

WOMEN OF THE LABORING POOR IN EARLY NATIONAL NEW YORK

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I want to delineate here a conception of gender – i.e., notions of womanhood and manhood – which among women was embodied in female sexuality, relations with men, and neighborhood and city life in early national New York. This gender system among the laboring classes was related to, but still distinct from, gender relations among the propertied classes. The methodological problem of this material is: how to make sense out of the most fragmentary, elusive evidence? The problem that remains unresolved is one of periodicity. Despite all that happened in New York in the next seventy years, court cases similar to those I discuss here turn up in 1860. How and when do such profound elements of social life change? At this level – one of emotions, sexuality, expectations between men and women – do social transformations proceed at a slower, almost glacial pace in comparison to other levels – say, to relations of the workplace? In studying women of the laboring classes, are we looking at a group so marginalized, so absorbed in the « reproductive » sphere, so removed from the « conjunctures » of history that their group life remains static for long periods? And since women of the laboring classes were so entirely submerged in this round of everyday life, how can we write their history? Should we only focus on points of apparent conjuncture, even if these points be few and far between? Must we of necessity frame our studies in a much longer chronological period in order to spot change?

I

Between 1784 and 1820, New York City grew from a slowmoving colonial outpost to a thriving commercial seaport. The Federalist and Early National years saw the city challenge and the outstrip its nearest rival, Philadelphia, in population and commercial supremacy. It was the economy of the harbor on which the city prospered; it was also the city's position as a port which accounted for the presence of one of its greatest economic resources, a vast collection of impoverished immigrants. Since the mid-eighteenth century, New York had held special attractions for the poor. It was not, however, until after 1820 and the advent of metropolitan manufacturing that New

York entrepreneurs would take full advantage of this potential labor force.

Women comprised a special group among the laboring poor. At certain points in their lives, in certain circumstances, women were the most vulnerable of all the impoverished. Widows, orphans, deserted wives, spinsters without families – all of those women without the support of male breadwinners were the most precariously situated of any laboring people, the poorest of the poor. The mercantile economy afforded women little employment; rather those who needed work found it around the edges, in positions generally removed from its productive life; as domestic servants, for instance, street-sellers, proprietors of bawdy houses.

In social life, laboring women were far more visible. In a period when their more prosperous sisters were just beginning to formulate the virtues of female privatism, laboring women remained insistently, demonstratively, sometimes histrionically, public. Both when single and married, they wove their relations with men, children, kin and peers in a dense public milieu. The city was their stage: there they found respite from care, some recourse from small injustices, and some ways to defend their own interests in their households. The monotonous round of physical labor, the tensions created by overcrowding and clamorous children, the harsh misogyny of laboring men: all these made the public realm of the street and neighborhood a place where strain could be diffused and deflected, if not eradicated. It was their claim to public terrain which gave laboring women their special identity – the truculent, quarrelsome, belligerent nature so familiar to public authorities – and their claim to some small degree of freedom from family obligation. By 1820, champions of the new universal womanhood, which found its identity in the domestic sphere, were already beginning to note the failings of this mode of urban femininity.

II

Women of different ages – or, to be more precise, at different points in their lives – frequented different corners of this public world. Single women could involve themselves in a city-wide milieu of young people, where rituals of sex and courtship were elaborated in old and new urban styles and institutions. Wives and mothers, more constrained by domestic duties, made the neighborhoods their domain; in the midst of crowded blocks of tenements, they carried on an outdoor life which, with its prying, gossiping and feuding, still resembled the rural world many had left behind. The participation of both groups of women in the collective life of the city meant that the sexual lines of the public domain were drawn quite differently than a half-century later. Their participation would also prove antithetical to the ideology of separate spheres for men and women, by 1820 just emerging among the urban bourgeoisie. Indeed, the strong, rowdy, vulgar, often mannish, women of New York's laboring classes seem an entirely different breed from the

chaste, delicate and retiring figures which would come to epitomize womanhood in sermons, advice manuals and ladies magazines. To domesticate the laboring woman would prove one of the most challenging missions which champions of the « true woman » faced¹.

To imagine New York before 1820, with its polyglot characters, its multitudinous sights, even its density of horrors, is to conjure up the clichés of a Hogarth print. Still, the multiplicity of people should not blind us to the fact that parts of the Federalist and Early National city were exclusively men's terrain. In this American city, Regency culture, with all of its cruelty and violent misogyny, was enfeebled by post-Revolutionary sentiment but not extinguished. As many scholars have noted, the New York élite took no pains to hide its aristocratic learnings; the British affectations of its members were articulated in a style of public life. « The sink of British manners and politics », Benjamin Rush called New York; certainly the duelling, horse-racing, shooting matches, fox-hunting and heavy gambling in which the urban gentry engaged emulated the pastimes of the Georgian rakes². These cultural patterns extended into the laboring classes as well. Working men and « sporting » gentlemen still gathered for cockfighting and bull-and-bear-baiting into the nineteenth century. In 1815, for instance, a butcher in Corlear's Hook, the center of rowdy waterfront amusements, kept a buffalo under his stall in the market: a uniquely American variation on the bull in bull-and-bear baiting³. Gambling and billiards also attracted slumming gentlemen to take their chances with journeymen and laborers. Except for the piquant presence of occasional prostitutes, women seem to have been excluded from these debauches of blood, drink and class rivalry.

Among the laboring classes, however, many sociable resorts were sexually mixed. The most frequented centers of public life were the streets themselves, where men and women met to court and quarrel. The bawdy houses and grog shops (which doubled as grocery stores) supported a heterosexual milieu of dancing, drinking and love-making. The excursions of which the urban poor were so fond included women, sometimes accompanied by men, sometimes in all-female parties; ferry rides to Long Island, carriage rides up the country to the North of the island, boat trips on the East River. A black servant-girl on trial for arson, in detailing her descent into crime, chronicled some of these plebeian amusements. She used money pinched from her mistress to take friends carriage-riding; later, on the Fourth of July, she « went with some girls, on board the steam-boat, on a party of pleasure,

¹ See also my dissertation, « Women of the Laboring Poor in New York City, 1820-1860 » (Yale University, 1974).

² Rush is quoted in Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: the Origins, 1763-1797*, Chapel Hill 1966, 347; Esther Singleton, *Social New York Under the Georges, 1714-1776*, New York 1902, 259-71.

³ Thomas F. DeVoe, *The Market Book*, New York, 1862, 388-89; James Grant Wilson, ed., *The Memorial History of the City of New York*, vol. 2, 458-59.

and paid the charges », and spent the rest at a bawdy house « on a frolic ». « It was in this manner », she concluded, « I squandered away the money I had stolen – in frolicking and rioting in the dance houses and other places » at Corlear's Hook, where poor girls, journeymen and sailors met ⁴.

Many « frolics » were for young women of courting age who, if constrained by family obligations or the rules of an employer's household, still had more chances to slip free of domestic duties than did women at a later stage of life. As girls reached puberty, an outdoor world of chores, street pranks and games metamorphosed into a new landscape of desire, where heterosexual attractions and machinations opened up new vistas. For city women, the significance of sexuality reached beyond the pleasures of the body: sex was the key to material pleasure, pleasures often otherwise entirely out of reach. Sex was a young woman's *entrée* to frolics on Corlear's Hook, but it also could open doors to a world of high urban style.

« Walking out » was the prelude to courting, a way to flirt, meet partners, pair off and tryst. Strollers tended towards City Hall Park and the avenues, especially Broadway and the Bowery, where the crowds and the mix of classes to some extent protected the young from the scrutiny of their neighborhoods. In these spots, courting always held the possibility of rich rewards. It was on Broadway in 1793 that Lanah Sawyer, a seamstress and a seaman's daughter, met Harry Bedlow, a man of uncertain occupation (he introduced himself to her as « Lawyer Smith ») and questionable character but with obvious high connections. When the two again walked out, Bedlow at first treated his companion to chaste and genteel entertainments: ice cream and a tour around the Battery. On the walk home, however, he demanded payment for his favors and either forced the girl (according to her) or invited her (according to him) into a bawdy house, where the two spent the night and had « connection ».

Bedlow was acting out his role in a familiar urban drama. After the subsequent rape trial, the phalanx of eminent attorneys for Bedlow felt sufficiently confident that the figure of the upper-class libertine could still command tolerance to invoke the tradition in his defense. This was not rape, they argued proudly, but rather seduction by an accomplished practitioner of the art. If there was blame, it fell on the girl for denying the realities behind a well-known social ritual. « Considering the difference of their situations », the defense argued, « To what motive could she attribute his assiduities? Could she imagine that a man of his situation would pay her any attention... unless with a view to promoting illicit commerce? Was it probable that [he]... had any honorable designs in his connection with a sewing girl? » ⁵.

⁴ *An Authentic Statement of the Case and Conduct of Rose Butler... Executed for the Crime of Arson*, New York 1819, 9.

⁵ *Report of the Trial of Henry Bedlow for Committing a Rape of Lanah Sawyer*, New York 1793.

The wealthy debaucher of poor girls was a familiar character in English Regency culture; although the Revolution had supposedly done away with such aristocratic corruption, it nonetheless survived, along with other élite prerogatives, in early national New York.

Outside of both the traditional neighborhood resorts of the poor – bawdy houses, taverns, grog shops – and the terrain of the wealthy libertine, young city men were creating a new kind of milieu, one which would have consequences for laboring women. The street life of the non-aristocratic « blood » took cues from the upper-class rake at the same time as it incorporated, to some degree, young men of the laboring classes. In the eighteenth century, particular styles of urban life and fashion were the exclusive property of the élite: to carry a silver-headed cane and parade in the Broadway promenade signified that one was gentry, entitled to deference and certain prerogatives. Young laboring women, through sexual liaisons with aristocratic men, had some access to this world. When Harry Bedlow treated Lanah Sawyer to ice cream, for instance, a quintessential urban delicacy, he gave her a taste of elegance. Similarly, the merchant Alexander Buchanan in 1820 seduced Nancy Martin, a washerwoman's daughter, with promise of, among other gifts, a black servant to wait upon her⁶ – a familiar accoutrement of the New York gentry.

By the turn of the century, however, young people of non-élite origins began to appropriate these aristocratic styles for themselves. The avant-garde of this movement, progenitors of the nineteenth-century dandy, were young men who lounged about the streets, extravagantly dressed, and affected the languorous, bored and contemptuous manner commonly associated with the aristocracy. Style, age, and bachelorhood rather than class seem to have united the « bloods »: they probably included clerks and young journeymen as well as merchants's sons. They seem to have been uniformly unmarried, with a great deal of time to while away parading and hanging about the streets.

While the bloods appropriated the costumes of young gentlemen, that democratization of style had ambiguous results. For the duration of its short existence the *Independant Mechanic*, a self-styled artisan newspaper, waged a battle against the bloods; the artisan editor was as affronted by their pretensions as undoubtedly were the élite themselves⁷. For him, the capitulation of these journeymen to aristocratic fashion signified their abandonment of the honest virtues of the artisan workshop with its autonomous republican styles. Artisans took pride in their garb of leather breeches; it signified a man of honest work, a defender of the Republican values of plainness and simplicity. In the aftermath of the Revolution, urban artisans

⁶ People v. Alexander C. Buchanan and William Wilson, New York Court of General Sessions, 13 March 1821, Municipal Archives and Records Center, New York, N. Y.

⁷ *Independant Mechanic* (New York, N.Y., 1811-12), *passim*.

had fought an ongoing battle to distance themselves and their city from aristocratic privilege; «aping» the rich, with its overtones of slavish dependance, was a vice of Old World retainers and lackeys. Artisans, not less than the wealthy, distrusted those who, in seeking their pleasure, stepped out of place.

For women, this new milieu had contradictory ramifications. The bloods wasted no affection on women: they were insulting, and contemptuous, affecting rakish misanthropy as a sign of gentility. If an unescorted woman passed a group of bloods on the street, especially after nightfall, she was verbally abused and sometimes physically harassed: «If she essays to proceed by the wall, they instantly verge that way, and defeat her intention. In this manner she is often obliged to pass and repass several times in front of the line, each one making his impertinent remarks on her as she tries to get forward – “An Angel, by H....s!” “Dam’d fine girl, by g....d!” “Where do you lodge, my dear?”». «Frequent language the most obscene, and actions the most gross» accompanied the hooting and catcalling⁸. Laboring women, more likely to be out on the streets alone, must have been frequent targets. Certainly the effect of the insults (which included «the drawing up of the upper, or pouting out of the nether lip, accompanied with a sort of hissing noise»)⁹ was to stake out streets which had previously been sexually integrated as exclusively male territory.

On the other hand, the milieu of the bloods, initially exclusively male, would over time incorporate young workingwomen. By mid-century, the female compatriot of the working-class dandy would be a familiar figure in city life. Extravagantly dressed, boisterous, often rude, she sashayed up and down the avenues on Sundays and in the evenings after work, often in a crowd of other girls, sometimes on the arm of a young man. She frequented the Bowery, Vauxhall Gardens and the oyster houses and bawdy houses: centers of a distinctive working-class urban culture which she had helped to create. With her fine clothes, beaux, and knowledge of high life, she beckoned to every newly arrived country girl. Although her engagement in this new milieu would be brief, lasting only until she married, she would nonetheless prove a troubling figure to both her own class and more prosperous guardians of social order. While the young working-class dandies would threaten the hierarchy of class, their female companions would be disturbing exceptions to accustomed family and sexual arrangements.

For young women, then, the city was eroticized terrain, where liaisons could bring anything from plebeian pleasures to the spoils of high style. To be sure, most laboring girls made plain matches with men of their own class, matches which brought them lives not dissimilar to those of their mothers. And to be sure, girls like Lanah Sawyer could pay dearly for their adventures.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 May 1811.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 May 1811.

Much heterosexual interaction, especially between different classes, was structured by exploitation, at which gentlemen were likely to be far more skilled than the women involved. Still, even entangled in exploitation there were possibilities for female independence or, at the least, an escape from the more familiar exploitativeness of the family. Over the next half-century, single urban women would pursue those possibilities. The city provided some room for young women to lead social lives away from their families; a growing employment market for women provided them the economic means – although scant, to be sure. In the antebellum years, the problems which domestic servants posed to their employers, the fears which female factory workers created among male trade unionists, the public anxiety over the increase in prostitution were all reflections of the growing independence of young single women, an independence both dependant on and constrained by heterosexual ritual.

III

The public lives of older women were more limited and would continue to be so in ensuing decades. To be sure, older women could still count on some of the pleasures of the young. Among laboring people, fancy dress was a sign of pleasure-seeking – dancing and drinking – rather than church-going; thus a charity's complaint that a «love of dress» was a common vice of artisans' widows¹⁰ indicates that married women, too, could «frolic». Because of the heavy work of housekeeping and child-rearing, however, married women lived mostly within their neighborhoods. Still, an intense public life thrived around their crowded dwellings.

The permeability of the boundaries between households, and between household and street, made domestic life highly public. Many household chores, for instance, were done in public. In warm weather, washing was done at street pumps; at the end of the Revolution, indeed, women still washed at the Collect Pond at the North of the city, where they dried their laundry on the banks. Tending pigs, the prizes of those laboring families prosperous enough to own them, was a public chore; despite a string of city ordinances, the battle to bar pigs from the NY streets was not entirely won until mid-century¹¹. Carrying water, beating carpets, even sweeping dirt out the door – all these involved women in a constant relationship with the world outside their households.

But constant interaction also gave rise to considerable tension. Domestic work was one cause of the innumerable quarrels which continually flared

¹⁰ Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children, Minute Books, entry for 21 November 1822, New York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.

¹¹ For washing, see *New York Packet*, 19 August 1784; on pigs, Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: the Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson*, New York, 1979, 93, 101-4.

up in these neighborhoods. In 1808, for example, one woman took another to court for throwing water on her children and striking them, shaking out her rugs over clean wash on the line, and sweeping dirt into her back yard¹². Borrowed household goods similarly sparked contention: dishes, clothes, and scanty utensils.

Since several families might share one or two rooms, household space itself was often not private, and disputes over domestic rights and territory quickly broke out in such situations. An assault case in 1800 stemmed from a fight over using the fireplace between two couples who shared two rooms; the woman in the room with the fireplace pushed the husband of the intruding pair down the stairs. With the characteristic truculence of the poor when confronted by neighbors or authorities, she assured her audience that « she had pushed him down and would do it again and would push his wife... down also if either of them should offer to come to her Door, and that she did not care if it Broke their Necks »¹³.

Children occasioned violent fights when a neighbor overstepped her rights in disciplining a child, or disciplined too harshly; children could also invade street territory which an antagonistic neighbor claimed as her own. When Sally Tilyou came out of her house one day to find the Lobb children on her stoop, she cursed them as « bastards and also called their mother a dam'd whore... saying that she would break the neck or legs of the bastards... and their mother likewise if ever they came on her walk or stoop »¹⁴. Likewise, a shared domestic life could become a weapon in feuds which stemmed from other grievances, as in the case of a tenant who poisoned the butter of a fellow tenant, tore up the well platform so that she would fall in, and habitually spat on her children when encountering them in the hall¹⁵. In a scrap of testimony from a manslaughter case, we sense how small irritations, perhaps from proximity, perhaps from one too many affronts to personal dignity, could become lethal. « Do you think I am going to be knocked off my chair two or three times? » demanded a woman when asked why, with her husband, she had inadvertently beaten a neighbor and drinking companion to death¹⁶.

Although women seem to have seldom been active in New York's frequent riots, they were sometimes participants in, or prime movers of, smaller and more localized crowds; « mobs » in which two, three or half a dozen people roughed up some offender of neighborhood mores. Evidence about motives of the mobs is scanty, but the targets were similar to those of European charivaris. Behind the case of three women who beat up a man in the street,

¹² People vs. Pell, General Sessions, 9 August 1808.

¹³ People v. McDougall, General Sessions, 14 October 1800.

¹⁴ People v. Tilyou, General Sessions, 14 August 1815.

¹⁵ People v. Cummings, General Sessions, 8 October 1800.

¹⁶ People v. Clarkson, General Sessions, 1 February 1815.

there was probably some breach of a sexual or marital code; in the frequent mob attacks on mistresses of bawdy houses, there were objections both to the ways the patrons of the houses disrupted neighborhood order and to the sexual conduct of the women. At issue in an attack on a woman whom her assailants called « thief » and « whore » were probably violations of domestic etiquette and sexual propriety.

It was indeed the belligerence and contentiousness of these women, far removed from the womanly virtues of timidity, which gave them a foothold in public life. They lit into children, constables, men and each other with broomsticks, shovels, and sticks of wood; they tore off the clothes of opponents, pummeled them, dragged them by the hair. Their quarrels were not private or cloistered; indeed, they were a highly visible part of the city's public life. As two women strolled up Broadway, a third rushed up and threw one of them against a fence¹⁷. Anger could take more imaginative forms, as when a complainant swore that « Mrs. McMullen shit in the face of Hannah Stillwell » in City Hall Park¹⁸.

More often, violence was monotonous, ritualistic, sometimes obsessive, shaping itself into familiar phrases in testimony to the court reporter: « she had beat him... and would beat him again »; she would « knock her brains out »; she had « repeatedly threatened her with violence to wit with beating her brains out, and killing her »; « she would tear his... guts out ». This female public life, although to some degree distinct from men's, quite clearly had none of the counterbalancing elements of a separate domestic sphere of calm and affection. Poor women entered into the turbulent city life around them with energy and voracity. For women beginning to pride themselves on the ability of their sex to create an alternative space in a city they perceived as corrupt and alienating, these wildly public wives and mothers would pose a serious problem.

IV

From what we know of other laboring people in this period in Britain and America, we can guess that women's friendships with neighbors and kin were probably as emotionally absorbing, than their relations with husbands, if not more so. Courting was a time for erotic attraction and love-making, but after marriage, except for the grog-shops and taverns, there were few points of playful contact between the sexes. Marriage was a practical transaction, the exchange of a man's wage for a woman's domestic services. As one philandering husband, a day laborer, said of his wife, « he only kept her to wash and mend for him »¹⁹. Women, for their part, valued the security

¹⁷ *People v. Denton*, General Sessions, 4 August 1808.

¹⁸ The complaint was later dismissed for perjury. *People v. McMullen*, General Sessions, 9 December 1805.

¹⁹ *Semuel v. Semuel*, New York Court of Chancery, Records of Divorce and Separation, Office of the New York County Clerk, New York, N.Y., 1815.

and material comforts men could provide. It was these elements, rather than love or passion, which a wife who deserted her shoemaker husband for another man stressed in a letter to the former in 1816: « she lived more comfortably than she had ever done... her house was well furnished and... they had a large store of goods »²⁰.

The significance of money and domestic services to marriage helps explain their importance as issues in heterosexual quarrels. Husband's accusations of theft were common causes of domestic altercations. The fight that ended with the death of George Hart's common-law wife in 1811 began this way, and to neighbors, he was adamant about the justice of his rage. « She had stolen 4 shillings from my pocket, and I will serve any d.....d w.....e so, who robs me of my money ». A woman's refusal to perform her domestic duties was another frequent precipitant. Such a fight in 1804 ended in manslaughter: a laborer returned home at night to find his wife asleep; when he asked her why she was lying in bed instead of fixing his supper, she replied « Ask my arse » and slapped her bottom²². To men, female drunkenness, a common incitement to male violence, involved a refusal of domestic obligation rather than moral transgression.

A drunken man was a familiar figure, aggravating, even maddening to his wife, but still acceptable within the terms of the marriage bargain; an inebriated woman, however, dramatized her determination to go after her own pleasure at the expense of her household responsibilities. John Banks, a sailor, beat his wife to death with a shovel in 1806 « because he often found her drunk when he went home, and that she would not only take his money but give him pot-liquor instead of coffee ». He added that on the day of the murder « she was very abusive and tantalizing when he came home » and that « he had brought home peanuts, and ordered her to brown them by the time he should return home; and that when he did return with some eggs he found she had done nothing »²³.

Such female offenses were more than violations of marital cooperation. They were breaches of the customary deference due the male: in the case of Hart, as a provider who distributed his earnings as he saw fit; in that of Banks, as a person with the prerogative to command the labor of others. Indeed, short of administering beatings, men threw woman out of the house with a consistency that bordered on ritual, thus dramatizing their role as proprietors of the household and its chattels. In an extreme enactment of patriarchal prerogative, Lawrence Bracken stormed into the room where his wife had just given birth and announced to her and her female attendants

²⁰ Hoffman v. Hoffman, Chancery, 1817.

²¹ *Trial for Murder. Court of Oyer and Terminer... 1811. The People vs. George Hart, murder*, New York, c. 1812.

²² People v. Nevin, General Sessions, 16 April 1804.

²³ *The Only Correct Account of the Life, Trial and Confession of John Banks*, New York, 1806, 8, 14.

that « the bed on which... [she] was then lying was his Bed and that... [she] should not lie upon it ». He then seized her by the hair and dragged her naked to the floor, when the neighbors intervened²⁴.

The extreme misogyny evident in these incidents shows us that patriarchy was not limited to the bourgeoisie. Indeed, to some extent, attitudes towards women among men of different classes converged. Certainly, gentlemen and working men would have agreed that a lady was due more respect than the scullery-maid, that her chastity and manners distinguished her as a breed apart. Rich men and poor men also shared a belief in the scheming nature of the entire female sex and the slyness of poor women in particular. The lower class bawd of sailors' ballads and journeymens' jokes was close kin to the avaricious whore of gentlemen's lore.

Among laboring men, the image of the rowdy moll, so integral a part of the bawdy popular culture of the eighteenth century, lingered on in the first two decades of the nineteenth. Sometimes amiable, sometimes scheming, she was one way or the other out to get her way with men. For « The Orange Woman », a Dublin girl in a sailors' broadside, getting her way meant simply satisfying her sexual desires: « I always fancy pretty Men. / Wherever I can find 'em » the « Hearty buxom Girl » declares unabashedly.

« I'll never marry, no indeed,
For Marriage causes trouble;
And after all the priest has said,
"Tis merely hubble bubble".
The rakes will still be counted rakes,
Not hymen's chains can bind 'em... ».

« And so », she happily concludes,

« Preventing all mistakes
I'll kiss where'er I find 'em »²⁵.

The Orange Woman was a sailor's dream come true, the proverbial whore with a heart of gold, a woman who found pleasure in men and asked little in return. Similarly, the obliging Mrs. Huggins in this bit of doggerel from a hairdresser's advertisement in 1808 seemed content with nothing more than an evening with « a good jolly cock »;

« At eve, by fire, like a good jolly cock,
When my day's work is done and all over;
I tipple, I smoke, and I wind up the clock,
With sweet Mrs. Huggins in clover »²⁶.

²⁴ Bracken v. Bracken, Chancery, 1816.

²⁵ Ballad lyrics in *The Amorous Sailor's Letter to His Sweet-heart and The Jolly Orange Woman*, Worcester, Mass., 1781 [broadside].

²⁶ Quoted in Rock, 160.

In other incarnations of the bawd, sex was a weapon, the instrument by which women duped men into marriage and then took them for all they were worth. « A father said to his son, What is your wife quick already? » ran a joke from an almanac at least partially aimed at an artisan audience. « Yes, said he, a pox on her, she is too quick, for we have been married but a month, and she is ready to lie in »²⁷. The source of humor in such jokes was a shared perception of women as inseparable from the babies they brought and of babies and women as parasites on men's lives. « One asked a friend, why he, being such a proper man himself, had married so small a wife? Why friend, said he, I thought that you had known that of evils we should cause the least ».

« A man complained to his wife she brought him nothing. You lie like a rogue, says she, for I bring you boys and girls without your help »²⁸. Men were led astray by a female nature that was dangerous in its sexual greed, a greed which was a magnet for other kinds of avarice. This association of female trickery with female sexuality permeated relations between laboring men and women. It was, for example, one reason for the ritualistic use of « whore » as an insult men flung at women in domestic quarrels. « You drunken w.....e, you thieving w.....e, if ever you trouble me again, I will kill you, by G.....!! » so John Banks, threatened his wife in the quarrel which led to her death²⁹.

« Passion », compounded of erotic desire, sexual assertiveness and frequently economic avarice, was a particular characteristic of the laboring woman in the canon of genteel thought. Although women in general did not rate high esteem within the canons of eighteenth-century Republican thought, there was a special derision reserved for poor women, who were the receptacles of all the traits which propertied women cast off in their ascent to ladyhood. « Passion » was the means of manipulation laboring women used to trick gentlemen into compromising situations. In the Bedlow trial, for instance, the defense invoked « passion » to explain Lanah Sawyer's motives in making Bedlow's acquaintance: « the hasty acquaintance which she formed with him, shows her desire of gratifying her passions ».

From passion, the defense imputed sexual experience, and on the basis of her supposed lack of chastity, challenged Sawyer's credibility and the credibility of the neighbor girls and women who testified to her modest and prudent character. « The condition of life » of these women, the defense argued, « gives us a right to doubt what they mean by these terms ». The sexual mores, then, of women from the « obscure » classes exempted them from whatever respect was due the élite of their sex. « Accustomed to levity, to allowing male friends liberties, they may esteem this consistent with mod-

²⁷ *Merry Andrew's Pocket Almanac*, New York, 1775.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Only Correct Account... of John Banks*, *op. cit.*, 6.

esty». Laboring women, did not know the meaning of chastity, the cardinal virtue of ladyhood. « It is well known that some girls frequently consider the permission of those liberties innocent, which in fact lay them open as easy victims of seduction »³⁰. The unbridled lust of the male rake supposedly found its equivalent in the unwomanly passion of the laboring woman.

If women were sexual manipulators, they were also fair game. When a washerwoman in 1821 confronted a merchant who had abducted her teenage daughter to a brothel, his raffish friend implied that with her virginity the girl had also given up the rights to her person. To the mother's insistence that the man had no right to hide the girl, the friend countered, « *You don't know but that he has* » since « she was a poor, ordinary insignificant thing – that had lost her virtue and been intimate with other *men* »³¹. Similarly, Richard Croucher, a workingman charged with raping a thirteen-year old serving girl in 1800 claimed that « she was a whore » and had seduced him into bed; his attorney (who had defended Harry Bedlow in a similar case) argued that « The passions may be as warm in a girl of her age as in one of more advanced years »³². Passions were thus, for a laboring woman, the means both of her triumphs over men and of her well-deserved fall.

Clearly, these were male interpretations of female intentions. What was the experience of heterosexuality for women themselves? Were male perceptions entirely fantasized, or did they derive from some social reality? Although there was no unifying and articulated self-consciousness among laboring women, there *were* common ideas and practices, especially around problems of sexuality. The female experience was certainly more complex than the bawdy images of men's lore allowed, but as this lore would indicate, laboring women did live their sexual lives almost entirely outside the emerging code of female chastity.

Indeed, until the turn of the century, single women from both the laboring and middling classes had a fair degree of sexual latitude. They shared with their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere along the Northeastern seaboard the very old belief that sex was an acceptable way to formalize a betrothal promise³³. Since the family had no investment in a daughter's chastity, courting was much freer of supervision than it would be for middle-class girls in the nineteenth century. Young couples made love freely, sometimes within a family's household.

³⁰ *Report of the Trial of Henry Bedlow, op. cit.*

³¹ *People v. Buchanan and Wilson, General Sessions.*

³² *Report of the Trial of Richard D. Croucher... for a Rape on Margaret Miller, New York, 1800, 15, 18.*

³³ For America, see the impressions of Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, Boston, 1980, 51-56; for Europe, Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, and Miriam Cohen, « Woman's Work and European Fertility Patterns », *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, Winter, 1976, 447-76; Cissie Fairchilds, « Female Sexual Attitudes and the Rise of Illegitimacy: A Case Study », *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8, Spring, 1978, 627-667; John R. Gillis, « Servants, Sexual Relations, and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London, 1801-1900 », *Feminist Studies* 5, Spring, 1979, 142-67.

Elma Sands, for instance, was a poor cousin of a seemingly respectable Quaker couple. Sands took the same « liberties » with her young man Levi Weeks, later accused of her murder, which Bedlow's lawyer, so derided in her class of women. These liberties, however, were tacitly accepted by her household. Boarders and family alike placidly watched Weeks and Elma disappear into bedrooms together; a boarder testified « he had never observed any courtship to be more warm ». Mr. Ring had witnessed them retiring to a bedroom at night but took no pains to stop them, since he « was induced to believe from their conduct, that they were shortly to be married ». « I always thought Levi a man of honor », Mrs. Ring testified at the trial in 1800, « And that he did not intend to promise farther than he could perform »³⁴.

This kind of courting, however, was one of many Old World practices which the changes of the post-Revolutionary era put under considerable strain. In stable village communities, neighbors and kin could enforce a man's betrothal promise and hence circumvent the possibility of illegitimate children; in cities, however, desertion was a much more serious problem, since men could easily evade such control by simply moving away.

We know about the Sands/Weeks courtship, in fact, because Sands was murdered the night of her wedding, and suspicions that Weeks had tried to evade his obligations resulted in his indictment. The slow breakdown of traditional marriage practices was probably one reason the murder became a *cause célèbre*, a magnet for popular fantasies and fears. Hundreds of people came to view the corpse the Rings laid out. Rumours swirled about the murderer's identity and the details of the killing; peddlars hawked handbills which conjured up « ghouls and goblins... dancing devils... accounts of witchcraft... strange and wonderful prophecies »³⁵. Elma's was an early and especially lurid act in a drama of female betrayal that had no doubt already touched many families, and that in ensuing decades would become a staple of nineteenth-century popular culture.

It is unclear how tightly marriage itself constrained women's sexual lives. The annals of the New York divorce court were filled with adulterous wives who made love with boarders and ran away with circus riders. In so doing, however, they risked estrangement from their husbands, indigence, and a fall into professional prostitution. It is doubtful if promiscuity, or what much later generations would call free love, would have been worth the risk for most wives. The plebeian tradition of self-divorce and common-law marriage did, however, give married women more freedom to follow their inclinations than their more properous sisters, bound to the perpetual legal union instituted in the marriage ceremony³⁶. Rosanna Hutson, for instance, married

³⁴ *Report of the Trial of Levi Weeks... for the Murder of Guelielma Sands*, New York, 1800.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ On the difficulties of divorce, see Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, *op. cit.*, 47.

a perfumer in 1790. Eighteen years later she left him to live with Robert Frazer, who publicly acknowledged and maintained her as his wife. Rosanna's case was only atypical in that her first husband filed for a legal divorce, a laborious and costly procedure; most separations and remarriages took place informally, outside the law³⁷.

Elise Martin, a slave at the time, married a fellow slave in 1790. In 1799, evidently freed, she left him to live with another man; although she did not legally terminate the first marriage, she nonetheless properly married her new lover in Trinity Church³⁸. Mary Allen landed on shakier ground; none of the alliances she made with men after she left her blacksmith husband in 1821 succeeded, and five years later, she was a prostitute.³⁹ The stakes in breaking up a marriage were always higher for women than for men. And although working people generally tolerated common-law marriage, there seems still to have been some opprobrium cast on the women involved.

When a female tenant discovered that her silversmith neighbor was not legally married, she avoided his wife « as much as she could »⁴⁰. Similarly, an Albany woman who deserted her husband replied to her kinfolks' entreaties to return that « she had sacrificed her character and there would be no use in her going back »⁴¹. Still, a big city like New York provided more room for sexual transgressors. Despite the intricate communities of acquaintance and surveillance within it, there was still room for women to start anew.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Nancy Cott has shown, new ideas about womanhood began to circulate through the « middling » ranks of American society. Women, often with the help of evangelical ministers, cast off the more sordid attributes of « The Sex » and assumed the mantle of Christ's special disciples, purer and more pious than men. In response to displacement from productive roles in the household economy, they created a separate woman's « sphere » where childrearing, religious and philanthropic activity and the emotional nurturance of men became full-time work.

Gender became a crucial element in the emergence of a culturally homogeneous middle class from a heterogeneous mixture of « middling » people. Gender practices distinguished the respectable from the working classes below them *and* the rich above. Although this highly self-conscious notion of womanhood drew on the image of the wealthy, accomplished lady of leisure, its advocates also insisted on distinctions: the « true » American

³⁷ Hutson, v. Hutson, Chancery, 1808.

³⁸ Martin v. Martin, Chancery, 1804.

³⁹ Allen v. Allen, Chancery, 1821.

⁴⁰ Schroepfel v. Schroepfel, Chancery, 1807.

⁴¹ Hoffman v. Hoffman, Chancery, 1817.

woman was an industrious, active wife and mother as opposed to the idle, ornamental lady of the gentry. By the 1820's notions of true womanhood were already becoming culturally dominant in prescriptive literature about families and in the popular press⁴².

Yet in practice these norms were not widely accepted outside the North-eastern middle class. In this paper I have tried to show the striking disparity between these new conceptions of gender and those of urban laboring women, who valued neither familial privacy, emotional engagement with spouses, nor chastity – three tenets of the new womanhood.

It is tempting to pose the question of whether the invention of domesticity improved women's lot. For some time, indeed, that question did interest many of us, however women's historians have come to see that formulation of the problem as an ahistorical one which eviscerates cultural process and ignores class. Laboring women certainly gained some advantages from their public mode of life and relative sexual freedom; support from neighbors in their fights with men, help with household duties and child-rearing, some autonomy from family when they were courting, and some ability to leave undesirable marital situations for better ones. Whatever their autonomy, however, it was undercut by the severe misogyny of their culture, a misogyny shared by laboring men and gentlemen alike.

The new domesticity conferred on women a superior moral authority, and thus mitigated these attitudes to some degree. Its benefits to women of the laboring classes, however, remain questionable. Neither material circumstances nor cultural mores predisposed working-class women to accept the « womanly » patterns of life which middle-class reformers sought to teach them. Throughout the nineteenth century, indeed, in the name of domesticity, these reformers, particularly women, unwittingly fostered a new brand of misogyny which targeted those groups of women living outside the tenets of domesticity as deserving of discipline and chastisement. This hostility to working-class women, rooted in charity programs and policies of the ante-bellum period, flourished after the Civil War and into the Progressive period in social welfare measures aimed at « bad » mothers and in commonly accepted notions that working women, because of their loose morals, were responsible for a host of sexual injustices inflicted upon them. The dialectic between class and gender is complex, but certainly it is clear that the woman of the working classes had reason to greet the advent of true womanhood as more of a threat than a promise.

The material in this essay forms the basis of chapter I, *City of Women: the Female Laboring Poor in New York, 1789-1860*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1986.

⁴² Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: « Woman's Sphere » in New England, 1780-1835*, New Haven, 1977. For a more recent study focused on the question of the role of gender in class formation, see Mary Ryan's fine-grained, *Cradle of the Middle Class: A Case Study of Oneida County, New York*, Cambridge, England, 1981.