016).

her descent into prostitution while still a girl. In these stories, victims of seduction are seldom older than eighteen, and could be as young as nine at the time of their fall.³ A girl's youth does not, however, make her sexual impropriety inconsequential. In fact, immediately after being convinced, tricked, or otherwise seduced into having sex, the direction of a girl's life is entirely altered. Her development into a respectable woman truncates. No longer can she hope to live virtuously, or even normally; no longer can she freely associate with her family, or return to the community from which she came. Though she might "recall to mind her heart-broken mother—her brothers and sisters—and weep," the path of depravity that a prostitute has set herself upon is inescapable.⁴ Tears and regret cannot regain family or a life of virtue, so a girl must resign herself to living out the remainder of her life in vice.

That prostitution narratives portray the victims of seduction as girls on the precipice of adulthood, whose indiscretion affects the remainder of their lives, is significant. In effect, this representation draws reader attention to the crucial juncture that girls faced as they approached adulthood in antebellum America. This was a time of increasing migration within the United States; a decline in available land and opportunity in rural New England compelled many young Americans to leave behind their provincial birthplaces in search of work in one of the country's growing cities.⁵ A girl's transition to womanhood, then, often brought about a move away from home. With this move

³ An account in the *Advocate of Moral Reform* reports on a number of girls between the ages of nine and eleven who worked in the third tier of urban theaters, one of the most prominent exchange places for commercial sex in the antebellum city. "Juvenile Thieves and Prostitutes," *Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 15, 1838, *HathiTrust Digital Library*, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011988301> (accessed July 16, 2016).

⁴ George Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York, Or, Life on Broadway Being a Mirror of the Fashions, Follies and Crimes of a Great City* (New York, 1853), 12.

⁵ Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 1-4.

came a degree of autonomy, as, for likely the first time in her life, a girl lived outside of the purview of her parents, and was free to behave as she wished.

To a cautious and concerned antebellum reader, that autonomy—limited though it would be for young, working women—was particularly troublesome. Rural Americans during this period already regarded cities like New York and Boston with mingled fear and distaste, and accounts reporting that girls in the city could neglect going to church and instead attend balls four times a week likely exacerbated their concerns about daughters living away from home.⁶ Moreover, not only did girls in the city face these temptations, but they also encountered them at precisely the age that prostitution narratives suggested a girl was most vulnerable to seduction.

Prostitution narratives' depiction of seduced girls, then, tapped into American fears about children leaving home during the antebellum era. In these stories, readers found a frightening image of what could happen to their own daughters that went to the city. How could readers be sure that the virtue instilled in their children at home would not be wiped away by urban vice? How could they know that their daughters would not become another of the “young women from the countryside, destitute of home, friends and work,” who found herself “compelled to adopt [the] repulsive and abhorrent profession” of prostitution?⁷ A girl becoming a prostitute after moving to the city was the manifestation of rural parents' fears for their daughter: away of their supervision, she would fall into sin.

Moreover, by portraying a girl's entire destiny as being dependent upon the

⁶ “Female Labor,” *National Police Gazette (New York)*, April 3, 1847, the *National Police Gazette* collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁷ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 17.

decisions she makes at sixteen or seventeen, prostitution narratives made the consequences of a girl's behavior immediately salient to parents. It tasked them with determining potential sources of a girl's decline into prostitution, and removing these influences from her life before she left for the city and did harm to her virtue. In order to do this, readers looked to accounts to determine the decisions and influences that led girls to their falls.

Reading is the cause most commonly cited as leading a girl to a seducer. Inheriting a tradition dating to antiquity, antebellum Americans believed reason and emotion to be cognitive capacities existing on a gendered binary, with men having domain over the former while women dealt in the latter. Because of the two capacities' irreconcilable nature, only one could be engaged at a time; novel reading was an activity that stimulated emotion, rather than reason. Women, then, were the sex more likely to indulge in fiction reading, for it suited the cognitive capacity thought to be inherent to them. While in moderation novels could provide a woman an opportunity to practice empathy, excessive consumption of fiction made her self-absorbed and capricious.⁸ Romantic fantasies would develop in the heart of a reader, causing her to engage in thoughtless behavior motivated by what she saw in novels rather than what is reasonable in the real world. A novel, then, was capable of leading a girl to danger. As Reverend John Bennett, author of a popular late eighteenth century exposition on female education and intellect, described, novels "inflamm[e] [women's] fancy, and effectively pave the way

⁸ Mary Kelley, "Genres of Print: Introduction," in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, ed. Robert A. Grossman and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 386; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 43-44.

for their seduction.”⁹

In a world that Americans believed was filled with prostitution, then, having a voracious reader for a daughter would be frightening. What would stop a girl from fantasizing that she might have a life like the ones about which she reads in books? What would stop her from attempting to make her fantasized life a reality? Romance, in particular, was a genre feared for encouraging the desires that would lead a girl directly into the arms of a seducer. “The libertine and the writer of romance are near akin,” suggested an article in the *Advocate of Moral Reform* that described how books cause girls to lose interest in the sober pursuits of daily life and instead dream of romance.¹⁰ Bored by their condition and given a peek into a life infinitely more alluring than their own, girls could be persuaded by romance novels to abandon a life of virtue and domesticity for the promise of love that a seducer offers.

Should a girl find herself in the company of a seducer, her chance of escaping his grasp before he ruins her is doubtful. Antebellum print sources continually insist on a girl’s inability to effectively judge good character in men, and advice abounds of the types of men she should avoid. “Ride, walk, sit, associate with no men, whose conduct has been such, as in a female, would cause you to avoid her society,” warns one account in the *Advocate*.¹¹ The omnipresence of such advice in print sources (particularly reform periodicals) suggests that girls were seen as unable to discern for themselves whether or not a man was a seducer. Unaware of his duplicitous nature, how could a girl escape his company before succumbing to his advances?

⁹ John Bennett, *Strictures on Female Education, Chiefly as It Relates to the Culture of the Heart, in Four Essays* (Philadelphia, 1793), 77.

¹⁰ “To Novel Readers,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 1, 1837.

¹¹ “Run, Speak to that young Woman,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 15, 1837.

Indeed, many of the girls who appear in prostitution narratives appear to be of good character despite their impending, or already realized, ruin. In George Thompson's *The Gay Girls of New-York*, a sensationalist novel chronicling the happenings of a brothel and its occupants, prostitute Hannah Sherwood is described as possessing "the praiseworthy attributes of generosity and humanity." Hannah helps defend other girls from seduction in hopes that they do not reach the same fate she has, proving herself to be a kind, if sometimes mischievous, fallen woman. Thompson recognizes that readers might be surprised to find his characterization of a prostitute so positive, but contends, "The loss of virtue in a woman does not necessarily involve the destruction of all the good qualities of her nature."¹²

Accounts such as this make clear, then, that some prostitutes are not merely sirens who intentionally set themselves upon a path of depravity in pursuit of a sinful life. Many are merely women whose naïveté and distance from home caused them to fall for a man's seduction. The *National Police Gazette* typically upheld this characterization of prostitutes, lamenting a girl's fall and expressing regret at her inevitable death in pointedly titled articles such as "Suicide of a Young and Beautiful Girl, Produced by Infamy and Deceit."¹³ In these stories, girls do not pursue lives of prostitution, but rather are forced into them by bad men.

Does a girl's lack of desire to become a prostitute, however, absolve her entirely from guilt for her condition? Many accounts suggest it does not. Though the *Advocate of Moral Reform* recognizes that girls might have had no intention of becoming prostitutes, it contends that they still carry some of the blame for their seduction. "I

¹² Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 22.

¹³ "Suicide of a Young and Beautiful Girl, produced by Deceit and Infamy," *National Police Gazette*, May 30, 1846.

firmly believe that in ninety-nine cases out of an hundred,” concluded a front-page article of an 1838 issue, “the seduced meets the seducer, if not half-way, yet a considerable distance, in consequence of the previous corruption of her heart.”¹⁴ Girls had, after all, been given plenty of warning about the dangers that might put them at risk of seduction. Reading, keeping bad company, and dressing provocatively were all hazardous behaviors in which girls were told not to engage.¹⁵ Furthermore, if seduced girls enjoyed reading so much, how could they have missed the advice against these activities that was so pervasive in print? They did not miss these warnings, the *Advocate* suggested—instead, they engaged in the precise behaviors they were cautioned against out of indulgence and recklessness. Even the *Gazette*, which does not share the *Advocate*’s predilection towards scrutinizing a girl’s behavior, noted tendencies of improper dress or reading in fallen women.¹⁶

In the subtext of many prostitution narratives, at least partial blame is placed on girls for their decline. Though accounts are not as harsh on girls as they are on others, they still do not represent these characters as being entirely innocent; a girl’s willful disregard for the advice and guidance she is provided “lowers her in [a seducer’s] estimation and encourages him to hope that once again he may be successful in his scheme of darkness.”¹⁷ In essence, these accounts suggest that a girl leads herself to the brink of seduction, where the task of her ruin then falls to the seducer.

But readers were unlikely to wait with baited breath to learn whether or not a man was “successful in his scheme of darkness.” After all, a prostitution narrative could not

¹⁴ “Connection Between the Vices No. 2,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, December 15, 1838.

¹⁵ “Connection Between the Vices No. 2,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, December 15, 1838.

¹⁶ “Interesting Particulars of the Murdered Female in Boston,” *National Police Gazette*, reprinted from the *Boston Mail*, November 8, 1845.

¹⁷ “Run, Speak to that young Woman,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 15, 1837.

go on without a man to carry out a girl's fall.

Wealthy Boys

Because a young man's sexual advances are presented as being a necessary component of a woman's descent to infamy, it is not surprising that these men are often placed at the center of blame in prostitution stories. More than any other character, young, wealthy men who take on the role of seducer are overtly labeled as being at fault for prostitution. Even accounts from the *Advocate*, which was quite open to blaming girls themselves, placed fault on these men; as the periodical describes, "Painting the character of the seducer in colors too dark...can never be done."¹⁸ This sentiment likely came from the active role that these men took in prostitution narratives; they are the ones who carry out the irreversible step of taking a girl's virginity. Because they play such a crucial role in a girls' downfall, it is almost impossible for authors not to assign fault to these men.

Who are the men that seduce young girls? In most accounts, they, like Henry Nelson, are the sons of privilege and respectability. And like the girls they come to seduce, these men are typically from a rural background. In many ways, representations of boys who become seducers tap into the same fears that representations of girls who become prostitutes did: both boys and girls are new arrivals in the city, are living away from parental supervision, and are thus at incredible risk of being drawn into the world of vice and sin. While for girls that risk is of becoming prostitutes themselves, for boys, it is of becoming the men who seduce girls and lead them to prostitution.

¹⁸ "Connection Between the Vices No. 2," *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, December 15, 1838.

Particularly worrisome for parents with sons was the young, male sporting culture emerging in urban areas during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Unsupervised boardinghouses where fellows of similar age and social standing stayed after moving to the city were the places where this culture developed. In a sense, boardinghouses for young men were the masculine counterparts to brothels for young women—both were represented in print as spaces where people of like morals came together, and accounts often made no distinction between the two.¹⁹ In male boardinghouses, away from the influence of family and home, a culture idealizing bachelorhood and sexual leisure arose. For these sporting men, unrestrained sexuality was an expression of identity, and antebellum courting rituals a threat to their way of life. They frequented dance halls and theaters, both common zones of commercial sex, and were free to do as they pleased in a growing city where consequences for bad behavior were seemingly nonexistent. Having no desire to marry, due both to its increasing cost and because the influence women asserted over the domestic sphere threatened the virility they cultivated around themselves, sporting men turn to brothels. In a prostitute, or a young girl that could be seduced and then tossed aside, these men found an opportunity for sexual gratification that occurred on their own terms, rather than those of their parents or antebellum propriety.²⁰

Boys arriving in the city would almost certainly move to one of the boardinghouses where sporting culture was forming. The apprentice system, which had

¹⁹ There were also boardinghouse for women, and stories often fail, perhaps intentionally, to note whether or not these are places of commercial sex. “Grand Larceny,” *National Police Gazette*, January 23, 1847.

²⁰ Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), Chapter 5: Sporting Men; Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 87, 125-128, 139-143; Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 11-12.

previously allowed transplanted young men to live with their employers in traditional domestic arrangements, largely collapsed in the northeastern United States following the War of 1812, making boardinghouses the primary place for young men to live.²¹ Parents, then, might be concerned that their sons would become taken with the licentious lifestyle of their roommates; it was these peers' influence that was believed to draw boys into a life of frequenting brothels. "The young man of twenty to twenty-three of lewd and lecherous habits often becomes the teacher and guide of the soft and unsuspecting lad from fifteen to seventeen," warns an account in the *Advocate*.²² The story that follows this declaration, which details the son of a respectable clergyman's first foray into a brothel, proved to parents that even boys instilled with the best values could be tempted into sin. These boys would then become the "Foes of Society," as a Boston minister christened men who practiced sexual immorality. Despite being women's "natural guardians and protectors," these men destroyed girls in their unquenchable lust.²³

In the same way that a rake could seduce a girl into prostitution, he could influence a boy to take up a life of sin. Much as girls are doomed to spend the rest of their lives in depravity following seduction, boys "quickly and easily...become ensnared and corrupted" by the world of vice to which their peers introduce them.²⁴ The consequences of a boy's sexual indiscretion, however, are considerably lower than they are for a girl. Though he might become a "foe of society" and a shame to his family, seducer boys are not predestined to the early and terrible death that seduced girls are—

²¹ Gillian Hamilton, "The Decline of Apprenticeship in North America: Evidence from Montreal," *The Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 3 (2000): 628-629; Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 11.

²² "The Rescue of the Innocent from the brink of Ruin," *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 1, 1838.

²³ "Strong but Just," *National Police Gazette*, January 9, 1847.

²⁴ "The Rescue of the Innocent from the brink of Ruin," *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 1, 1838.

and most often, they are not even held responsible for their behavior.²⁵

Though seducers are the party most overtly blamed for prostitution in antebellum narratives, the lack of consequence they face for their sins underscores the subtle ways in which authors often excused their behavior. The most defining feature of this trend is the frequent omission of a seducer's name in accounts. Though scholars have suggested that the authors of some sources, like the *Advocate*, relished the opportunity to publish the names of seducers, in actuality sources very seldom did this, instead referring to these men merely by their first initial or as "villains."²⁶ Even the *National Police Gazette*, which generally presented itself as sympathetic to the seduced and critical of the seducer, does this regularly; in the piece, "Effects of Seduction," a physician who seduced a twenty-two year old and abandoned her, pregnant, in New York goes unnamed.²⁷ Meanwhile, the name of the girl, Julia Thompson, is reported in full. Seeing as this story came directly to the *Gazette* from Thompson herself, it seems unlikely that the man's name was omitted because it was unknown—instead, the author hides the name deliberately, shielding the man's identity and reputation while condemning his actions. Moreover, the inclusion of Thompson's name forces her into the center of the unsavory story, making only her endure public knowledge of her sexual impropriety.

Even though accounts like this do not outwardly blame women for their fall—

²⁵ In my readings, I have never once come across a story in which a seducer dies an extraordinary or early death. More often, men like Henry Nelson or Richard Robinson, Helen Jewett's murderer, are shown to escape punishment and return to lives of normalcy.

²⁶ My own findings contradict those of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, as I have read very few accounts that name seducers. More often, it seems that the threat of exposing these men, which is seen in penny press papers of the period as well, is more common than actually doing so. Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1971): 572-574. For examples of articles that do not name the seducer, see: "Characters in Real Life," *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, December 15, 1838; "The Rescue of the Innocent from the brink of Ruin," *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 1, 1838.

²⁷ "Effects of Seduction," *National Police Gazette*, January 9, 1847.

men are the visibly condemned party—it still burdens them most with the consequences of sexual sin. The subtext of these pieces is that boys from the countryside who become seducers can continue on with their lives after ruining a girl, whose fate, alternatively, is sealed. Death does not hang over a young man’s ventures into a brothel as it does for a young woman. Because they face no consequence for their sin, fault leveled against seducers slips away in these accounts. In place of these men, authors find new characters to blame for prostitution. In particular, attention shifted onto the ways in which women could lead one another to the brothel, and how mothers could be responsible for a girl’s descent into prostitution.

Mothers

Because depictions of the seduced and the seducer in prostitution narratives tapped so deeply into the anxieties that Americans felt about ongoing shifts in migration, family structure, and autonomy during the antebellum period, it would only be natural for parents reading these accounts to wonder what role they themselves might play in a child’s ruin. Surely, the parents of those girls and boys who went wrong could not have brought them up properly, readers might assure themselves—but just in case, it would not hurt to see what accounts had to say about a family’s role in a child’s descent.

These readers would certainly not have had to search long to find material that would help them determine their place in a prostitution story. Accounts frequently entertain questions of what might have become of a prostitute if she had been raised differently, forcing readers to consider the ways in which an improper family could be to blame for a prostitute’s condition. In particular, the moral character and parenting

abilities of mothers was a topic of frequent exploration. “It is hardly too much to say,” the *Advocate of Moral Reform* boldly declared in an 1840 article that typified the periodical’s emphasis on a mother’s duty to her children, “that the mother, under God, holds in her hands the eternal destinies of her child.”²⁸

This is a constant refrain in the *Advocate*: God has provided mothers with an immense responsibility in caring for their children. The ideology scholars have referred to as Republican Motherhood—the responsibility of mothers to instill morality and good values in their husbands and children in order to uphold societal decency—was deeply at work in the *Advocate*’s rhetoric.²⁹ For instance, the *Advocate* frequently published the constitutions of auxiliaries to the Female Moral Reform Society (the organization that produced the periodical), which consistently include clauses dedicated to describing a mother’s obligation to properly instruct her children.³⁰ Nary a page of the periodical could be read without finding a reference to the responsibilities of Republican Mothers in ensuring the good character of their children.

Both empowering and accusing implications arise out of the *Advocate*’s unflinching support of this ideology. In one sense, this assertion suggested to mothers reading the periodical that they had the privilege and power to affect the moral state of society—after all, “No class in the community exert so powerful an influence in

²⁸ “On the Early Religious Education of Children,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 15, 1840.

²⁹ Richard A. Meckel, “Educating a Ministry of Mothers: Evangelical Maternal Associations, 1815-1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 4 (1982): 403-404, 422; Linda Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 202-205.

³⁰ For examples of auxiliary society constitutions that include clauses dedicated to explaining mothers’ duties, see: Rachel Robinson, “For the Advocate of Moral Reform: Ferrisburgh Chapter Constitution,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 1, 1837; J.M. Parker, “For the Advocate of Moral Reform: Chenango Chapter Constitution,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 1, 1837; “For the Advocate of Moral Reform: Heath Chapter Constitution,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, November 15, 1836.

controlling the morals and destinies of the rising generation as mothers.”³¹ The future was theirs to determine; by teaching morality in the home, a woman ensured her children would enact virtuous living as they made their way into public life. On the other hand, however, Republican Motherhood placed the burden of all societal evils on women. Had these women better instructed their children, vice would not exist to the wide extent that print sources suggested it did.

In this framework, the mother of a prostitute became the target of direct blame for her daughter’s condition. This might well have been the idea invoked by David McCord at the Ackerly trial, when he accused Mary’s mother of being a woman unworthy of the court’s trust—Mary’s sexual impropriety was a sign of her mother’s ineptitude as a moral guide, and the girl’s death was a consequence of her mother’s failings. By affirming the power of influence a mother had—that “No mother who does her duty in the nursery, and properly manages the young immortals committed to her care, will ever lose the influence which God and nature have given her over the minds and hearts of her children”—the *Advocate* also maintained that children gone wrong were the responsibility of mothers who had failed to maintain their household appropriately.³²

Print sources go beyond these abstractions by providing examples of mothers who failed to prevent a daughter’s descent to prostitution. Often, a mother’s shortcoming was her indulgence. Jane B., as reported by the *Advocate*, grew up under the care of a mother whose unwillingness to administer discipline towards her only daughter left the girl recalcitrant and slovenly. Years later, after a life of disregard for domestic duties and proper behavior, Jane could be found “sitting on the steps of a dwelling, thinly clad...her

³¹ Questions for Discussion at Maternal Meetings,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 15, 1837.

³² “Improprieties in Dress,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 15, 1836.

whole appearance [exhibiting] the extreme of wretchedness.” Having never been provided the moral or religious education that a girl requires from her mother, Jane led a debauched life of homelessness and alcoholism. Moreover, a childhood acquaintance found that “TOTAL DEPRAVITY was inscribed on every feature” of Jane’s face—the corruption that came from her life as a prostitute literally had been marked upon and became part of her appearance. This terrible fate, the account concludes, could have been avoided if Jane’s mother had taken seriously the charge that God assigned her as the moral guide of her child.³³

Lack of presence in a daughter’s life was the other major way in which a mother could doom a girl to a life of prostitution. A family with too many children, a column in the *Gazette* contended, was sure to have at least one girl go wayward—her mother’s attention was too divided to instruct her properly.³⁴ A mother’s death, too, could lead her daughter to the brothel. Midcentury biographers of Helen Jewett, the famously murdered prostitute, observed with regret the fact that Jewett’s mother had died when her daughter was a young girl. They noted that her mother’s death made Helen particularly vulnerable during puberty: “How deeply it is to be regretted that a girl...should not have had the watchful guardianship of a mother, at a time when the passions are bursting forth in their full strength.”³⁵ Though she was dead, Jewett’s mother was still placed at fault in these accounts for failing to impart on her daughter the care that might have prevented her from being seduced. A mother, therefore, must ensure that if death took her from her children

³³ Capitalization is from the original document. “Fatal Effects of Indolence; or the Story of Jane B.—” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, November 15, 1836.

³⁴ “National Police Gazette” column, *National Police Gazette*, October 31, 1846.

³⁵ *Authentic Biography of the Late Helen Jewett, a Girl of the Town, by a Gentleman Fully Acquainted with Her History* (New York), 3-5, partially republished in Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*, 90.

before she had the chance to properly instruct them, she had an adequate substitute whom she could trust to provide guidance.

This responsibility fell to the wider community of mothers. The *Advocate*, in particular, suggests that it was not sufficient for a mother to be content with maintaining proper morality in her own household; it was also incumbent upon her to help those children outside of her home who were in need. “Mothers especially ought to know, that while their beloved ones are safe beneath their watchful eye, the children of others, are reduced to a bondage most hopeless and degrading—and this...at our own doors.”³⁶ This account and others like it sought to convince women that it was their duty to knock down doors in search of children living in depravity, just as moral reformers did. More importantly, however, these accounts put blame on even those mothers who had taught their children proper morality—so long as prostitution existed, it was a mother’s charge to eradicate it.

The implication of this blame was a daunting one, for it meant that mothers were collectively responsible for an institution that existed on a far greater scale than they could address individually. Though a mother might have done all she could to prevent her daughter’s ruin, the failure of the community of mothers as a whole allowed prostitution to continue. Girls without mothers to protect and guide them were still in danger. Alone and without family, they might be lured into the comfort and love they were offered by another maternal figure—the brothel madam.

³⁶ “Extracts from Report of the Visiting Committee,” *Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 1, 1837.

Madams

Having indulged in reading fiction, been improperly taught by their mothers, or brought to ruin at the hand of a seducer, girls in prostitution narratives invariably come to face the consequences of their sexual impropriety. Abandoned by their lovers and unable to return to their families, girls find they have nowhere to go but to a brothel.

If not by the man who seduced her, it is through a girl's peers that she makes initial contact with a brothel madam. Both the *Gazette* and the *Advocate* report accounts in which sisters lead one another to a brothel. In some cases, this is done for malevolent purposes—girls might find it humorous to bring their younger sisters to a place of such depravity—while in others, it is done charitably—for instance, when a girl follows her sister willingly, feeling she has nowhere else to go.³⁷

Whether a girl is brought to a brothel by force or comes freely, a madam greets her with warmth and compassion. “You are in the house of a friend,” madam Mrs. Bishop tells young Lucy Pembroke in *The Gay Girls of New-York* using “the most honeyed accents.”³⁸ Madams convince prostitutes to see their arrival at the brothel as a mere transition from one home to another, a brick, urban row house replacing a rural farmstead as the girls' home. With this new home comes a new mother to care for them. “Just make yourself easy, my lady, that's my advice,” Madame S. tells her new boarder, Isabella, in Ned Buntline's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*. “Now be a good girl and I'll be a mother to you!”³⁹ In the same way a Republican Mother occupies the

³⁷ For a case in which a girl led her younger sister to a brothel because she found it humorous, see: “Restored,” *National Police Gazette*, August 22, 1846. For a case in which girls willingly followed sisters to a brothel, see: “Missionary Intelligence,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 15, 1836.

³⁸ Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 17.

³⁹ Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life*, (New York: Berford & Co., 1848), 9.

heart of her home, a madam exists at the center of her brothel; she presents herself to her girls as being responsible for their care, guidance, and instruction, just as a mother would be in any other home.

While characters within prostitution narratives might be lulled into complacency, if not entirely fooled, by the maternal persona adopted by madams, readers most certainly were not. A madam's duplicity and untrustworthiness would be obvious to antebellum readers from her first interaction with a newly arrived girl. "Anything you want to eat or drink shall be sent up," Madame S. tells Isabella at their first meeting, assuring the girl "you shall have books, or the papers, or anything that's reasonable!"⁴⁰ What a madam presents as offerings would be considered temptations by readers—fiction, after all, was what was believed to lead a girl into a life of prostitution in the first place, and gluttony and intemperance would only further her moral corruption. Providing these sources of sin to girls was not the care that mothers were meant to offer their daughters; madams were not teaching their girls piety or restraint, but rather giving them opportunities to indulge in the behaviors that destroyed their virtue.

As narratives continue, it becomes increasingly obvious to readers that a madam's purported maternal instincts are merely a guise used to exploit and profit from girls. Madams speak frankly about their intentions for fallen women, confessing that those in their care "will become a mine of gold to me," and celebrating how "these innocent looking girls always take the best, and command plenty of [profit]."⁴¹ Because madams make these comments in private, only readers—not prostitutes in the story—are privy to these women's duplicity.

⁴⁰ Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 8.

⁴¹ Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 16-17.

This allows a madam to continue using her role as mother to her advantage, exploiting the trust a prostitute places in her in order to further ensnare the girl in the brothel. In *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, when Madame S. discovers Isabella's friends are searching for her in order to save the girl from Madame S.'s brothel, she does not force the girl into hiding. Instead, she acts sweetly towards Isabella, bringing her breakfast and complying with her request for lemonade rather than coffee. Her guard lowered by Madame S.'s show of benevolence, Isabella fails to realize that her drink is laced with a drug to put her to sleep, and is nowhere to be found once her friends come knocking at Madame S.'s door.⁴²

It is only once a girl is firmly in a madam's grasp that the villainous woman reveals her true nature. Beneath a madam's "'painted old face,'" lies a woman capable of becoming "enraged...with fury in her looks" when at risk of losing one of her workers.⁴³ In *The Gay Girls of New-York*, Mrs. Bishop's determination to keep her prostitutes in order is put on display when she brawls with Hannah Sherwood, the aforementioned, good-natured if troublesome, prostitute who challenges the madam's authority. In shedding her motherly demeanor, Bishop makes clear to her prostitutes that she will not tolerate any behavior that might threaten her business. She banishes Hannah, and later takes vengeance on the girl by throwing a vial of vitriol on her face, blinding and severely disfiguring her former charge.⁴⁴

This portrayed ability to shift between overt kindness and genuine ruthlessness made madams highly capable businesswomen in the minds of readers. Ideas that madams were prosperous and successful in their business were exacerbated by popular

⁴² Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 42-43.

⁴³ Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 20.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 17-22, 74-75.

publications that claimed to offer inside information on the workings of brothels. “To Lovers of Horizontal Refreshments,” a broadside that appeared in a Philadelphia publication, was purportedly written and signed by eight local madams. “At a meeting of old Bawds,” the piece began, “the expected arrival from New York...of a large batch of handsome young whores, who are coming to this city with the evident intention of destroying our legitimate trade of fucking” was discussed. Dismayed by their new competition, the group of madams allegedly proclaimed “a crisis has occurred in our business that loudly calls for prompt and energetic action on our part to save us from disgrace and starvation.”⁴⁵

Prostitution is presented in this piece as a complex, proto-unionized business practice that involves cooperation between competing brothels in order to combat outside competition. Moreover, its existence suggests to readers that prostitution is tolerated enough by society for such a document to be placed in print. The extreme vulgarity of this broadside, along with its unrealistic descriptions of women’s bodies and genitalia, suggests that it was a satirical piece written by and intended for men involved in sporting culture.⁴⁶ To readers who came across this piece without realizing its authors and intended audience, however, the satire used here would be easy to miss.

During the antebellum era, humbug pieces appeared alongside real news stories, making the distinction between fact and fiction a blurry one for most readers. Editors were reluctant to inform audiences of whether or not the fantastic stories they told were

⁴⁵ “To Lovers of Horizontal Refreshments,” broadside, 1857, Box 1, John H. Hunt Papers 1849-1860, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁴⁶ For more information on the flash press, a subgenre of antebellum urban journalism created and consumed by sporting men, see: Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, Historical Studies of Urban America Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

true; instead, as Benjamin Day, editor of the New York *Sun*, stated when asked if a telescope about which he had written was actually capable of discerning the moon's flora and fauna, "let every reader of the account examine it, and enjoy his own opinion."⁴⁷ In the case of "To Lovers of Horizontal Refreshments," readers were the ones with the power to determine whether or not this was an accurate portrayal of prostitution in Philadelphia. Anyone who read the piece and saw it as truth, rather than satire, would assume that madams did in fact work together, and that their business practices were deft and aggressive.

The business savvy ascribed to madams would be quite disturbing to audiences, for two primary reasons. First, it disrupts the ideal of women occupying the domestic sphere, while men work and earn wages. A madam does not conform to these norms. Though she might have a paramour, she is economically self-sufficient—her work might even be more lucrative than his. Madams, therefore, were subjects of social scrutiny because their business practice breached the domestic sphere women watching over young girls were meant to occupy. Second, and perhaps more importantly, a madam's success in her business ventures was based entirely on the sexual ruin of others. If these women truly were profiting, as popular narratives often depict, then numerous young girls must be working for them, and even more men must be coming to brothels to purchase their offerings. Not only was a madam stepping out of her role by running a business, then, but also she was doing so by luring others to ruin.

As older women living outside of respectable society and engaging in immoral behavior, madams were an obvious group for the authors of print sources to target as being responsible for the continued existence of prostitution. Unlike other characters in

⁴⁷ Tucher, *Froth & Scum*, 51-52.

prostitution narratives, madams receive the sympathy of no writer. Their subversion of the tenets of motherhood for their own profit, at the expense of young girls, added to the repulsion that the public was likely to already feel because of their sexual immorality. Madams went further than mothers in causing a girl's ruin, for they actively manipulated the trust invested in them for selfish gain. To a public hoping to make sense of prostitution and why it existed, the presence of such crafty and treacherous women in society was horrifying; it might shake their faith in those around them, and compel them to reassess whom they could trust.

The Public

Print accounts chronicling the proliferation of prostitution in the antebellum era encouraged anxieties in Americans about the state of their society. Particular members of the public, to whose real world counterparts readers might have previously paid little attention, take on roles in these stories that center around a brothel and its inhabitants. Through these characters, authors put society as a whole on trial for the continued existence of prostitution, calling readers to be cautious of all those around them.

The wariness that these accounts recommended compounded the public's existing anxieties during the antebellum period. During this time, there was immense concern in parlor society about the plasticity of children's minds, and the ways in which exposure to sexual culture could affect development. Parents feared that a child who came across anything related to the era's growing dialogue around sex—including the print sources that discussed prostitution—would be encouraged into deviancy and sexual sin.⁴⁸ This

⁴⁸ Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 120-122.

meant that even those who aimed to actively fight against prostitution, like the moral reformers who used the rhetoric of motherhood in aid of their cause, actually “create the evil they would remedy” by drawing attention to sin.⁴⁹ Though their goals were moral, reformers only furthered the opportunities for girls to become prostitutes and boys to become seducers. Readers, then, were made to feel that their trust was misplaced in even those whose intent was virtuous.

This would be even more concerning because of print’s suggestion that other segments of the public intentionally sought to perpetuate prostitution and the dangers it posed to women’s spiritual and physical wellbeing. Chief among the groups depicted as such were abortionists. By removing from sex the inherent risk of pregnancy, abortionists were represented in antebellum accounts as allowing seducers to act uninhabited, thus encouraging ruin. Perhaps because women were held to a higher standard of morality than men, female abortionists in particular were lambasted in print. Though men like Dr. Shove could be labeled “cruel and violent,” women who performed abortions were described with more venomous language, regarded as “modern vampyrs [sic]...who thrive by butchery and blood.”⁵⁰ Madams Costello and Restell, two of the most prominent abortionists in 1840s New York, were the targets of smear campaigns in the *National Police Gazette* contending that the deaths of numerous women—even those who were not pregnant and thus had no reason to go to an abortionist—were their responsibility.⁵¹ By holding abortionists responsible for deaths with which they had no clear connection, these accounts made them appear a public scourge of which the general

⁴⁹ *Whip and Satirist of New-York and Brooklyn*, May 28, 1842, republished in Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 74-75.

⁵⁰ “Acquittal of Dr. Shove,” *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846; *National Police Gazette*, December 5, 1846.

⁵¹ “Where is Restell?—Was She Murdered?,” *National Police Gazette*, November 7, 1846.

populace should remain mindful.

If readers are part of the greater antebellum public, however, where can they place themselves in these accounts? Surely they did not seek to identify themselves with either the reformers who do more harm than good in their fervor, or with individuals like abortionists who purposefully preserve prostitution—but where else could they find themselves in prostitution narratives? In order to allow readers the opportunity to absolve themselves of blame for prostitution, an identifiable, moral segment of the public exists in many narratives. Stories abound, for example, of the heroism that neighbors display when they report local bawdy houses to the authorities (doing so, of course, without raising the public kerfuffle that moral reformers would).⁵² In another case, when a German girl screams for help when about to be raped in a brothel, it is passersby who save her from harm.⁵³ In these members of the public, readers find what they imagine themselves as being. They, after all, would do their part to put a stop to prostitution if given the opportunity—it is everyone else in society who would not do so.



In November 1845, the *National Police Gazette* reported that “Another Ellen Jewett Affair” had occurred in Boston. In a story with eerie parallels to the case that had created shockwaves through New York almost a decade prior, a prostitute, Maria A. Bickford, had been slain by the hand of her lover, one Albert J. Tirrell.⁵⁴

Just as it did in Mary Ackerly’s case, and in any number of other stories about prostitutes whose lives were destroyed by their paramour, the *Gazette* spoke with outrage

⁵² “Trial for keeping a Disorderly House,” *National Police Gazette*, March 20, 1847.

⁵³ “Attempt to Commit a Rape,” *National Police Gazette*, January 9, 1847.

⁵⁴ The *National Police Gazette* covers Bickford’s murder extensively from late 1845 to 1846, providing reports of the crime, information about the backgrounds of its victim and perpetrator, details of court proceedings, and opinions regarding the case. “Another Ellen Jewett Affair,” *National Police Gazette*, November 1, 1845.

on behalf of the fallen woman. Advertising a \$3,000 reward for the capture of Tirrell, the paper demanded that such a man, whose “character is entirely without relief, his case entirely undeserving of sympathy,” be brought to justice so he could never again contribute to the antebellum city’s growing “dark catalogue of homicides.” In coverage of the ensuing 1846 trial for murder, the *Gazette* continued its campaign against Tirrell, decrying his artifice as being the cause of Maria Bickford’s ruin. Not only had the man lured Bickford away from her husband and into a life of prostitution, but he also brought about her brutal end by taking a razor to her throat. Tirrell’s eventual acquittal created outrage at the *Gazette*, deemed as unbelievable as it was repugnant.⁵⁵

Yet while Tirrell might serve as the villain of the *Gazette*’s story, he is not the only player blamed for Bickford’s death. According to the newspaper’s reporting, Bickford had become dissatisfied with her life as a married woman in rural Maine when a group of female friends brought her to Boston for a short vacation. There, Bickford was “delighted by everything she saw—completely captivated—and on her return home...became dissatisfied with her humble condition.” She became “passionately fond of dressing extravagantly,” and began to dream of a life in Boston that offered the excitement her current situation lacked.⁵⁶

This infatuation with the glamor and opulence of the city was what made Bickford liable to be seduced by Tirrell. Had her friends not brought her to Boston, Bickford never would have fallen prey to the dangerous fantasies that tempted her away from the life of virtue she was leading in Maine. The *Gazette* even made note of how encouraging a woman’s recklessness—as these friends did—could cause her to end up on

⁵⁵ “The Boston Murder,” *National Police Gazette*, November 15, 1845; “The Boston Tragedy,” *National Police Gazette*, April 4, 1846.

⁵⁶ “A Brief Sketch of the Life of Mary A. Bickford,” *National Police Gazette*, December 6, 1845.

the doorstep of a brothel.⁵⁷ Blame for Bickford's death, then, could be assigned to the members of her sex who had prodded her along the path leading to depravity. This did not remove guilt from Tirrell, at least in the opinion of the *Gazette*—but it did mean that blame could be shared among multiple parties for a woman's fall.

Blame, as it manifests in prostitution narratives of the antebellum period, is not something that can be neatly assigned to a single actor; instead, it is shared by a variety of individuals. Such a wide variety of characters, from mothers to madams to reformers to abortionists, would not exist in a prostitution narrative if blame could be placed on only the seduced or the seducer. The pattern of blame observed in Maria Bickford's story—of men being able to bring about a girl's ruin only because she or members of her sex put her in compromising positions—is the most common one seen in antebellum narratives, yet others exist as well. No character is free of guilt in the body of prostitution narratives, and they all play a part in a girl's ruin.

While it would be easy to suggest that the diffusion of blame in prostitution narratives to female characters came merely as the result of men's control of print culture during the antebellum period, such an argument proves unpersuasive when considering the authors of these accounts. Indeed, many prostitution narratives were written by men, some of whose goal might have been to pardon their sex by placing blame on women. Women, however, also wrote widely about prostitution, and were just as apt as men to assign partial blame to a story's female characters.

A writer's gender, then, was not the determining factor in how he or she allocated blame in prostitution narratives. Equally significant were differences in the class,

⁵⁷ "The Life of Maria Ann Bickford, the Murdered Adulteress," *National Police Gazette*, December 6, 1845.

religion, and priorities of those who wrote. For all of these groups, print served as a means of enforcing their own values and condemning the transgression of them. In order to understand how and why different narratives sought to uphold different values, it is necessary to examine the nature of their creators.

CHAPTER 2

The Narrators

A diverse set wrote about prostitution. From working-class journalists purportedly just looking to inform the public of crime in their eight-page papers, to evangelical women appealing to Christian morality through their reform periodicals, to sporting men aiming to titillate and arouse their cohorts with sensationalist novels, more than a few writers in the antebellum world had something to say about prostitution.

Though they used similar characters and a consistent pattern of storytelling, each of these narrators had a distinct perspective on prostitution. How it came to exist, what effect it had on society, and, perhaps most importantly, who could be blamed for it, were subjects on which these authors diverged in their writing. In order to understand why distinct authors put distinct groups at blame for prostitution, it is necessary to explore these writers' backgrounds, their worldviews, and the nature of their publications. This chapter aims to do that.

Each of the three major sources used in this thesis—the *National Police Gazette*, the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, and midcentury sensationalist novels—will be here placed in its historical and cultural context. The amount of scholarship that has been devoted to each of these publications varies, some having received much closer attention by historians than others. A great deal, however, can be learned from these documents themselves, as their statements of purpose and styles of narration reveal insights about their views and perspectives.

This chapter will argue how authors and publications' perspectives, biases, and agendas permeated their coverage of prostitution. Stories are shaped by their tellers; the

nature of a narrative and its determination of fault for prostitution depends on the person who tells it. It is crucial, therefore, to identify and explain writers' perspectives in order to better understand both their allocation of blame and how they affected public perception of prostitution.

The National Police Gazette

At the time of its founding in September 1845, the *National Police Gazette* set out to distinguish itself from any other newspaper in antebellum New York. With the lofty goal of establishing a publication that “furnishes in its details of actual life a more profound and intricate history of human nature, and enforces more forceful lessons of morality than all other books of sage advice and solemn disquisitions of philosophy combined,” *Gazette* cofounders Enoch Camp and George Wilkes—the former the legal and financial manager of the enterprise, the latter its journalistic voice—sought to become the United States' first legitimate chroniclers of crime and corruption.¹

It is worth noting that the *National Police Gazette* as it is commonly remembered today bears little resemblance to the publication at its origin. The *Gazette's* legacy as a scandalous harbinger of tabloid journalism, which contained in its lurid pink pages equal parts semi-pornographic imagery and odes to masculine culture, has overshadowed the paper's origins as what historian Edward Van Every has aptly termed a “Moralizing Muckraker.”² Prior to its decline in popularity during the Civil War and later acquisition by sensationalist Richard K. Fox in 1874, the *Gazette's* pages were white, not pink, and

¹ “Our New Volume,” *National Police Gazette (New York)*, September 12, 1846, the *National Police Gazette* collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

² Edward Van Every, *Sins of New York as “Exposed” by the Police Gazette* (New York: F.A. Stokes Co., 1930), 3.

contained in their columns the relatively mundane details of local and national crime. Perhaps as a consequence of its sober nature, the *Gazette* under Camp and Wilkes has received far less scholarly attention than the later, flamboyant incarnation of the paper; only tangential work has been devoted to the *Gazette* before the Civil War, making its character and views during the antebellum period a relatively untapped area of study.³

The *Gazette* was first published in concurrence with growing dissatisfaction in New York about the city's police force. Tagged "leatherheads" by the public, police officers of 1840s New York were as overburdened as they were ineffective; a force of only eight hundred—who worked shifts exceeding twelve hours a day—could not possibly keep order in a city with a population approaching half a million. The *Gazette*, guided by the idea that "the success of the felon depends mainly upon the ignorance of the community to his character," took up the noble mission of making "vagabonds... notoriously known" to the public.⁴ Making readers aware of miscreants and their misdeeds, the *Gazette* claimed, would create a more vigilant society in which crime could no longer exist so extensively.

Self-congratulation runs deep throughout the *Gazette*. Aside from referring to itself as the "most extraordinary, interesting, and wonderful of all papers under the sun," the publication incessantly pays tribute to its proclaimed role in safeguarding readers

³ Van Every's research on the *Gazette* from 1930 appears to be the only significant piece of scholarship on the paper from the Camp and Wilkes years. Other sources, such as Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz's *The Flash Press*, devote only passing attention to the antebellum *Gazette*. Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, Historical Studies of Urban America Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 41-45.

⁴ David B. Welky, "Culture, Media and Sport: The *National Police Gazette* and the Creation of an American Working-Class World," *Culture, Sport, Society* 1, no. 1 (May 1998): 79; quote from the *Gazette*'s prospectus, republished in Van Every, *Sins of New York*, 5-6.

from harm.⁵ Pickpockets knew better than to target a man who carried the *Gazette* with him; no burglar would dare intrude upon a home where the paper was delivered.⁶ Moreover, Camp and Wilkes make clear that, though allies to law enforcement, they operated independently of the deeply resented and often corrupt police department; they “have not received a line of information from police officials,” and instead gathered intelligence both by their own means and through the tips of readers.⁷

The persona of vigilante protector to moral society that the *Gazette* adopts throughout its pages is clearly at work in the paper’s coverage of prostitution. The *Gazette*, as has been established, was an outwardly vehement critic of men who ruined girls. Articles reporting stories of seduction never miss an opportunity to label seducers “villains” of the highest order, and continually lament the sad fate of the “young and beautiful” girls these men trick and abandon. Moreover, in accordance with its purported mission of eradicating crime from the city, the *Gazette* claimed that it would “never cease to track the foul seducer, hot-foot through the world!”⁸ In sum, seducers were not only responsible for a girl’s descent to prostitution, but were also such threats to moral society that the *Gazette* would stop at nothing to bring them to justice.

Why, then, does the *Gazette* seldom name seducers?⁹ The paper’s guiding belief, after all, is that crime exists primarily because the public is unaware of it and its perpetrators. Far from bringing seducers to justice, would the *Gazette*’s refusal to provide their identities not enable these criminals to both escape punishment and continue

⁵ “Reduction of Price—New Feature,” *National Police Gazette*, October 10, 1846.

⁶ “Pickpockets,” *National Police Gazette*, May 1, 1847.

⁷ “Our Future Course,” *National Police Gazette*, August 7, 1847.

⁸ “Another Victim of Seduction! Death from Abortion!!” *National Police Gazette*, December 12, 1846.

⁹ For a more complete discussion of the *Gazette*’s tendency against naming seducers, see the “Wealthy Boys” section of Chapter 1, 25-26.

their wrongdoing?

In order to make sense of this inconsistency in philosophy and practice, it is necessary to consider the background of *Gazette* cofounder George Wilkes. Though his legacy is tied to it, the *National Police Gazette* was not Wilkes' only journalistic venture. Before taking on the role of New York's moral watchdog during his years at the *Gazette*, Wilkes delighted in chronicling sex and vice while working as a contributor at the *Sunday Flash* from 1841 to 1843. A weekly paper part of the subgenre of journalism devoted to sporting men that scholars have termed "the flash press," the *Sunday Flash* not only lauded expressions of male sexuality and licentiousness, but also provided extensive information to readers about the lives of prostitutes and the inner workings of brothels. All of this was done beneath the guise of moral reform rhetoric.¹⁰

Wilkes' temperament suited him to such a brand of journalism. A rogue of a man, Wilkes was the type to "spit in the face of a decent hard-working woman in the public street" when owed money.¹¹ He was a participant in the brothel bully culture of the 1830s that promoted violence against prostitutes and their property, and in 1836 was arrested for breaking into a house of ill-fame and terrorizing its inhabitants with a group of riotous friends. Labeled a thief, blackmailer, and coward by fellow journalists, Wilkes was hardly a paragon of morality and lawfulness when he joined forces with Enoch Camp in 1845, and therefore seemed an improbable candidate to create the decidedly anti-crime *Gazette*.

But create the *Gazette* he did. Scholars have suggested that this was Wilkes'

¹⁰ Biographical details of George Wilkes, along with information about his role in the flash press, come from Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 41-44; for information on the moral reform rhetoric in the flash, see: *The Flash Press*, 25-27.

¹¹ "Two Trials for Libel," *Subterranean*, September 20, 1845, republished in Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 43.

“first wholly legitimate enterprise,” and that the *Gazette* “was not remotely a flash paper.”¹² Relatively speaking, this is true; compared to Wilkes’ work in the flash, the antebellum era *Gazette* is positively demure, generally avoiding the topic of sex.

Still, Wilkes had been brought up as a journalist of the flash. Only twenty-four years old when he began working for the *Sunday Flash*, his time there had a clear effect on his ideas about how newspapers should be organized and presented to the public. For example, flash papers’ “wants” section, in which gossip and news sent to the editor by readers was reprinted, seems to have served as the model for the *Gazette*’s “To Correspondents” feature, in which the paper similarly solicits information from the public, albeit about local crime.¹³ Both the flash and the *Gazette*, too, included a single woodcut image on the front page of every issue. Woodcuts were by no means a common feature of 1840s newspapers; the cost of replacing worn wood engravings and the labor required to reapply ink between impressions prevented many newspapers from including images, meaning their presence in the *Gazette* was likely influenced by the aesthetic Wilkes knew from his work in the flash.¹⁴

Moreover, similarities between the flash and the *Gazette* were not limited to their shared style—content was also often common between the two. The *Gazette*, after all, was a publication inherently rooted in the most unsavory aspects of human nature. As a

¹² Cohen, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 43-44.

¹³ Examples of the *Gazette*’s “To Correspondents” section, which appears semi-regularly in the paper, can be seen in the December 12, 1846, December 19, 1846, and June 26, 1847 issues. For more information about the flash’s “wants” section, see: Cline, Gilfoyle, and Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 23.

¹⁴ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, “Another ‘American Cruikshank’ Found: John H. Manning and New York Sporting Weeklies,” *American Antiquarian Society* 112 (2002): 110; Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America’s First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 28; Georgia B. Barnhill, “Word and Image: Transformations in Pictorial Printing,” in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, ed. Robert A. Grossman and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: Published in association with the American Antiquarian Society by the University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 430-433.

self-described “record of horrid murders, outrageous robberies, bold forgeries, astounding burglaries, horrid rapes, vulgar seductions and recent exploits of pickpockets and hotel thieves,” the *Gazette* featured scandal and spectacle just as often as the flash.¹⁵ Though the *Gazette* purportedly sought to eradicate crime, and generally did not describe it with the titillation or graphic detail that the flash did, traces of overt sensationalism can be found in the paper. The woodcut that the *Gazette* commissioned in the midst of Maria Bickford’s murder case, for example, was sexualized in the extreme; in it, the slain prostitute lies supine on her bed, hair cascading to the floor while her breasts nearly fall from her nightgown.¹⁶ Similarly, the *Gazette*’s habitual publishing of brothel addresses in crime reports served the same purpose it did in the flash, by informing interested readers where they could purchase sex.¹⁷

These displays of sensationalism in the *Gazette* were infrequent enough for the paper to maintain a respectable reputation—Camp, Wilkes’ coeditor and a politician with vested interest in his social standing, would never have attached himself to the paper if it were considered a rag.¹⁸ Nonetheless, these indulgences shed light on the editorial voice behind the *Gazette* and its attitudes about sex and prostitution.

Wilkes hardly embraced in his personal life the morality he espoused in his writing. Even after founding the *Gazette*, his patronage of brothels and prostitutes was ongoing. To Wilkes, like other sporting men, prostitution was an amusement rather than a scourge to public life. His and the *Gazette*’s criticism of the “villains” who seduced girls was little more than a hollow echo of the predominant attitude about prostitution—

¹⁵ Van Every, *Sins of New York*, 20.

¹⁶ “The Boston Tragedy,” *National Police Gazette*, December 13, 1845.

¹⁷ Cohen, Gilfoyle, Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 118; “A Tough Case,” *National Police Gazette*, November 28, 1846.

¹⁸ Cohen, Gilfoyle, Horowitz, *The Flash Press*, 43-44.

in order to maintain a façade of respectability, the paper had to condemn the behavior of such men. As has been discussed, the subtext of this condemnation freed seducers from consequence for their action; their names were not printed even when they were known, and they had no reason to fear that the *Gazette* would uphold its promise of hotfooting them across the world. Attention was thereby shifted from these men to the women in prostitution narratives, who actually faced consequences for their actions.

This shift is particularly significant considering the context in which the *Gazette* was created. Scholars have discussed at length the nature of separate spheres—the placement of women in a private, domestic world and men in public life—during the antebellum era.¹⁹ Though this ideology had deep roots in Western society and had long shaped male-female interactions, it took on a distinctive form in antebellum America. The Revolutionary War had dislodged many of the restrictions of separate spheres; able to engage in political rhetoric and activity as never before, women took a visible position in public life during the war that threatened to erode the notion that their only place was in the domestic sphere. In response to such a threat to the patriarchal status quo, men found it necessary in the years following the Revolution to explicitly reassert in print that women had no place in public life, making discourse during this time intensely focused on the virtues of separate spheres.²⁰

The *Gazette* contributed to this rhetoric. Wilkes' depiction of prostitution—a public institution in which both men and women partook—told of the dangers that women encountered when they stepped outside of the domestic sphere. While men faced

¹⁹ For a historiographical survey of scholarship on antebellum separate spheres, see: Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 9-39.

²⁰ Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place," 18-20.

no penalty for commercial sex and could move freely through this aspect of public life, women who did so would quite literally die as a consequence of breaching their prescribed place. This representation not only served to reaffirm the belief that separate spheres maintained order in American society, but also to remind the *Gazette's* predominantly male audience that a woman's ruin came as a consequence of her own transgressions; had she behaved properly and remained in the domestic sphere, such a fate never would have befallen her.²¹

The *Gazette* existed primarily to sell itself—Camp and Wilkes were quite frank in editorials about the monetary benefit they hoped to derive from their enterprise.²² Necessary to maintaining an audience was providing readers with narratives that affirmed their own sense of morality; no man, after all, would continue buying a paper that faulted him for the sin present in American society. Shifting blame for a prostitute's condition onto the woman herself and her decision to enter public life, then, served the economic purpose of salving men's consciences and encouraging their continued patronage of the *Gazette*. Equally significant to Wilkes' experience in the flash press and continued connections to sporting life was his pursuit of profit, which motivated him to create a newspaper that sustained the worldview of its readers.

The *National Police Gazette* was not, of course, the only antebellum publication to concern itself with prostitution; accordingly, the goals of its creators were not necessarily those of other writers. The women of the Female Moral Reform Society, for instance, cared little about the profit they collected from the *Advocate of Moral Reform*.

²¹ As a working class newspaper, the *Gazette* was read primarily in such spaces as saloons and taverns, which were highly masculinized, implying that the paper's audience was mainly male. Welky, "Culture, Media, and Sport," 80-81.

²² "Reduction of Price—New Feature," *National Police Gazette*, October 10, 1846.

Instead, their concern was one of reforming society. With the unwavering goal of eradicating sexual sin from America, female moral reformers refused to comfort readers by absolving their guilt for prostitution, and instead compelled them to consider what part they played in vice's continued existence.

The Advocate of Moral Reform

Fueled by the evangelical zeal George Finney ignited throughout New York during the Second Great Awakening, moral reformers were quick to mobilize in the fight against sexual sin. Disgusted by both the proliferation of prostitution in the antebellum city and the double standard that enabled men to escape punishment for the licentiousness that brought women public condemnation, the women of the Female Moral Reform Society (FMRS) came together on the May 12, 1834 to organize a resistance. “The time for *action* has come,” its members—all female—wrote in an early issue of the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, the mouthpiece of the society that in just five years would become the most widely read evangelical periodical in the United States.²³ “We cannot be silent.”²⁴ Indeed, silent they were not.

To an audience of over 36,000, reformers recorded in the *Advocate* the particulars of what they viewed as being American society's moral dereliction. “Few, if any,” began an 1838 exposé, “are aware of the amount and horrid forms of depravity in [New York].”

²³ “Something must be done,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 15, 1836, *HathiTrust Digital Library*, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011988301> (accessed July 16, 2016); Lisa Shaver, “‘Serpents,’ ‘Fiends,’ and ‘Libertines’: Inscripting an Evangelical Rhetoric of Rage in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*,” *Rhetoric Review* 30, no. 1 (December 17, 2010): 5; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America,” *American Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1971): 570.

²⁴ Both quotes here are from the same article, and italics are part of the original source. “Something must be done,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 15, 1836.

Readers, the *Advocate* argued, needed to know that brothels could be found on every block; that girls fell victim daily to the wiles of seducers while boys indulged in lives of revelry and godlessness at the inducement of their peers. They needed to “be roused to feel...the necessity of wakeful diligence in their attempts to reform the manners and habits of society.”²⁵ Readers needed, in short, to feel outrage about the sin surrounding them and committed to joining the fight against it.

More than any other publication in the antebellum world writing about prostitution, the *Advocate* was genuinely dedicated to eliminating sexual immorality. No winking, covert endorsements of sexual exploration are included in the pages of the periodical, no brothel addresses provided, no alluring images of slain courtesans printed. The titillation and relish so characteristic of other publications discussing prostitution were entirely absent from the *Advocate*, replaced instead by resolved conviction to the cause of moral reform. Guided by a belief that human effort was crucial to creating society in God’s vision, evangelical Christians were quick and enthusiastic in their embrace of new technologies that would allow for wide, inexpensive distribution of their publications.²⁶ To the women of the FMRS, the ability to create and circulate a periodical was not merely a means of earning money or occupying time; instead, it was a charge their “Heavenly father...signally owns and blesses” that would allow them to spread their cause and thus help deliver society to salvation.²⁷

Accordingly, reformers’ rhetoric was both righteous and scriptural, filled with

²⁵ “The Rescue of the Innocent from the brink of Ruin,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 1, 1838.

²⁶ Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 48-50.

²⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, the Beast, and the Militant Woman,” 565; “What is the tendency of detailing Facts in the work of Moral Reform?” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 15, 1837.

quiet fury about the wicked turn American morality had taken. Though scholars have perhaps overstated the extremity of language used in the *Advocate*—poised condemnations of sexual sin appear far more often in the periodical than vitriolic attacks on seducers and prostitutes—a tone of dignified rage is indeed present throughout every issue.²⁸ Reformers did not hesitate to censure those they felt played a part in prostitution’s continued existence, and no entity was immune from their reproach. The church was criticized for failing to impart on its congregants the importance of the Seventh Commandment; schools were labeled ineffective in teaching worthwhile values to their students; even the male relatives of moral reformers were criticized for having “thoughtlessly fallen in with the popular current” that preserved the double standard and kept sexual sin alive.²⁹

The brash and unorthodox style of the *Advocate* attracted some controversy, and required that moral reformers frame their work as being distinctly nonthreatening to the social order. Reformers were no strangers to accusations of their work having breached respectable feminine behavior; these women did, after all, have a penchant for literally venturing outside of their households and into brothels so they could confront madams and prostitutes.³⁰ Yet members of the FMRS were painstaking in their efforts to convince readers that they were not radicals, writing openly about their desire to exert

²⁸ I refer here primarily to Lisa Shaver and her article, “‘Serpents,’ ‘Fiends,’ and ‘Libertines’: Inscribing an Evangelical Rhetoric of Rage in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*.” While the outrage Shaver ascribes to moral reformers is indeed palpable in some *Advocate* articles, my own research suggests that more common are pieces that levelheadedly explain the religious and social reasons for reformers’ disdain for prostitution.

²⁹ “My Mother is a good sort of Woman,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, February 1, 1837; “On the Education of Females,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, August 15, 1838; “To the Young Men who read the *Advocate of Moral Reform*,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 1, 1837.

³⁰ For more information about moral reformers’ brothel visits, see Nicolette Severson, “‘Devils Would Blush to Look’: Brothel Visits of the New York Female Moral Reform Society, 1835 and 1836,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (2014): 226-246.

virtuous influence on society “without becoming Amazon[s]” in the process. In an effort to soften their image to the public, they espoused the virtues of housework, declaring that a “woman ought never [leave] the sphere which God in his wisdom has assigned her.”³¹ Even their choice to use the pen, rather than the podium, to deliver a message about the evils of prostitution was a deliberate strategy for feminizing their work, as writing was far more acceptable than public speaking for women in the antebellum era.³²

Together, these strategies functioned to cast moral reformers’ concern with prostitution as being distinctly feminine. Their issue with prostitution, they suggested to readers of the *Advocate*, had less to do with the legislative and economic dimensions of the institution than with its moral and social implications. Though prostitution might overtly appear to be a matter of public rather than private life, reformers contended that its disruption of the domestic sphere—its ability to tear apart households, to entice sons and daughters to engage in sexual sin—gave women the right to fight against it. In fact, as members of the more moral sex and protectors of domestic tranquility, reformers were obligated to take the lead in confronting a force so disruptive to the home and family.³³

Moral reformers, then, most certainly did not define their work as an attempt to subvert social order; they argued, instead, that their endeavors aimed to find the most effective way of reinforcing the values of Christian morality that sexual sin had disrupted. The *Advocate*’s orientation was forward thinking, aiming to solve rather than diagnose the problems of prostitution. Though the periodical took note of the poor judgment or character that led girls to lives of prostitution and boys to the brothel, it did so less to chastise transgressors of good morality than to offer instruction of how to correct bad

³¹ “An Important Thought,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, October 1, 1838.

³² Shaver, “‘Serpents,’ ‘Fiends,’ and ‘Libertines,’” 2-3.

³³ Shaver, “‘Serpents,’ ‘Fiends,’ and ‘Libertines,’” 7-9.

behavior so prostitution could not continue. This is perhaps the most distinct feature of the *Advocate*; unlike other antebellum publications, its focus was not on scapegoating a particular segment of the population as being responsible for prostitution. Moral reformers sought to initiate an end to sexual immorality, and action went further than blame in achieving that goal.

Moreover, aside from being a moral imperative, eradicating sexual sin represented to reformers the opportunity to demonstrate the important role that members of their sex played in American life. Putting their mark on society must have been an exhilarating prospect to moral reformers; these were women whose political energies had long been stifled, who had watched men try, and fail, to bring about an end to sexual immorality. Should they succeed in doing what men could not, proven would be women's ability to influence society in ways that were not only meaningful, but that were also decidedly feminine.

Accordingly, reformers chose motherhood as the means by which to advance their cause. Because Republican Motherhood was an ideology as familiar to audiences of the *Advocate* as it was to the periodical's writers, reformers used it prominently, emphasizing the ways in which a woman's innate ability to influence her family could help put an end to prostitution. They made note of which behaviors women ought to teach their children and which they should prohibit. They encouraged readers to take seriously their role as moral beacons to their families, for the influence, good or bad, they encouraged in the home would eventually find its way into wider society. Perhaps most critically, reformers validated the efforts of their readers, reminding them that the "deep fount of feeling in a Christian mother's heart" was capable of creating "a land purified of its

abomination.”³⁴ Mothers were held to an extraordinarily high standard in the *Advocate* because of reformers’ sincere belief that the world was these women’s to shape.

While reformers meant for the language of motherhood to empower women reading the *Advocate* to see the role they could play in improving society, an unintentional drawback of this rhetoric was that it shifted onto mothers’ shoulders the burden of prostitution. If mothers were truly capable of influencing society in whatever way they saw fit, anything less than total eradication of prostitution would indicate that women had fallen short in their divinely ordained mission.³⁵ Indeed, throughout the *Advocate*, reformers betray anxiety about being unable to carry out the task they had been given, fearful that “a mother’s influence [could be] undermined” by outside forces.³⁶ They worried particularly about instilling good morals in sons, who reformers acknowledged as being decreasingly subject to their mothers’ influence after childhood and increasingly so to that of the male social sphere. Even if a male comrade were the one to introduce a son to prostitution, responsibility for his behavior still rested with his mother; as the root of her family’s moral successes or shortcomings, she was accountable for ensuring that her child was not susceptible to temptation in the first place, no matter how persuasive his company.³⁷

The fear that reformers expressed in print about the limits of their influence seems

³⁴ “Extracts from the Report of the Visiting Committee,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 1, 1837.

³⁵ For more information on the way that mothers were assigned blame for failing to succeed in eradicating prostitution, see the “Mothers” section of Chapter 1, 27-31.

³⁶ “A Voice from an Imprisoned Youth, Now in the State Prison of New Jersey,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, August 15, 1838.

³⁷ Though not stated explicitly, this idea is present in an *Advocate* article that describes a young man being influenced to go to a brothel by his male friends, despite being the son of good Christians. Blame falls on the young man’s parents for not “[realizing] the dangers that surround them” and not “[being] ever on the alert to keep [their sons] in the paths of virtue.” “The Rescue of the Innocent from the brink of Ruin,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, September 1, 1838.

to have been compounded by their inability to effect change when they took direct action. As has been mentioned, the women of the FMRS were frequent visitors to brothels, where they presented arguments to prostitutes themselves about the evils of sexual immorality. These outings were not, however, particularly successful; after almost two years of brothel visits, the FMRS had convinced only four prostitutes to leave commercial sex in favor of reformed, Christian lives.³⁸ While scholars have convincingly argued that this was a consequence of prostitutes generally becoming involved in commercial sex for its economic benefits and therefore being unlikely to abandon their livelihood for moral reasons, reformers seem to have internalized from their experiences in brothels feelings of inadequacy and guilt. They noted in an 1840 *Advocate* column that mothers “ought...in all honesty, blame themselves alone” for the continued existence of sexual immorality.³⁹ Had reformers been more adept at exercising their maternal influence, more persistent in their attempts to find and eliminate immorality, prostitution, they believed, would be no more.

Though scholars have suggested that the edge found in the *Advocate* was an expression of women’s building resentment towards male dominance in the antebellum world, equally responsible for the periodical’s tone was reformers’ growing frustration with their own inability to enact in society the change they presumed they could.⁴⁰ It

³⁸ Severson, ““Devils Would Blush to Look,”” 241.

³⁹ Timothy Gilfoyle has described in detail the economic incentives working-class women in the antebellum city had for entering prostitution, which Nicolette Severson has argued made moral reform rhetoric unattractive to prostitutes working in brothels; reformers’ rhetoric was fundamentally mismatched from the needs and priorities of prostitutes. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992), 56-57; Severson, ““Devils Would Blush to Look,”” 229-230, 240-242; “Parental Responsibility,” *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, March 1, 1840.

⁴⁰ Both Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lisa Shaver attribute the *Advocate*’s tone and rhetoric to a sense of anger that women felt towards men due to continued social, political, and economic subordination. Though I believe this is true to some extent, the periodical also shows signs of dissatisfaction with its own

must have been an immense disappointment for reformers to realize that their approach to eliminating prostitution was little more successful than men's; no longer could they consider themselves distinct from the society that allowed commercial sex to survive, and tarnished was their self-image of being mothers that could shape the world in whatever way they saw fit. Entering the fight against sexual immorality had been as much of a risk as it was an opportunity for the women of the FMRS, and rather than prove their capabilities as moral influences, it showed that they had fallen short of their goal.

Reformers' earnest desire to make a difference, along with the elevated standard to which they held themselves and other mothers, allowed blame for the continued existence of prostitution to fall to them. It had been their self-professed duty to eradicate commercial sex, and they had failed. The feelings of guilt and unease that reformers expressed in the *Advocate* were what set them apart from others writing about prostitution in the antebellum era; no other group placed blame on themselves for their inability to bring an end to commercial sex. Much more common than fighting for the eradication of prostitution was the use of sex and sin as a means to titillate and arouse readers, something that, as will become clear, the authors of sensationalist books and novels had no objection to doing.

Sensationalist Literature

Theatrical and melodramatic, urban literature of the antebellum period embraced prostitution as a means of captivating the attention of audiences across the country. Written by flâneurs that professed having nothing more than a desire to “penetrate

work. Smith-Rosenberg, “Beauty, Beast, and the Militant Woman,” 562; Shaver, “‘Serpents,’ ‘Fiends,’ and ‘Libertines,’” 3.

beneath the thick veil of night” to introduce readers to “the underground story of life in New York,” these sensationalist books and novels’ shared content, style, and distribution tactics made them a distinct and cohesive force of mid-nineteenth century print culture that had considerable influence on the ways in which rural Americans thought about prostitution.⁴¹

Setting and treatment of setting were central to sensationalist texts. Like the *Gazette* and the *Advocate*, sensationalist literature concerning prostitution was written and published primarily in New York, and accordingly focused a majority of its attention on the city. Stories abounded of young girls getting into trouble in the notorious, sinful Five Points, of being trapped in brothels by wicked madams that profited from their sexual ruin and who administered brutal punishment when displeased.⁴² The city was very much a character of its own in these stories; its institutions and geography were surveyed, its inhabitants described in detail, and its opportunities for tragedy explored. New York is so much a part of these texts that its name was even included in many of their titles; Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, George Thompson’s *The Gay Girls of New-York*, and George Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* all made their setting known immediately to readers.

It was not coincidental that authors included New York in the titles of their work. A city of rapid population growth and increasing cultural influence, New York was a source of fascination to many Americans during the antebellum period, making the

⁴¹ George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 5.

⁴² I refer here to Lucy Pembroke and Hannah Sherwood’s experiences, respectively, as were discussed in the “Madams” section of Chapter 1, 32-37. George Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York, Or, Life on Broadway Being a Mirror of the Fashions, Follies and Crimes of a Great City* (New York, 1853), 16-20, 35.

inclusion of its name in a book's title a clever marketing decision.⁴³ These books were distributed in places as far from New York as St. Louis and New Orleans, and as disparate from the city (and one another) as Alabama and Canada.⁴⁴ To readers in these places, too far removed geographically from the city to experience it for themselves, these texts provided what they believed to be a genuine depiction of "life as it is in New York," a look into a world about which they knew little but were curious.⁴⁵

The space between New York and the outlying locales where sensationalist books were sold was, however, not merely physical. Significant cultural and psychological distance existed between these areas as well, which limited the ability of readers from outside of New York to recognize the fabrications present in sensationalist works.⁴⁶ Rural Americans, particularly, were inclined to believe the worst of metropolises like New York, anxious about sin in the city and the ways in which urban life could corrupt respectable young men and women.⁴⁷ If there were anywhere that a prostitute might extract revenge on her seducer by brutally murdering his servant, forcibly locking him in a cellar, and then setting fire to his house so he would burn with it, it was in New York.⁴⁸ The city was, in the minds of audiences unfamiliar with it, a place that could play host to such incredible tragedies. After all, sensationalist works christened themselves "mirror[s] of the fashions, follies, and crimes of a great city," and offered in their first pages

⁴³ Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2.

⁴⁴ Ned Buntline's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York's* cover page includes a list of the book's distributors throughout the United States. Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life*, (New York: Berford & Co., 1848).

⁴⁵ Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, Publisher's Note.

⁴⁶ For further discussion of disconnect between urban publications and rural audiences, see Tucher, *Froth & Scum*, 88-96.

⁴⁷ Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 1-4; for further information on how the city was believed to corrupt young people, see the "Rural Girls" and "Wealthy Boys" sections of Chapter 1, 16-27.

⁴⁸ This remarkable scene takes place in *The Gay Girls of New-York*, and is noted by Thompson as being "too true." Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 50-61.

certifications from police or government officials attesting to the accuracy and truthfulness of their contents.⁴⁹ What reason did readers from outside the city, who were unfamiliar with local men of import, have to suspect that these certifications were as invented as the stories they proclaimed to be “accurate,” “correct,” and “laudable”?⁵⁰

Though authors of sensationalist literature verified to readers the truth of their accounts through such falsified endorsements, a tone of moral outrage was still necessary to give legitimacy to their work. Like Wilkes of the *Gazette* and authors of the flash, those writing sensationalist novels needed reason to venture into dens of sin in their writing, justification for providing titillating accounts to a public unwilling to admit its predilection for scandal. The common refrain of these texts, as with the *Gazette*, was that the only way to eradicate prostitution and other forms of vice from the city was to expose them; that only by “discover[ing] the real facts of the actual condition of the wicked and wretched classes” can “Philanthropy and Justice...plant their blows” on urban sin.⁵¹

What sensationalist writers proclaimed to uncover through their exploration of New York’s darkest quarters was that the city’s swelling immigrant population was the cause of its growing crime. Immigration was, indeed, a matter of serious concern to many Americans in the decades preceding the Civil War; never before or since has a larger percentage of the United States population been foreign-born.⁵² Sensationalist texts joined a contemporary urban literary trend that exoticized sin, claiming that in New

⁴⁹ This is the subtitle of Thompson’s *The Gay Girls of New-York*.

⁵⁰ Prefacing *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* is a letter from New York Police Commissioner George W. Matsell. Although Matsell was indeed a real figure, his testimony is suspect, both because it came within a day of Buntline sending his book to Matsell for review, and because “Edward Z. C. Judson,” Buntline’s real name, is signed beneath the letter, indicating his authorship of the note. Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, Publisher’s Note.

⁵¹ Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, 5.

⁵² Kevin Kenny, “Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Making the Irish American: History and Heritage of the Irish in the United States* ed. J.J. Lee and Marion R. Casey (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 367.

York's most notorious neighborhoods, "not one *American*, to a hundred foreigners, can be found."⁵³ Immigrants were believed to have brought more than just their bags with them when they arrived in America; intemperance, sexual immorality, and indecent behavior all landed with them as well.

Particularly worrisome were the Irish, who represented the most significant threat to established nativist order because of both their size and cultural distinctness. Forced en masse from the Emerald Isle by the Great Famine, the Irish accounted for up to half of those migrants arriving in New York. Even more concerning than their size, however, was the Irish way of life, which was deemed irreconcilable with American values. As Catholics, the Irish were feared by the Protestant majority as bringing to the United States the hierarchal, European structures from which the country had expressly declared independence.⁵⁴ Moreover, notions that the Irish were subhuman, apelike in appearance and savage in demeanor, circulated through the public's imagination, fueled by representations in sensationalist literature of Irishmen as drunkards who used unintelligible jargon and lived in bestial "greasy quarters."⁵⁵ Difference was marked with disgust in these accounts; not only were the Irish, their religion, and their living conditions completely unidentifiable to rural, native-born readers, but they were also utterly repulsive, unquestionable contributors to the declining condition of American morality.

Authors of sensationalist accounts extended this pattern—of making abhorrent

⁵³ Elizabeth Kelly Gray, "The World by Gaslight: Urban-gothic Literature and Moral Reform in New York City, 1845-1860," *American Nineteenth Century History* 10, no. 2 (2009): 139-142; Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, 88.

⁵⁴ Kenny, "Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment," 366-368.

⁵⁵ Media depictions in the antebellum period frequently represented Irish people as resembling apes due to the belief that they were racially inferior and less evolved than Anglos. Kenny, "Race, Violence, and Anti-Irish Sentiment," 364-368; Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 21.

and blameworthy those characters with whom their audience would never identify—to their discussion of prostitution. While the Irish and other immigrant groups might be at fault for crime and immorality generally, it was brothel madams that sensationalist literature charged as being responsible for prostitution specifically. Like the Irish, madams were framed in sensationalist accounts as animalistic beings. They “foamed with rage” and struck out viciously when displeased, preyed on any “lambs” that came across their doorstep, made their livelihood by ensnaring and destroying as many innocent girls as possible.⁵⁶ They were characters readers were meant to abhor. Moreover, madams were entirely unidentifiable to rural audiences; because only urban spaces could sustain their businesses, madams were a distinctly non-rural class. While seduced girls, their families, and seducer boys all originated in the countryside and thereby might have real world analogues in rural audiences, madams did not. They were the only characters in prostitution narratives that could be blamed for commercial sex without potentially alienating rural readers, and thereby made logical targets for authors motivated to sell books.

For, like Wilkes of the *Gazette*, sensationalist writers were driven to their craft by economic incentives. Claim though they might that their intentions were to nobly unveil and eliminate the dangers of the antebellum city, authors exploited the rural public’s fascination with the salacious aspects of urban life by providing intimate examinations of sin in New York. There was profit to be made from such pursuits. The topics that writers discussed in sensationalist accounts—crime, immigration, prostitution—were emotionally charged ones; they stirred deep feelings of fear, outrage, and disgust. But

⁵⁶ Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York*, 13, 20. For more information on the ways in which madams were blamed for prostitution and the reasons why they were more maligned than any other character in prostitution narratives, see the “Madams” section of Chapter 1, 32-37.

these matters also captured readers' attention, satiating their curiosity about urban areas and perhaps even exciting feelings of thrill and arousal they were unwilling to admit to having. Readers could visit saloons, encounter prostitutes, and voyeuristically watch sin unfold without ever stepping foot on Manhattan; sensationalist novels gave them the opportunity to see the darkness of New York without becoming part of it. At home, with a book in hand, they were free to explore sin as they wished, able to experience on their own terms the city about which they were so curious.



The influence that narrators had on antebellum prostitution narratives is undeniable. As the creators of these stories, blame was theirs to decide, a power that authors wielded in distinct and telling ways. While the *National Police Gazette* excused its readers from fault for commercial sex, the *Advocate of Moral Reform* challenged those reading their work to consider how their own shortcomings had contributed to the decline of American morality; sensationalist literature, meanwhile, shifted blame onto those people who had no clear place in their audience. These patterns of blame help illuminate both narrators' values and their perception of who was at fault for the changing conditions of the antebellum world.

As should be clear, however, narrators did not craft their stories in isolation; equally important to their own worldview was that of their audience. Authors deliberately catered their narration to readers, and told the stories they believed the public wanted to hear; in the case of the *Gazette* and sensationalist literature, that fault for prostitution rested with others, not them, and in the case of the *Advocate*, that mothers had the unique ability and obligation to effect virtuous change in the world around them. Authors were as influenced by the expectations of their audiences as they were by their

own values when creating stories about prostitution.

It becomes necessary, then, to turn to those reading prostitution narratives. Who was part of the antebellum audience? How were readers influenced by what they read about commercial sex? In what ways did they come to blame prostitution for other societal issues? A story would go unheard if not for its audience, making an evaluation of prostitution narratives' readers crucial to fully understand the effect these accounts had on antebellum society.

CHAPTER 3

The Audience

In late 1846, Unitarian minister Theodore Parker took to the stage of the Melodeon, one of Boston's premier speaking venues, to give notice of a troubling threat sweeping the city. "Foul, polluting and debasing all it touches," this hazard, Parker warned members of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, "has come to curse man and woman, the married and the single, and the babe unborn."¹

The danger to which Parker referred was, of course, prostitution. Though the minister left no records as to what exactly motivated him to give his sermon, signs suggest that Parker was well attuned to ongoing discussions of commercial sex during the antebellum era. A voracious reader throughout his life, Parker told a familiar story of prostitution, in which innocent girls were defiled and left for ruin by treacherous boys.² His telling conformed almost perfectly to the antebellum era's standard narrative of prostitution, revealing the minister's familiarity with contemporary print sources explaining commercial sex. Moreover, what Parker had read clearly left an impression on him. That the minister felt compelled to give a sermon about prostitution, to warn members of his congregation how it was capable of plaguing their communities, indicates the ways in which narratives could live beyond the page in the antebellum era.

¹ Recorded and published in Boston, Parker's sermon was reprinted in an early 1847 issues of the *National Police Gazette*. Though the *Gazette* makes no note of when the sermon was delivered in Boston, the time required to record, publish, transmit to New York, and print the sermon suggests it was given no later than December 1846. The *Gazette* also does not make reference to where the sermon was given, but Parker preached primarily at the Melodeon during the 1840s and 1850s, making it the likely site of his address. "Strong but Just," *The National Police Gazette (New York)*, January 9, 1847, *the National Police Gazette* collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; "Theodore Parker," American Transcendentalism Web, the Virginia Commonwealth University Archives, <http://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/parker/> (accessed February 26, 2017).

² "Theodore Parker," American Transcendentalism Web; "Strong but Just," *The National Police Gazette*, January 9, 1847.

In the decades preceding the Civil War, the United States was in the midst of what historian Daniel Walker Howe has termed a “communications revolution.” To a greater extent than ever before, Americans had access to information about what was happening in the world around them. The newly developed telegraph allowed for the rapid transmission of news between disparate parts of the country; the 1846 formation of the Associated Press helped create a national dialogue that readers could experience anywhere; newspapers, magazines, and periodicals became increasingly standard fixtures of the American lifestyle.³ This was a time when Americans were the most literate population in the world—a time when, as Alexis de Tocqueville described upon his sojourn through the country in 1831, “there [was] scarcely a hamlet which [had] not its own newspaper.”⁴

In a society that increasingly turned to the page, what was written in print was of great import. According to Howe, the communications revolution did more than increase Americans’ access to information; it also exposed them to new ideas, ones that could transform their perception of the world around them. Accounts could be promising, offering to readers a sense of “boundlessness [for] America’s prospects.” But they could also be frightful, making impossible to ignore the disturbing realities of the present, and inspiring fear about what the future might hold.⁵

Prostitution narratives were part of the latter camp. These accounts made the thousands of Americans reading them aware, perhaps for the first time, of the vice and sin that existed in the antebellum world. They detailed how prostitution arose, who was

³ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*, The Oxford History of the United States Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5, 296, 847.

⁴ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 627; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: G. Adlard, 1838), 182.

⁵ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 7.

vulnerable to its trappings, and how it could transform society as a whole.

This chapter aims to both determine who was reading prostitution narratives of the antebellum era, and also to demonstrate the ways in which these stories could shape the worldviews of their audiences. As a source, Parker's sermon is something of an anomaly; most Americans who recorded their reactions to commercial sex seem to have done so in such places as letters, diaries, and journals. Because these sorts of documents were not made available to the public, they are beyond the scope of this project. This chapter relies instead primarily on prostitution narratives themselves as a means of determining how the public was told commercial sex would affect their lives.

Though unable to show exactly what members of the public thought about prostitution, narratives remain useful documents. As historian Andie Tucher has argued, the way in which "news is presented... can be immensely revealing, resonant with the fears, hopes, and anxieties of society." Like other journalistic efforts undertaken to achieve popularity, prostitution narratives "present[ed] facts and truths that [made] sense to the community of consumers they [were] trying to lure and that accommodate[d] their vision of the way the world works."⁶ Using Tucher's arguments as a framework, this chapter will consider how readers thought about commercial sex. Popular narratives were designed to reflect the truths their audiences embraced, and were grounded in the public's presumptions about propriety and sociability; accordingly, they can help illuminate how readers felt about prostitution and what effect they believed it had on the antebellum world.

⁶ Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 2-3, 191-209.

Identifying the Public

Before exploring how audiences responded to prostitution narratives, it seems prudent to evaluate who was reading these accounts. Knowing the size and character of the antebellum reading public allows for a fuller understanding of both the magnitude of effect that these stories had on society, and also the reasons why readers responded to them in the ways they did.

Though prominent in antebellum print culture, prostitution narratives were still read by only a segment of the public. It is difficult to say with certainty the number of Americans that read about prostitution; circulation figures, however, offer some insights into the scale of the publications printing these accounts. The *Advocate of Moral Reform*, in 1842, boasted a monthly circulation of 15,560; even more impressive was the *National Police Gazette*, which after only one year in publication purportedly printed 23,000 copies per week.⁷ Presuming there was relatively little overlap between readers of the *Advocate* and the *Gazette*—these publications were, after all, targeted at very different social groups—these figures suggest that approximately 0.2% of the United States population subscribed to print sources in which prostitution narratives appeared.⁸ This estimate does not even account for the number of Americans reading sensationalist novels, for which circulation figures are not available.

These figures, however, were self-reported. Circulation for the *Advocate* was

⁷ “The Anniversary of the Female Moral Reform Society,--Sad condition of the 8th Ward,” *New York Herald*, May 12, 1842, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers digital database, University of Michigan Library, <http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/ncnp/start.do?prodId=NCNP&userGroupName=umuser> (accessed September 30, 2016). Circulation figures can be found on the front page of every issue of the *National Police Gazette*; in the first issue of the *Gazette*'s second volume, circulation is noted as being 23,000. *National Police Gazette*, September 12, 1846.

⁸ The United States population was approximately 20,000,000 in 1845, based on averages of the 1840 and 1850 populations, which were 17,063,353 and 23,191,876, respectively. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population, 1790-1990,” <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/files/table-4.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2017).

determined at a meeting celebrating the anniversary of the Female Moral Reform Society (FMRS), while that of the *Gazette* was printed in every issue on the newspaper's front page. Because both the *Advocate* and the *Gazette* were publications that benefited from perceived popularity—the former to prove that its cause was legitimate and non-radical, the latter to bolster its reputation as an aid to eliminating urban crime—it is conceivable that their editors took certain liberties when reporting circulation.⁹ George Wilkes, the roguish and self-important editor of the *Gazette*, almost certainly did so; a single week in 1845 allegedly saw an increase in his paper's circulation from 9,200 to 15,000.¹⁰ Though the *Gazette* surely made significant advances in popularity during its early years, a near doubling of circulation from one issue to the next seems unlikely, and indicates that figures reported by these publications were inflated to at least some extent.

Overstated as they might have been, however, circulation figures generally underestimated the actual readership of a publication. Newspapers, periodicals, and novels were not simply read by one person; single documents could be consumed many times over by multiple readers before falling into disuse. This, of course, is particularly true of books, which could remain in a library or collection long beyond the time of their first use. Even ephemeral documents like newspapers and periodicals, however, seem to have been read more than once during the antebellum period. Scholars have suggested that single issues of the *Gazette* might have been read up to a dozen times each; perused primarily in public spaces such as saloons and taverns, the *Gazette* was likely shared and

⁹ For more information on the ways in which these publications framed themselves and their missions, see Chapter 2's "The National Police Gazette" section, 44-52, and "The Advocate of Moral Reform" section, 52-59.

¹⁰ Circulation was at 9,200 on October 25, 1845, before catapulting to 15,000 just one week later on November 1, 1845. *National Police Gazette*, October 25, 1845; *National Police Gazette*, November 1, 1845.

exchanged among men looking to keep up with the news of the day.¹¹ The *Advocate*, despite being a parlor periodical read more often in private spaces than public ones, also seems to have been shared; editors note their desire for mothers to show the periodical to their daughters, indicating that single issues of the *Advocate* were read multiple times by women of the same household.¹²

As should be apparent, the exact scale of prostitution narratives is indeterminate. Actual circulation for the publications printing these stories was lower than what was reported by their creators; perhaps only half of the issues said to be circulating in the antebellum world truly were. Yet circulation numbers, no matter how accurate, failed to account for the full readership of these documents; there were perhaps five readers to a single copy of the *Advocate*, the *Gazette*, or a sensationalist novel. Anywhere from 20,000 to 100,000 Americans, or 0.1% to 0.5% of the entire United States population, could have been reading prostitution narratives in this period.

As has been discussed, authors had distinct segments of the population in mind when writing these accounts. The *Gazette* was meant primarily for working class men, the *Advocate* for Christian mothers, and sensationalist novels for rural Americans looking to vicariously explore the city.¹³ Writers could not, however, control the readership of their work once these documents became public, meaning audiences could be wider or different than what authors expected. By examining pricing and distribution information, it is possible to determine who did and did not have access to prostitution narratives, as

¹¹ David B. Welky, "Culture, Media and Sport: The *National Police Gazette* and the Creation of an American Working-Class World," *Culture, Sport, Society* 1, no. 1 (May 1998): 79.

¹² "An Appeal," *Advocate of Moral Reform*, July 15, 1836, *HathiTrust Digital Library*, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011988301> (accessed July 16, 2016).

¹³ For more information on how narrators directed their work at these audiences, see Chapter 2: The Narrators, 43-66.

well as the demographics of the average reader of these accounts.

It should perhaps go without saying that prostitution narratives were only available to those who could read. Though illiterate Americans might have been engaged in the rhetoric of prostitution to some extent—if, for example, they attended a church where the minister gave sermons about commercial sex, or overheard these tales being discussed in a tavern or parlor—they were unable to partake in reading these stories themselves. A hidden consequence of this was that audiences of these accounts were predominantly white, and particularly excluded African Americans. Census figures indicate that, in 1850, 4.9% of the United States' white population was unable to read and write, while 22.1% of the nation's free black population was illiterate; moreover, only a select number of the over three million enslaved people living in the South at this time could read and write.¹⁴ The existence of an all-black auxiliary to the FMRS indicates that some literate African Americans took an interest in moral reform.¹⁵ Still, many prostitution narratives, particularly those in the *Gazette* and sensationalist novels, were overtly racist, giving black readers little incentive to spend their money on these accounts.¹⁶

For these stories, of course, came at a cost. The publications in which prostitution narratives appeared were sold at rates that excluded from readership the poorest segments

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of the United States and Territories, 1850," and "Persons in the United States over twenty years of age who cannot read and write, 1850," retrieved from United States Census Bureau Population and Housing archives, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html> (accessed March 4, 2017); "The Slave Experience: Education, Arts, & Culture," *Slavery and the Making of America*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/history2.html> (accessed March 4, 2017).

¹⁵ Lisa Shaver, "'Serpents,' 'Fiends,' and 'Libertines': Inscripting an Evangelical Rhetoric of Rage in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*," *Rhetoric Review* 30, no. 1 (December 17, 2010): 11.

¹⁶ Sensationalist novels, in particular, relied heavily on racism and stereotypes when characterizing African Americans; George Foster, for example, described New York's black population as being composed of "savage, sullen, reckless dogs" who frequently engaged in violent and riotous behavior. George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York: Dewitt & Davenport, 1850), 56-57.

of American society. The *Gazette*, distributed for five cents per issue during its first year of publication, cost five times what contemporary penny press papers did; the FMRS required that subscribers to the *Advocate* pay their \$1 annual subscription fee for the periodical in advance, rather than on a per-issue basis; sensationalist novels were sold for 25 cents apiece, a rate perhaps too steep for those struggling to live off of low wages.¹⁷ In order to access prostitution narratives, readers needed to have at least some degree of disposable income; accordingly, the audiences of these accounts were composed primarily of Americans who were economically in at least the upper reaches of the working class.

Geographic location also played a role in determining the types of accounts that the public read. Generally, people throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas, could read prostitution narratives. Though these stories were published in New York, they circulated widely, and in some cases were specifically targeted at those living outside of the city.¹⁸ Even the *Gazette*, which wrote primarily about crime in New York and therefore might seem to have been of little interest to outsiders, had readers in places as far away as Michigan and Alabama.¹⁹

While no Americans seem to have been altogether excluded from reading about prostitution because of the place they lived, geographic region could affect the types of narratives they consumed. Southerners, for example, did not have access to the

¹⁷ Price figures for the *Gazette* can be found on the front page of every issue; after an initial rate of three cents per issue, the *Gazette* raised its fee to five cents on November 15, 1845, before dropping to four cents per issue the following year. The *Advocate* also lists directly beneath its masthead that its \$1 per annum fee must be paid in advance. *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* has a listed retail price on its front cover.

¹⁸ For more information on sensationalist novel distribution patterns, see Chapter 2's "Sensationalist Literature" section, 59-66.

¹⁹ In every issue of the *Gazette*, there is a list that describes the agents that sell and distribute the paper in various cities; for an example, see the front page of *National Police Gazette*, October 3, 1846.

Advocate. By 1837, there were 255 auxiliaries to the FMRS throughout Upstate New York, New England, and the Midwest, yet not one society existed below the Mason-Dixon line.²⁰ This was likely a consequence of moral reform's connections to other social movements, like abolitionism, that were threatening to the social and economic hierarchy of the South, and therefore made the FMRS unpopular there.²¹ Because auxiliaries were responsible for distributing the *Advocate* in their communities, areas without a society would be unable to read about prostitution from a moral reform perspective; Southerners, therefore, experienced prostitution only as sensationalist novels or as the *Gazette* published them.

Though these accounts were targeted at very distinct segments of the population, a general composite of those reading prostitution narratives exists. The typical reader of these stories was literate, white, and had the means to afford the relatively expensive publications in which they appeared. Though audiences could be found anywhere throughout the country, specific regions were more likely to read one style of narration than others; rural Southerners, for example, most likely consumed sensationalist novels, while those in New York probably read the *Gazette*. As should be kept in mind, readers of these stories comprised only a fraction of a percentage of the American population. Still, small audiences did not make for small reactions; the ways in which people interpreted these stories were far from insignificant, and indicate how accounts could inspire fear about both the present and the future.

²⁰ A complete list of the FMRS's auxiliaries can be found on the last two pages of the *Advocate's* August 15, 1837 issue. 271 auxiliary societies existed at this time, 133 (49.1%) of which were in Upstate New York, 89 (32.84%) in New England, and 33 (12.18%) in Ohio or Michigan. The remaining 16 auxiliaries were found in New York City and its surrounding areas, and in the Mid-Atlantic.

²¹ Temperance was another movement to which moral reform was connected. For more information, see: Amber D. Moulton, "Closing the 'Floodgate of Impurity': Moral Reform, Antislavery, and Interracial Marriage in Antebellum Massachusetts," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 3, no. 1 (2013): 2-3, 12-14.

Reactions

When concluding his sermon at the Melodeon, Theodore Parker posited whether prostitution might be “the result of modern civilization.” Had the conditions of the changing antebellum world, he asked, been what had allowed commercial sex to arise?²²

To members of the minister’s congregation, Parker’s hypothesis might have seemed sensible. This was, indeed, a time of immense and disorienting change. All around them, Americans saw a world that every day became more unrecognizable. In the countryside, farmers were forced to rely increasingly on emerging markets for income, as declining birthrates and migration of children to urban areas created a shortage of labor that made subsistence agriculture nearly impossible.²³ In the city, unfamiliar faces and lifestyles became ubiquitous, as places like New York swelled to populations four times their former size.²⁴ Was it unreasonable for Parker or his congregants to believe that prostitution had taken root during the antebellum era precisely because it was a time in which matters of mobility, economy, and morality were persistently in flux?

Americans reading prostitution narratives would think not. Throughout the antebellum era, accounts made clear to readers that commercial sex was indeed a consequence of ongoing change in society. Prostitution narratives were always grounded in reality; they showed commercial sex as arising because young men and women lived away from parental supervision, because urban anonymity allowed sin to flourish. These stories connected closely to changes already taking hold of the antebellum world,

²² “Strong but Just,” *The National Police Gazette*, January 9, 1847.

²³ Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 121-122, 134-139, 152-155.

²⁴ Census reports show New York’s population rising from 202,589 in 1830 to 813,669 in 1860. U.S. Census Bureau, “Population of the 90 Urban Places: 1830,” and “Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1860,” <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html> (accessed March 23, 2017).

conveying to their readers that it was indeed “modern civilization” that allowed commercial sex to survive.

But prostitution narratives did not merely consider the present; these accounts also looked to the future. In manners both direct and indirect, they outlined to readers the consequences that prostitution would have on society in years to come. Both economic and social issues would arise from commercial sex, popular narratives suggested, creating discomfort in readers about the prospects of their society.

Economically, prostitution was believed to be capable of subverting resources from legitimate businesses to immoral ones. This was a process that would begin on a small scale, with individual actors, like clerks. Present to young, white men who migrated to the city during the antebellum era was an opportunity for a better life. Increased wages, higher social standing, and the chance to make a name for themselves were all imagined as being possible for these men. This was believed to be particularly true for those clerks who lived virtuously; during this time, economic and moral successes were inextricably tied to one another in popular imagination.²⁵ Young men who spent their time reading, writing, attending church services, or otherwise improving their character were believed to better their chances of achieving economic respectability.²⁶ While clearly undertaken by clerks with personal interests in mind, cultivating morality also had consequences for the nation as a whole; a young man’s individual success meant that society itself was becoming more morally and economically prosperous. By investing in their own futures, clerks were collectively creating the future of America as well.

²⁵ Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1-5.

²⁶ Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale*, 79-90.

Immensely disturbing to audiences, then, must have been prostitution narratives' assertion that many clerks used their leisure time for sin, rather than for improving character. While a chance to better themselves was available to young men who moved to the antebellum city, also present was the ability to behave badly with little consequence. Freed from the purview of their parents and able to do as they liked in notorious places such as the Five Points, clerks were said to said to perpetually spend their nights at saloons, theaters, and brothels. "Surrounded by the fascinations of this great city," the *National Police Gazette* wrote with regards to clerks living in New York, young men "can scarcely resist the numerous temptations that beset [them]."²⁷

Clearly, clerks were damaging their own morality by engaging in sin; but popular narratives suggested to readers that this behavior was also harmful to the nation as a whole's moral economy. By choosing to sin, clerks were funneling money towards immoral places like brothels. Not only did this strengthen these institutions, but it also stole money directly from the pockets of honest businessmen. Prostitution, an account in the *Gazette* described, roused in clerks a lust so insatiable that they became "obliged to supply [their] new and artificial wants from the till of their employer." Though it provided no discernable figures or statistics to support its claim, the *Gazette* reported that over a third of the money flowing into brothels was cash stolen from employers by their errant clerks.²⁸ Audiences reading accounts such as these would be left with the impression that prostitution was a threat to honest capitalism; it both encouraged theft and directed money away from legitimate businesses.

There were social reasons as well for the public to take issue with clerks stealing

²⁷ "Dishonest Clerks—The Remedy," *National Police Gazette*, October 17, 1846.

²⁸ "Dishonest Clerks—The Remedy," *National Police Gazette*, October 17, 1846.

from their employers and bringing money to brothels. Immensely disturbing to readers must have been the luxurious lives that prostitutes could live because of their immoral profession. Sensationalist novels describe prostitutes staying in elegant rooms filled with books and champagne, musical instruments and perfumes, places in which a woman “could not be in want of anything which art could devise, or wealth command.”²⁹ Aside from potentially stirring envy in readers, the wealth attributed to prostitutes in accounts like this suggested to audiences that women were capable of improving their circumstances by becoming involved in commercial sex. Readers might have worried about what effect this example would have on young women coming of age in antebellum society—would these girls trade for their sexual virtue the glamor of a brothel they saw in print?³⁰

Moreover, this depiction of wealth for women might have exacerbated concerns about gender relations in the United States. In particular, the consequences this could have on marriage seem likely to have been on the minds of those reading prostitution narratives. During the antebellum era, many women looked forward to marriage as a way to establish households of their own.³¹ Yet married women faced legal and economic restrictions that single women did not. Coverture, inherited from English common law, prevented a woman from having legal status independent of her husband, and also

²⁹ Ned Buntline, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York: A Story of Real Life*, (New York: Berford & Co., 1848), 79.

³⁰ It is worth noting that only the highest-end brothels in the antebellum era, such as Rosina Townsend’s, where Helen Jewett lived, contained the extreme luxury described in sensationalist literature; most actual brothels were relatively modest in their size and furnishings. Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 79-83.

³¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 36.

required that she relinquish her earnings to him (should she work for wages).³² Because prostitution was shown in many antebellum accounts as being lucrative, readers might have worried that it would represent an alternative to marriage for women. A prostitute could avoid the restrictions of having a husband while still being quite comfortable economically, and therefore might be feared as becoming a model for women who sought to live independently.

Prostitution was also imagined as doing harm to marriage by offering to men the opportunity to abandon their wives in favor of paramours in a brothel. Sensationalist novels claimed that husbands who were “disgusted with their position” would often “throw off the marital yoke” and free themselves from “henpecking” wives by becoming involved with a prostitute.³³ This, in fact, had purportedly already occurred on a large scale across the Atlantic; Reverend Elon Galusha warned the public, in a sermon printed in the *New York Herald*, that “licentiousness most awful—horrible to the Christian eye” had caused “40,000 married couple’s [sic] bonds to be struck asunder” in France.³⁴ Accounts such as these suggested to the public that even the sacred bonds of marriage were vulnerable to the perversion of prostitution.



To many antebellum Americans, prostitution narratives seem to have been harbingers of an end to moral society. These accounts twisted existing circumstances of the antebellum world into prospects that were frightening to the typically white, middle-

³² Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women’s Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 93-99; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 36.

³³ George Thompson, *The Gay Girls of New-York, Or, Life on Broadway Being a Mirror of the Fashions, Follies and Crimes of a Great City*, (New York: 1853), 108-109.

³⁴ Galusha’s sermon was originally given at a FMRS meeting before being reprinted for the general public in the *Herald*. “The Anniversary of the Female Moral Reform Society,--Sad condition of the 8th Ward,” *New York Herald*, May 12, 1842.

class Americans reading them. They offered conceptions of a future that ran contrary to the ideas of propriety these audiences valued, perhaps deeply disturbing readers' sense of place and morality in the antebellum world. They were accounts that readers could carry with them long after they had turned from the page, that they could continue to consider as they went about their daily lives.

Of course, not all readers would respond to these accounts in the ways described in this chapter. Some Americans, particularly those engaged in prostitution, might have found the ideas put forward in popular narratives about commercial sex's effect on society humorous, rather than frightening. Others might have doubted the extremity of these accounts, and instead saw prostitution as only a minor nuisance amongst more pressing matters of the antebellum world.

Yet for all Americans, these narratives offered something worthwhile: the chance to blame prostitution itself for whatever problems might develop in the future. Whether readers believed or not that prostitution could bring about a decline of the economy or an end to marriage, these accounts gave them the opportunity to shift blame onto something that was already considered perverse and outside the realm of normal society. This blaming, of course, mirrors what writers encouraged their audiences to do with characters as they read prostitution narratives. Shifting fault seems to have been the way in which Americans reckoned with prostitution; doing so provided the public with some sense of control over a phenomenon that otherwise might be unconscionable.

CONCLUSION

Mary Ackerly Revisited

When a jury ruled in 1846 that Mary Ackerly was at fault for her own death, it might have seemed that her case had come to a close. Henry Nelson and Dr. Shove walked free. Mr. and Mrs. Ackerly were forced to accept that their daughter had been deemed a harlot who deserved her fate. And Mary, of course, was dead.

But the outcome of the Ackerly story was far from settled when Judge Barculo dismissed his courtroom that October afternoon, for the *National Police Gazette* gave new life to the case by reprinting its particulars just a week later. “Revolted,” the *Gazette* declared to its thousands of readers in response to Dr. Shove’s acquittal—yet another example of wealth triumphing over justice, the paper contended.¹ Whether audiences agreed with the *Gazette*’s sentiments or not, the paper offered to those who read it an alternative narrative to the one that Dr. Shove’s attorneys had constructed in Westchester. It forced readers to consider for themselves who could be placed at fault for Mary’s death.

Twelve men determined the verdict at this trial—swift and unanimous, they ruled in just moments that the fallen woman herself was responsible for her fate. In the court of public opinion, however, it was the thousands of Americans reading the *National Police Gazette*, the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, and sensationalist novels of the antebellum era that had the power to decide where blame lay for prostitution. These arbiters were far more diverse than the men who sat on the jury at Dr. Shove’s trial; while

¹ “Horrible Disclosures of Seduction, Abortion, and Murder, in a House of Ill-Fame in New York,” *National Police Gazette (New York)*, October 24, 1846, the *National Police Gazette* collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; “Acquittal of Dr. Shove,” *National Police Gazette*, October 24, 1846.

not a complete cross-section of the American population, those reading prostitution narratives were both male and female, rural and urban, evangelical and hedonistic. They had distinct backgrounds and perspectives, unique ideas about the world and who was responsible for its problems.

Popular accounts offered to these readers convoluted and often contradictory messages about who could be blamed for commercial sex. Some identified single characters as being at fault, while others diffused responsibility among a number of figures. Seduced girls and seducer boys, along with mothers, madams, and the public itself, were all shown as playing distinct roles in perpetuating commercial sex. Because these accounts were inherently incongruous with one another, each offering its own version of events, the public never received a clear answer as to who was responsible for prostitution; instead, it was tasked with deciding for itself which narratives seemed true, and which pattern of blaming should be upheld.

Opinions about this matter were neither monolithic nor straightforward—yet this is precisely what makes prostitution narratives of the antebellum era so fascinating to study. The stories that authors told and that readers embraced tell a great deal about the values and fears of distinct segments of the American public. Competing perspectives about who was to blame for prostitution illuminate competing ideas about gender, mobility, religion, and change in antebellum society. These accounts make clear that ideological battles were ongoing in America during this period, and that the population as a whole would likely never agree on how to respond to sin.

In reading prostitution narratives, Americans took part in an ideologically democratic process. They chose to consume the narratives that made sense to them, ones

that reaffirmed their own views. But from interacting with one another, and perhaps by coming in contact with sources other than those of their choosing, members of the public became aware that not everyone shared their perspective as to who should be blamed for prostitution. Assigning fault was a pluralistic endeavor in this era, one in which a number of competing ideals existed alongside each other.

Whether in Mary Ackerly's case, or one of the many other prostitution narratives circulating throughout antebellum print culture, the question of who was at fault for a girl's ruin was not easily answered. This was a matter far more contentious than the jury's undisputed acquittal of Dr. Shove would suggest. Commercial sex represented many things to many Americans; to some it was frightful, while to others it was titillating. Common, however, was the way prostitution stirred in all those reading and writing about it considerations of how blame could be assigned. The brothel was an image powerful enough to provoke discussion about what antebellum society was and what it should be. A prostitute's story, therefore, did not come to an end upon her death; instead, it lived on in the minds of those who read it, forcing them to consider what implications such a tale had to both their own lives and to all the world around them.

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