

Pub 13 05
3/94 J. Lewis Larson



CITY *of* EROS

*New York City, Prostitution,
and the Commercialization
of Sex, 1790–1920*

TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE

W·W·Norton & Company

New York London

brothel attacks in the colonial and early republican eras were limited, isolated forays against the private property of misbehaving citizens. Heads did not roll in brothel riots, and mobs did not turn to butchery.⁵

After 1820, physical violence against prostitutes increased dramatically. On nearly seventy occasions, brothels, "female boarding houses," or prostitutes themselves were attacked in the years between 1820 and 1860. And over forty such incidents occurred in the 1830s. Many of these riots focused on more than buildings and personal property. Increasingly, individual females were assaulted. Rather than being an isolated victim, Mary Gambel was part of a trend (for a list of riots, see appendix 2).

Some of these vigilante acts against prostitutes continued the colonial tradition of limited, extrainstitutional violence. In these cases, the perpetrators' actions were premeditated and well designed and organized. The participants had clear notions of how to enter the house and specific intentions of what to do inside. Repeated attacks by certain individuals, the circumspect behavior inside the brothel, the "respectable" backgrounds of some offenders, and the accusation by prostitutes that city officials encouraged certain assaults suggest premeditation and calculation. The prostitute's property, not her person, took the beating. The accoutrements of a prostitute's trade—her bed, furniture, glassware, and crockery—were destroyed.

Testimony by prostitutes themselves reflected the vigilantes' well-planned and limited goals. Early one morning in 1842, for example, Jane Williams's house was stoned and then forcibly entered by three men who simply destroyed her furniture. Similarly, Mary Wall admitted five potential customers to her house after they arrived in a hack one evening in 1833. After sitting down, they requested a drink, inquired about her glasses and decanters, and then "grabbed a fire shovel and commenced breaking . . . all most everything on the sideboard." Likewise, the four men who entered Mary Ann Davis's house on Centre Street "behaved in a very noisy and disorderly manner, breaking tumblers, cursing and swearing and when they were going away they took one of her decanters." George Gale and Bentley Curran participated in four brothel attacks during a two-week period in 1831. Forcibly entering Elizabeth Baker's establishment on several different occasions, they broke her windows, destroyed her stoop, and committed "many outrages of an . . . offensive nature." Finally, Isaac Roberts celebrated Christmas in 1851 by leading forty men to Catherine Cauldwell's brothel on Lispenard Street, "to give a benefit," in their words. Once inside, Roberts gave orders to "ribbon everything," and his accomplices put tumblers in their pockets, broke a

sofa, and destroyed a piano stool. Before departing, they heaved stools through the front window.⁶

The limited scope of these brothel attacks sometimes reflected neighborhood opposition to prostitution. When Catharine Brown obtained lease on a King Street house in 1833 and proceeded to conduct an o brothel, neighbors protested. Their opposition and anger, however, w unheeded by public officials. Finally, members of a neighborhood 1 seized the moment and took their own vigilante action. They ente the house, destroyed Brown's belongings, and chased her away. Bro never returned.⁷

Other assaults, however, appeared to be random and solitary. Drunk disorderly, and delirious males often became incensed when a prosti or madam denied them their heart's desire. John Evans, for exam was arrested for throwing stones at the house of Eliza Vincent after "refused him admittance." Similarly, James Van Dine broke into Reb Weyman's house "by forcing open the windows and shutters . . . tl behaved in a most riotous and disorderly manner." One January eve in 1834, William Green traversed Church Street, hopping from g gery to brothel, his drunken enchantment terminating only whe broke a brothel window.⁸ Even personal acquaintance afforded l protection for vulnerable prostitutes. For example, Adeline Miller c plained that several men she knew repeatedly visited her house, stea in and then doing as they pleased. Similarly, Hannah Fuller was a ened by William Ford early one summer morning in 1844. After kie in her door, he removed his boots and pants, carried her to the bed, attempted "to ravish and . . . carnally know her." Only the last-mi intervention by the watch prevented the rape. Fuller later droppe charges because Ford was an "old friend."⁹

Women on the street had even less protection from such assa Mary Smith, a Leonard Street prostitute, was walking home in after an evening at the Park Theater when William Nosworthy se her "in a grossly rude and indecent manner and raised her clothes to expose her nakedness to the passers by."¹⁰ The increasing frequ of these attacks during the 1830s reflected, in part, the growing pe tion that prostitutes were fair game for the aggressions of frust males.

The most threatening form of assault was "the spree" or "row." Fi by male camaraderie and substantial quantities of liquor, gangs of paging drunks moved from one saloon or brothel to another, beco increasingly obnoxious and violent at every stop. This intoxicated vitality convinced Edgar Allan Poe that the spree was "the mad e:

of a counterfeit hilarity—the joint offspring of liberty and of rum.¹¹

Sprees were usually arbitrary, unplanned, and unstructured. In 1834, John Lawrence, Henry Flender, and a dozen others attempted to break in to several Chapel Street brothels, but settled instead for spattering the front doors with mud. On another occasion, Samuel Anderson, Charles Dykes, and their chums failed in their effort to break into a brothel on Anthony Street, retreated to the street, and launched stones through the front windows. According to another criminal indictment, a gang of seven young men out on a "frolick . . . proposed to see Mother Brown" and proceeded to smash in the door of her Collect Street house. Finally, William Weed brought eight to ten accomplices "to take possession" of Eliza Swinson's Chapel Street brothel, but they stoned her "castle" only after she locked them out.¹²

Many sprees evolved into scenes of sadistic terror. The three rioters who stoned Amanda Smith's house on Franklin Street also "destroyed her furniture, knocked her down, beat her on the face and head so as to blind her entirely, and after having knocked her down, kicked her." The invaders, charged the district attorney, then beat her crippled son William "in a most shameful and outrageous manner." Witnesses testified that the same men forced their way into two other Orange Street brothels, "making a great noise and disturbance, breaking the furniture." Likewise, John Golding led four other men into Elizabeth Rinnell's Crosby Street house and demanded food, drink, money, and entertainment. After their drunken orgy, Golding assaulted and beat Rinnell. On another occasion, Jane Williams refused to open her brothel door to a dozen men. Two then forced their way through a window, punched Williams in the head, and opened the front door, allowing the remainder to come in and stampede about the house. Similarly, when John Williams entered an Anthony Street brothel, he threw oil of vitriol in Mary Ann Duffy's face, severely scarring her. And when Edward Halliday and friends broke into a Bancker Street house, each one "drew a sword and slashed before them, [and] wounded Sarah Smith, the woman of the house, in the face."¹³

The threat of rape was common in many of these brothel riots. Five men, for example, broke into Eliza Logue's Thomas Street house when she refused them admittance. After breaking the cookery and throwing a lamp at the head of a prostitute, they strangled Logue and "threw her across the foot of a bed and endeavored by force and violence to have connection with her." Only the nearby watch, hearing the commotion, prevented the consummation of the act. In 1840, after beating Mary Lee, Benjamin Waldron and his gang followed her as she tried to escape, striking "her in the face several times and threaten[ing] to commit other

outrages." In another instance, more than ten laborers broke into E Ann Potter's Suffolk Street house, violently assaulted her, and "threatened to pickle" and rape her before hastily departing.¹⁴

What sort of men were these "brothel bullies"? Indictments by district attorney listed 80 percent as ordinary laborers and the remainder as semiskilled workers (1 percent), skilled artisans (19 percent), white-collar professionals (under 1 percent). Most rioters lived in same ward as the prostitute they attacked or in a neighboring one. More than a quarter resided in more distant areas of the city. While more were working-class laborers, brothel rioters crossed class lines. In 1840, for example, the attorney James Lozier joined a neighbor, the grocer Charles Taylor, and two others in attacking Adeline Miller's Elm Street brothel.¹⁵ The instigators of these assaults, therefore, were not simply disenfranchised "rabble," parts of unruly mobs, professional criminals, or clearly defined deviants but "respectable" elements of society as well. Indeed, it appears that their behavior was tolerated and sometimes condoned by neighbors and the municipality.

More important, brothel riots were part of a larger transformation in the patterns of male leisure and social behavior. Simultaneously with the sudden rise in brothel riots, America experienced an increase in communal drinking among men. According to the historian W. J. Rorabaugh, such group intoxication was commonplace after 1820 and ended the participants with feelings of liberty and independence while in the company of a sense of equality. The group drinking binge was an ideological statement: to be drunk was to be free. Liquor therefore increased American male's sense of autonomy.¹⁶

Brothel sprees were an extension of such drunken displays of egotism and egotism. If liquor offered an illusion of freedom, the brothel riot promoted male sexual supremacy. Men lost their inhibitions and individual accountability. Participants unleashed pent-up frustration by attacking a visible independent and sometimes materially successful woman. Whereas a vigilante attack on a house of prostitution was a public test, a spree was a source of fun. As mock-heroic skirmishes of violence and violation, such attacks were an aggressive form of misogynist, carnivalesque recreation, a means to assert male prerogative and supremacy at the expense of a hapless, vulnerable prostitute. The spree offered an illusion of power to powerless men.¹⁷

Linked to these intoxicated revelries was the emergence of a particular male, working-class subculture in New York. Numerous observers by midcentury complained of the "schools of vice" that encouraged prostitution, prize-fighting, and drunkenness. According to Elliot Gorn, the social choices and limited economic opportunity taught many male

value physical prowess and verbal bravado. Fighting was often the primary expression of such a culture.¹⁸ In a world full of potential violence, economic unpredictability, and psychological insecurity, sexual assault on successful prostitutes promised some men a moment of independence, autonomy, and honor.

Prostitutes, however, did not always passively accept these physical assaults. In 1843, for instance, an angry Amelia Norman stabbed one of her clients in the chest on the steps of the Astor House. Only a deflection by his rib prevented the knife from piercing his heart. On another occasion, when John Briggs became uncontrollably drunk and disorderly in Phoebe Doty and Moll Stephens's brothel, one prostitute tried to shoot him with a pistol. Similarly, Mary Gambel, upon being stabbed in the nose, scratched her assailant's face so badly that nearly a month later she was convinced that "he must [still] carry the marks with him."¹⁹

Most important, antebellum prostitutes used the law to protect themselves. Before the creation of a municipal police force in 1845, criminal prosecution in New York was a private matter. Individual citizens, not public officials, initiated most criminal charges. Shrewdly bringing legal proceedings against their aggressors, prostitutes utilized the machinery of the state to defend their interests and property rights, firmly entrenching their profession in the social fabric of the metropolis. Even streetwalkers sought legal redress when threatened or attacked. For example, when a drunken male approached and kissed a prostitute promenading on Broadway, she objected to his uninvited sexual advances and had him arrested. On another occasion, Jane Williams charged Jim Waters with assaults after he struck her when she abandoned him on the street for another client. Waters unapologetically justified his actions: "I had no notion of letting her off," he insisted. "She wanted to go away with another fellow cause he was dressed a little better than I was."²⁰ Williams, unsatisfied, fully prosecuted her assailant. Instead of retreating to the domestic hearth, numerous prostitutes asserted themselves by every means at their disposal.

Just as the extreme behavior of men in brothel attacks revealed a transformation in attitudes toward prostitution and the nature of male violence in antebellum society, the use of the legal system by prostitutes to defend themselves was equally important. Private prosecution during the prepolice era gave prostitutes the power to define crime and protect their own property and "commerce." These prostitutes did not see themselves as "fallen women." They publicly defended their personal integrity and private property instead of succumbing to violent intimidation, and they refused to act as fugitives from justice. Such prostitutes rejected

a defensive, a reticent posture when subjected to violent terror. In asserting their rights, they forswore surrender.

Forcing the resolution of these conflicts into a public forum, prostitutes turned the municipal government into their agent and protector. For example, they summoned the watch when attacked and prosecuted violators upon arrest. Some rioters consequently considered the watch a protector of the brothel. In 1829, when Marshal Joseph L. Hays tried to arrest three men in the process of destroying Miss Robins's house in ill fame, the culprits temporarily took him hostage, too. Another tin Charles Taylor and Charles Jennings berated the watch who removed them from Adeline Miller's house, "saying it was a damned shame if watchmen should receive pay for protecting whore houses."²¹ Outraged by the destruction of their property, prostitutes brought their assailants to court. Rioters were thus compelled to repair the damage even when the judge knew about the illicit carnal activities of the plaintiff. Although the district attorney records provide no clue as to the final decisions in most cases, on at least twelve occasions the courts convicted the riotous defendants. At other times, men eluded conviction only because the prostitute dropped the charge.²²

In this ironic fashion, the state both defended and protected prostitution. Unlike earlier societies which barred testimony from prostitutes or later forms of legal intervention which sought to regulate, control, and hinder the independence of prostitutes, antebellum New York's governmental power invoked for their benefit. When prostitutes exercised their property rights, the municipality was compelled to defend prostitution and prosecute its more violent enemies. Since antebellum government was devoted primarily to protecting the interests of taxpayers and private property, a bewildered municipality faced an unappealing, imperfect choice: suppress sexual deviancy, punish prostitutes and thereby violate their (and ultimately others') property rights, or punish their male aggressors and tolerate the existence of prostitution. In the end, the state chose to defend property, and thus prostitution, at the expense of other laws and the prudish sensibilities of many New Yorkers. In 1842, even the sporting journal the *Whip* concluded that the "brothel bully" had gone out of fashion. "Robberies, and even murder at brothels were not infrequent" during the 1830s. "Now they are seldom heard of."²³

Brothel riots represented the nexus where changes in gender relations and the underground economy met. Outside the home, prostitutes were among the most visible women in the industrializing antebellum city. One newspaper lamented that "a new code of ethics" had emerged by 1836, glamorizing the prostitute with her gold watch, splendid e

rings, and embroidered stockings, at the expense of "a poor hardworking man, who sticks to one woman, . . . his wife." Indeed, by 1825, madams like Maria Williamson were successful enough to own several brothels and they play an active role in New York's lucrative real estate market. Later on, others like Rosina Townsend, Adeline Miller, and Julia Brown became public figures appearing on the front pages of the penny press, in the diaries of the city's gentry, and in guidebooks sold at corner newsstands. The *Herald* asked when "was there ever found an instance of the open and shameless defence of the character of a public prostitute?" Why, indeed, had leading prostitutes become models "of truth and virtue"?²⁴ At a time when gender roles were in the initial stage of redefinition and the "cult of domesticity" was gaining ground, the behavior of some prostitutes served as a vivid counterpoise.

These actions by prostitutes probably affected the way many Americans viewed women outside the household. The historians Christine Stansell and Mary Ryan, for example, have shown how antebellum society grew increasingly restless over the public activities and mobility of working women in general. Similarly, contemporaries feared that women in public places risked destructive physical harassment. "There are strange things said of attacks upon females in the streets of New York, . . . if alone," reported *Niles' Register* in 1831. The former mayor Philip Hone proclaimed that some outrage was committed nightly by "young ruffians who prowl the streets insulting females."²⁵ For women, the message was clear—get off the streets, stay in the home.

At the same time, between 1820 and 1850, women had greater control and influence over prostitution than in any other period. Low wages in the factory and the household made prostitutes the best-paid women workers in the nineteenth-century city. And the willingness of many prostitutes to prosecute their violators in the public arena illustrated their confidence in their own individual rights. Many of the women who were attacked—Jane Williams, Mary Wall, Mary Gambel, Rebecca Weyman, and Adeline Miller—were among the best-known prostitutes and madams in New York City, celebrities in their own right. The rise of violence against prostitutes and brothels, in part, reflected a widening gap between certain groups of men and women in the sex trade. Brothel attacks increased at the very moment when political and other forms of rioting were increasingly suppressed and held in disrepute. Just as some white men terrorized black proprietors of small businesses, oyster shops, churches, and theaters, others found the increased economic and social power of prostitutes threatening.²⁶

Furthermore, many of the houses attacked appear to have been "private" brothels—places with high prices, exclusive clients, and admit-

tance by appointment only. In certain respects, private brothels illustrate a widening gender and class division between increasingly affluent artisans and less successful male artisans and workers. Male rioters, certainly, sought to make private brothels more public. All prostitutes, irrespective of economic rank or celebrity status, were public women should be available to all men. Efforts to limit accessibility, in the case of the brothel bully, violated custom and male prerogative.

While antebellum gender relations were being transformed, so was New York's growing underground economy. A close examination of brothel attacks reveals several important political influences ultimately signaled changes in the organization of prostitution in the city. In 1836, for example, John Chichester and his politically connected gang attacked at least three bordellos. Entering Jane Ann Johnson's Chapel Street brothel with bats, they destroyed windows and shutters and threatened to cut Miss Jackson's throat. Chichester's gang then broke into Eliza Ludlow's house and forced her to serve brandy; they concluded their guzzling by tossing the glasses in the fire. Then they "abused the inmates of the house," burned a rug, broke a bench, and hurled it at a prostitute, and threatened to toss one woman out the window.²⁷

Active though it was, Chichester's gang gave pride of place to Thomas Hyer's. From 1836 to 1838, Hyer's group raided at least four brothels. Once, upon breaking into Ellen Holly's house in 1836, they grabbed an inmate and, "by the most forcible and violent means," gang-raped her. Although convicted for the deed, Hyer a year later led the same gang into Mary Banta's house, destroyed her tableware, and knocked an inmate unconscious. Within the next two decades, his violent habits were rewarded with the American heavyweight boxing championship and important political alliances. Hyer, for example, boxed and defeated James ("Yankee") Sullivan in 1849. But by 1852 the two had reconciled their pugilistic and political differences, "and with a troop of their respective friends paraded Howard and Mercer streets and their respective neighborhoods, making the night hideous with their drunken orgies," according to the *Tribune*. Forming alliances with the nativist Bill Poole, Democrat Mike Walsh, and the Republican William Seward, Hyer gained control of the prostitution, saloons, and gambling dens along Mulberry Street in the two decades before the Civil War. The pugilist turned politician cast such a memorable shadow over New York that his name a century later the famed ward boss George Washington Plunkitt invoked Hyer's memory during his discussions on Tammany Hall (figure 7).

While motives were less evident in other attacks, participants certainly enjoyed significant political connections. For example, the rioters

Fig. 7 Tom Hyer
New-York Historical Society, NYC



destroyed Jane Weston's, Sarah Ferguson's, and Adeline Miller's belongings were white-collar workers and skilled laborers, allegedly acting on orders from Justice John Bloodgood and Street Inspector Daniel McGrath. In 1834, Phoebe Doty accused William H. Tuttle, a clerk for the mayor, and John L. Martin, a tavern keeper, of attacking her bawdy house and commencing "a work of outrageous and disorderly conduct . . . by squirting upon them . . . dirty water." On a separate occasion, Andrew R. Jackman, a City Hall officer and future city assessor and common school trustee, and seven other skilled workers broke into Mary Adams's Thirteenth Ward establishment. While inside, they accosted an inmate, wrapped her up in a straw mat, and rolled her down the stairs.²⁹

The political links between these public officials and "public" women were not entirely new. In fact, the association of legal authority with illicit sex was an old one. As early as 1810, for example, John DeLacy complained that disorderly-house keepers used physical threats and municipal protection to evade prosecution. The "wretches," he concluded "are encouraged and counselled by profligate and dishonest brothel marshals with whom their crimes and interests are interwoven." Similarly, in 1806, the watchmen James Skaats, Frederick Storms, and Samuel Dunn were charged with "going to a common dance house and there joining in dancing with the common girls and their associates." And in

1810, a city marshal himself was arrested for running a disorderly house by the East River. Proprietors like Patrick McDermott of East 6th Street used law enforcement officials to arrest prostitutes for sex when they left his establishment. In 1815, Ebenezer Burling concluded that city marshals were little more than "brokers among the prostitutes."³⁰

In some cases, corruption charges reached as far as the mayor's office. In 1806, George and Amelia Benwood testified in court that "the mayor had given [them] a license to keep a whore house and dance house and a tavern." Similarly, William Lowe "declared that the mayor had given him . . . a license to keep a public whore house and given him privilege to whip or cowhide any of the girls or whores he may have in his house."

But these early examples of municipal duplicity were informal and inconsistent, and subject to the whims of individual officers and political officials. It is doubtful any mayor in the early republic gave a saloonkeeper license to operate a brothel. But the rise of party politics brought a new relationship between the municipality and the prostitute. The gangs led by Hyer, Chichester, and others played critical roles in the distribution of power and the early formation of the antebellum political machine. As Amy Bridges has argued, while elites in New York concentrated on federal and state issues, while concerns and grass-roots organization were left to a new political class—the career politician. The rich and the well-born thus dominated national party politics, and local career politicians minded the neighborhood political store. To control their fiefdoms, ward-based politicians often employed gangs to keep opponents away from the polls, guard lot boxes, and enforce political conformity. Hyer, for example, was not the nativist "Bowery B'hoys" who, according to Alvin Harlow, "was not as vicious as rival Five Points gangs and had a tendency 'toward political rather than the purely savage or criminal.'"³²

But if local politicians controlled votes, they lacked money. In order to establish a secure financial base, ward politicians resorted to bribery and extortion of neighborhood proprietors. Saloons, gambling dens, houses of prostitution paid tribute in return for local officials' ignorance of laws regulating such activities. As prostitution became a significant revenue source for the local political boss, gangs were probably used as means to control and police brothel keepers and their inmates. By the 1840s, for example, one journalist concluded that some brothels were "under the special protection of the bloods of the aristocracy." In addition, the private prosecution of brothel rioters, effective in individual and isolated cases, was inadequate against more public, collective violence. Employing terror, politically motivated gangs restructured

most highly organized forms of prostitution and established a financial foundation for the political machine for the remainder of the century.³³

The brothel riots of the 1830s thus marked a turning point in the structure of prostitution and sexual politics in New York. Thereafter, it appears that ward bosses enjoyed direct ties with the promoters of prostitution and cooperated with local police in systematically extorting and protecting successful brothels. For example, the U.S. marshal Isaiah Rynders openly derived political support from the proprietors of brothels and saloons with prostitutes. Similarly, Congressman John Clancy ran the prostitute-filled Ivy Green saloon on Elm Street, where Rynders's empire Club frequently met. Even a police court justice and conservative Whig like Robert Taylor, a onetime mayoral nominee, routinely visited brothels without a second thought, searching for evidence in criminal cases. In 1850, when Police Officer John J. McManus arrested most of the saloon and brothel keepers in Five Points, Alderman Patrick Kelly quickly came to their aid. Similarly, Michael Norton, an Irish immigrant who represented the Fifth and Eighth wards as alderman, state senator, assemblyman, Tammany district leader, and district court judge between 1864 and 1889, was known for his alliances with the underworld. In 1865, John Acton, president of the Board of Police, complained that Norton's neighborhood was "a pandemonium of thieves, prostitutes and murderers" and that Norton took "it upon himself to become the champion of these desparate and dangerous classes."³⁴ By 1840, this combination of political and police control of New York's underground economy had grown more entrenched, and it persisted for the remainder of the century.

This complex mixture of gender relations, violence, and political corruption gave rise to a new participant in commercial sex—the "pimp." As brothels were attacked more frequently during the 1830s, men for the first time were hired to provide protection. Both madams and prostitutes admitted that men lived in their houses to discourage physical attacks or perform services such as buying groceries, repairing the house, or serving the guests. The controversial editor George Wilkes claimed that many of these "gentlemen brothel pensioners" enjoyed significant political connections and met "with considerable toleration from a portion of society." By midcentury, numerous writers were similarly speaking out against the "fancy-men" of prostitutes and the "necessary evil pimps." Many enjoyed ties to local political figures. George Foster insisted that "[n]ine-tenths of these villains" were "red-hot politicians" who served "to keep the City Government for the most part in the wrong hands."³⁵

While such pimps did not exert complete control over the tenants in a house of prostitution, they served as a visible reminder of a brothel's

need for physical protection and political tolerance. Streetwalkers the other hand, required a more dominating type of pimp, especially after 1830. Physical harassment and frequent arrests were common of a streetwalker's life. Unless their prostitution was only occasional, streetwalkers employed male partners or "lovers" to assist and protect them. "Scarcely any public women," wrote George Wilkes, "are for length of time without their pensioners." Similarly, the writer George Thompson claimed in semifictional descriptions of New York's prostitutes, "[It] is well known that almost every gay girl [prostitute] always has a 'bosom friend,' who protects her and is the recipient of her caresses during the absence of *cash* customers."³⁶

Pimps were, by the 1840s, "an essential *attaché* to a brothel as a pretty woman to a cigar store," according to one observer. Others derided them for existing "on the money gained by prostitution." Described as "sleek, pale-faced and *moustached*," they stood in front of Broadway and Park Row cafés and prowled the environs of Five Points and Hell's Hook. By the 1850s, a visible, well-established system of pimping existed in New York. When Mayor Fernando Wood instigated a campaign against streetwalkers in 1855, pimps appeared with them in court. Commonly referred to as "Broadway Statues," they stood in front of "monster" hotels along New York's best-known avenue (figure 8). They "scamped have the audacity to address [women] without ceremony," complained one reporter, "and if their advances are received with indignation, . . . the wretches apologize and plead mistake." The corner of Broadway and Broome Street was a notorious hangout for pimps where prostitutes had to hand over their earnings before resuming their work. The writer Junius Browne in 1869 remarked that most "crippled in the town" relied upon these "roughs," "lovers," and "protectors" "strike her thrice for every kiss."³⁷ By the midnineteenth century, pimps were a standard feature of New York prostitution. They remain so to

"IN THIS WORLD," Herman Melville once wrote, "sin that its way can travel freely, and without a passport; whereas Virtue pauper, is stopped at all frontiers."³⁸ But in antebellum New York the cost to prostitutes who wanted to operate freely was high. And perhaps the greatest price was physical coercion. Brothel riots represented the most evident danger for women involved in the sex trade. But in a larger sense, such violence spoke to a broader issue. Male hatred of and intolerance toward women, rather than moving underground or being marginalized, grew more pronounced during these years. In some cases, gender inequality virtually became a sufficient cause for violence. Rioting, rather



Fig. 8 "Broadway Statues"
From Jonathan Slick, *Snares of New York* (1879)

upholding traditions, redressing legitimate grievances, or reacting against social injustice, served as a vehicle for certain men to control and intimidate certain women.

Indeed, these violent acts may represent the dark side of the otherwise egalitarian subculture of the Bowery. Even those working-class males—the "toughs," "brothel bullies," and "fire laddies"—who operated in the Bowery milieu, men like Tom Hyer, John Chichester, and their cohorts, reveled in their assaults upon women. Some of them may have defended the honor and rights of "Bowery G'hals" on occasion, but given the opportunity, the same men inflicted physical harm on prostitutes and madams elsewhere. Clearly, these males believed they had the right to control, if not physically coerce, prostitutes and other public women. And such attacks quite likely had an impact that went beyond the specific encounter. Just as lynchings in the American South later in the century extended psychological control far beyond their immediate victims, brothel riots probably imposed similar behavioral constraints upon prostitutes.³⁹

Violence inflicted upon prostitutes, of course, never embodied whole essence of antebellum gender relations in New York. Yet, if assumptions regarding women were expressed within structures of action and feeling rather than as a body of explicit ideas, as Chri Stansell and others have argued, antebellum brothel riots were emblematic of a new attitude toward prostitutes and women in public life. Escalation of violence against prostitutes and their residences reflected in part, changing power relations between antebellum men and women.

The efforts of these men to extend their power over autonomous sexually independent women were never completely successful. In many cases, their violence was greeted with defiance. Through self-defutilization of the legal system, and the adoption of pimps, embroiled prostitutes protected themselves. But in the final analysis, the victors in this struggle were not prostitutes or madams. For individual prostitutes, reliance upon pimps, while never total and always in flux, represented a loss of autonomy. Furthermore, the willingness of certain municipal officials to tolerate, if not endorse, violence against prostitutes marked a turning point in New York's underground economy. The ultimate beneficiary of this was the ward politician. As many Tammany Hall emerged as the controlling political force of Gotham, vice rackets now allied to neighborhood machine representatives used extortion, force, and outright terror to restructure commercial sex and cement male hegemony over the profits of prostitution.

In 1836, one extraordinary act of intimate violence carried the meaning of this sexual transformation in New York to the rest of America.



SPORTING MEN

IT SEEMED like just another violent event in New York's "decade of riots." The body of twenty-three-year-old Helen Jewett lay lifeless in her room, discovered by her madam, Rosina Townsend, on an April morning in 1836. Within days, however, the incident was a national cause célèbre, and for three months the events surrounding the murder held center stage in the drama of New York. Jewett—erudite, glamorous, seductive, and youthful—was the most celebrated prostitute in New York's most popular brothel. Her murder proved to be the city's most intensely covered story of the decade.¹

The events surrounding the eve of 9 April 1836 quickly became public. Townsend testified that on the night of the murder, nineteen-year-old Richard P. Robinson visited Jewett with the intention of spending the entire evening (figures 9–10). Robinson was a frequent guest of Jewett's, usually under the alias of Frank Rivers. Quietly arriving at 9:00 P.M., Robinson immediately went to Jewett's room. Townsend remembered serving a bottle of champagne to the couple around 11:00 P.M. The night proceeded uneventfully, and shortly after midnight Townsend and her girls retired to their respective rooms. Suddenly, at 3:00 A.M., the madam awoke. Investigating her parlor, she noticed that a globe lamp was out of place. Townsend knew that only two residents in the house had such a lamp, so she picked it up and climbed the stairs to return it. She went first to

5



Fig. 9 "The Real Helen Jewett" (1836)
Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

Maria Stevens's room, but found it bolted. The madam then went to Helen Jewett's room next door and found it unlocked. When Townsend opened the door, smoke unexpectedly billowed out into her hallway. Momentarily shocked, she quickly recovered and retreated down the hallway, threw open the window, and screamed for the watch. Catching her breath, the madam returned to the room and entered the bed chamber to find an unconscious Jewett, her head dripping blood and smashed. By now, her body was partly consumed in flames (figure 10). Townsend doused the fire and hastily looked around the house for the murderer. Downstairs she noticed that the rear door was ajar. And i



Fig. 10 "Richard P. Robinson" (1836)
 Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

back and adjoining yards lay a hatchet and Robinson's cloak.

The circumstantial but overwhelming evidence led to the quick indictment of Robinson. From the start, the trial attracted national attention. The presiding judge, Ogden Edwards, was a leading Whig politician, as well as a grandson of the theologian Jonathan Edwards and a cousin of Aaron Burr. The public quickly learned that the defendant was a highly valued clerk in Joseph Hoxie's profitable Maiden Lane garment business. Robinson's presence in the house the night of the murder made a guilty verdict seem likely. The crime's violence and sexual origins attracted considerable attention, and nearly everyone had an



Fig. 11 "Ellen Jewett . . . female" (1836)
 Courtesy American Antiquarian Society

opinion. "This is the most awful case of depravity, murder, and the fruits of licentiousness and bad passions," wrote the former Philip Hone in his diary. To another, Robinson was simply "the S youngster."²

More significant was the reaction by the New York press. By 1835, early American newspapers put advertisements and related mercantile information on their front pages. Journalistic etiquette traditionally demanded that tales of sex and scandal be omitted altogether from the city's daily press. But the editor James Gordon Bennett, a recent upstart, the *Herald*, saw opportunity in a slain prostitute. To expand the paper's market appeal, Bennett devoted three months of unprecedented front-page coverage to the murder and trial. Within a week, a biography of Robinson with "extracts" from his diary was published to satisfy public demand.³

Penny papers like the *Sun* and *Transcript* in New York, as well as others in Philadelphia, Boston, and Albany, quickly joined the fray with their own front-page episodes of delicious carnality and salaciousness. Jewett was at once a "goddess," "the Venus of that Papal destruction," "the beautiful ruling spirit of that palace of perdition one who 'gave grace to licentiousness—elegance to its debauchery.' The published letter described Jewett as "as sweet a companion now as Oh! lovely creature, what form! what a figure! what a fine bust!

lineaments, rich lips, full bust. Your mind too, is of the first order." As the *Herald* proclaimed, the Jewett murder agitated "the public mind beyond any event that was ever heard or saw in any city."⁴ The trial's national publicity, in effect, initiated the era of the sex scandal in the penny press.

Quickly taking sides, the penny press moralized. Bennett's *Herald* believed Robinson innocent; the *Sun* and *Transcript* found him guilty. Each accused the others of being "advocates of prostitution and wickedness." More important, each made the trial a starting point "to open a full view upon the morals of society." Jewett was a symbol of "the whole frame of society which debauch young women and young men, and root out virtue and morality." It was no secret, one paper proclaimed, that business had a "new code of ethics," and clerks and merchants entertained themselves in such houses, "opening the doors of fashionable profligacy and vice to the innocents from Missouri, Ohio and the west and the south." The Jewett murder was the "natural result" of a society that fostered and protected such commercialized sexuality. "We are all guilty alike," remonstrated the *Herald*.⁵

The intensified coverage, however, did little to render justice. On 8 June 1836, Robinson was acquitted (figure 12). Robinson supporters, it was rumored, had bribed jurors and garnered false testimony on the defendant's behalf. Most considered it a great miscarriage of law. Two years later, for instance, Philip Hone summarily described the verdict as "the foulest blot on the jurisprudence of our country."⁶

Public fascination with the trial was no aberration. The persons of Jewett and Robinson brought out numerous submerged sexual tensions of antebellum America. Jewett, whose real name was Dorcas Doyen, was born to Welsh immigrants in Augusta, Maine. Orphaned at age thirteen, she was adopted by a local judge. As a teenager, however, she was banished from her adopted home because of her sexual liaisons with a sailor and a banker. Living for short periods in nearby Portland and Boston, she eventually made her way to New York, supporting herself by working in several brothels. Attractive, intelligent, and refined, Jewett was a popular regular in the third tier of the Park Theatre. By 1835, she had several suitors competing for her attention, some even willing to marry her. At the time of her murder, she owned clothing and jewelry valued at more than \$1,500.

Jewett represented two contradictory fears of many nineteenth-century critics of prostitution. The loss of her virginity through innocent teenage sexuality and its devolution into prostitution embodied middle-class fears of downward mobility. "Step by step had Dorcas Doyen descended the course of a life of common shame," noted one writer a

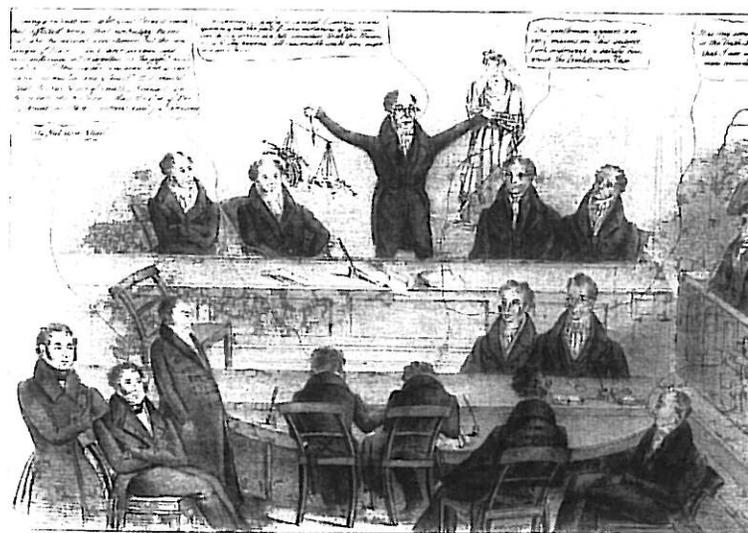


Fig. 12 "The Trial of R. P. Robinson" (1836)
New-York Historical Society, NYC

decade later. One erotic mishap, and the fall from respectability to marginality was likely, if not guaranteed. Jewett's case saw the final result—death. On the other hand, Jewett never truly succumbed to economic want. Rather, prostitution provided her with male patronage, a handsome residence, desirable possessions, and personal autonomy. In sum, she was wealthy, free, and female. Jewett simultaneously resented the dangerous, "inevitable" results of sexual freedom along with the tangible benefits of a career in commercial sex.⁷

Like Jewett's, Robinson's sexual behavior was laden with symbolism. Born into a highly respectable Connecticut family, he typified the young, single male in New York, the "nabob," unencumbered by apprenticeship, employer control, or church stricture. Robinson admitted that his boss was concerned only with his duties at the store, inquiring how Robinson passed his nights. "I was an unprotected man without female friends to introduce me to respectable society, serving a boarding house, where I could enter at what hour I pleased—subject to no control after the business of the day was over," remembered Robinson.⁸

To the American public in 1836, Richard Robinson was on trial for more than just the murder of Helen Jewett. As the boardinghouse

group, and market economy replaced the craft household, family, and "moral economy," young men frequented brothels and visited women in assignation houses in growing numbers. Robinson himself bragged of the numerous women at his command: "It was first one girl and then another, till like the Grand Turk I had a harem, and only threw the handkerchief to the one I chose." Critics cited Robinson's "intense selfishness" and his tendency to hold "everything secondary to his own advantage." "What else can be expected of . . . youths similarly situated," concluded one writer, who "are brought from the quiet routine of country life, to be plunged into the midst of all the intoxicating pleasures and dazzling temptations of this great Babel of enjoyment."⁹

Robinson's promiscuous adventures aptly illustrated the restructuring of male sexual behavior in New York after 1820. Numerous young men courted prostitutes, "kept" women, paid their rent, and assumed aliases to hide such activities. Sexual desires were now expressed through institutions of public leisure and commercial exchange—the theater, the boardinghouse, and the brothel. More significantly, Robinson's behavior was defensible in the minds of his supporters. Jewett was a social leech out to ruin a rising but poor clerk, a female threat to "Young America." Indeed, "no man ought to forfeit his life for the murder of a whore," concluded some apologists. As the cry for justice in the murder of a prostitute rang out, Robinson's contemporaries saw themselves on trial. Many ran to his defense. There "appears to be a fellow-feeling in the audience," Philip Hone noted during the proceedings; "I was surrounded by young men about his own age, apparently clerks like him, who appeared to be thoroughly initiated into the arcana of such houses." The event so polarized New York that the prostitute's partisans donned "Helen Jewett mourners"—white beaver hats with a black band of crepe halfway up the crown—as badges of opposition to the defenders of her accused murderer. Not to be outdone, Robinson's sympathizers jammed into the City Hall courtroom daily, wearing "Frank Rivers caps" as their symbol of solidarity.¹⁰

In that tiny, overcrowded municipal chamber, New York and the rest of America confronted a changing sexual ethos. Robinson not only murdered a woman but, more important, also challenged the emerging "respectable," bourgeois, Christian morality. In the years following the Second Great Awakening, the values of self-control, chastity, domesticity, sobriety, and frugality were espoused by Protestant and Catholic clergy, male and female moral reformers, and entrepreneur and small merchant alike. Severe social restrictions increasingly limited intimacy between young men and women as the nineteenth century progressed. Long before the phrase was popularized by a twentieth-century

president, these groups admonished young Americans to "just say

Robinson's sexual behavior mocked these ideals. For the next decade it was a national topic of discussion (figures 13–16 reflect the or interest in the case). More than any single person, Robinson presented a tension of what constituted "respectable" sexuality on public view. In all, his popularity among large numbers of urban youths represented the emergence of a "sporting male" culture. Organized around various forms of gaming—horse racing, gambling, cockfighting, pugilism, and "blood" sports—sporting-male culture defended and promoted male sexual aggressiveness and promiscuity. For young men like Robinson, bachelorhood was the ideal. Prostitution, sexual display, and entertainment brought excitement to a prosaic world. Respectable reproductive heterosexuality, in contrast, was associated with fertility and female control. Self-indulgence, not self-sacrifice, meant manhood; unregulated sex was the categorical imperative for the sporting male.

The most conspicuous sexual ethic of this subculture was its defense of prostitution. The short-lived sporting press, typified by story 1 and journals like the *Rake*, the *Whip*, the *Flash*, and the *Libertine* among the most forthright advocates of male sexual freedom. While some of their coverage copied the penny press in its tendency to exaggerate and sensationalize, their appeal rested upon a positive view of male sexual indulgence. "Man is endowed by nature with passions that should be gratified," argued the *Sporting Whip*, and no blame can be attached to him, who for that purpose occasionally seeks the woman of pleasure. Another insisted that brothels were "as necessary as bread or wine." Similarly, it was "a mistaken idea" to assume that a woman who engaged in "illicit intercourse with one or two men, gradually sinks and deeper into the abyss of shame," claimed the *Weekly Rake*. Even the most admired females of classical Greece like Sappho and Phryne were not considered common harlots or kept mistresses. One journal defended prostitutes as "charitable and feeling," many visiting the almshouse and helping the poor. Others were depicted as artists with "poetic effusions, . . . indicative of a cultivated and reflecting mind." Prostitution, argued yet another journal, should be legalized and regulated. The "cause of morality served by the suppression of open brothels; they are as essential to the well-being of society as churches."¹¹

Elements of this male subculture, especially with its "rough amenities," existed before 1820, when prostitution was centered in the areas of New York. Among mariners and longshoremen, prostitution was viewed as an ordinary part of a jack-tar's life. Along the East River, reported one official, "the denizens of Corinthian haunts in the vi

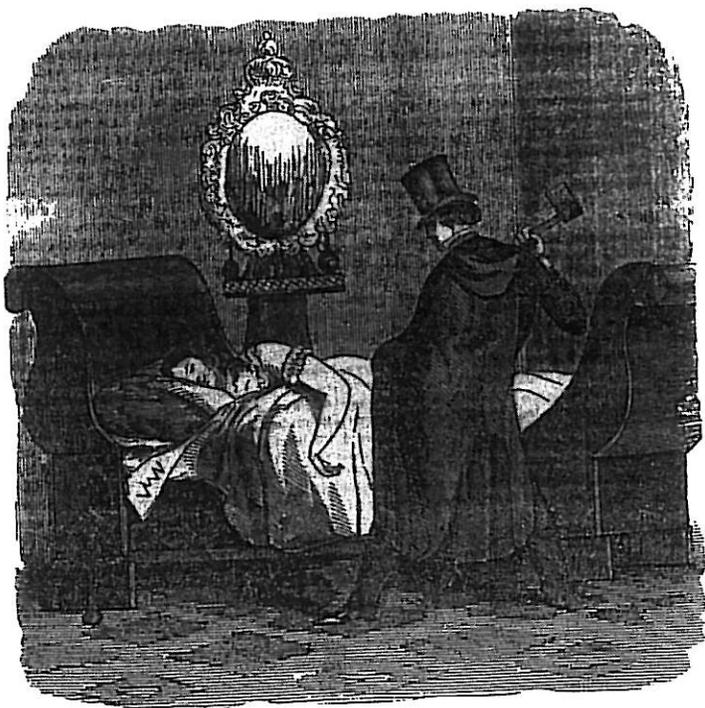
Fig. 13 right. Helen Jewett (1849)

Fig. 14 below. The Murder (1849)
Both from George Wilkes, *The Lives of
Helen Jewett and Richard Robinson*
(1849)



Fig. 15 Helen Jewett (1887)

Fig. 16 Richard Robinson (1887)
Both from George Washington Walling,
Recollections of a New York Police Chief (1887)



of the docks" beckoned seafaring visitors to enter the taverns. One n complained in 1811 that Thomas and Rachel Greer's notorious W Street brothel by the East River was disrupting her family. Her sons "kept a miss" in the house "by the name of Nancy and . . . s] considerable money there to support her." It was only a matter of she feared, before their younger siblings would follow.¹²

Some sailors acknowledged that they slept with prostitutes m their nights on shore. James Jones, for example, arrived in por immediately went to Daniel Truesdale's Corlears Hook tavern and in with a girl by the name of Polly Miller with whom he slept night." George Gould and a shipmate admitted that they cohabited Catharine Butler and Betsey Hill for several nights until Hill's f lover interrupted their visit. Even at midcentury, Walt Whitman that the "hardest houses" of prostitution were those in Cherry, V and Walnut streets, adding, "Sailors, canal-boatmen, young fellows the country, etc. go regularly there." Similarly, Florry Kernan re that "[i]t was a jubilee, indeed, to the landlords of [Five] Points the crew of a United States ship-of-war got paid off."¹³

The few surviving arrest records for the early nineteenth ce tend to confirm that most clients of prostitutes were less than af visitors to New York. For example, of the thirty-seven identifiable

arrested in houses and saloons with prostitutes from 1811 to 1813, only fourteen were listed in city directories. The majority (62 percent) were new residents, visitors, or transients.¹⁴ Before 1820, it appears, prostitutes attracted only a small portion of the male population as clients, and remained a marginal entertainment.

REX

The 1830s witnessed an expansion of this male sexual fraternity, along with several noticeable changes that continued into the twentieth century. Most evident was its youthful character. Increasingly, large numbers of young males—clerks and apprentices, immigrants and native-born, tourists and residents—visited prostitutes. The ever greater transiency of urban life and the changing structure of work disrupted older traditions of courtship for young men. As bachelorhood and the postponement of marriage grew commonplace, sexual activity outside marriage and courtship rituals grew more common. Second, married men frequented prostitutes in increasing numbers, integrating this group of men into the subculture of male promiscuity. Finally, the rise in male sexual activity with prostitutes was never entirely confined to specific economic classes or social groups. Undoubtedly, distinctions of wealth, ethnicity, race, age, and even styles of dress periodically surfaced. But in the broad context of male heterosexual behavior, the institutions and customs that sponsored commercial sex tended to promote male camaraderie. Gender identification more often overwhelmed divisions based upon class, religion, and ethnicity. Sporting-male culture, in effect, displaced older rules and traditions governing sexual behavior for young, married, and “respectable” men. By the age of the Civil War, the writer George Ellington could conclude that many “fashionable bloods and old fogies, known rakes, and presumedly pious people, wealthy bachelors and respectable married men, fast sons and moral husbands” consorted with prostitutes. If this became widely known, Ellington feared, it would “convulse society.”¹⁵

The youthfulness of New York’s sexual epicures, as the case of Richard Robinson illustrated, drew attention in a variety of quarters. In 1833, for example, Alexander Polsty lamented that his fifteen-year-old was “a constant frequenter” of the prostitutes in Francis Legg’s Anthony Street saloon. “[H]e stays all night,” said Polsty, “sleeping with . . . the female inmates. . . .” Others noted that the majority of clients “were half grown boys of the very worst kind.” Forming crowds outside some houses of ill repute, the youths committed some of “the grossest indecencies in the neighborhood.” Others lamented how such youthful behavior was tolerated even by middle-class women. “It often happens, that young men who are *known* to frequent the *dens* of infamy and vice,” wrote one critic, “are freely admitted to the society of ladies.” Another

clerk who attended fancy balls and visited with New York’s elite fe openly supported a mistress. “And yet,” remonstrated one observe young man in the whole city is more popular with the ladies.”¹⁶

By midcentury, journalists and doctors were convinced that sex with prostitutes was the norm for young male New Yorkers. “Mere boys of the rising generation, have their fancy women, or favorite prostitute noted one newspaper. In 1857, and 1858, Walt Whitman observed “the majority of nearly grown and just grown lads” in Brooklyn and New York “feel perfectly at home in the most infamous places—and . . . for their pleasures mostly there.”¹⁷ Although “respectable society” in the growing practice, he wrote,

the plain truth is that nineteen out of twenty of the mass of American men, who live in or visit the great cities, are more or less familiar with the houses of prostitution and are customers to them.—A large proportion of young men become acquainted with all the best known ones in the ci

Large numbers of married men also visited brothels. “The enormous increase of prostitution in New York,” concluded the *Whip* in 1840, “has . . . augmented vice in the married station.” Numerous anecdotes and stories in the sporting press pointed to the growing frequency with which married men resorted to brothels. For these and other reasons, the police court justice Robert Taylor routinely visited brothels and searched for evidence in divorce cases.¹⁸

Most significant, neither the benefits of privilege nor the trappings of wealth discouraged visits to the whorehouse. That frequent visitor to New York life, George Templeton Strong, claimed in 1853 that “the morals and manners, even among the better class of young men in town,” glorified the prostitute. Fearing the larger implications for American society of such a development, Strong wondered, “Was there among the boys of any city so much dissipation redeemed by so much culture and so little manliness and audacity even of the watchman’s sort?” Among “the best classes of Men” living in New York and Brooklyn, Walt Whitman admitted, “the custom is to go among prostitutes as an ordinary thing. Nothing is thought of it—or rather the wonder is, how can there be an ‘fun’ without it.”¹⁹

Specific incidents involving noteworthy New Yorkers supported these generalizations. The wealthy merchant Thomas H. Smith, for example, married a young prostitute in 1839. “I did not believe the rumor he had Strong conceded. “[H]is blushing bride is a protégée of that respectable female, Mrs. [Adeline] Miller of Duane Street, a damsel who has been on the town for twenty years.” Less than a year later, Smith’s “arrogant bride” left him and fled to Europe with a nineteen-year-old para-

Similarly, the former mayor Cornelius Van Wyck Lawrence consorted with prostitutes, until the proprietor and madam of "the Red House" in Harlem, "a noted sporting place," played on Lawrence's fears of public disclosure. "It seems the gentleman and lady have been living on Lawrence ever since he committed this indiscretion and bleeding him freely," concluded Strong. And at midcentury, the sewing machine entrepreneur Isaac Singer and the politico Daniel Sickles similarly drew public attention for their philandering with prostitutes.²⁰

Still other observers noted the popularity of prostitutes with segments of wealthy New York. In 1846, their frequency induced the *Tribune* to conclude that three-quarters of the sexual relations in New York were "venal, licentious, and adulterous." In his path-breaking study of New York prostitution in 1859, Dr. William W. Sanger conceded that almost "everyone can specify acts now tolerated in respectable families which, so far as being permitted fifteen years ago, would have . . . warrant[ed] the expulsion of the offender from the domestic circle." Middle-class professionals like Sanger and Strong equated the increasing recourse to prostitutes with a deteriorating sexual morality. "Words cannot express the destitution and nakedness, moral and mental, the threadbare and ragged state of intellectual dilapidation into which . . . wealthy, weak minds . . . sooner or later sink," wrote Strong. After the Civil War, George Ellington was convinced that at least two of every three men of wealth and leisure in New York devoted "a certain portion of their time and wealth to some fair one."²¹

Sporting-male sexuality, in effect, consistently challenged and often confused emerging divisions based upon social class, work, and education. As commercial sex became an intrinsic part of urban masculinity and male sexuality, definitions of respectability were undermined. Frequenting prostitutes was not "confined to any particular grade," observed the *Whip* in 1842. "Perhaps such manners exist more amongst the lower classes than others, but all have a touch of them." College "patricians" were as likely "as any town blackguard" to hire women for sex. From lowly clerks to aristocratic merchants, "thousands of boys met constantly in the street in company with prostitutes."²²

Some distinctions centered on certain character types, which Ned Buntline termed "fancy men for the upper ten-thousand" and "fancy men for the lower million." To an extent, these groups replicated certain class-oriented divisions. But as Elliot Gorn has shown, fancy men were a large, heterogeneous mix of wealthy and poor, educated and ignorant, fashionable and ragged. Leisure activities, not work, defined the fancy. In the boxing ring, gambling den, and saloon, a "rough" egalitarianism reigned. Whereas in Europe sporting males were equated

with "gentlemen," in New York older patterns of deference and social behavior broke down. The "mass of sportsmen," George Foster wrote "are the hundreds of individuals of whom one recognizes figures that language names, and who gather round certain haunts in the Bowery and elsewhere."²³

The "fancy man of the lower million" was most often linked to the Bowery. Known for his "bloody bulldog spirit," the "Bowery B'hoys" were young, working class, independent, and rowdy. Writers like George Foster and John Vose portrayed them as revelers in pugilism and prostitution. "The gambling house, the house of prostitution, the groggery," insisted Foster, "are the habitual sphere where he expends his active life." The family, for these men, was "a myth." Few of the refinements of "high" culture made their way into the world of the Bowery. Some sporting males also enjoyed close associations with New York's criminal underworld. The initiators of the numerous brothel attacks during the 1830s and 1840s, for instance, came from this violent group of sporting males. Still others closely associated with the underground economy lived with prostitutes, many as their "chosen lovers" or pimps. This "class of community," noted the *True Flash* in 1841, "start about the town well dress supported by the small change and extras of the frail sisterhood."²⁴

In contrast, "upper-tendom b'hoys," dandies, and nabobs prized close links over fisticuffs. The quintessential dandies were fastidious in dress and detached in manner. They were known for their flashy outfits, finger rings, watch chains, leather boots, and "fashionable" behavior. They aspired to be part of the "upper crust" and "the *bon ton*." They displayed "polished manners" and "the ways of a gentleman." At the same time they were described by observers as "knaves" and "rascals." Critics categorized them as part of the "Puppy order" and "conceited fops." Indeed the dandies moved between the "respectable" world of elite society and the criminal underworld of Gotham. Indulging in wine, women, and pleasure, "the fast boy of Young America" was, according to Charles Astor Bristed, "dressy, vulgar and good-natured."²⁵

The dandy combined elitist pretensions with democratic values. "I am a rich man's son," claimed the protagonist in John Vose's semi-fictional *Leaves from the Diary of a Broadway Dandy*, "yet I prefer to be full, 'one of the people,' in every sense of the word." Money and brains were not the primary measures of man, but rather his leisure and sexual pleasures. The dandy inhabited a world of unlimited extramarital sexuality. Full of sexual bravado, he enjoyed kissing at age six; by fifteen he engaged in "serious flirtations" with teenage heiresses. As a young adult, he visited as many as seventeen ladies daily, evidence that "love affairs [were] pretty strong." The dandy sponsored elaborate be-

filled with prostitutes—"how the Eighth Ward abounds with beautiful girls," he proclaimed. Indeed, such "fancy men" pursued "careers of male prostitution" through the seduction and extortion of married women with "careless and indulgent" husbands. The dandy rejected all rules of sexual propriety. "[I]f a young lady made love to me, . . . it was not my fault but hers!" The "sporting fancy gentry," declared another writer, were "not usually trapped into marriage with much facility."²⁶ Whether Bowery B'hoys or Broadway dandy, sporting-male culture broadly equated sexual promiscuity and erotic indulgence with individual autonomy and personal freedom.

This bachelor ideology was further elaborated by Donald Mitchell. Although Mitchell has been forgotten in the twentieth century, he was considered one of the great English-language stylists in his own time. His writings appeared in many a schoolchild's *McGuffey's Reader*, and he frequently contributed to *Harper's*, *Knickerbocker*, and *Atlantic* magazines. Among his most influential works was *Reveries of a Bachelor*, which appeared in 1850 and remained popular and in print into the twentieth century. In *Reveries*, Mitchell articulated the bachelor attack on the "feminized" family and the trappings of domestic life. Matrimony "has a great deal of fire in the beginning, but it is a fire that consumes all that feeds the blaze," he concluded. It only turned men into "captives" of women. A wife "will tear the life out of you," warned Mitchell, "making you pay in righteous retribution of annoyance, grief, vexation, shame, and sickness of heart." Marriage only brought new and irresolvable troubles—in-laws asking for money, nauseating cooking, trite conversation, materialistic demands, fading love, estranged attachments, and dead children. For Mitchell, the wife, in the end, was simply "the prostitute of fashion."²⁷

Mitchell celebrated the autonomy and the freedom of the single male life. "Can a man stake his bachelor respectability," he asked, "his independence and comfort, upon the die of absorbing, unchanging, relentless marriage, without trembling at the venture?" No intelligent male, "free to chase his fancies over the wide world," would choose marriage and its claim on his time, his trouble, and his thought. Nothing was more pitiful than a wearied bachelor who conformed and consigned himself to what others called "a nice match." Most important, marriage compromised male sexuality. Mitchell relished the diversity of beautiful young women and the opportunities they offered the bachelor. "My fancy would surely quicken . . . if [a woman] were in attendance," he argued. "Surely imagination would be stronger and purer, if it could have the playful fancies of dawning womanhood to delight in."²⁸

The popularity of these literary exposés of sporting-male sexual behavior

sheds some light on the way many men perceived their social condition. Most midnineteenth-century cities had a large, unmarried male population, between 20 and 40 percent of all the men under thirty. Sporting life was a growing part of urban culture by the second quarter of the nineteenth century. During the 1820s and 1830s, for example, observers noted the expensive carriages that lined up nightly in front of James Roberts's prostitute-filled dance house in Greenwich Village, Bowne's Elm Street brothel, and numerous Canal Street houses. In New York, surveying the city's voluminous sex trade, reporters for *McDowall's Journal* corroborated similar charges, adding that the clientele was not only wealthy but so plentiful that some brothels had to turn away customers. One busy brothel reportedly served twenty-eight clients in half an hour. "The dress and appearance of these men," reporters concluded, "resembled that of men of wealth and fashion."²⁹ Brothels, theaters, and cafes were filled with country merchants, businessmen, and clerics. "The inhabitants of the self-righteous and self-styled virtuous villages and hamlets . . . , men who are thought to be so virtuous at home go to the brothel . . . when they visit the city."³⁰

Such impressionistic accounts might be dismissed as the exaggerated fears of outraged reformers and defenders of a more restrained morality. And indeed hard evidence regarding nineteenth-century urban sexuality remains sparse and elusive. The absence of opinion poll data, participant-observation studies, combined with the sometimes odd and dishonorable judgments of middle-class observers and the closeted nature of much of this activity, makes definitive conclusions almost impossible. Yet the diversity of opinion on this increasingly visible male promiscuity is striking. Patrician figures like Philip Hone and George Templeton Strong, working-class mouthpieces like the *Subterranean*, the women's rights defender Elizabeth Blackwell, the "purity" reformers Anthony Comstock and the editors of the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, and bohemians like Walt Whitman and the editors of the sporting press all noted and commented on this sort of male behavior. Taken together, such judgments surely add up to more than hypersensitive warnings of moral decay.

Even the supposedly sharp distinction between those who frequented the Bowery and those who went to Broadway, often seen by contemporaries and later historians, as indicative of class divisions, was not quite fluid, and the areas were economically integrated. Despite its reputation, for example, Broadway was by the 1840s an outpost of the working-class gangs led by John Morrissey and Bill Poole, each of whom headquartered a block away along Church and Mercer streets, respectively. Still other gangs centered in the Bowery, such as Tom Finneran's, were allied to counterparts on Broadway. Hyer's compatriots frequented

Broadway establishments as well as their own on the Bowery. At the same time, Broadway was increasingly known for its plethora of prostitutes and pimps, most working out of the many brothels on adjoining and parallel streets. Finally, by the 1850s, this section of Broadway was also the heart of New York's "bohemia," vividly described and popularized by Walt Whitman. While New York's leading boulevard attracted many expensive hotels, theaters, and restaurants, the wealthy were by no means Broadway's primary clientele.³¹

Furthermore, these descriptions of male promiscuity were partially confirmed by a surprising number of men who publicly admitted to sexual intercourse with prostitutes. Arrest records, especially those involving panel house and pickpocket victims—clients of prostitutes robbed during their sexual encounters who hoped to retrieve their stolen articles—provide a window on the hidden world of nineteenth-century male sexuality. For example, Jesse Chatterdon of Queens admitted he lay in bed with Kate Male and "they embraced and fondled with each other." Later he realized he was missing \$300. Similarly, on the night he lost \$500, John D. Moore had instructed a hackman, "[T]ake me to a house where there are some girls." He ended up in a Tenderloin brothel. After Robert Johnson was robbed by Carrie Smith during an 1865 visit, he admitted that he had followed her to a Crosby Street brothel and "there went to bed" with her. In another case, Mary O'Connor confessed she robbed Darius Eastman of Brooklyn because he treated her badly. "He gave me only ten cents," she cried, "and he had sexual intercourse with me, and I only thought it was a dollar bill he had in his pocket."³² Over and over again, robbery victims acknowledged in courtroom testimony that they "went to bed" with the women. Increasingly, affluent resident males prosecuted prostitutes in panel house and pickpocket cases. From 1862 to 1870, in 55 percent of the cases brought to trial, the male victims were city residents. For many men, the loss of personal property outweighed any loss in moral standing or public embarrassment such legal action brought.³³

Certain institutional supports and leisure activities fostered the expansion of sporting-male sexuality in antebellum New York. The theater was the most controversial. By the late eighteenth century, London theaters like Drury Lane and Covent Garden were known for their elegant courtesans and *femmes d'amour*, and Americans were keen to make comparisons. In New York, Washington Irving noted that the theater promoted flirtatious fantasies for all. After attending the Park Theater in 1802, he observed that women in the expensive boxes were "studious to please; their charms were set off to the greatest advantage; each box was a little battery in itself, and they all seemed eager to outdo each

other in the havoc they spread around. An arch glance in one bo rivalled by a smile in another."³⁴

Stage entertainment was an indisputably popular activity in antebellum New York. By the 1820s, New York allegedly had more theaters than any other city of comparable size in the world. A wide range of attractions—dramas, summer gardens, concerts, lectures, operas, melodramas, and "blood and thunder" melodramas—catered to an ever-growing urban audience. George Templeton Strong described the immense throngs of all classes, lured to the opera in Castle Garden in the 1850s. "Everyone goes, and nob and snob, Fifth Avenue and Chatham Street, sit side by side fraternally on the hard benches. *Advocate of Moral Reform* maintained, "[T]he poorer classes are as addicted to amusement as the rich, and seeking it in its approved forms; they patronize the theatre in larger numbers than those more affluent. . . . They are journeymen, clerks, and agents, . . . or they are apprentices, and nameless classes of vicious boys." Theater patronage was a microcosm of American society. It was, as Lawrence Levine has argued, a kaleidoscopic, democratic institution offering a widely varying fare to all socioeconomic groups and classes.³⁵

Despite popular appeal, drama remained a symbol of moral corruption and unrefined culture for many. "The good is mixed up with the bad," admitted the former mayor Philip Hone in 1841. "Shakespeare and the lowly crowd come in equally for their share of condemnation, and the same indiscriminately voted immoral, irreligious, and what is much more so, *unfashionable*." Another former mayor and early reformer, Stephen Van Rensselaer, charged that theaters were "the leading cause of the depravity of the people of both sexes." Charles Loring Brace of the Children's Aid Society complained, "[H]omeless boys and newsboys waste their time going to the theaters and gambling away what little money they possess." George Templeton Strong argued that the stage emphasized "intrigues with married women, elopements, seductions, bribery, cheating, and fraud of every description—set off with a liberal allowance of *double entendre*." The prevalence of profanity and "broad indecency" did little more than "excite the most violent passions and . . . the lowest and most depraved of human tastes."³⁶

The close relationship of sporting-male sexuality and theater was reinforced in the divorce trial of America's famed tragedian Edwin Forrest. Besides being America's most popular actor, Forrest was the century's symbol of sexual individualism and freedom for the male. Mrs. Forrest's eminent lawyer, Charles O'Connor, used the testimony of Caroline Ingersoll, an assignation house keeper, to incriminate the actor. Forrest originally denied any impropriety, but when Ingersoll took the stand, she charged Forrest with consorting with women

ious houses of assignation in the city. From 1846 to 1851, Forrest "was the habitual frequenter of a house of prostitution." The evidence "punched the great tragedian much harder than any evidence singled out in the opening," according to George Templeton Strong. His wife's legal victory was greeted with singular outrage by Forrest's admirers. When Mrs. Forrest elected to speak at Brougham's Lyceum a month later, Strong considered it "a most absurd step" and feared a repeat of the Astor Place riot. The "chivalry of the Bowery," he reported, "is said to be in fierce wrath at the verdict against her husband."³⁷

What Forrest practiced offstage was promoted by theater owners inside. The secluded, semiprivate balcony labeled the third tier was reserved for sporting men to rendezvous with willing women. Managers defended the practice, arguing that prostitutes were a necessity in order for theaters to attract men and remain profitable. "Ah, Mitchell," proclaimed the *Rake*, referring to the owner of Mitchell's Olympic Theater, "your little band of musicians and large one of pretty legs, voluptuous breasts, and bright eyes bring all the money into your treasury." George Foster satirically concluded in 1850, "[T]he respectable and virtuous public will not visit an assignation, even though it be called a theater."³⁸

Even the elite Park Theater, with its reputation for elegant, aesthetic drama, an exclusive clientele, and sponsorship by John Jacob Astor and John Beekman, hardly discouraged prostitution. During Tyrone Power's historic 1838 performance, at least eighty prostitutes roamed the third tier in search of customers. City marshals were sometimes called upon to remove patrons and prostitutes for their "very outrageous, turbulent and noisy" behavior. Francis Grund critically concluded, "[F]ew ladies . . . are ever seen at the theater; and the frequenting of them, even by gentlemen, is not considered a recommendation to their character."³⁹

The Bowery Theater was nationally known for its sexual excursions from propriety (figure 17). Its raucous productions and Bowery B'hoys clientele earned it the nickname the Bowery Slaughterhouse. The *Herald* considered it "without exception the worst and wickedest [theater] that ever stood a month in any city under heaven." Prostitutes working in Chapel Street brothels openly attended performances at the Bowery. One prostitute remarked, "[W]e girls always patronize the Bowery—moreover the manager here is a very clever man." A journalist concurred, claiming that sporting-male sexuality in the Bowery Theater outrivaled the unrestrained debauchery depicted in Hogarth's *Rake's and Wanton's Progress*. "[O]aths, shouts, shrieks from the throats of drunken outcast bands, and leprous male prostitutes, saluted the ear, and blasphemous confusion reigned supreme." Walking about, one could observe "males and females in strange and indecent positions in the lobbies, and

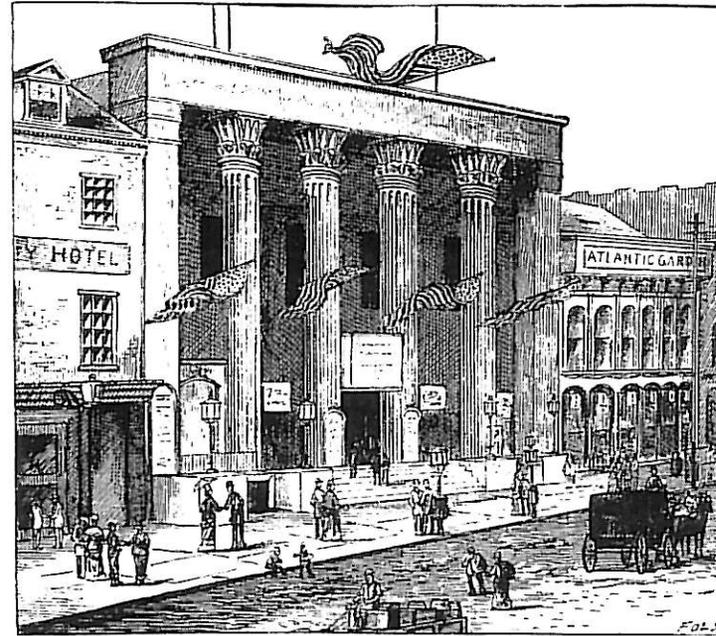


Fig. 17 The Bowery Theater
From George Washington Walling, *Recollections of a New York Police Chief*
(1887)

sometimes in the boxes." So blatant was the lubricious activity in the Bowery that it lacked only a few front bedrooms to make it complete. "There is not a dance hall, a free-and-easy, a concert saloon, or a vi drinking place," reported one Englishman in the 1830s, "that presents such a view of the depravity and degradation of New York as the gallery of a Bowery theater."⁴⁰

Theaters promoted sporting-male sexuality not only in the third tier but in the brothel as well. For example, Mary Benson's and Julia Brown's houses on Church Street were favorite resorts for men attending Pamo's Opera House. Mrs. Bowen's establishment on Leonard Street was directly opposite the National Theater. Leonard Street residents in 1838 complained that the prostitutes in Jane Williams's house "frequently visit the theatres unattended by gentlemen and as they state visit the third tier." Some houses were even physically connected to a theater. Behind the Park Theater in Theater Alley, for example, was a brothel explicit for actors. In addition, Rebecca Fraser ran a brothel on the short street

in the early 1820s before moving around the corner at Ann Street in 1825. For nearly a decade, from 1831 to 1839, Mrs. Newman ran a house with at least eight girls only a few doors behind the Park.⁴¹

Brothels and theaters enjoyed close spatial ties. The six major theaters operating from 1820 to 1829, for example, were located within two blocks of a house of prostitution. During the ensuing two decades, theaters like the Bowery, Broadway, Chatham, Lafayette, National, and Park shared their blocks with similar prurient establishments. Until it burned down in 1841, the National Theater was next door to Julia Brown's famous brothel. By the Civil War, six of fourteen Broadway theaters were sharing the same block as a house of prostitution, often in the rear of the theater, along Mercer or Crosby Street. Other theatrical establishments were never more than a block from a brothel.⁴²

Yet these well-known theaters actually restrained blatant carnal display when compared with the "sub-theater." After 1830, these small establishments did not even bother restricting public sexuality to the third tier. Stephen Allen, in an 1838 report to the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents, wrote that small, minor theaters, short on "respectability," were "more injurious to the morals of the city than the older establishments." Because of the small size of these institutions, prostitutes were not segregated, but ventured freely through the premises. The lure of quick profits from cheap titillation encouraged the unregulated growth of these burlesque palaces for several decades. "At many of the smaller theaters things have been carried to an outrageous pass," wrote George Foster in 1849. The sub-theater, indeed, was "little better than a brothel turned inside out." "The city is utterly dismal," declared George Templeton Strong a decade later. "I'm thinking of course of lager-beer saloons and low theaters."⁴³

Toleration of sporting-male sexuality only encouraged dance halls, saloons, and supper clubs to reach out for the same clientele. Saloons, such as those along City Hall Park, frequently divided the rear or upstairs area into small cubicles for prostitutes. Similarly, expensive restaurants sometimes provided boxes, or "private supper rooms," where customers dined and copulated with prostitutes. Although in the early nineteenth century some taverns encouraged dancing, by 1840 there were numerous dance houses where prostitutes mingled in the audience, looking for potential customers. Since many saloons provided a small area for dancing when they hired musicians to entertain their customers and since dance halls served large volumes of liquor, the two types of institutions were frequently indistinguishable.⁴⁴

A number of factors help explain why this sporting-male world became such an integral part of New York culture after 1820. First, the city

attracted a large, transient male population. New York, wrote Sar Halliday in 1861, was "a population of *strangers* in a strange land." registers of leading New York City hotels as early as 1835 counted nearly 60,000 guests annually. In the same year, approximately 22,000 men aboard ships entered Manhattan. By 1860, the number of visiting seamen had tripled. Furthermore, from 1840 to 1855, 68 percent of 3.2 million immigrants arriving in the United States landed in New York. And during the decade preceding the depression of 1857, over a million persons came through the port.⁴⁵

Second, family life endured new pressures as New York industrialized and grew into a modern metropolis. Many young males found it more and more difficult to marry and raise a family. By the 1820s, apprentices and journeymen were increasingly exploited by their employers as the old artisan system broke down and gave way to one of wage labor. Greater disparities between rich and poor were apparent by the Jacksonian era, and it became harder for unskilled laborers and journeyman workers to support a family.⁴⁶ Some complained that only men with sufficient wealth in New York could afford to court, marry, and maintain a family.

Paradoxically, some working-class men felt compelled to marry (still avoiding a family) for economic reasons. As the "family wage" became the popular standard of paid labor, working-class men required the domestic labor of a wife in order to maintain themselves more economically. For men earning less than \$250 annually before 1860, this was a necessity. Even men earning this amount enjoyed a clear advantage in marrying because a wife's labor brought in considerably more than her maintenance cost.⁴⁷ Such circumstances probably encouraged men to marry more for economic reasons and less for romance, so that love, thereby separating physical intimacy from marriage.

Third, courtship habits and customs in New York City changed considerably after 1820. The transient population, the rising importance of the teenage peer group, and the decline of apprenticeship and child regulation transformed teenage and adult sexual relations. As early as 1819, John Pintard complained about the balls and parties of New York's elite. Among the few forums for young New Yorkers to meet members of the opposite sex, Pintard saw "but little benefit, in the way of marriage, resulting from all these public fairs where young ladies are exhibited for sale." He took solace, however, in the thought "that not a single young man has taken place this season." Generally, Pintard considered the young men "too profligate" and the ladies "too extravagant," reflecting a change in "the conceptions of morals" since his days of courtship.

Pintard astutely identified a new trend in urban courtship. After 1820, even the selection of a spouse was subject to the vagaries of the market. "Personal" ads appeared for the first time in local papers. Many males openly expressed frustration in finding female companions. In the 1840s, for example, young mechanics placed newspaper advertisements seeking the attention of young ladies between fifteen and twenty, reiterating their good moral character and desiring to change their "present solitary lives of celibacy for the more pleasing and social life of conjugal bliss." Admitting that their method was unusual, the young workers expressed the hope that the "irksomeness of introduction, acquaintance and courtship [would] justify [them] in making this public address." By the 1860s, "personals" were a regular feature in New York newspapers.⁴⁹

In rural and small-town America, courtship rituals and customs were less subject to the rules of the market. In New York, though, the difficulty in finding marriage partners for men and women alike was so pronounced that eventually a cottage industry of "marriage brokers" appeared. "They marry as they buy a house or sell a horse, invest in real estate, or go abroad," noted Junius Browne. "The reason they remain unwedded is because they don't find time to look for a wife." James McCabe similarly reported that "matchmakers" regularly advertised in city papers. And even frustrated parents of single young males were induced, according to Elizabeth Blackwell, "to provide a mistress for their sons, in the hope of keeping them from houses of public debauchery."⁵⁰

Finally, discontent over the enhanced power of women within marriage probably induced many men to visit prostitutes. As writers and reformers like Catherine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Hale, Horace Bushnell, and others articulated the ideals of female domesticity, women were increasingly held responsible for family and child-rearing matters. While never universal, and differing across class and ethnic lines, this ideological construct had evolved into a pattern of behavior for most middle-class Americans by the midnineteenth century. The average American woman enjoyed increasing power and autonomy within the family, especially over matters of sexuality and reproduction. In addition, lecturers and writers like Dio Lewis and Henry Wright found that information pertaining to female control of fertility and sexuality was highly popular and well received by women after midcentury. Male licentiousness and "marital excess" were favored topics of interest and complaint among females in the United States. Increasingly, the American middle class idealized male sexual control and self-restraint within the family and depicted women as "passionless."⁵¹ Quite likely resentful

of this female power and its "petticoat government" ruling sexuality at family life, men sought sexual pleasure elsewhere.⁵²

WHEN the Reverend William Berrian of Trinity Church admitted to occasional brothel visits in New York, George Templeton Strong candidly observed that the admission was hardly startling. Such visits were commonplace. The "significance lies in the fact that he has been seldom," said Strong, "and in the surprise with which one hears of even one visit every five years on an average."⁵³ For numerous nineteenth-century American males, whether young men like Richard Robinson or older ones like William Berrian, aspects of masculinity, social status and self-esteem rested on demonstrating a promiscuous, heterosexual orientation. In a rapidly changing urban environment, sex meant more than physical gratification or reproduction; it frequently determined a portion of one's identity.

Sporting-male sexuality was centered on what might be labeled a promiscuous paradigm. This model of behavior rested on an ethic of sensual pleasure that, on the one hand, distanced men from women "feminine weakness" and emotional attachments and, on the other, bonded them with other males. This paradigm of sexual behavior and the institutions it fostered embodied more than just a youth culture, for it included older adult males. Sporting men were more than just bachelors, for numerous married men participated in their activities. And they were more than rowdy Bowery B'hoys, because dandies, nabobs, and "fan men" belonged to the fraternity. Undoubtedly, certain divisions were reflected in the different venues of commercial sex. The rich patronized elegant parlor houses, and members of the working class visited street walkers or cheap boardinghouses. Some brothels admitted only men of a particular race or geographic origin. Broadway dandies and Bowery B'hoys hardly joined hands in their nocturnal excursions. But these men shared an infatuation with prostitution and promiscuous sexual behavior. In this sexual context, sporting-male ideas and activity served to promote a certain gender solidarity among nineteenth-century urban males. Through the milieu of commercial sex, urban heterosexual males demarcated part of their subculture.

The glorification of male heterosexual freedom and bachelorhood permeated not only New York but much of America. From frontier communities to eastern cities, sporting-male culture grew ever more prominent during the course of the nineteenth century. Male heroes like Davy Crockett, for example, reveled in the sexual autonomy that came with

frontier life. As the historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has shown, Crockett's popularity stemmed in part from his misogynist orientation and exhibitionist, nonreproductive sexuality. Crockett's almanacs were filled with veiled references to masturbation and homosexuality, unsupervised courtship, and cathartic violence. The family was for Crockett, as for the sporting male, a female preserve organized to control and restrain his sexual freedom. Even his nickname—"the gentleman from the cane"—inverted the language of respectability and lampooned the emerging sexual norms of middle-class America. Not surprisingly, Crockett's largest audience was found not on the frontier but in the growing urban centers of the eastern seaboard.⁵⁴

As sporting-male culture grew prominent, efforts to define middle-class respectability became more pronounced in New York and elsewhere. Bourgeois thought gradually divorced reproduction from sexual pleasure; one sign of this was the burgeoning literature on sexual abstinence and self-control. Physical intimacy between young men and women brought disdain and opprobrium. Furthermore, commercial leisure institutions promoted commercial sex, and this only widened the social gaps separating young men and women. Sporting-male life in nineteenth-century New York thus offered a kind of liminal social space, even an alternative culture, between the more clearly defined worlds of respectability and criminality. Here men could assume different identities, sometimes multiple identities, that departed from dominant social mores. In search of relationships offering individual expression and sexual promiscuity, men increasingly resorted to commercial venues. Dismissing fears and warnings of disease and degradation, these men chose sexual indulgence over continence.



Part II

HALCYON YEARS

Lust and wickedness are acceptable to me,
I walk with delinquents with passionate love.
I feel I am of them—I belong to those convicts and prostitutes
And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

—WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*¹