
City of Women

SEX AND CLASS IN NEW YORK,
1789-1860

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Chapter 6 Harrowing Truths: Manufacturing Work

Laboring women found new resources within the great transformations in New York life between 1820 and 1860. But they also confronted harsh difficulties as industrial wageworkers. Women, social commentators commonly acknowledged, were the lowliest antebellum workers, subject to the worst wages and most brutal labor practices. "The great disproportion which exists between the prices of labour of men and women," conceded a charity as early as 1817, "is a matter of serious regret." Labor reformer Matthew Carey in 1830 termed women's working conditions "harrowing truths."¹ Subsequent observers concurred that of all those pulled into the wage relations of metropolitan industry, women workers were the most precariously situated.

Sex segregation in the labor force was the source of their problems. Women were a distinct group of workers, concentrated in a few "female" employments. By 1860, three or four dozen industries employed more than 90 percent of the city's workingwomen; conversely, within most of these industries, most workers were female.² Crowded into this segregated part of the manufacturing system, women suffered from a competition for work even keener than that which men endured in New York's overstocked labor market. The result was low wages (often below subsistence), frequent bouts of unemployment and severe overwork when employed.

The "outside system," precursor to New York's sweatshops and notorious for its starvation wages and appalling working conditions, grew directly from the sex-divided labor market and further institutionalized it.

The outworker's wage "*does not decently support life*," the ladies of the SRPW charged with uncharacteristic vehemence in 1859.³ Outwork consisted of piece-rate tasks performed, mostly by hand, outside factories or central workplaces, usually in the worker's own lodgings—lodgings that were usually tiny and badly lit and ventilated. Outwork was synonymous with women's work. Although men sometimes worked in the outside system, they did so only in those trades that employed women. The outside system originated in garment and shoe manufacturing, but by the 1850s employers in other women's industries had also adopted it, and even employers of women *inside* factories used patterns imported from the outside system to structure work. By dispersing female workers among thousands of individual workplaces, outside employers made it virtually impossible for women to combat the low wages and exploitative conditions which set the terms of their employment.⁴

Yet sex segregation and its associated forms of exploitation were consequences, not causes, of women's inferior position in the labor market.⁵ Sex segregation grew out of a deeper political economy of gender, founded in the sexual division of labor in the household. It resulted from the incorporation of patterns of female subordination within the family into those of capitalist exploitation. The development of the outwork system demonstrates with particular clarity how a gender system tied to the household economy helped to divide, or segment, the work force into a sexual hierarchy that bestowed privileges upon men. Outside work mediated the requirements of the two great employers of women's labor—families and manufacturers. For married women and mothers, tied to the demands of children and households, it provided a means of earning a living without leaving the tenements, a viable way of working a double shift as housewife/mother and wageworker. For single women, too, the outside system offered a readily accessible way to earn a living, albeit a meager one. More generally, the outside system, by strengthening women's ties to household labor, minimized the cultural disruptions caused by women's wage earning and at the same time shored up crumbling family economies with female contributions.

Outwork and the Clothing Trade

Historians and economists have usually viewed outwork as a transition, a precursor to the prototypical industrial form of the factory.⁶ The dispersed work force and handicraft technology intrinsic to outwork made the system

too cumbersome to allow capital accumulation, so the argument goes; as soon as technological innovation occurred and it became possible to centralize the labor force, such wasteful and irrational forms of production disappeared. By this logic outwork was marginal to "real" industrialization, and women outworkers comprised only an auxiliary to the industrial proletariat.

But if outwork was only a precursor to the factory system in some settings, it was crucial to the industrializing process in many great cities. In New York, the outside system flourished through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth with the infamous sweatshops whose horrors Jacob Riis, among others, publicized. A similar process occurred in London, Paris and other metropolitan manufacturing centers in Europe.⁷ While employers in some places utilized outwork only until they overcame cultural resistance to women working outside the home, New York employers capitalized upon and strengthened that resistance.

In New York, material conditions inhibited the rise of factories. By 1815, ground rents were already high, and they spiraled throughout the next decades. There was, moreover, no readily available source of waterpower.⁸ But given the enormous supply of cheap labor in the city, another course of development was possible. Rather than superseding the artisan system with large, highly mechanized factories, employers transformed it from within, avoiding high overhead costs through the proliferation of small-scale, labor-intensive enterprises. This happened in many trades, but the clothing trade was especially amenable.

Before 1812, there had been virtually no ready-made clothing in America. Except for the poor, who bought their clothes secondhand, Americans had their garments made by artisans—tailors and seamstresses—and by wives, daughters and female servants. There was a rough division of labor between the household and the artisan shop. Women at home did the plain sewing; artisans, the garments that required more skill and fitting.⁹ When tailors were involved rather than tailoresses (seamstresses) and dressmakers, there was a stricter division of labor. Tailors would not touch most women's work—shirts, dresses, children's clothes and mending. They worked on those men's garments that were closely fitted, like breeches and vests, or cumbersome to sew; like coats and capes.¹⁰ The division of labor between women and men would have important ramifications in the nineteenth century, since industrialization occurred first in the making of men's clothes—which tailors had traditionally monopolized—thus introducing female wageworkers as competition. The only ready-made clothing in the eighteenth century was for sailors and soldiers. "Slop work" was the tailors' term for these cheap garments made with little care and no fitting. The small but steady trade in slops provided journeymen tailors work in the

winter, the slack season for custom orders, while masters put out some of the plainer slop work—shirts and pantaloons—to women they employed the year round.¹¹

Cheap labor, not new technology, transformed the slop trade into a booming industry. By 1820, the old putting-out system was in serious decline; after the War of 1812, British manufactured goods “dumped” at low prices had driven many American handicrafts off the New York market. Because of the advent of the New England textile mills as well as the continuing progress of the British factories, hand spinning, the staple of given-out work, all but disappeared after 1815; women like one “Widow Hammel,” who applied to a charity in 1817 for funds to repair her spinning wheel, would have had a hard time finding work.¹² The New England mills provided their owners with the means to utilize female labor beyond the given-out system, but in Manhattan, employers had no such resources at hand. Recall that even the stern gentlemen of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism had allowed in 1821 that there was “a defect of profitable employment” for poor women.

The outside system opened up this labor market for profitable employment. After the War of 1812, conditions for other manufacturing besides textiles were beneficial. Because of the thriving port, the city was already a major center of capital, its prosperous merchants on the prowl for new investments. The advent of regular trans-Atlantic and coastal shipping lines put New York producers in a favored position over competitors elsewhere to buy raw materials and sell finished goods, and the federal Tariff of 1816 gave domestic industry much-needed protection from British goods. The postwar wave of immigration brought to the city an army of poor workers.

Master and merchant tailors were the first in these advantageous circumstances to hire large numbers of women. The outside system allowed them to cut costs to the bone. There were minimal expenses for overhead, and they could easily hold down wages by taking on and letting go workers according to their needs of the moment. By 1860, the federal census reported 25,000 women working in manufacturing—one-quarter of the entire labor force—and two-thirds of them worked in the clothing trades.¹³ The garment trades began to prosper in the 1820s, as city merchants captured the lucrative Southern trade in slave clothing. With an assured market for slops, employers began to take on more women to sew the work that journeymen preferred to do only in the slow season. By the 1830s, some shops employed as many as 500 women, and coarse Negro cottons, as they were called, were regular cargo on southern-bound packets. From slave clothing, the trade diversified into a luxury trade in fine linen shirts and vests for Southern planters, and firms also began to keep high-quality ready-mades in stock for local customers, travelers and gentlemen visiting the city on business.

When the Erie Canal connected the city with Midwestern and upstate New York customers, a Western trade developed in dungarees, flannel drawers, and hickory and flashy figured shirts; in 1849, the gold rush gave the impetus for a California trade in overalls and calico shirts for the thousands of miners/adventurers who had no women to outfit them.¹⁴ By 1860, two-thirds of the garments made in New York went south and the rest were shipped to a nationwide market. “Scarcely a single individual thinks of having his shirts made at home,” averred an observer of fashion.¹⁵ He neglected the farm families who continued to make their own clothes well into the late 1800s, but he was right about city people and townsfolk, whose sense of style in men’s clothes was already attuned to New York ready-mades by the 1840s.

The clothing trade was one New York business that offered workingmen and immigrants a path from waged employment to proprietorship. The market was usually dependable and the profit margin often high.¹⁶ Most important, a man needed very little money to set up shop. Even the largest employers combined work on the premises with outwork, thus holding down their expenses in high downtown rents. By 1860, the renowned Brooks Brothers, for instance, employed 70 workers inside and 2,000 to 3,000 on the outside. The smallest proprietors, tailors themselves, did not keep shop at all but contracted out goods from the large shops, cut them at home and put them out, thus passing along all the costs of space, light, fuel, needles and thread to their home workers.¹⁷

If the trade offered the journeyman an entrée to entrepreneurship, however, it did not necessarily bring him affluence. By midcentury, the economic pressures on employers were heavy. The trade operated on a dense network of credit, and the search to maximize credit was the driving force behind operations at every level. Profits could be high, but they seldom appeared in ready cash. At its most complex, the trade involved a jobber or merchant, a master tailor, his inside workers, one or even two levels of subcontractors, and their outworkers. Since profits at every level came from the difference between the fixed payment received and costs paid out for labor and overhead, there was heavy pressure to cut wages. All down the line, goods were passed along on credit and payment was postponed until the finished work was returned. As a result, there was little cash on hand at any given moment at any level of the trade. This was the reason that the business depressions of 1837 and 1857 were calamitous for employers large and small. Dependence on credit was also the factor that above all others bred some of the worst labor practices in the North. “The period was hardly known for its sentimentality in business, but even the hardest-boiled contemporaries acknowledged that the sewing trade was unscrupulous.”¹⁸

The economic pressures on small shop owners at midcentury played into

a plethora of complaints about rate cutting, underpayment and withholding wages. "The worst features," maintained New York *Tribune* editor Horace Greeley of employment in the trade, "are its hopelessness and its constant tendency from bad to worse."¹⁹ Women living with a man's support were not so adversely affected, but single women and their dependents could suffer terribly. Women's charities and urban writers reacted to this situation by absorbing the figure of the seamstress into the traditional category of the "worthy" poor. Like other philanthropic constructions, the sentimental seamstress, solitary, pallid and timid, embodied bourgeois aspirations and prejudices, but there can be no doubt she also represented, however distortedly, real situations.²⁰ Two stories make the point, both from 1855, a depression year. "When flour was so high last winter as to place it beyond the reach of the provident poor," the secretary of the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows related, "One of the managers visited a respectable Widow, who had maintained herself and her three little girls by sewing." The eldest had just died from starvation, which the ladies delicately termed "disease aggravated by improper food," and the second child was also sick with the same malady. When the visitor inquired about the family's needs, the woman asked for flour: "'But you have thought before that meal would answer,' said the Manager, 'and you know we hardly think it right to give flour at its present price.' 'Yes,' said the woman, bursting into tears, 'we have lived on meal this winter, but the Doctor says it killed Mary and now Katy is getting in the same way, and I cannot let her die, too.'" The response of a second mother in the same situation—one of her eight children sick with a chest complaint—was less suited to the conventions of Victorian pathos. "Perhaps it will please the Lord to take him," she replied matter-of-factly to the manager's solicitude: "If it would please the Lord to take them all, I should be glad, then I'd know they were well off; but how I shall support them all another year in this world I am sure I can't tell."²¹ These were extreme cases, but they embodied the hardships not of isolated individuals but of a class of single mothers.

The outworkers' most pressing problem was underpayment. Like employment in many metropolitan trades, seasonal work peaked in October and April, when shops rushed out orders for winter and summer stock. The pattern was sufficiently predictable for women to meet the slack seasons with some forethought, by turning to other kinds of work. But there were also fluctuations week to week that were impossible to foresee; to be out of work one or two days every week was common for outside workers. There was no guarantee that when a seamstress returned her sewing to the shop she would get more, and if she did, it was not necessarily a full week's work. This meant that self-supporting women had to shift about from one shop to another for employment, a feature of the trade that workingwomen

protested bitterly. For women on their own, labor time was precious, and they keenly felt the wasted hours spent seeking work, waiting for work and returning work.²²

"Small as are the earnings of these seamstresses, they constantly tend to diminish," Horace Greeley observed. Clothing manufacturers, especially the small employers, were notorious for vicious rate cutting.²³ Because there were so many women competing for work, there was little that needlewomen could do about it. "I have heard it said, and even by benevolent men, in justification of this hideous state of things, that these women do not complain," wrote a nettled Matthew Carey in 1830. "True. It would answer no purpose. If the price of shirts were brought down to six cents (as it sometimes is . . .), they would accept it, and thankfully too. Their numbers and their wants are so great, and the competition so urgent, that they are wholly at the mercy of their employers."²⁴ Between 1820 and 1860, observers generally estimated wages at between 75 cents and \$1.50 a week, with an increase in the 1850s at the upper end of the scale to \$3.50. (See Table 2, p. 226.) In 1853, when a workingman with a family of four needed to earn \$600 a year, the *Tribune* contended that a needlewoman with full employment—an uncommon enough situation—could at best earn \$91.²⁵ These were subsistence wages for a young woman on her own or for a woman living with an employed man, but not for a single mother—and many New York workingwomen were indeed supporting households without any male assistance. (See Table 3, p. 227.) In 1855, 355 of 599 wage-earning women in two New York census districts were doing so.

Was it the unskilled nature of the work rather than the sex of the workers which accounted for the seamstresses' low wages? It is difficult to answer, since women have often been paid as "unskilled" workers by virtue of the fact of their sex. In New York, for instance, vest making was skilled work that required training and expertise, yet female vest makers' wages were far lower than those of tailors.²⁶ Even if we define seamstressing as "unskilled" work, however, we can still see a significant differential between the seamstresses' earnings and those of unskilled male day laborers. Throughout the period, day laborers managed to enforce a customary wage of around a dollar a day—if necessary, through informally organized "turnouts," or strikes—while outworkers earned anywhere from a shilling to 25 cents per day (the highest figures cited put the needlewomen's wages at 50 cents per day).²⁷

The most unscrupulous practice of employers in the light of the antebellum moral code, and the one which outside workers protested most vehemently, was that of withholding wages. It was not uncommon for employers, especially small proprietors and subcontractors, to postpone paying a woman when she returned her work, to require alterations before

they paid her, to refuse to pay her at all, or to hold back the deposits that they required for taking out work. A visitor to New York described one of these transactions between a seamstress and an employer in 1852: "He takes the bundle, unrolls it, turns up his nose, as if he had smelt a dead rat, and remarks, in therossest manner possible, 'You have ruined the job,' makes the whole lot up together, and contemptuously throws it under the counter. . . . She then asks for her money back, but only receives a threat in return, with a low, muttering grumble, that 'you have damaged us already eight or ten dollars, and we will retain your dollar, as it is all we shall ever get for our goods, which you have spoilt!'"²⁸

In 1855, the outworker Margaret Byrnes took her grievances to the mayor's court when she encountered this treatment. She had taken finished shirts back three times to Davis & Company, suppliers to the Western and Southern trades; on each occasion the proprietors demanded more alterations, refused to pay for the shirts they did accept, held back her deposit, and finally tried to coerce her into paying them for the sewing they rejected. Soon after Byrnes went to court, Mary Gilroy of Five Points joined the fray with her own charges against the Davises, who had also refused to settle with her and had fleeced her out of a deposit. Clearly not a woman to take foul play sitting down, Gilroy had retaliated by taking out a dozen Davis shirts to hold for ransom. While the trial shows that the nonpayment of women's wages was an open scandal, neither woman secured much satisfaction despite all the favorable publicity as well as testimony from the Davises themselves that could hardly have been more damning. Margaret Byrnes won back her deposit but not her wages, and Mary Gilroy, as far as the record shows, may have taken her hostage shirts to the grave.²⁹

Proprietors like the Davises provided the material from which social investigators and journalists sympathetic to the seamstresses fashioned the figure of the villainous employer, a stock figure in fictional renditions of the outside system and a foil to the timid, pitiable seamstress of the sentimental imagination. "There sat the proprietor in his shirt-sleeves, a vulgar-looking creature, smoking a cigar." "He can browbeat, and haggel with, and impose upon a poor, weak, sickly, industrious work-girl to more purpose, and more to his own advantage than any body else."³⁰ These images of iniquity so dominate the historical evidence that it is difficult to look at the situation analytically: Why should these employers have been so particularly abusive and dishonest? From the small employer's point of view, what seemed villainy to others was a way to cope with the cutthroat economics in which he operated. "The clothing makers for the southern trade are generally the target of popular hostility on account of low wages, and there can be no doubt that many of them are gripers," the *Tribune* acknowledged. The paper was the self-proclaimed champion of the needlewomen, but its editor,

Horace Greeley, was never a man to get his mind around the imperatives of capitalism, and here his paper pointed out simple economic fact: "If they were all the purest philanthropists, they could not raise the wages of their seamstresses to anything like a living price. . . . They can only live by their business so long as they can get garments made here low enough to enable them to pay cost, risk and charges and undersell. . . . If they were compelled to pay living wages for their work, they must stop it altogether."³¹ Thus when proprietors put off paying a workingwoman as the Davises did, they were not always lying when they claimed they had no cash on hand. Nor was the issue of flawed work necessarily a sham. For all the extraordinary advantages the outside system gave employers, it was not the most technically efficient and rational organization of work, and one of its drawbacks was nonstandardized work—that is, garments sewn too differently from each other to be sold for a unit price.³²

In the 1850s, employers hard pressed by growing competition introduced the sewing machine, which standardized the stitch, and began to put out detail work instead of whole garments. Home workers sewed pieces of the garment—cuffs, buttonholes, sleeves—which were then assembled in inside shops. In the shops, employers could maximize their supervision of the assemblage, the step in production at which the mark of individual workers could be most conspicuous.³³ The new methods of production increased the pressure on small employers, who did not have the resources to shift to such an organization but still had to offer standardized merchandise in order to compete. Consequently, when these men niggled over alterations, they could be genuinely concerned with the quality of their stock as well as covertly engaged in driving down the wage.

For seamstresses, wage cutting and underemployment bred overwork. When piece rates fell, they could only do more work for the income they needed.³⁴ Since work was not always available, they had to work as much as they could when they did find employment. In the 1830s, Matthew Carey found that seamstresses without male support worked from sunrise to nine or ten at night; in the 1850s, the sewing machine drove piece rates so low that fifteen- to eighteen-hour workdays were not uncommon. "Those who make at the lowest prices appear to have no other mission on earth but to sew up bleached muslin into shirts," maintained Virginia Penny. "In some instances we have been informed, that where there are two or three or more women or girls engaged in this enterprise of making shirts . . . they absolutely divide the night season into watches."³⁵

To comprehend fully the hardships of outside workers, we must understand the nature of the labor itself. Hand sewing strained the eyes and cramped the back and neck so much that a practiced observer like Virginia Penny could recognize a seamstress on the street by her peculiar stooped

carriage: "the neck suddenly bending forward, and the arms being, even in walking, considerably bent forward, or folded more or less upward from the elbows."³⁶ The curvature came from bending over and sewing in badly lit rooms: Most tenement lodgings were dark in the daytime, and seamstresses had to economize in their use of candles. The tiny backstitch they used was painstakingly slow; it took about twelve hours to make one shirt. There was, moreover, a multitude of chances to make mistakes. A shirt bosom could be too full, the sleeves too short and the wristbands too long, and the man who examined the garments—the employer or his "piece master," as the foreman of outside workers was called in large shops—might return the work for alterations on any of these counts. Even a clearheaded woman could easily botch the piecing, but a tired one who had been working for hours was much more likely to make a mistake that would cost hours to repair—sewing in a sleeve backwards or embroidering a buttonhole out of line.³⁷

The sewing machine, as it was used in the context of nineteenth-century capitalism, did little to lighten the labor. Machine sewing was as taxing as hand sewing; it only shifted the strain from the arms to the lower torso. Women working the machines suffered chronic pain in their hips, nervous disorders from the jarring of the mechanism and eyestrain from following the long lines of stitching.³⁸

In their appeals for help, seamstresses and their supporters stressed the high rate of mortality and disease associated with their trade, what we could call the biological experience of class. A doctor in 1860 guessed that a thousand women a year died of causes related to sewing in the outside system. Malnutrition, fatigue, cold and bad ventilation in the tenements bred pneumonia and consumption, the major killers of nineteenth-century cities. A newspaper investigator in 1853 heard that the hardest-working women could squeeze as much as double the average earnings out of the piece rates, but the extra money usually went to medicines. "Will the men of New-York allow the unfortunate Shirt Sewers to stitch their own shrouds?" a seamstresses' broadside rhetorically inquired.³⁹

Who were the outworkers? The only systematic information comes from the New York state census for 1855, the first to record women's employments. A sample from two census districts, both neighborhoods of the laboring poor, gives us some bare facts about the "outside" seamstresses, who comprised 242 of the 599 workingwomen sampled.⁴⁰ The statistical profile is more varied than the sentimental picture of the solitary widowed seamstresses. (See Table 4, p. 227.) Many outworkers were lodgers living on their own—most likely as young, unmarried women. Daughters in the

households of workingmen were also represented in significant numbers—about three in ten workers.

The outworkers, it seems, were a heterogeneous and mobile group. Workers moved in and out of the system in accordance with their situations—as self-supporting workingwomen, as daughters, as breadwinning wives and widows. In terms of historians' paradigms of female industrial forces, there are several models relevant here. The largest group of women was similar to the girls of the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills (who are often taken as the prototypical American case): daughters looking to improve their fortunes, living away from their families. Daughters living within male-headed family economies, the kind of households that some scholars believe to have predominated in the nineteenth-century working class, made up the next largest group. Finally, women from all-female households and women supporting children or kin each comprised about one-tenth of the outside workers.

These statistics tell nothing about the evolution of the outside system, since by 1855 it was already well in place. My guess is that in the first two decades of the century, when the sex ratio was more balanced in New York and the pool of single women smaller, the outwork system primarily employed married women. By midcentury, however, the census evidence shows that the system had come to capitalize upon a variety of female situations. The paucity of factory and workshop employments (aggravated by sexual segmentation) and the widespread distaste for domestic service pushed single women as well as housebound married women into outside work. As immigrants poured into New York, the outside system, a mesh of work reaching out through the tenements, easily pulled in new arrivals.

The Familial Relations of Outwork

Since the late eighteenth century, manufacturing entrepreneurs had integrated patterns of family industry into commodity production. The expansion of outwork in the countryside depended on the labor of wives and (especially) daughters; indeed, the assumption that families were the foundation for manufacturing labor was so widespread that when Samuel Slater set up America's first textile mill in Rhode Island in the 1790s, he routinely went about recruiting entire families to work there. The adaptation of household forms to manufacturing is hardly surprising in a society where employers hired their workers directly off family farms.⁴¹ But in the city, too, entrepreneurs absorbed household labor into wage labor; here, in con-

trast to New England, the popularity of the family form as a way to organize manufacturing was not necessarily an extension of the fact that workers were already living in families. With a pool of single women at their disposal, New York employers might have organized work in other ways—in small all-female shops like those of male craftworkers, for instance, where they could more effectively enforce standards of production; for that matter, they might have set women to work alongside men in workshops. That they instead expanded the outside system of individual households indicates the power of family patterns as a model for women's proper role in industrial development.

For women, this adaptation had ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, household forms allowed them to turn cooperative family traditions, based in mutual need and common labor, to the business of surviving in the cutthroat labor market. Children, cousins and sisters helped women earn a living wage. On the other, female subordination within households allowed employers (and sometimes male heads of working groups) to reproduce especially severe forms of exploitation, underwritten by familial custom, within metropolitan industry. The outside system bolstered up older forms of patriarchal supervision and curtailed the ways in which single women could turn manufacturing work to the uses of independence. For good and ill, the household organization of work reinforced women's associations with family labor and thus inscribed a particular construct of gender relations into the manufacturing system.

By 1860, employers of women in other New York industries besides clothing had also turned to outwork. The 1840s saw the emergence of a new middle-class market for a panoply of consumer goods: embellishments and adornments to grace the Victorian home and person. Artificial-flower making, fringe and tassel making, embroidery, mantua making, fancy book-binding and parasol making flourished, along with all manner of other fancy stitched, burnished and gilded manufactures. Light and easily transported, most of these goods could be put out. Requiring deftness and delicacy in their assemblage, they were considered suitable for female hands. Shoe binding, the female employment that had been second to sewing at the turn of the century, also continued to provide work for women. In all these industries, the organization of outside work was similar to that of the clothing trade.

The outside system promoted female dependence on the family, both because of the low wages outworkers earned and the form their labor took. Family work could be crucial in combating the effects of wage cutting. Women with children assigned home work to their children just as they did domestic chores. In box making, children helped with the easier parts of cutting and gluing; in matchstick making, the lowliest of put-out em-

ployments, young children dipped the matchheads while mothers and older siblings cut out the sticks. In families of seamstresses, children as young as five could do the simple task of pulling bastings, and at ten years or so, daughters were nimble-fingered enough to sew straight seams and attach buttons. Most important, children who knew their way about the streets could save their mothers valuable time by carrying work back and forth from the shop.⁴² Female kin and younger siblings provided help to single women and daughters.

In the households of some immigrant craftworkers—tailors, shoemakers, fur workers—family industry existed as the “family shop.” In their work relations, these operations resembled the cooperative groups of farms and eighteenth-century craft shops. The men did the most skilled work, negotiated with employers and supervised the different operations; women and children worked at the preparatory and subsidiary tasks.⁴³ In the 1855 census of one poor neighborhood in the Fourth Ward near the waterfront, 16 percent of seamstresses were living with male kin who worked in the tailoring trade; such households were probably family shops.⁴⁴ By the 1850s, piece rates were so low that a journeyman tailor had difficulty making a living without a family to help him: “A tailor is nothing without a wife, and very often a child,” went a maxim of German craftsmen.⁴⁵

The family shop was a unit laboring for its own subsistence, dependent on the help of all. Men and women, however, occupied different positions within this cooperative group, just as they did in the family, with men at the top and children at the bottom. The hierarchical structure may not have been especially important when families labored on farms or in craft shops, each person working for the common good and sharing more or less equally in the earnings. But hierarchy did become significant when each individual earned wages, for as wage differentials developed between men, women and children, it became profitable for adults, especially men, to replicate familial arrangements among non-kin as well as kin. In other words, in the nineteenth century, traditions of family labor became a means of exploiting women and children as well as a way for working people to support themselves cooperatively.⁴⁶

Forms of outside work that replicated the family hierarchy thus developed among unrelated men and women. Women on their own were well situated to work in these groups. Women and girls began to work in the 1850s for unmarried journeymen in the same capacities as wives and daughters who assisted tailors in their own homes. The journeymen mediated between piece masters and the home shop and took the largest portion of earnings. Poor as these men were, they were still employers and women were their workers. They paid the women fixed wages and took the small profits for themselves.⁴⁷ Women also put themselves at the top of this type

of arrangement in the "learning" system. Learning was a debased form of apprenticeship that corresponded to the relation of parents and children in family labor. In exchange for the crudest training, girls worked for tailors, seamstresses, dressmakers and milliners either for their keep or for a few pennies a day. Journeymen also used this system: Adults made their profit by taking out work at regular piece rates and paying learning girls either lower rates or nothing at all to make it up. Learning proliferated in the 1850s along with the family shop and its variants as a way for individuals to combat the effects of the sewing machine. Like all child laborers, learners were the humblest of the trade, but since their employers themselves were so poor, the learners' condition was especially lowly. In 1853 a *Herald* reporter found a learners' garret near the waterfront where four teenage girls worked for an Irish seamstress every day except Sunday in exchange for their board; they paid for rent, clothes and Sunday's food by prostituting themselves to sailors.⁴⁸

All forms of outside work merged with "sweating," whereby a subcontractor exacted his profits from the "sweat," or highly exploited labor, of his outworkers. Sweating spread through the poor districts in the 1850s. It combined all varieties of family labor. There were many levels of sweaters: journeymen tailors, piece masters themselves (who contracted work from their employers), garret masters and mistresses. The journeymen who took out work for their wives were engaged in a kind of sweating, although in the sweating system proper, the contractor invested no labor of his own.⁴⁹ The use of the sewing machine, made practicable in 1850 with Isaac Singer's invention of the foot treadle, encouraged the spread of sweated labor. Very few women workers (and few tailors, too) could afford their own machines, but neither could they afford to do without them.⁵⁰ Employers could impose the sewing machine relatively easily upon a system in which small-scale production predominated and workers were used to absorbing overhead costs. A German-born New York tailor told the story well. "The bosses said: 'We want you to use the sewing-machine, you have to buy one,'" he recalled. "Many of the tailors had a few dollars in the bank, and they took the money and bought machines. Many others had no money . . . so they brought their stitching . . . to the other tailors who had sewing machines, and paid them a few cents for the stitching. Later, when the money was given out for the work, we found out that we could earn no more than we could without a machine."⁵¹ Since seamstresses were less able to save money than tailors, few could purchase their own machines, and the shift to machine work made it more necessary for them to work for some kind of sweater.

There is no evidence about how laboring people felt about the comparative merits of outwork and other kinds of employments—whether, for

instance, parents preferred their daughters to work in sweatshops rather than in factories, because close family or family-like supervision made it more difficult for girls to stray. In the New England countryside, the outwork system allowed farmers to patch up disintegrating family economies with women's earnings and at the same time to keep their daughters at home.⁵² Similar dynamics may have been at work in the city, where outside work may have helped to ensure the cooperation of children—especially daughters—in family wage economies. Married women, of course, were already tied to families; the incorporation of domestic patterns into the manufacturing system greatly weakened their position in the labor market, but it was consonant with the actualities of their everyday lives. For single women, especially those on their own, the situation was different. Here a comparison with Lowell is helpful. Both the Lowell system and the New York outside system imposed household forms on women living away from their families. When the Boston Manufacturing Company set up shop at Lowell in 1814, the employers created a system of boardinghouses alongside their factories, a system that required their young female employees to live under strict supervision.⁵³ Although the New York outside system was not consciously crafted by one group of men, it had similar effects. In a city where people of all classes feared the adverse effects of city pleasures and wage earning on young women, outwork quieted anxieties about female independence by reintegrating young women into household dependencies. For single women, outside work reinforced economic pressures toward dependency at just the historical moment when their ties to family life were weakening.

The submersion of women waged workers in private households did a great deal to make a large part of the female work force invisible. Employers capitalized upon a construction of women as "outside" the economy, lacking acumen about the world outside their doors. "Our employers set up the most frivolous pretexts for reducing our wages," a former seamstress remembered. "Some of them were so transparently false that I wondered how any one could have the impudence to present them." She concluded that they could because they "considered a sewing-woman as either too dull to detect the fallacy, or too timid to expose and resent it."⁵⁴ This was a psychology of heterosexuality as well as one of class; likewise, when a piece master used derision in order to drive down a woman's wage.⁵⁵ Employers were writing a language of women's sphere—working-class version—into industrial capitalism.

Inside Work

After 1850, a small but growing number of factories began to employ women. In the sewing trades, the introduction of the sewing machine encouraged employers to centralize their work in "inside" shops, and in other consumer manufactures, employers installed light machinery that women could tend. These developments were significant enough that by 1860, the Children's Aid Society could hail the expansion of factory work for women as one of the most hopeful signs of progress in the city.⁵⁶

It was this sector of employment that must have provided the readiest recruits to working-class youth culture. Inside workers were overwhelmingly young and single. The factory "girls" were just that, late adolescents and young women sixteen to twenty-five years.⁵⁷ The wages for inside work were much better than payments for outside work, high enough to finance fine clothes and leisure pursuits. This was partly because piece rates were higher on the inside (the pool of available workers was probably smaller than it was in the outside system), partly because employment was steadier: Factory hands did not have to piece together a full week's work from different shops. (See Table 5, p. 228.) Although inside workers could experience seasonal unemployment, their employers would have had to consider the depreciation of machines and buildings and so would have engaged in a less capricious pattern of production than those who depended on outside work.

In inside shops where there was no machinery, the camaraderie of workmates could resemble that of earlier artisans. This was the case in a straw-sewing manufactory which a reporter sketched in a newspaper article on female labor in 1853. Straw sewing, an old put-out female trade, had once been the source of straw hats and bonnets for Northeasterners. In the 1830s New York straw shops found a new market in the Southern and Western trades, producing hats for farmers across the country.⁵⁸ The sewing was as wearisome as any waged needlework, but the straw sewers the reporter met, "a lively, intelligent class of women," did not fit the popular image of the victimized sewing woman. Mingling amusement with labor, the straw sewers' working time was more like that of artisans in the early 1800s. As the journalist reported it, they talked the whole day through, touching on politics, theology and metropolitan affairs. They were great newspaper readers, and from their knowledge they argued about elections (although they could not vote) and zealously expounded their views on the prospects of American expansion. There were "rowdy girls" who might have fre-

quented the dance halls after hours. There was also a more respectable set. The latter, devoted like so many male artisans to self-education, frequented lecture halls in their leisure time and on the particular day of the reporter's visit were discussing a physiology lecture one of them had heard. Sermons, too, furnished material for talk from the churchgoers. For the less serious, there were pastimes like those of the Bowery. The theater was a favored recreation, mimicry a worktime diversion. The reporter watched them entertain each other with imitations of local electioneering candidates, just as Bowery habitués might have done on an evening when the talk turned to Tammany politicians. At the dinner hour some talked and others danced and later, back at work, all joined in singing, directed by a leader they all had elected. A few who were taking voice lessons also rehearsed what they had learned for the benefit of the others.⁵⁹

The straw sewers were a singular lot, whose workplace culture was sufficiently strong to sustain other, more formal associations. Eight years before the reporter's visit, they had called a meeting of all workingwomen in the city in an attempt to create a federation of women's trade unions. In 1851, they were again in the forefront of efforts to organize the sewing trades. Here was a female workplace network which, like that of the Lowell girls in the 1830s and 1840s, could foster consciously militant collective action. This is not to romanticize their work, which was as tedious and tiring as any task work.⁶⁰ Working away from home, however, did bring chances for thinking and acting that were less available to outside workers or women engaged in domestic labor, who were more entangled in ubiquitous household concerns. The sixty straw sewers pried open for each other a world in which their imaginations could roam from Canada to Cuba, from theology to physiology, and even venture into the male sanctum of electoral politics.

The Familial Relations of Workshops

The workshops, the domain of single women, would seem to have been quite separate from family households. But there, too, household relationships and patterns of domestic authority proved extraordinarily adaptable to women's employment. Inside as well as out, employers translated familiar forms of gender relations into the organization of factories and workshops.

Structurally, the line between inside shops and the outside system was blurred. Employers seem to have drawn quite specifically on their experi-

ences and successes with outside work when they set up workrooms. Many shops that employed women, for instance, put out work not only to home workers but to inside hands as well. Evening outwork helped inside girls increase their earnings and allowed them to supplement their own energies with family labor. The practice was possible in most women's trades, since materials tended to be light, portable and workable by hand. Mantilla makers, for example, took sewing home after hours; hat makers took linings home to stitch; cap makers, who worked in an especially low-paid trade, took work home at night.⁶¹

On the shop floor itself, work might also replicate outwork patterns. When employers hired children, for example, they lessened the trouble children caused by placing older hands over them in a kind of parental arrangement. Children increased problems of work discipline greatly, and in New York, adult labor was so cheap there was no real incentive to employ them. Nonetheless, some shops set children up as learners, trading off the problems they caused for their nearly gratuitous labor. In the outside system, parents, masters and mistresses mediated between children and employers; employers transferred this arrangement to the factory, where the incentive for older hands to keep children in line was their own piece-rate payment.⁶²

The position of the factory foreman was often analogous to that of the outworkers' piece master, and in all but the largest businesses he was the same person; in small shops, employers themselves did both jobs. The distinguishing feature of the foreman, like the piece master, was his ability to make arbitrary decisions which, when they concerned women workers, were often based on heterosexual concerns. He had considerable power. The inside hands received their materials from him, as did the outworkers; he decided who could do the best paid work; he collected finished goods and tallied up the piece-rate payments. It was often the foreman (or foreman/employer) who set the piece rates and hired and dismissed workers. The superimposition of outwork onto the workshop regime enlarged the area in which women depended on his discretion. He chose the women who could take work home. In umbrella factories, it was only the "best" girls who could take home extra work, lest they damage the silk; in a belt manufactory, only those women the foreman knew. During slow seasons, workingwomen were also especially dependent on his favors, for then there was not enough work to go around and he divvied it up according to his own preferences.⁶³

There was a psychology of gender at work in the foreman's determinations. Intent on opening new fields of employment for her sex, the indefatigable Virginia Penny wondered why there were not more *forewomen* and fewer *foremen* in New York. William Sanger, a physician commissioned

by municipal authorities in 1855 to investigate the causes of prostitution, noted the same phenomenon, and went on to criticize the extraordinary power these men wielded over a workingwoman. "If she finds that a smile bestowed upon her employer or his clerk will aid her in the struggle for bread, she will not present herself with a scowling face; or if a kind entreaty will be the means of procuring her dinner as a favor, she will not expose herself to hunger by demanding it as a right," contended Sanger, who knew something about the trades from his female working-class patients at the hospital for venereal disease.⁶⁴

Of course, foremen also wielded power over male workers. In the early inside shops, the structure of work gave foremen far more leeway than their descendants in the twentieth century would know. Work was not yet minutely subdivided or highly mechanized. The antebellum workrooms lacked the systematization that the assembly line and scientific management, which diminish the play of individual judgment, were later to establish. In this sense, the foreman's position resembled that of a master craftsman; he gained his power over both men and women in the give and take of production. New York printers in 1850, for instance, protested their foreman's favoritism in distributing copy: "The certain men who are noted for their amenity of manners, and plasticity of sentiments, to the Foreman, always get the fat, while others, men who think civility is preferable to servility, have to take the refuse."⁶⁵ While the printers chafed under a debased workplace authority, however, workingwomen negotiated with their foremen within extraneous but firmly rooted patterns of family and gender hierarchies. As in the household, women never supervised male workers, although they did sometimes oversee children and other women. Masculinity continued to be a more desirable attribute than femininity for those whose job it was to discipline others in work.⁶⁶

Still, transplanted sexual hierarchies were a less effective means of labor discipline in the context of factories and workshops than they were in the outside system. Female workers found plenty of ways to circumvent the dictates of deference. Women were "more apt to get in trouble among themselves" when employed in large numbers, complained one shop owner.⁶⁷ With their own knowledge of workroom standards, precedents and procedures, factory girls must have been able to confront the foremen with their own expertise; in their very numbers, they offered each other some degree of mutual protection. They may have brought to the workroom some of the same skills in limiting male caprice which their mothers exercised in the neighborhoods or they themselves used in the dance halls. Certainly they do not seem to have been an especially "pliant and docile"

labor force, to use the patronizing characterization Marx made of women workers in *Capital*.⁶⁸ Rather, the same sociability that expanded in evenings on the Bowery sprung up during the day at all sorts of odd moments to disrupt the pace of work.

Like all people when they first experienced industrial work discipline, New York workingwomen would not recognize the importance of time and steady work in the owner's balance sheet. "They do not feel the interest in their work they should," an employer complained to Virginia Penny. "If a procession is passing, they think it very hard if they cannot have ten or fifteen minutes to look out the windows . . . they forget that three minutes lost by twenty girls amounts to an hour."⁶⁹ In the now-famous terms E. P. Thompson explicated, the employer had to *use* the time of his workers;⁷⁰ to him, time was money, and when his employees idled, they were not passing their own time but wasting his. Women would "laugh and talk and 'carry on' half the time" with each other. The straw sewers' pleasures, so appealing to the journalist who spent the day with them, may not have amused an employer trying to cut costs and stabilize production. From another point of view, those women's diversions were simply the "habits of levity and idleness" which annoyed so many overseers of female labor: talking, gossiping, joking, singing, bickering.⁷¹

Similar problems afflicted any factory owner in the early years of industrialism, when capitalists struggled to inculcate workers with a discipline of time and regular work that went against the grain of centuries of human "nature." But the "habits of levity and idleness" must have run especially deep in young women, whose interests in men, amusements and courting could be more pressing than their worries over hungry children at home. The girls in a gunnysack manufactory were always late, their employer attested, and absented themselves so often that he had to employ more hands than he wanted so that he would "not get out of a supply" of workers on any given day. When shoe binders had earned enough on piece rates to get by for the next few days, they took a day or two to rest whether or not they were due for a holiday. Women wire workers in one factory were such habitual absentees that for a while the proprietor had to stop his machinery altogether; they wanted days off on the flimsiest of pretexts, he complained—to help their mothers, to go on a picnic, to get ready for a party.⁷²

Since most inside shops employing women also employed men as either foremen or workers, the workroom became a place where, to some extent, the preoccupations of pleasure could be played out. The powers of desire could slip into the daily routine. When men and women worked together, they smuggled into the rigorous and dreary workday some of the same pleasures of bantering and flirting that blossomed after hours. A journalist

charged in 1851 that the prospect of fraternizing with men was luring young women away from female trades to the printing houses—although it is likely that the high wages there were as important as the attractions of mixed company. Working with men posed all too many opportunities for "trifling" young women—a favorite disparagement used by employers of women. "When men and women are employed in the same department, they talk too much," claimed one of Penny's informants. In a candy manufactory, the "girls make so much noise, laughing and talking with men, and waste so much time" that the exasperated proprietor separated them in different rooms. Another employer's strategy was to forbid conversation; Penny deduced this rule in operation at Brooks Brothers when she heard not a word spoken in a mixed workroom in the half-hour she was there.⁷³ These sociable, often high-spirited workers were difficult to incorporate into the popular figure of the mournful workingwoman. Rather, they provided the material for a competing image, the factory girl, an image that embodied a recognition, however muted, of the challenges to women's customary place that inside workers might pose.

The Factory Girl

The factory girl first materialized in social commentary in the 1830s, then more noticeably in the 1850s. This urban woman bore little resemblance to the factory girls at Lowell, with their spotless reputations, nor was she anything like the stereotype of the sewing woman, the quintessential victim. The factory girl was, in her own way, an emblem of female self-assertion: impudent rather than timid, sociable rather than retiring, robust rather than thin and pale. She was close kin to Lize of the Bowery, but while Lize was a comic figure, laughably feminine in her adulation of boyfriend Mose, the factory girl signified a more disturbing kind of female independence. She appeared in urban journalism and reform literature not in connection with poverty or popular culture but with the problems of sexual immorality and prostitution.

At issue was female work culture and the inducements it gave to sexual and social adventuring. "The crowding of young girls in large factories and shops is always perilous," warned the Children's Aid Society in 1860.⁷⁴ Journeying to and from work, factory girls were liable to all sorts of temptations from strangers and workmates. The mixing with men, the after-hours amusements and the encouragement young women gave to each other's "trifling" concerns supposedly undermined female morals.

"The daily routine goes very far toward weakening that modesty and reserve which are the best protectives against the seducer," argued William Sanger. "Women contract acquaintance for the sake of having an escort on their holiday recreations, or because some other woman has done so, or as the mere gratification of an idle fancy; but all tend in the same direction, and aim to undermine principles and jeopardize character."⁷⁵

Denunciations of the supposed low morals of factory girls had been common in British and American condemnations of the factory system since the 1830s; Engels fell right into line in 1844 with his imputations in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* that female factory workers were too uppity and sexually wanton to make good wives.⁷⁶ But not only reformers or allies of the labor movement were worried. Workingmen, too (and possibly mothers, although we don't hear from them), saw the factory girl as threatening to the kind of working-class community they were fighting for, a community based (at least in aspiration) on family cooperation and women's submersion within it. Radical English artisans through the 1820s and 1830s denounced the destruction of female morals the textile mills supposedly effected, and the association between prostitution and factory employment was pivotal to the discussions of female labor in the National Trades' Union of the American Northeast in the early 1830s.⁷⁷

We have one detailed account of the problem from a workingman. James Burn was an English hatter who lived and worked in New York during the Civil War. Young women in general, and factory girls in particular, were among the things about New York Burn really did not like. He would have been familiar with the already well-worn discussion of the domestic failings of English factory girls when he set about recording the perfidies of their New York counterparts. At work and in the boardinghouses where so many lived, he observed, the gathering of young women in itself wreaked havoc. Like the Lancashire factory girls, few made good wives. "They are neither fitted for wives by a due regard for the feelings and wishes of their husbands, nor a knowledge of the simple rudiments of housekeeping." Although many did marry, they remained lamentably independent. "They will not be instructed by their husbands; and as proof of their obstinacy, one of their common remarks to each other when speaking of their husbands is that they would like to see a man who would boss them." This was all reminiscent of Manchester, bad enough, but the metropolitan context made things worse. The range of "out-door temptations" was wider; indulgence all too readily available for "the passion for amusement, or the impulse for vanity." The New York incarnation of the factory girl presented her particular difficulties.⁷⁸

Burn's comments are especially interesting because he was one of the few

workingmen to register his personal opinions on female independence in the historical record. He was a crotchety fellow who looked gloomily on most of the lighter side of life, and he also had an ax to grind. By the time Burn was living in New York, the intractable masculinism of working-class consciousness had been shaken a bit; Burn, with his authoritarian patriarchy and his baleful portrayals of women's pleasures and women's self-regard, seems a throwback to another era. Yet in his own dyspeptic way he was complaining about what concerned other people as well. For if the working class, as men imagined it, now granted women a respected place, just what that place was and who was to define it were matters of considerable disagreement. One understanding, which enjoyed strong support from skilled men like Burn, flowed from the labor movement's vision of a reconstituted working-class family, where wives and daughters would derive their social worth from their households, and where both their labor and their sexual conduct would be subject to the authority of husbands and fathers. The factory girl, who worked outside her household, carried on flirtations and liaisons away from parental scrutiny, circumvented the family wage economy and used her wages to indulge her "vanity"—this low, loose character was anathema to such hopes and ambitions.

Exactly what were the "low" morals of inside workers, the "trifling concerns" that threatened to degrade their characters? Sexual freedom seems to have been the issue: not the *fact* of premarital sexual activity, but young women's freedom from parental control over their erotic ventures. Sexuality was both a consequence of social autonomy and its metaphor. The real sin of the factory girl lay not in premarital sex, but in advertising, with her fancy clothes and assertive ways, the possibilities of a life for women outside the household just at the moment when great numbers of working people were beginning to look on the rejuvenation of that household as a primary political goal.

The factory girl was, of course, the creation of a discourse, a representation of experience refracted through political concerns. She was not, however, sheerly a contrivance of the imagination. Her "passions" and "vanity" were others' renditions of her life in a new kind of milieu of work and leisure, a life which grew out of the conjuncture of immigration patterns, youth culture and women's manufacturing work. To be sure, the factory girl represented only an evanescent moment in any one woman's experience, an identity embraced (if at all) for a few years before marriage and motherhood. Moreover, while many young women must have indeed taken advantage of the distance from their families, others were dutiful daughters who went right home from work. Still, the women who learned the benefits of "outdoor temptations" as opposed to indoor duty, meager and short-

lived as was their independence, stood outside a centuries-old order of female dependency. No wonder James Burn the hatter found them deplorable.

✓ In its first phase in New York, capitalist manufacturing turned the household into its own kind of workplace. Domestic work and family relations mediated employers' requirements and women's obligations. The household organization allowed small entrepreneurs to cut overhead costs drastically and promoted the translation of family relationships of authority and subservience into the idiom of employer and employee. In outwork, the translation was direct, since wage labor actually incorporated domestic labor. The process was more striking in factories, which were structurally removed from the household. There the importation of family or family-like arrangements served to heighten the contradiction between women's independence as wage laborers and their continuing connections, psychological and economic, to family economies and male authority.

○ In both the tenements and the factories, family labor helped working-women survive on wages that were often below subsistence. But the persistence of family relationships in female manufacturing labor also tied women to particular kinds of exploitation. The development of the outside system as the dominant structure of female wage labor in America's leading industrial city deeply divided the work force along gender lines. Outside work, partly sanctioned by its resemblance to household relations, limited women's means of redress through collective action. The sexual division in the labor force made it less feasible for men and women to organize together. Structurally, socially and psychologically, family relations circumscribed women's position as individual wageworkers whether or not their work spilled over outside the family economy. By 1860, great numbers of workingwomen were laboring for their own subsistence or working as primary breadwinners for their families; they were neither temporary wage earners nor contributors to households headed by male breadwinners, and they were certainly not working for pin money. Yet these were the terms in which the manufacturing system engaged them.

In other ways, however, the logic of wage relations worked *against* women's consignment to the family. In the factories and workshops, some possibilities for a transformed female identity opened up, consonant with those that appeared in the milieu of leisure. But female workshop employment, while economically functional in a city with a surplus population of single women, also touched off cultural anxieties. The starving seamstress was an object of pity and concern and her distress was a spur to reform efforts, but she was assimilable to those efforts precisely because she was the

kind of working-class woman, housebound, deferential and meek, that genteel people liked, a version of the "true" woman of the bourgeoisie. The factory girl, better off economically, was more venturesome and disturbing. In her antidomesticity, she conjured up threatening possibilities in a society ideologically moored to separate sexual spheres. However efficient workshop production might have been, employers must have found outside work—and the set of cultural dependencies it invoked—a stabilizing force in the manufacturing system. Employers might yet find common ground with workingmen in agreeing that a wage-earning woman's place was in the home.

Chapter 9 Women on the Town: Sexual Exchange and Prostitution

As urban reformers and writers told it, no tale of working-class life was more chilling in its revelations of vice than the prostitute's. From the 1830s on, prostitutes flitted wraithlike across the pages of urban social commentary, a class of women rendered human only by the occasional penitent in their ranks. Prostitutes had long been familiar to New Yorkers, but between 1830 and 1860 women "on the town" became the subject of a sustained social commentary. By the 1850s, urban prostitution was troubling enough to lead city fathers to lend the services of their police force in aiding William Sanger in conducting a massive investigation. Dr. Sanger's report, the compendious *History of Prostitution*, represents the coming of age of prostitution as a social "problem" in America, and its integration into the new discourse of secular urban reform.

The very fact that reformers in the 1850s were thinking about prostitution had to do with tensions over gender relations and female sexuality. To them, prostitution was simply a verifiable empirical reality synonymous with the degradation of morals and public health. But between the lines of their considerations ran another discussion, barely delineated, about the dangerous impulses of girls and young women. In New York culture, the image of the Bowery Gal was one side of the coin of youthful pleasures; that of the hardened girl on the streets was the other. The alarm over prostitution was one response to the growing social and sexual distance that

working-class women—especially working-class daughters—were traveling from patriarchal regulation.

The problem of prostitution as reformers defined it had no necessary relation to the experience of the women involved. For laboring women, prostitution was a particular kind of choice presented by the severities of daily life. It was both an economic and a social option, a means of self-support and a way to bargain with men in a situation where a living wage was hard to come by, and holding one's own in heterosexual relations was difficult. The reasons girls and women went into prostitution, the uses they made of it and the relation it bore to the rest of their lives varied greatly. The reformers' image of prostitution as an irreversible descent into degradation obfuscated more of this complex reality than it revealed.¹

The Problem

In 1818, when the city watch published its latest statistics on crime, the authorities took a complacent view of prostitution. Although the numbers of known prostitutes and bawdy houses in the city had doubled in a dozen years, they reported, the women and their patrons had never been more quiet and law-abiding.² In subsequent years, an offensive against urban vice put an end to such laissez-faire attitudes. After 1831, when the evangelical women of New York's Magdalene Society first took up the battle to banish prostitution from the city, denunciations of what was purported to be an urgent problem became common currency among moral reformers and public authorities. "We have satisfactorily ascertained the fact that the numbers of females in this city, who abandon themselves to prostitution is not less than TEN THOUSAND!!!!!" announced John McDowall, agent for the Magdalene Society, in its first annual report in 1832. McDowall's figure was up by more than eight times from the 1818 estimate, a supposed increase which should give us pause.³ Whatever number reformers picked, however, they used it to stress the reason for alarm. The National Trades' Union in the 1830s, the Ladies' Industrial Association in 1845, reformers Matthew Carey and later Horace Greeley all promoted a similar view that prostitution was making heavy incursions into the female poor.⁴ By 1855, public concern was sufficiently strong to move the aldermen to commission William Sanger to conduct a statistical investigation in New York of the kind Parent-Duchâtelet had published for Paris in 1836. Sanger's researches confirmed to him and to his public (as such researches often do) that the city was indeed prey to an "enormous vice." It was, he gravely concluded,

"a fact beyond question that this vice is attaining a position and extent in this community which cannot be viewed without alarm."⁵

Was, indeed, prostitution on the rise, expanding along with the manufacturing system, as many people believed? Given the fragmentary statistics, it is hard now to answer conclusively, but the reformers' and officials' estimates tend (contrary to their own conclusions) to disprove the argument. In fact, prostitution seems only to have increased along with the population, at the rate one would expect in a city that multiplied in size more than six times between 1820 and 1860. There was certainly an increase in the absolute number of prostitutes. Police Chief Matsell estimated there were 5,000 women on the town in 1856, as compared to the watch's 1,200 in 1818.⁶ But these figures, tenuous as they are, actually indicate a slight *decrease* in the numbers of prostitutes proportional to the urban population. On the level of numbers alone, then, it seems there were more prostitutes simply because there were more people.

Of course, this does not mean there were no problems. The increase in absolute numbers had important effects. Commitments of women to prison for vagrancy, the statutory offense under which prostitution fell, more than doubled between 1850 and 1860; imprisonments for keeping disorderly houses, often the rubric under which houses of prostitution fell, multiplied by more than five times between 1849 and 1860.⁷ These statistics cannot tell us how many women were convicted for prostitution, since the police could arrest women in the streets simply because they were homeless. But since the majority of female arrests were of girls and young women ten to thirty years old, the age bracket into which the majority of the women Sanger interviewed fell,⁸ it seems likely that prostitution played some role in the increase in vagrancy arrests from 3,500 in 1850 to nearly 6,500 in 1860. In itself, this spectacular rise must have convinced New Yorkers they were living amidst an epidemic of female vice, insofar as they closely associated female homelessness and poverty with depravity.

The urgency of the discussion, however, was also a response to the changing character of the trade. What disturbed observers was not just the number of women who bargained with men for sex, but the identity of those women. For if the numbers of known professional prostitutes were not growing disproportionately, those of casual prostitutes—girls or women who turned to prostitution temporarily or episodically to supplement other kinds of livelihoods—probably were. Moreover, the entire context of the transaction was changing, as prostitution moved out of the bawdy houses of the poor into cosmopolitan public spaces like Broadway. "It no longer confines itself to secrecy and darkness," lamented Sanger, "but boldly strikes through our most thronged and elegant thoroughfares."⁹

Prostitution was becoming urbane. The trade was quite public in the

business district as well as in poor neighborhoods, a noticeable feature of the ordinary city landscape. Since prostitution was not a statutory offense, there was no legal pressure to conceal it. By 1857, William Sanger could catalogue a wide range of establishments catering to prostitution. "Parlor houses," clustered near the elegant hotels on Broadway, were the most respectable, frequented by gentlemen; the second-class brothels served clerks and "the higher class of mechanics."¹⁰ In some theaters, prostitutes solicited and consorted with patrons in the notorious third tier, reserved for their use, although the high-toned Park Theater had closed its third tier in 1842, and Sanger noted that other theaters patronized by the genteel were following suit. Except for the parlor and bawdy houses, however, the trade was informal rather than organized; that is, a woman could easily ply it on her own outside a brothel. Prostitution was still a street trade of independent workers; pimps were a phenomenon of the early twentieth century, a consequence of the onset of serious police harassment.¹¹ The places where "street-walkers" resorted served other erotic functions as well. Houses of assignation, where much casual prostitution took place, were private establishments where a couple could rent rooms by the hour; illicit lovers used them for trysting places. There was a hierarchy of houses of assignation: the respectable brownstones off Broadway, where ladies carried on affairs during the hours of the afternoon promenade; the shabby-genteel houses, where shopgirls, milliners and domestic servants went with gentlemen "sweethearts" with whom their work brought them in contact; and the cheap houses where working-class couples and prostitutes resorted and where fast young men set up their working-class mistresses to live. Around the waterfront were the lowest class of establishments, basement dramshops with rooms in the back frequented by sailors, immigrants and poor transients, and better-kept dancing houses with adjoining rooms for girls and their clients.¹² In the same working-class neighborhoods, prostitution also went on in the tenements themselves. In the district near City Hall, where there was a lively interest in commercial sex from the many men of all classes doing business there, an investigating commission found that "it is a well-known fact that in many of the tenant-houses of this district such persons [prostitutes] occupy suites of apartments interspersed with those of the respectable laboring classes, and frequently difficult to be distinguished from them." In the lowest neighborhoods, near-destitute residents sometimes rented out corners of their rooms to prostitutes.¹³

There were specialized services as well. In the 1840s, a nascent commercial sex trade began to offer variegated sexual experiences beyond the prostitute's bed, mostly to gentlemen. The sex trade was centered in the area between City Hall Park, the commercial heart of the city, and the Five Points. There, crime and amusement rubbed elbows, laboring people mixed

with gentlemen and the quick scam flourished. Visitors and men about town could, within an easy walk from most places of business, gain entrance to dance halls featuring naked performers, brothels with child prostitutes, eating places decorated with pornographic paintings, pornographic book shops and "model artist" shows, where naked women arranged themselves in edifying tableaux from literature and art (Susannah and the Elders, for example)—as well as a variety of facilities for having sex. The network of sexual experiences for sale was certainly troubling evidence of the centrality of sex to metropolitan life; indeed, its presence in the most cosmopolitan areas of the city was one indication of just how closely a particular kind of sex (bourgeois men with working-class women) was linked to an evolving mode of sophisticated urbanity.¹⁴

In a city so concerned with defining both women's proper place and the place of the working class, the alarm over prostitution stemmed in part from general hostilities to the milieu of laboring women from which prostitutes came. "Prostitution" evolved in the nineteenth century as a particular construction, the grouping of a range of sexual experiences which in actual life might be quite disparate. The discourse about prostitution was embedded in genteel preoccupations; while working-class people had their own concerns about prostitution, they remained marginal to the developing public discussion. Bourgeois men and women, who understood female sexuality within the terms of the cult of true womanhood, tended to see any woman who was sexually active outside of marriage as a prostitute. While their judgments were not inherently class bound ("true" women who strayed were equally liable to condemnation), they obviously weighed more heavily on poor women, who did not adhere to standards of premarital (or sometimes even extramarital) chastity. Although working-class men and women could judge and condemn with the same severity as reformers, they did so by the standards of a sexual morality with more fluid definitions of licit and illicit, good and bad, respectability and transgression.

Going to Ruin

For laboring people as well as bourgeois moralists, prostitution was closely linked to "ruin," a state of affairs to be avoided at all costs. But while bourgeois men and women viewed ruin as the consequence of prostitution, working-class people reversed the terms. It was ruin, occasioned by a familial or economic calamity (for women the two were synonymous), that precipitated the "fall" into prostitution. The disasters that afflicted women's

lives—male desertion, widowhood, single motherhood—propelled adult women into prostitution as a comparatively easy way to earn a living. The prospect of prostitution was, like the possibility of these other misfortunes, a part of everyday life: a contingency remote to the blessed, the strong and the fortunate, right around the corner for the weak and the unlucky. Prostitution was neither a tragic fate, as moralists viewed it (and continue to view it), nor an act of defiance, but a way of getting by, of making the best of bad luck.

Prostitution was indeed, as reformers liked to point out, tied to the female labor market. Women on their own earned such low wages that in order to survive, they often supplemented waged employment with casual prostitution. There is a good deal of information on this practice in the 1850s because William Sanger asked about it. "A large number of females," he observed, "earn so small wages that a temporary cessation of their business, or being a short time out of a situation, is sufficient to reduce them to absolute distress."¹⁵ A quarter of Sanger's subjects, about 500 of the 2,000 women interviewed, had worked in manufacturing employment, mostly in the needle trades. More than a quarter again had earned wages of a dollar or less a week; more than half earned less than three dollars. Some 300 were still working at a trade; 325 had only left their work within the six months previous.¹⁶

From this information, we can infer something about the earning patterns of young women on their own. Their wages alone could not have financed nights on the Bowery. Casual prostitution, exchanging sexual favors with male escorts for money or food and drink (what a later generation called "treating"¹⁷), may have been one way young women on the town got by. The stories Sanger collected from his errant subjects, however, also chronicled the grimmer side of female employment, when there was no money to buy food, let alone theater tickets. "M. M., a widow with one child, earned \$1.50 a week as a tailoress." "E. H. earned from two to three dollars a week as tailoress, but had been out of employment for some time." "M. F., a shirt-maker, earned one dollar a week." "S. F., a widow with three children, could earn two dollars weekly at cap-making, but could not obtain steady employment even at those prices."¹⁸

Many of the women with whom Sanger and his police interviewers talked had turned to prostitution as the closest employment at hand after suddenly losing male support. Many had been left alone in the city by husbands or family: 471—almost one-fourth—were married women who had become single and self-supporting through circumstances beyond their control. Eight percent had been deserted by their husbands; fifteen percent widowed. Fifty-seven percent had lost their fathers before they reached the age of twenty.¹⁹ In themselves, such statistics tell us nothing about the role

that destitution played in prostitution. Taken together, however, they do reveal the forces that made prostitution a reasonable choice in a society in which economic support from a man was a prerequisite for any kind of decent life. "No work, no money, and no home," was the succinct description one woman gave of her circumstances. The stark facts that others recited illuminate some of the urgent situations which pushed women out onto the streets. "My husband deserted me and four children. I had no means to live." "My husband eloped with another woman. I support the child." "I came to this city, from Illinois, with my husband. When we got here he deserted me. I have two children dependent on me."²⁰ These were the painful female actualities from which popular culture would fashion its own morality tales of sexual victimization and depravity.

Sanger veered away from the blanket moral condemnations of early reform literature toward the more dispassionate and environmentalist perspective of early British and French social science. While moral categories entered into his analysis, he preferred to focus on exterior forces and social solutions rather than on the spiritual transformation of the working class that the evangelicals sought.²¹ Women were victims of poverty, the wage system, orphanage, abandonment and seduction. For Sanger, even their "passion" became a kind of environmental factor, divested of moral choice and existing apart from their conscious agency.

Yet ultimately Sanger's survey yields a very different picture than his own preferred one of the victim of circumstance, the distressed needlewoman and the deserted wife at starvation's door. His exhaustive queries revealed a great deal about the roots of prostitution in economic desperation, but they also produced compelling evidence about more complex sources. When Sanger asked his subjects their reasons for taking up prostitution, over a quarter—a number almost equal to those who cited "destitution"—gave "inclination" as their answer. "Inclination," whatever its moral connotations, still indicated some element of choice within the context of other alternatives. "C. M.: while virtuous, this girl had visited dance-houses, where she became acquainted with prostitutes, who persuaded her that they led an easy, merry life." "S. C.: this girl's inclination arose from a love of liquor." "E. C. left her husband, and became a prostitute willingly, in order to obtain intoxicating liquors which had been refused her at home."²²

The historical issues are complicated. One can imagine a sullen woman trapped in the virtual jail that was the Blackwell's Island venereal disease hospital, flinging cynical answers—"drink," "amusement"—to the good doctor's questions as those most likely to shock him or to appeal to the preconceptions she sensed in him. But although this may have been true in some encounters, the dynamic between the doctor and his subject is an

unlikely explanation of why so many women rejected a paradigm of victimization (which, if anything, Sanger himself promoted) for answers that stressed their own agency in entering prostitution. Altogether, 918 of the subjects implied motives other than hardship. Sanger classified their responses as: "too idle to work," "persuaded by prostitutes," "an easy life," "drink, and the desire to drink," "ill-treatment of parents, relatives or husbands."²³ Whatever the ways in which the women constructed their stories in consort with Sanger, there seems to have been some common self-understanding, widely enough shared to seem independent of the doctor, that one might choose prostitution within the context of other alternatives.

Of course we cannot separate such answers from the economic difficulties laboring women faced. But structural factors alone cannot clarify why some women took up prostitution and others in similar straits did not. Nor can they illuminate the histories of women who entered prostitution from comparatively secure economic positions. Almost half of Sanger's subjects, for instance, were domestic servants; servants were long notorious (at least since 1820) for turning to prostitution not because they were desperate for work but because they longed for a change.²⁴ And although the poorest New Yorkers, new immigrants, were well-represented in the 1855 sample—35 percent of Sanger's subjects were Irish, 12 percent German—there were also significant numbers of the native-born: 38 percent, or 762 of the total. Daughters of skilled workers were also present to a surprising extent—30 percent—surprising, since one would suspect their family's prosperity would protect them.²⁵ True, divisions between immigrant and native-born, skilled and unskilled in themselves mean little. Plenty of native-born laboring people found themselves in distressed circumstances by 1855, and the economic distinction between skilled and unskilled broke down in many trades. The point is more general, however. It is possible to see from Sanger's statistics that while a substantial proportion of prostitutes came from the ranks of unskilled immigrants, as one might expect, a large number did not. Even more significantly, a sizable group of women (73) had fathers in the elite artisanal trades—ship carpentry, butchering, silversmithing—and a scattering (49) claimed to be daughters of professional men—physicians, lawyers and clergymen. Still others came from small property-owning families in the city and country, the daughters of shopkeepers, millers and blacksmiths.

Sanger threw up his hands over an array of data that defied his preconceptions. "The numerous and varied occupations of the fathers of those women who answered the question renders any classification of them almost impossible."²⁶ But the range of family circumstances is confounding

only if one assumes that indigence was the major cause of prostitution. In fact, a variety of factors led women into the trade. The daughter of a prosperous ship carpenter could end up on the streets because she was orphaned and left to support herself; she could also use prostitution as a way to escape a harsh father's rule. A country girl, abandoned by a suitor, might go on the town because she knew no other way to earn her bread, or because she was determined to stay in the city rather than return to the farm. A married woman might even hazard the prospects of a hand-to-mouth independence, supported in part by prostitution, rather than submit to a drunken and abusive spouse.

Prostitution as an economic choice dictated by extreme need cannot be understood apart from women's problems in supporting themselves and their consequent forced dependency on men. Prostitution as a social choice, an "inclination," cannot be separated from the entire fabric of that dependency. Sexual mores must have varied among Catholics and Protestants, immigrants and native-born, country and city folk (the evidence is silent on this point). Whatever the differences, however, by the 1850s urban culture exposed all working-class women to modes of sexual exchange which, in certain situations, easily merged with casual prostitution. Sexual favors (and, for wives, domestic services) were the coin with which women, insofar as they could, converted that dependency into a reciprocal relation. Sexual bartering, explicit and implicit, was a common element in relations with men from the time a girl became sexually active. Girls and women traded their sexual favors for food, lodgings and drink. This is not to say that all sexual relations with men were coterminous with prostitution; there were boundaries. Working-class women seem to have known when their daughters and peers threatened to slip over the line into "ruin." Mothers, we shall see, sensed when their girls were approaching "trouble," and "whore" was an insult that women flung about in neighborhood quarrels.

But while middle-class people clearly demarcated opposing erotic spheres of darkness and light, working-class people made more accommodating distinctions. Some women who had "gone to ruin" could find a way back before they became too old to marry. Of all that went on the town, one out of five sooner or later left prostitution, reported the Alms-house commissioners. "They find some way of earning an honest livelihood."²⁷ The parents of Sarah Courtney, an Irish serving girl, sent her to the House of Refuge in 1827 for having "yielded her virtue for gain"; six years later, the warden noted, Sarah had married a respectable workingman. Sarah Freeman, detained a year earlier, had taken up prostitution after the man who kept her died; she was contrite when she entered, the superintendent noted, and some years later he appended the information that she had

married respectably.²⁸ One wonders about these women. Were there difficulties with their husbands? Was there atonement, and what was its price? What was the nature of repentance? The answers remain veiled. Perhaps for the minority of working-class Protestant churchgoers, the boundaries between licit and illicit sex were more rigid, the road back to propriety a difficult one. Christian observance, however, did not necessarily entail strict condemnations of female transgression. It is likely, for example, that free blacks, a highly devout community, held to the permissive views of premarital female sexuality that characterized Afro-American culture throughout the nineteenth century. And even Irish Catholics, whom one would guess to be subject to strict interdictions from the church, seem generally to have been immune to the conception of irredeemable female transgression (perhaps because the American church had not yet embarked on the surveillance of sexual mores for which it later became so well known). In general, laboring people seem to have made their judgments of female vice and virtue in the context of particular situations rather than by applying absolute moral standards.

For working-class women, the pressures of daily life took the form both of need and desire: the need for subsistence, the desire for change. Either could be urgent enough to push a girl or woman into that shady zone not too many steps removed from the daily routines in which she was raised. The resemblance of prostitution to other ways of dealing with men suggests why, for many poor women, selling themselves was not a radical departure into alien territory.

Girls

It was in large part the involvement of young girls in prostitution—or more important, the relationship to the family that juvenile prostitution signified—that brought prostitution to public attention in the 1850s.

Indeed, the discourse of prostitution expressed and deflected popular anxieties about what happened when daughters ventured out on the town. Adolescents and young women found casual prostitution inviting as metropolitan life made it an increasingly viable choice for working girls. Casual prostitution bordered on working-class youth culture; both provided some tenuous autonomy from family life. Of course, there were other reasons for widespread public concern about this kind of youthful sex. Prostitution was inseparable from venereal disease, economic distress, unwanted pregnancy, the sexual degradation of women and class exploitation. The public dis-

course about prostitution, however, also addressed deeper changes in gender relations within the working class.

Prostitution was by no means a happy choice, but it did have advantages that could override those of other, more respectable employments. The advantages were in part monetary, since prostitution paid quite well. The gains could amount to a week or even a month's earnings for a learner, a servant or a street seller; for girls helping their mothers keep house or working in some kind of semi-indentured learning arrangement, money from men might be the only available source of cash. As a thirteen-year-old in the 1830s tartly answered the moralizing warden of the House of Refuge when he insisted on the point, she would, indeed, sell herself for a shilling if she could get no more, and she would prefer to do so (or "play the Strumpet," as he interpolated) to her usual work, scrubbing up in public houses in exchange for food for her family.²⁹ Earnings could be far more substantial than this culprit's shilling. In 1825, for example, fifteen-year-old Jane Groesbeck, who also ended up in the House, earned a glorious five dollars (a poor girl's fortune) when she went to the races and met Mr. G., a merchant storekeeper, who hired Jane and her girlfriend to spend the night with him. Ten years later, Mary Jane Box made between twenty shillings and three dollars every time she slept with a man at a bawdy house; the serving girl Harriet Newbury, a country girl from Pennsylvania, came into a windfall of luck in 1828 when a navy captain gave her ten dollars each time they had intercourse.³⁰ These were gentlemen's prices. Prostitution with workingmen yielded smaller gains, "trifling things"—a few shillings, a meal or admission to the theater. But even to sell oneself for a shilling was to earn in an hour what a seamstress earned in a day in the 1830s.

The lively trade in juvenile prostitution is one of the most striking—and least explored—features of the Victorian sexual landscape. Who were the men who created the demand for young girls' sexual services? It is easy to assume they were bourgeois gentlemen. Certainly gentlemen had money for such pleasures, and Victorian men could use sex with prostitutes to satisfy longings they could not express to their supposedly asexual wives. What we know most about in this regard, the illicit sexuality of the British late Victorians, tends to bear out the assumption that pedophilia was a gentleman's vice that grew out of the bourgeois eroticization of working-class life and depended upon the availability of poor girls for purchase. Dickens's deliciously vulnerable Little Nell was an early, less self-conscious representation of an erotic interest that Lewis Carroll—to take a well-known example—pursued in private photographic sessions with naked little working-class girls, and that fueled a London trade in child prostitutes which became by 1885 a national scandal.³¹

Contrary to this parable of bourgeois (male) depredation, however, the

erotic sensibilities of workingmen were also involved. Juvenile prostitution stemmed not just from class encounters but from the everyday relations of men and girls in working-class neighborhoods. Rape trials, one source of information about illicit sexuality, show that sex with girl children was woven into the fabric of life in the tenements and the streets: out-of-the-ordinary, but not extraordinary.³² Child molestation figured significantly among reported rapes between 1820 and 1860.³³ Poor girls learned early about their vulnerability to sexual harm from grown men, but they also learned some ways to turn men's interest to their own purposes. Casual prostitution was one.

The men who made sexual advances to girls were not interlopers lurking at the edges of ordinary life, but those familiar from daily routines: lodgers, grocers (who encountered girls when they came into their stores on errands) and occasionally fathers. Sometimes the objects of their attentions could be very young. For the men, taboos against sexual involvement with children seem to have been weak; in court, they often alluded to their actions as a legitimate and benign, if slightly illicit, kind of play. A soldier, for example, charged with the rape of a five-year-old in 1842, claimed that he had only done what others had. "It is true I lay the child in the Bunk as I often have done before as well as other men in the same company. I did not commit any violence upon the child."³⁴ This man and others accused seem to have respected a prohibition against "violence," or actual intercourse, while they saw fondling, masturbation and exhibitionism as permissible play. "He then pulled my clothes up," seven-year-old Rosanna Reardon testified of her assailant in 1854, "and carried me behind the counter . . . he unbuttoned his pantaloons and asked if I wanted to see his pistol." "I did not intend to hurt the girl," a grocery clerk protested of his four-year-old victim. He had only taken her on his lap and petted her. "I will never do it again and had no wish to hurt her."³⁵ Episodes like these did not necessarily involve severe coercion; rather, child molestation often involved child's play. "He danced me about," remembered Rosanna Reardon. Michael O'Connor, another girl's assailant, claimed he had merely come visiting on a summer's night—as he said, "took off my hat coat and shoes and went to the front door and sat down with the others"—when two girls out on an errand "commenced fooling around" in the doorway "about which would go upstairs first." He gave one a push and told her to go upstairs and the other to stay. Soon thereafter the mother of the remaining child charged downstairs "and accused me of having put my hands under her Daughter's clothes."³⁶ Whatever really happened, the mother thought there were grounds for suspicion when a grown man took to tumbling about with two girls. Roughhousing, teasing, fondling and horseplay were the same tokens of affection that men gave to children in the normal course

of things. Similarly, the favors men offered in exchange for sexual compliance—pennies and candy—were what they dispensed in daily life to garner children's affection. Men's erotic attention to girls, then, was not a discrete and pathological phenomenon but a practice that existed on the fringes of "normal" male sexuality.

Child molestation could blur into juvenile prostitution. The pennies a man offered to a girl to keep quiet about his furtive fumbings were not dissimilar to the prostitute's price. Adult prostitutes were also highly visible throughout the city, and their presence taught girls something about sexual exchange. A baker's daughter in 1830 learned about the pleasures of the bawdy houses in carrying sewing back and forth between her mother and the prostitutes who employed her to do their seamstressing.³⁷ John McDowall was shocked in 1831 to see little girls in poor wards playing unconcernedly in the streets around the doors of dramshops that served prostitutes; two decades later, Charles Loring Brace observed packs of girls on Corlears Hook hanging about the dance saloons prostitutes frequented and running errands for the inhabitants and their customers.³⁸ For the great majority of girls, however, it was not the example of adult prostitutes that led them into "ruin" but the immediate incentive of contact with interested men. Laboring girls ran across male invitations in the course of their daily rounds—street selling, scavenging, running errands for mothers or mistresses, in walking home from work, in their workplaces and neighborhoods and on the sophisticated reaches of Broadway. Opportunities proliferated as New York's expanding industry and commerce provided a range of customers extending well beyond the traditional clientele of wealthy rakes and sailors. Country storekeepers in town on business, gentlemen travelers, lonely clerks and workingmen were among those who propositioned girls on the street.

Men made the offers, but girls also sought them out. "Walking out" in groups, hanging about corners, flirting with passersby, and generally being "impudent & saucy to men" (as parents committing a girl to the House of Refuge described it) could lead to prostitution.³⁹ The vigilant John McDowall at watch on fashionable Broadway observed "females of thirteen and fourteen walking the streets without a protector, until some pretended gentleman gives them a nod, and takes their arm, and escorts them to houses of assignation."⁴⁰ Catharine Wood, fifteen years old in 1834, was a girl with two trades, stocking making and book folding, and thus more advantaged than an ordinary servant or slop worker. Still, when a girlfriend took her out walking on the Bowery, she could not resist the prospects of nearby Five Points, and began to take men to houses of assignation there. Sarah White, a fur worker in 1840 and likewise from respectably employed working folk, took to walking out at night with her workmates from the shop

and soon left her parents to go "on the town."⁴¹ Girls actively sought out other girls, tempting friends and acquaintances with the comparative luxuries of a life spent "walking out" to places like the Bowery Theater, where Sarah White's brother found her, stressing such pleasures to the still-virtuous as, in the words of one reprobate "how much better clothes she could wear who worked none."⁴² By the 1850s, respectable New Yorkers were appalled at the eroticization of public space girls like these had brought about. "No one can walk the length of Broadway without meeting some hideous troop of ragged girls," an outraged George Templeton Strong reported.⁴³

As witnesses to men's sexual initiatives to adult women, and occasionally objects themselves of those advances, girls must have learned early about the power—and danger—of male desire. As they grew up, however, they could also learn to protect themselves; even more, to bargain for themselves. Girls saw older women trade sex for male support, lodgings, drink and dress; these lessons in exchange educated them about sexual bargaining. As a result, adolescents could sometimes engage in it with considerable entrepreneurial aplomb. The testimonies of a gang of girls committed to the House of Refuge in 1825 for prostitution and pickpocketing give some insight into the mentality and mechanics of sexual bargaining on the street in the early part of the century. Eleven to fifteen years old, the girls had all worked off and on in service but at the time of their apprehension were living at home. They went out during the days street scavenging for their mothers and eventually went for higher stakes, first by prostituting themselves with strangers on the streets, next by visiting a bawdy house behind the Park Theater "where they used to accommodate the men, for from two to twelve shillings." The series of episodes that finally landed them in the House of Refuge began one day when, along with a neighbor boy, they fell into company with a country merchant on Broadway. They took him to a half-finished building near City Hall, where two of the girls went down to the basement with him. While he was having intercourse with one, the other picked his pocket. Their next client was an old man they also met on Broadway. The transaction with him took place right on the street, in a dark spot under the wall of St. Paul's churchyard. While one "was feeling of him," another took his money. Finally apprehended at the theater, where they were spending their spoils, the girls were taken to the House where most of them remained intractably unrepentant: one, put in solitary confinement to soften her heart, "singing, Hollowing, and pounding," pretending to be beaten by the discomfited warden and screaming "Murder."⁴⁴

City life allowed such girls to find a wide range of customers and to travel far enough to thwart their mothers' vigilance. Early experiences with men,

which girls may have shared round with their peers, perhaps bequeathed a bit of knowledge and shrewdness; perhaps the streets taught them how to turn sexual vulnerability to their own uses. To be sure, there were no reliable means of artificial contraception; only later, with the vulcanization of rubber, did condoms become part of the prostitute's equipment. Any sexually active girl would have risked an illegitimate pregnancy, attended by moral and financial burdens that could bring her to the edge of "ruin." Nonetheless, there were ways to practice birth control. Most likely, a girl engaging in sexual barter stopped short of sexual intercourse, allowing the man instead to ejaculate between her legs, the client's customary privilege in the nineteenth century. Recipes for abortifacients and suppositories, I have already noted, probably circulated among young women. If other measures failed, abortions, provided by midwives and "irregular" physicians (as those outside the medical establishment were called), were widely available in American cities. Indeed, ferreting out abortions—both medically induced and self-induced—was a major task of the city coroner. In 1849, the chief official of public health in the city reported that stillbirths were increasing at an alarming rate, and he concluded darkly that the role of "crime and recklessness"—that is, abortion—in this phenomenon "dare not be expressed."⁴⁵

To us now, and to commentators then, selling one's body for a shilling might seem an act imbued with hopelessness and pathos. Such an understanding, however, neglects the fact that this was a society in which many men still saw coerced sex as their prerogative. In this context, the prostitute's price was not a surrender to male sexual exploitation but a way of turning a unilateral relationship into a reciprocal one. If this education in self-reliance was grim, the lessons in the consequences of heterosexual dependency were often no less so.

"On the Town"

Prostitution offered more than money to girls. Its liaisons were one important way they could escape from or evade their families. For young girls, the milieu of casual prostitution, of walking out, could provide a halfway station to the urban youth culture to which they aspired. For older girls, casual prostitution could finance the fancy clothes and high times that were the entrée to that culture. For all ages, support from lovers and clients could be critical in structuring a life apart from the family.

Prostitution and casual sex provided the resources for girls to live on

their own in boardinghouses or houses of assignation—a privilege that most workingwomen would not win until after the First World War.⁴⁶ Before factory work began to offer a more respectable alternative, sex was one of the only ways to finance such an arrangement. The working-class room of one's own offered a girl escape from a father's drunken abuse or a mother's nagging, the privilege of seeing "as much company as she wished" and the ability to keep her earnings for herself.⁴⁷ Sanger touched on this aspect when he identified "ill treatment" in the family as one of the primary reasons girls went into prostitution. The testimony he collected bears witness to the relationship between youthful prostitution and the relations of the household: "My parents wanted me to marry an old man, and I refused. I had a very unhappy home afterward." "My step-mother ill-used me." "My mother ill-treated me." "My father accused me of being a prostitute when I was innocent. He would give me no clothes to wear." "I had no work, and went home. My father was a drunkard, and ill-treated me and the rest of the family."⁴⁸ Sexuality offered a way out. For this reason, while petty theft was the leading cause of boys' commitments to the House of Refuge, the great majority of girls were there for some sexually related offense. Bridget Kelly was the daughter of a dock laborer who drank and beat his children, making her (in the experience of the House of Refuge warden) "an easy prey for Care less persons who persuaded her from home." A washerwoman's daughter made the acquaintance of a young man in 1845 on the Bowery and began meeting him regularly without her mother's knowledge, sometimes at a house of assignation. Her mother found out and put a stop to the courtship, afterwards upbraiding the girl so relentlessly that she finally ran away to live in the house of assignation where she had already lost her virtue; from there it was only a short step to incarceration. A foundry worker brought his daughter to the House in 1850 because, he claimed, she had gone to live in a bad house; the girl said she had left because her parents beat her.⁴⁹

The inducement was freedom from domestic and wage labor. From the parents' point of view, running about the streets went hand in hand with laziness and idleness at home and abnegating one's obligations to earn one's keep. Elizabeth Byrne, her father claimed in 1827, thought he "should support her like a Lady"; he sent her to the House of Refuge to save her from ruin. Other families took the same step. Mary Ann Lyons, a "hard" girl given to singing vulgar songs, had been living with her mother for several months in 1830 "doing little or nothing." "Her brother undertook to punish her for not bringing chips [scavenged wood] to help her Mother in Washing Clothes." Amelia Goldsmith, daughter of a cartman, expected more help from her family "than she ought and because she did not get it, she left her trade" in 1840 for an all-female lodging house.⁵⁰

For many young girls the most immediate restraint on sexual activity was not the fear of pregnancy but rather family supervision. A girl's ability to engage quietly in casual prostitution or sexual bartering depended largely on whether she used streetwalking openly to defy her obligations to her family. She might earn a little money now and then from casual liaisons; as long as she hid the luxuries she gained thereby and continued to earn her keep at home, she might evade suspicion. But part of the allure of prostitution was precisely the chance it offered to break free of work and authority. The "ruin" working people feared for their girls was not sexual activity alone, but sex coupled with irresponsibility; the defiance of the claims of the family went hand in hand with working-class conceptions of immorality. Parents became alarmed and angered, for example, when their girls moved about from one servant's position to another without consulting them. They saw such independent ways as a prelude to trouble. Sometimes the girl had changed to a place in a "bad house," a dance hall or house of assignation where the temptation to dabble in prostitution would have been nearly irresistible. Sometimes, however, the girl provoked her parents' wrath simply by shifting from one place to another. Mary Galloway, for instance, fifteen in 1838 and a shoemaker's daughter, had been enamored of walking the streets since she was thirteen. She left home to go into service "thinking that then she would have a better opportunity to walk out evenings," but this led her continually to change places in search of a situation where she would have more time to herself, and she changed so often that her mother finally thought it best to send her for "correction" to the House of Refuge, where incarceration and the strictest of daily routines would presumably set her straight.⁵¹

Fancy dress also played into prostitution. As in the cases of domestic servants and factory girls, fancy dress signified a rejection of proper feminine behavior and duties. For the girls who donned fine clothes, dress was an emblem of an estimable erotic maturity, a way to carry about the full identity of the adult, and a sign of admission into heterosexual courting. Virtuous girls, who gave over their wages to their families, had no money to spare for such frivolities; from a responsible perspective, fancy dress was a token of selfish gratification at the expense of family needs. The longtime warden of the House of Refuge, who had seen plenty of girls come and go, declared in the 1830s that "the love of dress was the most efficient cause of degradation and misery of the young females of the city."⁵² Sarah Dally is a case in point. Her involvement in prostitution stemmed from a set of circumstances in which fine clothes, freedom from work and resentment of her mother were all combined. In 1829 she was the fifteen-year-old daughter of poor but respectable Irish people. In one of her places at service she befriended another serving girl who was in the habit of staying privately

with gentlemen. In walking out with her friend "in pursuit of beaux," Sarah met a Lawyer Blunt and stayed with him several times. In return, Mr. Blunt liberally set her up with ladies' clothes: a silk coat and dresses, a chemise and lace handkerchief, a gilt buckle (all which she put on to go out walking with him) and a nightgown and nightcap for their private meetings. Sarah successfully concealed the new clothes from her family, but her mother's watchfulness began to chafe. When she complained, her friend convinced her to accompany her to Philadelphia, where Sarah would be free to go out fully on the town. To pay for the trip, the pair tried to rob a house, failed and ended up in jail. The journey back to virtue, however, was far more possible than it would have been for a girl from polite society who had similarly chosen "ruin." Eight years later, Sarah was reported to be respectably married and doing well. She had presumably renounced the delights of ladies' clothes.⁵³

Country girls from New England and upstate New York were also open to the inducements of prostitution in the city. Refugees from the monotony and discipline of rural life, they were drawn by the initial excitement of the life, its sociability and novel comforts. Rachel Near, for instance, came from Poughkeepsie to New York in 1835 to learn the trade of tailoring from her sister. About three months after she arrived she ran into another Poughkeepsie girl on the street whom a man was supporting in a house of assignation. "She persuaded her to go into her House, which was neatly furnished by her ill gotten gain, and asked her to come and live with her, and persuaded her until she consented to do so." There Rachel met a Dr. Johnson, visiting the city from Albany, who supported her in style for six weeks, and she supplemented her earnings from him with visits to a bawdy house "where she used to get from 5 to 7 \$ pr night, some weeks she used to make 40 & 45\$." Rachel's kin found her and sent her back home, but the next summer she ran away from Poughkeepsie and "fully turned out again." Fifteen-year-old Susannah Bulson also followed a well-trodden path. She was an Albany girl who had been "seduced" by a young cabinet-maker. For a few weeks after they began their liaison in 1835, he supported her in a room across the river in Troy, but she did not want to disgrace her family by her presence, so the two left for New York, where he took a room for them in a boardinghouse. A number of the other boarders were single women who came and went as they pleased, and after seeing this kind of life, Susannah "felt she should prefer this kind of pleasure" to living with her young man and left for a house where she set up on her own. Several months later, the man who would have played the part of heartless seducer in a melodramatic rendition of their story was still trying to persuade Susannah to come back to him.⁵⁴

Rural courtships often played a part in urban prostitution. Some young

women had sex with their suitors, were "kept" by them and eventually married: They make no appearance in the historical record. For others, the adventure ended badly; unlike Susannah Bulson, they were the ones left behind, not the ones who did the leaving. It was from such experiences that nineteenth-century popular culture would eventually create the seduced-and-abandoned tale. A virtuous country girl succumbs to her lover's advances; he persuades her, against her better judgment, to follow him to the big city. Once there he cruelly deserts her, leaving her penniless, alone, shamed before her family and the world. William Sanger gave an early version of this plot in his interpretation of the category "seduced and abandoned" that 258 of his subjects had cited as the reason for their fall. "Unprincipled men, ready to take advantage of women's trustful nature, abound, and they pursue their diabolical course unmolested," Sanger explained. The woman, "naturally unsuspecting herself . . . cannot believe that the being whom she has almost deified can be aught but good, and noble, and trustworthy."⁵⁵ Women's generous and indiscriminating nature made them an easy mark.

In truth, it was a bad bargaining position, not a too-compliant nature, that made women a mark for "unprincipled men." Courtship was a gamble; elopement, the possibility of rape and male mobility made it all the more treacherous. Country girls were especially vulnerable to the process whereby desertion led to prostitution. Sanger found that 440 of his subjects were farmers' daughters.⁵⁶ Left alone in the city, often without friends to help them, country girls sometimes had no choice but to turn to the streets for their bread. The sanctions of rural communities gave some protection to young women, but once they isolated themselves from neighbors, family and other women, they could find themselves caught in an escalating series of circumstances in which intercourse, voluntary or involuntary, led to prostitution.

Once again, however, we should avoid interpreting prostitution as a desperate measure. It could also be an act of shrewdness, prompted by a woman's comprehension of the power relations in which she found herself. Once a farm girl perceived the possibilities the city held out, to sell her favors for money was a logical countermove in a sexual system in which men might take what they could get—sometimes through rape—and turn their backs on the consequences. To exact a price from a man, hard cash, must have held some appeal to a woman whose last lover had just skipped off scot-free.

But it would also be wrong to cast prostitution as a deliberate bid for control; mostly, farm girls—like their urban peers—just wanted to live on their own. Once abandoned by a suitor, a young woman could easily want to stay away from the family she had deserted or defied. Cornelia Avery

ran away from home in Connecticut in 1827 with a stagecoach driver her father had forbidden her to marry; when the man deserted her, she took up prostitution instead of going back. And what else could Marian Hubbard do, tired of the farm, and taken in by a scoundrel? Marian's second cousin Joe Farryall from New York, visiting his kin in Vermont in 1835, convinced her to return with him to the city. Although she knew nothing of his character, he persuaded her—or so she later recounted—that she worked too hard, and that he would make a lady of her if she came to New York. Halfway there she slept with him, only to find on arriving that he was the keeper of a brothel inhabited by a dozen other country girls he had lured there under similar pretenses. When the warden of the House of Refuge, where Marian ended up, inquired about Farryall, the watchmen told him that the man made three or four such recruiting trips to the countryside each year.⁵⁷

The money and perquisites from casual prostitution opened up a world beyond the pinched life of the tenements, the metropolitan milieu of fashion and comfort. Every day girls viewed this world from the streets, as if in the audience of a theater: the elaborate bonnets in shop windows, the silk dresses in the Broadway promenade, the rich food behind the windows of glittering eating places. Bonnets, fancy aprons, silk handkerchiefs, pastries were poor girls' treasures, coveted emblems of felicity and style. There were serious drawbacks to prostitution: venereal disease, physical abuse, the pain of early intercourse and the ever-present prospect of pregnancy. While the road back to respectable marriage was not irrevocably closed, it must have been rocky, the reproaches and contempt of kin and neighbors a burden to bear. Still, casual prostitution offered many their best chance for some kind of autonomy—even for that most rare acquisition for a poor girl, a room of her own.

In this context, the imagery of unregeneracy served to interpret a particular kind of adolescent female rebellion. The debauched juvenile would become central to the bourgeois construction of a pathological "tenement class." "Hideous and ragged" girls and young women moved attention away from other villains—capitalist exploitation, deceiving seducers, deserting husbands, the ordinary and sometimes cruel nature of erotic experience between the sexes—to the supposedly pitiable nature of working-class childhood and the supposedly disintegrating moral standards of working-class families.

The urgency that discussions of prostitution took on in the 1850s indicates just how disturbing youthful female independence could be in a society structured culturally on women's dependence on the household. In the public spaces of New York, as well as in domestic service and on the Bowery, the evidence of girls' circumvention of family discipline was

deeply troubling, especially (but not exclusively) to people who saw the family as woman's *only* proper place and asexuality as a cardinal tenet of femininity. The stress on the female reprobate's active pursuit of her appetites was the reformers' rendition of an obvious fact of youthful prostitution: It was not solely the resort of hopelessness and misery.

Antebellum Victorian culture generated two opposing images of the prostitute. One was the preyed-upon innocent, driven by starvation's threat or by a seducer's treachery to take to the streets. Women reformers—especially the ladies of the Female Moral Reform Society—played an important role in popularizing this construction. The prostitute-as-innocent was a sister to the familiar figure of the downtrodden sewing woman and similarly allowed genteel women to stretch their sexual sympathies across class lines. The other image was the hard, vice-ridden jade, who sold her body to satisfy a base appetite for sex or, more likely (such was the difficulty of imagining that women could have active sexual desires), for liquor. This creature was almost wholly beyond redemption, certainly forever cast out from the bonds of womanhood. The prostitute-as-reprobate depended upon older conceptions of the vicious poor, but the figure also assimilated moral "viciousness" into the new environmentalist thought promoted by the secular reformers of the 1840s and 1850s.

In the 1850s it was the "abandoned" female, not the betrayed innocent, who captured public attention. Her popularity reflects the generally hardening tone social commentators were taking toward the poor, as an emerging "scientific" comprehension of urban problems gripped their imagination. The ascendancy of the abandoned woman may also signify a weakening of women's influence in urban reform movements. Women had drawn their reforming energies from evangelicalism. As reformers moved away from a religious to a secular orientation, women's evangelical language of the heart and their empathy with the "fallen" of their sex may have seemed less than relevant to the new breed of scientific philanthropists concerned with environmental solutions to problems of public health and disorder.

We are still too much influenced by the Victorians' view of prostitution as utter degradation to accept easily any interpretation that stresses the opportunities commercial sex provided to women rather than the victimization it entailed. Caution is certainly justified. Prostitution was a relationship that grew directly from the double standard and men's subordination of women. It carried legal, physical and moral hazards for women but involved few, if any, consequences for men. Whatever its pleasures, they were momentary; its rewards were fleeting and its troubles were grave. But then,

the same could be said of other aspects of laboring women's relations with men. Prostitution was one of a number of choices fraught with hardship and moral ambiguity.

Charles Loring Brace, who labored to redeem girls from New York's streets, spoke to the heart of the issue. By the time he began his mission in 1853, poor girls knew enough about the politics of interpretation to invoke the sentimentalist imagery of prostitution in their own defense when dealing with reformers and police. "They usually relate, and perhaps even imagine, that they have been seduced from the paths of virtue suddenly and by the wiles of some heartless seducer. Often they describe themselves as belonging to some virtuous, respectable, and even wealthy family." "Their real history," scoffed the streetwise Brace, "is much more commonplace and matter-of-fact. They have been poor women's daughters, and did not want to work as their mothers did."⁵⁸ In the 1850s, the opportunities for girls to repudiate their mothers' lot in this way were greater than ever.

Chapter 10 The Uses of the Streets

On a winter's day in 1856, an agent for the Children's Aid Society encountered two children out on the street with market baskets. Like hundreds he might have seen, they were desperately poor—thinly dressed and barefoot in the cold—but their cheerful countenances struck him favorably, and he stopped to inquire into their circumstances. They explained that they were out gathering bits of wood and coal their mother could burn for fuel, and agreed to take him home to meet her. In a bare tenement room, lacking heat, furniture or any other comforts, he met a "stout, hearty woman" who, even more than her children, testified to patient perseverance in a crushing situation. A widow, she supported her family as best she could by street peddling. Their room was bare because she had been forced to sell off her clothes, furniture and bedding to supplement her earnings. As she spoke, she sat on a pallet on the floor and rubbed the hands of the two younger siblings of the pair from the street. "They were tidy, sweet children," noted the agent, "and it was very sad to see their chilled faces and tearful eyes." Here was a scene that seemingly would have touched the heart of even a frosty Victorian soul. Yet in concluding his report, the agent's perceptions took a curious turn. "Though for her pure young children too much could hardly be done, in such a woman there is little confidence to be put . . . it is probably, some cursed vice has thus reduced her, and that, if her children be not separated from her, she will drag them down, too."¹

Home visits like this one had been standard practice for thirty years. But why the indictment, seemingly so unsupported? Philanthropists cus-

tomarily parlayed harsh judgments about, but in the 1830s such a devoted mother surely would have won approbation as “deserving” and “virtuous.” What, then, accounts for the distinction between her and her “innocent” children?

The answer lies in a curious place—the streets where the agent from the Children’s Aid Society first met the children. Their presence there was to him *prima facie* evidence of their mother’s vicious character. Between roughly 1846 and 1860, this association between the streets, children and parental depravity crystallized in bourgeois thought into a dramatic imagery of the fearful pathology of the “tenement classes.” The problem of the streets generated a discourse and a politics which engaged some of New York’s ablest, most energetic and imaginative reformers. Like the earlier evangelicals, they aimed to eradicate poverty itself. Their aims shifted, however, from the redemption of souls to the transformation of the material conditions of the city. Although Christian zeal inspired many of them, salvation was only an incidental byproduct of their efforts. Urban social geography, not the landscape of the soul, engaged their ardor for exploration.²

The Reformers

The ascendancy of the problem of the streets to paramount importance on the reform agenda in the 1850s can be attributed to two men, George Matsell and Charles Loring Brace. Matsell, New York’s first chief of police, sounded the call for action in 1849, when he used the forum of his office’s semiannual report to alert the public to “a deplorable and growing evil” of which, he insinuated, they did not know the half. Poor children were overrunning New York’s streets, spreading crime, disorder and disease into every thoroughfare, every cranny. “I allude to the constantly increasing number of vagrants, idle and vicious children of both sexes, who infest our public thoroughfares,” the chief solemnly warned.³

Matsell was a man who liked to take himself seriously. Son of a tailor and a printer by trade, he had worked himself up through the Tammany ranks, garnering the plum of the chief’s spot when the city established its first professional police force in 1845.⁴ On his inauguration (according to his inveterate enemy, the labor journalist Mike Walsh) the chief promptly commissioned a bust of himself for the office and saddled his subordinates with the cost. Walsh held Matsell and Matsell’s face in utter contempt: “It is difficult to conceive why a fellow so revoltingly ill-looking and stupid

should desire to give publicity to that which other ugly people take pains to conceal.” The question of the man’s looks and the man’s figure aside (he weighed more than 300 pounds and was, in Walsh’s words, a “degraded and pitiful lump of blubber and meanness,” a “Beastly Bloated Booby”⁵), the anecdote of the bust reveals an unabashed drive toward self-aggrandizement which was also to play into the report of 1849.

On one level, the report was Matsell’s bid for a place in the ranks of New York’s most distinguished reformers, alongside such men as the learned John Griscom and the well-born Robert Hartley. Matsell cast himself as a heroic sentry who cried the news to his fellow citizens of a threat to the very survival of their city. He made the case for himself at the expense of the city that employed him by casting the police (and their chief) in a bold, noble light against a dark and menacing background.

There had been strong opposition to the creation of the police, and their participation in the bloody Astor Place Riot in 1849 intensified public protest. In the context of this political battle, the report, published in the aftermath of the riot, functioned as a sensational advertisement for the necessity—the indispensability—of the police as an army standing between civilized life and a criminal invasion. It is difficult to convey fully the report’s inflammatory effect; a few phrases will have to do: “Their numbers are almost incredible,” Matsell said of the street children. The danger was so great, yet so concealed, that those whose “business and habits do not permit them a searching scrutiny” of the city around them (i.e., everyone except the police) could only be dimly aware of the threat. “The degrading and disgusting habits of these almost infants” were such that “it is humiliating to be compelled to recognize them as a part and portion of the human family.” “Clothed in rags” and “filthy in the extreme,” “cunning and adroit,” habitués of “the lowest dens of drunkenness and disease,” one looked in vain for vestiges of childhood innocence in them.⁶

Weird and paranoid as the text seems now, it was rapidly reprinted, widely circulated and quoted all over the newspapers. No one seems to have taken issue (Mike Walsh had left off publishing his paper for a career in professional politics). The wide acceptance shows how much a particular narrative mode had come to structure perceptions of the working class. Matsell’s alarmist exposé of high crime seemed true because he packaged his observations within the rhetoric and conventions of an established genre of reportage about the city, the urban sketch. Dating from Pierce Egan’s *Life in London*, published in 1821, the sketch was a fictional tour of the city in which a cosmopolitan man-about-town, the author/narrator, conducted his readers through the metropolis, chiefly the spots of vice and poverty respectable people would never otherwise visit. In New York, the penny presses, which began publishing in the 1830s, serialized sketches for a mass

audience; in the late 1840s, journalists like Ned Buntline, George Foster and Solon Robinson began packaging their sketches as books: Buntline's immensely popular *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, Foster's series *New York in Slices*, *New York by Gas-Light* and *New York Naked*, Robinson's *Hot Corn: Life Scenes in New York Illustrated*.⁷ The short sketches in reform literature—the accounts of home visits—developed in parallel with these literary sketches and also appeared in the penny newspapers as news-about-town. Reports from home visitors likewise presented their ramblings about the poor quarters of New York in graphic and lurid detail, and the two forms played off each other. Reformers derived some of their imaginative zest from the literary accounts and began publishing sketches themselves in the 1850s, and the journalists drew on reformers for their details of low life. Robinson, for example, centered his “narratives of misery” on encounters of fictional characters with the real-life reformer Louis Pease of the Five Points House of Industry. While the sketch writers could create animated and sympathetic portrayals of working-class life, they also peopled their most exotic and titillating pictures of urban poverty with depraved creatures who bore a strong resemblance to the “vicious” poor.

The lines of literature and reform converged in Matsell, who used the role of venturesome cosmopolitan to heighten his credibility as reformer. As chief of police he posed as the official man-about-town, the hardy narrator who in the people's service gallantly strode into those fearful regions where genteel readers feared to tread. If, in the end, he was only dramatizing mundane (if unpleasant) encounters with little scavengers, peddlers and child prostitutes—encounters that many middle-class people had on the streets—then all the more compelling. This was the best kind of exposé, the one that recast the familiar within the conventions of suspense, one that electrified the ordinary with the excitement of the titillating, the significant and the grand. Literary convention as much as social reality created the urban horror in which ordinary working-class people, going about their daily business, came to figure as an almost subhuman species.

One of Matsell's readers was Charles Loring Brace, a new graduate of Yale seminary and scion of a distinguished Connecticut family of declining fortunes. In 1852 Brace had just returned from a European tour, inspired but also vaguely shaken by what he had seen in the aftermath of the revolutions of 1848. Looking for meaningful ways to help the laboring classes with whose aspirations he had sympathized in Europe, he immersed himself in New York in city mission work. Matsell's observations echoed what Brace was coming to learn in his work with boys in the mission. Moved to act, in 1853 Brace founded the Children's Aid Society (CAS), a charity that concerned itself with all poor children but especially with street “orphans,” as the society was wont to call its beneficiaries.⁸

Throughout the 1850s, the CAS carried on the work Matsell had begun, documenting and publicizing the plight of street children in vivid prose. Together, Matsell and Brace laid out the parameters of the problem of the streets that gripped the socially conscious in the 1850s. Although the *problems* of the streets—the fights, the crowds, the crime, the children—were nothing new, the “problem” itself represented altered bourgeois perceptions and a broadened political initiative. An area of social life that had been taken for granted, an accepted feature of city life, became visible, subject to scrutiny and intervention.

Matsell's report and the writing Brace undertook in the 1850s distilled the particular way the genteel had designated themselves arbiters of the city's everyday life. Clearly, the moment had been long in the making. Since the 1820s moral reformers had conceived their task as refashioning the cultural milieu of the poor; the campaign against the streets was one episode in a long offensive. Nonetheless, that offensive reached a new pitch in the 1850s. Never had New York faced social problems of such magnitude; never had bourgeois fears of the poor been so intense. In the face of this crisis, reformers moved out with unprecedented energy and confidence, buoyed by a conviction of their abilities to change the very face of the city.

The reasons for the consolidation of bourgeois consciousness in the 1850s are complex. The recovery in the 1840s from the prolonged depression that followed the Panic of 1837 was one factor, a signal proof that capitalism—what New Yorkers knew as “commerce and trade”—was capable of regenerating itself. A new breed of entrepreneurs rode the tide of recovery, often men who had risen from humble stations to positions of wealth and power: the clothiers, the broker-speculators, ex-artisans like the publisher and mayor (1844–45) James Harper or, for that matter, Matsell himself. More generally, the great outpouring of domestic ideology in this period, in advice books, sermons, novels and ladies' magazines, widely disseminated conceptions of a genteel cultural identity. This identity still incorporated Protestant piety—certainly the observance of Protestant forms—but its ties to evangelicalism were looser than they had been in the 1820s and 1830s. In the 1840s, domesticity had become a social program as much as a religious one, devoted to what Catharine Beecher, a preeminent exponent of true womanhood, called “the building of a glorious temple” to democracy.⁹ Domestic ideology, not religious ardor, allowed reformers to expand their support beyond the circles of zealots of the 1830s; it also gave them the impetus and the popular interest to begin translating reform measures into the law.

The Crisis of the 1850s

New York in the 1850s contained extremes of wealth and poverty. There was an elegant downtown of expensive shops and residences, mostly serene. In the poor parts of town, wretched new arrivals stumbled about, ragged and gaunt. There were shanties on the outskirts, and here and there, sights of shocking filth and poverty. Many, of course, beginning in 1847, were refugees from the Irish Potato Famine. Melville's hero Redburn need not have traveled to the British Isles to confront the terrors of human misery; in the city from which he sailed he could have found ragged women and children crouching in basement entryways, if not in holes in the ground as he did in Liverpool.

The crisis was evident in the sight of homeless indigents who roamed the streets. Although real-estate developers built blocks and blocks of new tenements in the northern wards, the construction could not absorb the flood of immigrants. New York's population increased by 300,000 over the decade, to a total of about 813,000. The more resourceful of those who could not afford or could not find lodgings threw up shacks in empty lots outside the built-up districts and squatted there; others, disoriented and at wit's end, wandered through the streets looking for housing, kin, work or, at least, a spot to shelter them from the elements. A small newspaper notice from 1850 reported an occurrence that was atypical enough to be newsworthy, but certainly not rare: "Six poor women with their children, were discovered Tuesday night by some police officers, sleeping in an alleyway, in Avenue B, between 10th and 11th streets. When interrogated they said they had been compelled to spend their nights where ever they could obtain any shelter. They were in a starving condition, and without the slightest means of support."¹⁰ This was uptown and east of the Bowery, in a poor neighborhood. But homeless people also appeared in more prosperous locales like the business sections around City Hall. Police Inspector William Bell, in his laconic and monumentally phlegmatic fashion, described one desperate case he attended there: "I found a woman and Girl about 7 or 8 years of age sitting on the coping in the rain. I asked her where she lived. She appeared not to understand English. I told her I would give her her choice—to go home or to go to Blackwell's Island for 6 months—She appeared to understand me as she got up and went away."¹¹

Although most indigents managed eventually to double up in other people's rooms, overcrowding took its toll. Entire families crowded into sublet small back bedrooms. In some pockets of what is now the Lower East

Side, population densities approached those of London's worst neighborhoods.¹² Public health deteriorated drastically. When cholera struck in 1849, it raced through the tenements like fire and fanned out over the rest of the city. By fall, more than 5,000 people had died. Typhus, an immigrants' disease of dirt and overcrowding, was endemic and, in some sections of the city, became epidemic in 1852. Deaths from consumption also rose sharply, especially in the small black community and among immigrants, who were the principal victims of overcrowding. General mortality climbed, peaking in 1849 and 1853 but through 1860 remaining far above the stable level of the forty years before the Famine migration. In 1859, the mortality rate was 1 in 27, far higher than that of Paris (1 in 37) or London (1 in 40). Deaths of children also increased alarmingly: In 1820, 38 percent of children under the age of five died; in 1850, the figure was 52 percent and remained the same in 1860, a proportion equal to the infant mortality rates of the worst English factory districts. "The infants and children die in fearful ratios," one investigation acknowledged.¹³

Economically, the post-Panic upswing of the 1840s continued until the depression of 1853–54, which anticipated the Panic of 1857. The surge of impoverished laborers into the city, apart from the social perils they posed, meant high profits for trade and industry. Many workingmen, we have seen, wanted things to be different. In 1850 associated craftworkers had taken to the streets and to the committee rooms of the Industrial Congress to combat the "trickish system of speculators that makes use of us like machines," as the window shade painters put it so eloquently.¹⁴ The employment of immigrants exacerbated the processes of sweating and deskilling already proceeding apace in the crafts. But good times for the city's employers came to an end with the downturn in the business cycle and then the far more serious Panic, which approached in its gravity the catastrophe of 1837. Unemployment soared. In 1857, when businesses first began to fold in the fall, an estimated thousand people a day were discharged; by the end of October, some 20,000 workers in the clothing trade (out of a total of 30,000) were out of work. In response, laboring men organized a movement of the unemployed that reached out beyond the crafts to any man (but not woman) by virtue of his lack of work. In 1854–55 and again in 1857, thousands of workingmen marched to demand jobs and relief from the Common Council. Troops and militia were called out to protect the Sub-Treasury and the Custom House. To one visitor from Britain, this all had the familiar ring of class warfare, despite all one had heard of American equality: Even in America, he wrote in 1858, "bands of men paraded in a menacing manner through the streets of the city demanding work and bread."¹⁵

It was this sense of impending catastrophe that animated a second generation of reformers to formulate a wide-ranging program of social renewal.

These activists reoriented themselves away from the familiar categories of pietism—virtue and vice—toward a surveillance of the material conditions of city life. Public health, mortality rates and housing conditions became their chief concerns. They pursued a pietist science of poverty, based on utilitarian premises of standardization and efficiency but also on a consideration of the moral properties of the environment. This group included the leaders of the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor (AICP), especially the influential Robert Hartley, the public health expert John Griscom, William Sanger, Charles Loring Brace, the women of the American Female Guardian Society and Louis Pease of the Five Points House of Industry.¹⁶

Women were not prominent among these philanthropists. The American Female Guardian Society, descendant of the Female Moral Reform Society, did turn to environmentalist measures with a shelter for homeless women opened in 1847, vocational programs and a “placing-out” program for destitute children to rural foster homes. But most of the female associations that survived were not inclined toward the new analysis, with its emphasis on medical language and its arrays of statistics. Rather, they held onto the familiar methods of moral reform, to be belittled by some male reformers as “unscientific.”¹⁷

The common enemy of the tenement classes brought these men together. A precursor to the “dangerous classes” (a term not used widely in America until after the Civil War), the tenement classes were conceived as a source of both moral and physical contagion—agents, not victims, of social distress, active allies of “sickness and pauperism.” In 1842, when John Griscom published his influential report on public health, the phrase had not yet materialized. He referred to his subjects as the laboring population. In Griscom’s writing, laboring people were products of their environment, fading back into the material squalor that was his main focus—shadows on crumbling walls, ghosts in garbage-strewn hallways. Still, they did carry on as active, coping human beings, objects of pity if not of sympathy.¹⁸ With the invention of the tenement classes, however, the distinctions between people and their surroundings began to blur, and humanitarian sentiment faded away. The tenement classes and the tenements themselves appeared equally loathsome.

An official investigation of the tenement house problem in 1857 enlarged the scope of the discussion.¹⁹ This “scientific” undertaking assimilated the conventions of the urban sketch to produce an account far outstripping in its sensationalism the productions of the 1840s. The police force contributed to the genre by shedding light on a milieu that had been, except for the incursions of tract visitors, mostly closed to the genteel. The popularization of the idea of the tenement classes after 1850 was partly due to publicized

police investigations like Matsell’s and to accounts written by journalists who accompanied policemen on their rounds—or, conversely, by urban explorers who ventured into the dark places of the city under police escort (Dickens’s visit to Five Points, chronicled in his *American Notes* of 1842, is a case in point). The lurid narrative of the Tenant House Report of 1857 vied with the detective stories of the (deceased) New Yorker Edgar Allan Poe in its allusions to unspeakable horrors. In the report, a pack of state legislators became men-about-town. Braving what the “mere theorist in political economy”—pantywaist!—could only picture to himself, these daring men steeled themselves to sights that they could not have imagined. The intrepid explorers plunged into Corlears Hook as if it were a remote African settlement on the Congo, its “mysteries” and “horrors” tucked away from civilized knowledge. “Though expecting to look upon poverty in squalid guise, vice in repulsive aspects, and ignorance of a degraded stamp,” they assured their readers, “we had not yet formed an adequate conception of the extremes to which each and all of these evils could reach.”²⁰ The parallel between fact and fiction was not lost on the committee members, who claimed they had visited scenes that, “if portrayed in the pages of romance, might be regarded as creations of diseased fancy.”²¹ These were voyeuristic journeys into the heart of darkness, the enthralling, “unimaginable” sinfulness of working-class life hidden away behind the facade of bourgeois society.

Why attempt to convey to the imagination by words the hideous squalour and deadly effluvia, the dim, undrained courts oozing with pollution, the dark, narrow stairways, decayed with age, reeking with filth, overrun, with vermin; the rotted floors, ceilings begrimed and often too low to permit you to stand upright; the windows stuffed with rags? or why try to portray the gaunt, shivering forms and wild ghastly faces, in these black and beetling abodes?²²

In contrast to Griscom’s characterizations in 1842, the poor of the Tenant House Report never did anything. They did not converse, or cook, or do laundry, or discipline their children; mostly they just peered out from their “fever-nests,” an exhausted and depleted species. Crowded together, the pathologies of the “pariah inhabitants” fed on each other. The festering cancer threatened to contaminate the whole body social:

Narrow alleys, dark, muddy, gloomy lanes, courts shut in by high walls, and dwellings, into the secrets of which the sun’s rays never penetrate, are a portion of the veins and arteries of a great city; and if they be disregarded, the heart and limbs of the city will sooner or

later suffer, as surely as the vitals of the human system must suffer by the poisoning or disease of the smallest vehicle.²³

Family life was one of the principal sources of infection. A view of familial patterns as the preeminent source of poverty moved to the center of the reformers' etiology, displacing the evangelical belief in the defective moral character of the individual as the fundamental cause. In the web of images of blight and disease the reformers used, the family emerged as a recurring motif. The tenement house itself was "the parent of constant disorders, and the nursery of increasing vices."²⁴ This attention to the importance of the family came from bourgeois men's and women's own preoccupations with domesticity. When reformers entered tenement households, they saw a domestic sparseness which contradicted their deepest understanding about what constituted a morally sustaining household; material effects and domestic morality were closely connected. "[Their] ideas of domestic comfort and standard of morals, are far below our own," observed the AICP. The urban poor had intricately interwoven family lives, but they had no *homes*. "Homes—in the better sense—they never know," declared the 1857 investigating committee. The AICP scoffed at even using the word: "homes . . . if it is not a mockery to give that hallowed name to the dark, filthy hovels where many of them dwell." The children, who should be protected within the domestic sphere, were instead encouraged to labor in the streets, where they "graduate in every kind of vice known."²⁵

Children's presence on the streets was thus not a *symptom* of poverty but a cause. In opposition to the ever more articulate and pressing claims of New York's organized workingmen, these first scientific experts on urban poverty proposed that family relations, not industrial capitalism, were responsible for the massive distress which anyone could see was no transient state of affairs. Low wages, unemployment, even the crisis of overexpansion of the city's population might be irrelevant to the problem of poverty: As the AICP claimed, families were "more deteriorated by the defects of their habitations, corrupting associations, and surrounding nuisances, than by the greatest pecuniary want to which they are subjected."²⁶

Two lines of social thought, then, came together in the interest in the streets. One was the concern with public health, which grew stronger after the cholera epidemic of 1849. The street was the path whereby the malign energies of the tenement spread outward; "the multitude of half-naked, dirty and leering children" carried contamination from the "fever-nests."²⁷

The other was the absorption in domesticity as the paramount mode of civilized life. The presence of children on the streets, besides being morally and epidemiologically dangerous, was proof of how tragically lacking the

working poor were in this respect. From both standpoints, a particular geography of sociability—the engagement of the poor in street life rather than in the home—became in itself evidence of a pervasive urban pathology.

"Idle and Vicious Children"

New York's streets, we have seen, in large part belonged to its working-class people. Family economies bridged the distance between public and private to make the streets a sphere of domestic life. For poor children, the streets were a playground and a workplace. Street life, with its panoply of choices, its rich and varied texture, its motley society, played a central role in their upbringing, part and parcel of a moral conception of childhood that emphasized early independence contingent on early responsibility.

George Matsell was in part reacting to a great expansion of children's presence on the streets that took place after 1846. The crowds of ragged urchins, which both appalled and fascinated him and his contemporaries, were in part a consequence of the population explosion in that decade, in part a result of changes in hiring practices. In the crafts, the use of apprentices had long been declining, but in the 1840s apprentices virtually disappeared from artisan workshops, as masters rearranged work to take advantage of a labor market glutted with impoverished adults. Where apprenticeship did survive, the old perquisites, room and board and steady work, were often gone: The "halfway" apprenticeships which did remain provided only irregular and intermittent work to boys. Small girls, too, found themselves replaced by young Irishwomen in the service positions that had traditionally been theirs. In New England industrial centers, children shifted from apprenticeships and domestic service into the factories. New York, however, lacked the large establishments that elsewhere gave work to the young, and the outwork system was limited in its abilities to absorb child workers.²⁸ Thus while New York's streets had always been a domain for children, they took on a new importance in the 1850s as a major employer of child labor.

Huckstering was the most reliable legitimate employment for children on the streets. The resurgence of huckstering (or street peddling) in the 1850s took place right alongside the debut of such modern institutions of marketing as A. T. Stewart's department store; the efflorescence of this ancient form of urban trade is one index of the strains which children's rising unemployment in other sectors placed on family economies. Musing in 1854 on a collection of New York sketches entitled *Hot Corn Stories* (after

the indigenous Manhattan delicacy), George Templeton Strong wonderfully evoked the way in which the street sellers' presence tinged the metropolitan atmosphere: "*Hot Corn* suggests so many reminiscences of sultry nights in August or early September, when one has walked through close, unfragrant air and flooding moonlight and crowds . . . and heard the cry rising at every corner, or has been lulled to sleep by its mournful cadence in the distance as he lay under a sheet and wondered if tomorrow would be cooler."²⁹ Hucksters, both adults and children, sold all manner of necessities and delicacies. Downtown, passersby could buy treats at every corner: hot sweet potatoes, baked pears, tea cakes, fruit, candy and hot corn itself. In residential neighborhoods, hucksters sold household supplies door to door: fruits and vegetables, matchsticks, scrub brushes, sponges, strings and pins. Children assisted adult hucksters, went peddling on their own and worked in several low-paying trades that were their special province: crossing sweeping for girls, errand running, boot blacking, horse holding and newspaper selling for boys. There were also the odd trades in which children were particularly adept, those unfamiliar and seemingly gratuitous forms of economic activity which abounded in nineteenth-century metropolises: One small boy whom Virginia Penny found in 1859 made his living in warm weather by catching butterflies and peddling them to canary owners.³⁰

The growth of the street trades meant that large numbers of children, who two decades earlier would have worked under close supervision as apprentices or servants, spent their days away from adult discipline. This situation magnified children's opportunities for illicit gain, the centuries-old filching of apprentices and serving girls—the thieving which Matsell argued was reaching epidemic proportions. When parents sent their children out to the streets to earn a living, the consequences were not always what they intended. We have already seen how chores like scavenging could lead to theft. While robbing people—pickpocketing and “baggage smashing”—seems to have been limited to professional child thieves (properly trained by adult sponsors), appropriating random objects was another matter. Child peddlers were not averse to lifting hats, umbrellas and odd knickknacks from the household entryways they frequented in their rounds, or snatching shop goods displayed outside on the sidewalks as they roamed about.³¹ Indeed, children skilled in detecting value in the seemingly inconsequential could as easily spot it in other people's loose ends. As the superintendent of the juvenile asylum wrote of one malefactor, “He has very little sense of moral rectitude, and thinks it but little harm to take small articles.”³² A visitor to the city in 1857 was struck by the swarms of children milling around the docks, “scuffling about, wherever there were bags of coffee and hogsheds of sugar.” Armed with sticks, “they ‘hooked’ what

they could.”³³ The targets of such pilfering were analogous to those of scavenging: odd objects, unattached to persons. The booty of children convicted of theft and sent to the juvenile house of correction in the 1850s included, for example, a bar of soap, a copy of the *New York Herald* and lead and wood from demolished houses. Pipes, tin roofing and brass door-knobs, Chief Matsell warned, were likewise endangered.³⁴

The police often made scavenging synonymous with theft when defining crime and vagrancy. A vagrancy charge depended on whether or not an officer considered a child to be engaged in legitimate activity. It is possible, then, that the increase in juvenile commitments (from 475 in 1851 to 936 in 1860) came partly from the tendency of the police to see a child on the streets as inherently criminal.³⁵ Charles Loring Brace noticed the ongoing confrontation between children, police and mothers in Corlears Hook. The streets teemed with “wild ragged little girls who were flitting about . . . some with baskets and poker gathering rags, some apparently seeking chances of stealing. . . . The police were constantly arresting them as ‘vagrants,’ when the mothers would beg them off from the good-natured Justices, and promise to train them better in the future.”³⁶ The journalist George Foster thought that many arrests of children for petty larceny were due to the police's narrow view of what constituted private property. The city jail, Foster wrote, was filled, along with other malefactors, “with young boys and girls who have been caught asleep on cellar doors or are suspected of the horrible crime of stealing junk bottles and old iron!”³⁷ As children's presence in the public realm became criminal, so did the gleaning of its resources. The distinction between things belonging to no one and things belonging to someone blurred in the minds of propertied adults as well as propertyless children.

So when reformers accused working-class parents of encouraging their children to a life of crime when they sent them out to the streets to earn their keep, they were not always wrong. Parents were not necessarily concerned with whether or not their children took private property. Some did not care to discriminate between stolen and scavenged goods; the very poorest could not afford to quibble with their children about whether or not a day's earnings came from illicit gain. One small boy picked up by the CAS told his benefactors that his parents had sent him out chip picking with the instructions “you can take it wherever you can find it”—although like many children brought before the charities, this one may have been embroidering his own innocence at his parents' expense.³⁸

But children also took their own chances, without their parents' knowledge. We have seen how girls gambled with prostitution, another lure of street life. This is why an upstanding German father tried to prevent his fourteen-year-old daughter from going out scavenging after she lost her

place in domestic service. "He said, 'I don't want you to be a rag-picker. You are not a child now—people will look at you—you will come to harm,' " as the girl recounted the tale. The "harm" he feared was the course taken by a teenage habitué of the waterfront in whom Inspector Bell took a special interest in 1851. After she rejected his offer of a place in service, he learned from a junk shop proprietor that, along with scavenging around the docks, she was "in the habit of going aboard the Coal Boats in that vicinity and prostituting herself." Charles Loring Brace claimed that "the life of a swill-gatherer, or coal-picker, or chiffonier in the streets soon wears off a girl's modesty and prepares her for worse occupation," and Matsell claimed that huckster girls solicited the clerks and employees they met on their rounds of countinghouses. Petty theft, too, could be lucrative for children. By midcentury, New York was the capital of American crime, and there was a place for children, small and adept as they were, on its margins. Its full-blown economy of contraband, with the junk shops at the center, allowed children to exchange pilfered and stolen goods quickly and easily. Anything, from scavenged bottles to nicked top hats, could be sold immediately.³⁹

The self-reliance that the streets fostered through petty crime also extended to living arrangements. Abandoned children, orphans, runaways and footloose boys made the streets their home, sleeping out with companions in household areas, wagons, market stalls and saloons. In the summer of 1850, the *Tribune* noted that the police regularly scared up thirty or forty boys sleeping downtown along Nassau and Ann streets. They included boys with homes as well as real vagabonds.⁴⁰ Prostitution was the only way girls could get away from home, but boys were less constrained: "Sleeping out" was a permissible sort of boyhood escapade. Chief Matsell reported that in warm weather, crowds of roving boys, many of them sons of respectable parents, absented themselves from their families for weeks. Such was Thomas W., who came to the attention of the CAS; "sleeps in stable," the case record notes. "Goes home for clean clothes; and sometimes for his meals." Thomas's parents evidently tolerated the arrangement, but this was not always the case. Boys as well as girls could strike out on their own to evade parental discipline. John Lynch, for example, left home because of some difficulty with his father. His parent's complaint to the police landed him in the juvenile house of correction on a vagrancy charge.⁴¹

Reformers like Matsell and the members of the CAS tended to see such children as either orphaned or abandoned, symbols of the misery and depravity of the poor. Their perceptions, incarnated in the waifs of sentimental novels, gained wide credibility in nineteenth-century social theory and popular thought. Street children were essentially "friendless and homeless," declared Charles Loring Brace. "No one cares for them, and they care

for no one."⁴² His judgment, if characteristically harsh, was not without truth. Orphanage was far more frequent among all classes in the nineteenth century than it is today. Last-born children could easily see both parents die before they reached adulthood. Poor people were more adversely affected than their well-housed contemporaries by contagious diseases, unhealthful work and unsanitary living conditions and thus often died at earlier ages. If children without parents had no kin or friendly neighbors to whom to turn, they had to fend for themselves. This is what happened to the two small children of a deceased stonemason, who had been a widower. After the father died, the pair "wandered around, begging cold victuals, and picking up, in any way they were able, their poor living." William S., fifteen years old, had lost his parents when very young. After a stay on a farm as an indentured boy, he ran away to the city, where he slept on the piers and supported himself by carrying luggage off passenger boats: "William thinks he has seen hard times," the CAS agent recorded.⁴³

But the evidence reformers garnered about the "friendless and homeless" young should also be taken with a grain of salt. Just as reformers were more sympathetic to those women who claimed that seduction or starvation had driven them to prostitution, the CAS, a major source of these tales, favored those children who came before the society's agents as victims of orphanage, abandonment or familial cruelty. Accordingly, young applicants for aid could present themselves in ways pitched to gain favor. Little Johnny the street seller, a great favorite with the society, confessed that he had used the ploy of orphanage to gain admission to their Newsboys' Lodging House. The truth he admitted, however, was a melodramatic tale as appealing as the original to the hearts of the charity agents. His drunken parents, he explained, had sent him to the streets to steal and beg to support their vices. Whatever the veracity of his story, it meshed nicely with the beliefs about working-class parents that he must have sensed in his benefactors.⁴⁴ In reality, there were few children so entirely friendless as the CAS liked to believe. The reformers' category of the street orphan concealed a variety of circumstances. In the worst New York slums, families managed to stay together and to take in those kin and friends who lacked households of their own. Orphaned children as well as those who were temporarily parentless—whose parents, for instance, had found employment elsewhere—typically found homes with older siblings, grandparents and aunts.⁴⁵

Working-class families, however, were often far from harmonious. Girls and young women, we have seen, sometimes took considerable risks to escape them. Interdependence, enforced cooperation and obligatory sharing in the family wage economy bred conflicts that weighed heavily on the young. In response, children sometimes chose—or were forced—to strike out on their own. Relations with stepparents often generated tensions

which eventually pushed a child out of the household. Two brothers whom a charity visitor found sleeping in the streets, for example, explained that they had left their mother when she moved in with another man after their father deserted her. If a natural parent died, the remaining stepparent could be indifferent to the fate of the stepchild; a stepmother, facing dismal prospects for herself and her own offspring, might reject the burden of additional children. "We haven't got no father nor mother," testified a twelve-year-old wanderer of himself and his younger brother. Their father, a shoemaker, had remarried when their mother died; when he died, their stepmother moved away and left them, "and they could not find out anything more about her."⁴⁶

The difficulties experienced by all, children and adults, in finding work in these years also contributed to a kind of halfway orphanage, as family members traveled about seeking employment. Parents seeking work elsewhere could leave children in New York in situations that subsequently collapsed and cast the children on their own. The parents of one boy, for example, left him at work in a printing office when they moved to Toronto. Soon after they left, he was thrown out of work; to support himself he lived on the streets and worked as an errand boy, newsboy and bootblack. Similarly, adolescents whose parents had placed them in unpleasant or intolerable situations might simply leave. A widow boarded her son with her sister when she went into service; the boy ran away when his aunt "licked him." Because of the estrangements and uncertainties such arrangements entailed, parents sometimes lost track of their children. The widower Mr. Pangborne, for example, put his little girl out to board when he signed on to a whaling ship in 1849; when he returned, he found that the woman in charge had lost the child in the streets. He finally located his daughter in the municipal orphanage, where she had been placed as an abandoned child.⁴⁷

What reformers portrayed, then, as a stark tableau of virtue and vice was in actuality a complicated geography of family life, invisible to men and women who believed a child's place was in the home, under the moral tutelage of a woman. Children were expected to earn their keep, and when they could not, they took to the streets. To reformers, this response was *de facto* proof of parental depravity.

Although reformers included both parents in their condemnations of working-class families, the indictments affected women more than men. Women dealt with the charities more often than did men: In 1858, for instance, the AICP aided 27 percent more women. And mothers were more directly involved than fathers in the domestic labor that was the cause of all the alarm. Single mothers, in particular, relied on their children's casual employment in the streets. In general, poor women were more responsible for children, both from the perspective of reformers and within the reality

of the working-class household: Like other women, motherhood was central to their adult lives. Yet as genteel society saw it, mothering was an expression of an innate "womanly" nature which took the particular psychological and material forms of emotional nurturance and a comfortable home. The very different patterns of working-class motherhood, shaped by social factors reformers were ill prepared to understand, could only be construed as unwomanly neglectfulness, reflecting badly not only on their character as parents but on their very identity as women. In reform annals of the 1850s working-class mothers frequently take on the character of a sub-human species: bestially drunken and abusive, indifferent, "sickly-looking, deformed by over work . . . weak and sad-faced." If, as in the case of the mother we encountered at the beginning of this chapter, a woman's appearance did not fit the bill, reformers deduced a hidden depravity from the facts of her situation. Like prostitutes, working-class mothers became a kind of half-sex, by virtue of their inability or refusal to conjure up the "natural" abilities of the "true" woman.⁴⁸

The Children's Aid Society and Corrective Domesticity

Charles Loring Brace shared the alarm and revulsion of reformers like Matsell at the "homelessness" of the poor, but he also brought to the situation an optimistic liberalism, based upon his own curious and ambiguous uses of domesticity. In his memoirs of 1872, looking back on two decades of work with the New York laboring poor, Brace took heart from his belief that the absence of family life so deplored by his contemporaries actually operated to stabilize American society. In America, immigration and continual mobility disrupted the process by which one generation of the working class taught the next a cultural identity, "that continuity of influence which bad parents and grandparents exert." Brace wrote this passage with the specter of the Paris Commune before him; shaken, like so many of his peers, by the degree of organization and class consciousness among the Parisian poor, he found on native ground consolation in what others condemned. "The mill of American life, which grinds up so many delicate and fragile things, has its uses, when it is turned on the vicious fragments of the lower strata of society." In New York, families were constantly broken up, Brace continued cheerfully. "They do not transmit a progeny of crime."⁴⁹

It was through the famed placing-out system that the CAS turned the

“mill of American life” to the uses of urban reform. Placing out sent poor city children to foster homes in rural areas where labor was scarce. It was based on the wages-fund theory, the popular scheme that, a few years before, Mrs. Storms had urged the workingwomen of the Ladies’ Industrial Association to adopt. “If, owing to the peculiarity of our country,” the CAS argued, “we have, in the families of our farmers, institutions scattered all over our fields, which will take this very burden . . . which need the labor whereof we have an abundance . . . is it not the better part of economy and wisdom to make use of them?” This was the argument whereby the CAS defended itself against critics’ quite plausible charges that “foster parents” were simply farmers in need of cheap help, and placing out was a cover for the exploitation of child labor. At first, children went to farms in the nearby countryside, just as did those the city bound out from the Almshouse, but in 1854 the society conceived the more ambitious plan of sending parties of children by railroad to the far Midwest, to Illinois, Michigan and Iowa. By 1860, agents had placed out 5,074 children.⁵⁰

At its most extreme, the CAS only parenthetically recognized the social and legal claims of working-class parenthood. The organization considered the separation of parents and children a positive good, the liberation of basically innocent, if somewhat tarnished children from the tyranny of irredeemable adults. The legacy of childhood innocence was ambiguous. Socially liberating in many respects, the idea also provided one basis for class domination. Since the CAS viewed children as innocents to be rescued and parents as corruptors to be displaced, its methods depended in large measure on convincing children themselves to leave New York, generally, but not necessarily, with parental knowledge or acquiescence. Street children were malleable innocents in the eyes of the charity, but they were also little consenting adults, capable of breaking all ties to their class milieu. Many parents did bring their children to be placed out, but the society also at times worked directly through the children.⁵¹ In 1843, the moral reformer and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child had mused that the greatest misfortune of “the squalid little wretches” she saw in the New York streets was that they were not orphans.⁵² The charity visitors of the CAS tackled this problem directly: Where orphans were lacking, they manufactured them.

It is difficult to discern much about the actual experience that lay behind the society’s paeans to the placing-out scheme. On the one hand, agents inquired into the family circumstances of potential emigrants and sought out the consent of those parents who could be located. On the other, CAS visitors alluded to opposition to children’s emigration from parents and acknowledged that their “orphans” were sometimes runaways with fictitious histories. Brace lamented the fact that mothers would rather see their

sons “ruined” in New York than send them to salvation out West. Parents, he complained, were known to follow emigrating parties to recover their children. Priests supposedly propagated rumors among the Irish that the CAS sold their children into bondage, converted them to Protestantism, and renamed them: “that thus even brothers and sisters might meet and perhaps marry!”⁵³ We can wonder retrospectively how carefully the society inquired into stories of orphanage, and how thoroughly agents for the emigrating parties searched for living parents. We can also conjecture about the expectations the poor themselves—children and parents—held about the trip West. The Irish, in particular, were accustomed to the seasonal migrations of adolescents as farm laborers and domestic servants.⁵⁴ Sending one’s son to Iowa may not have initially appeared much different from sending him on a harvest gang. For similar reasons, emigration may have seemed ordinary to children. Certainly the CAS appealed to the street child’s enterprising nature with its tales of Western opportunity and fortune.

The domestic ideology that underlay placing out gave a liberal like Brace the theoretical basis for constructing a persuasive rather than a coercive program to reform the tenement classes. Placing out was based on the thoroughly bourgeois belief in the redeeming influence of the Protestant home in the countryside. “The great duty . . . of the Visitor,” the CAS declared, “is to get these children of unhappy fortune utterly out of their surroundings, and to send them away to kind Christian *homes in the country*. No influence, we believe, is like the influence of a *Home*.”⁵⁵ There, the morally strengthening effects of labor, mixed with the salutary influences of domesticity, could remold the child’s character. Standards of desirable behavior could be internalized by children rather than beaten into them, as had been the practice with the CAS’s most important forerunner in the field of juvenile reform, the House of Refuge. Like other early nineteenth-century asylums, the House had been based, in theory, on the power of geometrically ordered architecture and strictly regimented routines to reorder inmates’ habits; in practice, its staff freely used solitary confinement and corporal punishment to force the recalcitrant into compliance with the forces of reason.⁵⁶ Home influence, however, could bypass the use of force by deploying subliminal persuasion instead. The foster home, with its all-encompassing moral influence, could be a more effective house of refuge than the genuine article. “We have wished to make every kind or religious family, who desired the responsibility, an Asylum or a Reformatory Institution . . . by throwing about the wild, neglected little outcast of the streets, the love and gentleness of home.” The home was an asylum, but it was woman’s influence rather than an institutional regimen that accomplished its corrections.⁵⁷

Gender divisions were marked in the CAS. Male and female reformers did different work, the men as paid agents who supervised the society's main ventures, the women as volunteers who staffed the more marginal girls' projects. The latter—a lodging house and several industrial schools—were less novel than the programs the men operated and thus less well described in the organization's literature. The women volunteers were accordingly much less visible.

The society also gave different kinds of help to boys and girls. Placing out was mostly for boys, who seem to have been more allured by the journey than were girls. Parents were less reluctant to place out sons, who were likely to roam away from home anyway, than daughters, whose contributions to the household were more reliable and more easily enforced.⁵⁸ Sexual considerations may have also entered in. Sending girls away, unlike boys, was courting sexual danger.

Brace's own imagination was more caught up with boys than girls, his most inventive efforts pitched to them. Alone among his contemporaries, Brace sensed something of the creative energies of street culture. His writings are sweeping, animated and brimming with detail precisely because he was so fascinated by the vitality and hardihood of the street boys. His absorption in the Western scheme came partly from the hope that emigration would redirect their toughness and resourcefulness, "their sturdy independence," into hearty frontier individualism.⁵⁹ Brace activated male sympathies to enliven the society's much-touted Newsboys' Lodging-House, a boardinghouse where, for a few pennies, newsboys could sleep and eat. The Lodging-House was, in fact, a kind of early boys' camp, where athletics and physical fitness, lessons in entrepreneurship (one of its salient features was a savings bank), and moral education knit poor boys and gentlemen into a high-spirited but respectable masculine camaraderie.⁶⁰

This approach had little to do with the female side of things—heading for the territories was very much a masculine adventure—and so the women were left mostly to their own devices with their girls. Mixing Brace's critique of the city with the understanding of domesticity they drew from their own experiences, they developed the rudiments of a parallel, yet distinctly female, strategy of secular urban reform.

In their efforts, the women drew sustenance from the sentimentalist imagery of virtuous working-class women that had long inspired their most sympathetic work with the poor. Rather than limiting themselves to separating the virtuous from the vicious, however, the women of the CAS took as their task the creation of a plebeian womanliness from the materials at hand. The domestic arts, not prayer and repentance, were their agents of

transformation. In the industrial schools and lodging house, girls recruited off the streets learned the arts of plain sewing, cooking and housecleaning. The precepts of domesticity guided their education: "Nothing was so honorable as industrious *housework*," the ladies insisted. The goals were partly vocational—outfitting the students for work as seamstresses and domestic servants—but they were also familial. Many students, the ladies proudly attested, went on to enter respectable married life as well as honest employment. Marriage was the vehicle of reform. "Living in homes reformed through their influence," these women carried on as emissaries of domestic womanhood.⁶¹ Energized by their mission, properly understood through learning from their social betters, and equipped with the proper skills, "true" working-class women need not retire into timid and tearful solitude, but could enter into the effort to transform their class milieu.

The women reformers also instituted meetings to convert the mothers of their students to a new relationship to household and children. Classes taught the importance of sobriety, neat appearance and sanitary housekeeping, the material bases for virtuous motherhood and proper homes. Most important, the ladies stressed the need to keep children off the streets and send them to school. Their pupils were not always willing. Mothers persisted in keeping children home to work and cited economic reasons when their benefactresses upbraided them. Such rationales the ladies considered a mere pretense for the exploitation of children and the neglect of their character training. "The larger ones were needed to 'mind' the baby," volunteers sarcastically reported, "or go out begging for clothes . . . and the little ones, scarcely bigger than the baskets on their arms, must be sent out for food, or chips, or cinders."⁶² The Mothers' Meetings tried to wean away laboring women from such customary patterns to what the ladies believed to be a moral geography of family life: men at work, women at home, children inside.

The CAS was to prove immensely influential in the subsequent history of nineteenth-century reform.⁶³ In the 1850s, its ideas were already compelling because they gave coherence to diffuse but widely felt discomforts with city life. Between the lines of Brace's writing, we can catch glimpses of what a comfortable bourgeois city might look like. The regenerated metropolis would be far better ordered, as one might expect, its streets free for trade and respectable promenades, emancipated from the inconveniences of pickpockets and thieves, the affronts of prostitutes and hucksters, the myriad offenses of working-class mores. The respectable would dominate public space as never before, and the city itself could become something of an asylum, an embodiment of the eighteenth-century virtues of reason and progress, the nineteenth-century virtue of industry.

The women's approach was at first only a minor strain within the CAS

vision. It was, however, their far more prosaic version of domestic reform, not Brace's, that would eventually predominate within American reform and social work. The thrust of Brace's program—promoting the disintegration of families—ran counter to the ladies' faith in the importance of a strong domestic life. Rather than encouraging girls to break away, then, the ladies sought just the opposite—to create among the urban working class an indigenous domestic life, thereby transforming urban social space.

In short, the women viewed domesticity and true womanhood as a means to regenerate a class-divided city. What they understood to be common sense, we can see as a hegemony of gender. Properly established gender norms could realign the social geography of the city, strengthening boundaries between public and private and circumscribing the riotous energies of working-class children and the promiscuously sociable lives of working-class women. While Brace looked to the past, to a rural republic, to solve the problems of the modern city, the women worked from a different angle. Their own understanding of domesticity led them to focus on the power of a new kind of working-class woman to abolish class conflicts. Still marginal in the secular reform movement, the CAS women stuck close to their girls' schools. Yet they were onto something.

Family Law

State involvement in child raising increased dramatically in the nineteenth century. The key to the great intervention—what Jacques Donzelot has termed “the policing of families”—lay in changes in the common law. In the colonial and early national years, the legal identity of children (like that of women) had been wholly subsumed, within a strictly patriarchal logic, under male heads of families. But American courts, in a line of child custody cases beginning right after the turn of the century, began to chip away at the principle of absolute paternal rights by advancing a doctrine of “the best interests of the child.” To accomplish the separation of the child's legal identity from the patriarchal unit, judges invoked the state's sovereign authority over children's welfare—*parens patriae*, literally, the state is the parent.⁶⁴

Parens patriae legitimated state intrusion into the once inviolable domain of the father. The doctrine affected a wide range of legal disputes over apprenticeship, custody and adoption in which bourgeois as well as working-class people were involved. Its main *social* consequences, however, lay with the child-saving agencies and institutions it spawned, and were borne

by the poor who were their chief clients. We have encountered two child-saver organizations in New York, the CAS and the House of Refuge. By the end of the century, there were 250 such agencies nationwide.

There is a persuasive argument, however, that judicial law does not initiate change but codifies changes already in the works. Taking this tack, we can return to the social history of the urban poor and see its importance in transforming legal doctrine. The problems—and the “problem”—of the poor were the material from which, in large measure, judges fashioned their reconsiderations of authority and power within the family. Apart from individual cases of custody contested between spouses and kin, it was the reformers' involvement with poor children which raised, in the first place, questions of child welfare. In the context of prevailing antebellum strategies of reform, a broad reading of *parens patriae* made a great deal of sense: Reformers as early as the 1820s had seen their task to be removing children from vicious, corrupt “associations.” The seminal antebellum decision on institutional custody, indeed, involved a suit against the Philadelphia House of Refuge, a replica of its New York progenitor. The court was only approving established practice when it ruled that state guardianship could supersede that of natural parents “unequal to the task of education.” Since its establishment, the New York House of Refuge had assumed the power to alienate custody from parents; in the Philadelphia case the courts followed suit.⁶⁵

More broadly, changes in the law bore a relationship to changes in urban working-class families. Into the causal sequence of reform movements and legal transformation we must insert the actions of children. Strict legal notions of patriarchy broke down, in part, because they no longer made sense in a society where some of its most troublesome members so often defied patriarchal control. In cutting loose from their families, children themselves raised the question of their distinct legal identity, as they began in large numbers to slip through the family networks of regulation which in the eighteenth century had served as an informal judicial system for the young.

New York's first school truancy law, passed in 1853, brought the doctrine of *parens patriae* to bear directly on the problem of street children. The framers of the act, the AICP, saw the law as an extension of their work. With far more clout than “mere Moral influence,” it made children's school attendance a condition of family relief. In essence, the law banned school-age children from the streets. Those found “wandering” there were to be taken before a magistrate, then either released on parents' assurance (to be sent to school, to some lawful employment or kept at home) or, if orphaned, to be taken on as wards of the state. Moreover, whatever the family circumstances, the state could assume custody of habitual wanderers. “Our State

... by assuming the place of a parent to its helpless children . . . raises them from the degradation of their present condition to one of equality." "Degradation" was a cultural, not an economic term; the abrogation of parental rights depended not (as it had in the eighteenth century) on whether parents were providing a livelihood for their children, but on the social context in which they were raising them. "If the parent is intemperate, incompetent, or indifferent to the education of his children, the law should take his place."⁶⁶

His place? It was to take thirty more years, and an active women's movement in the city's settlement houses which insisted that working-class mothers, properly trained, could undo the worst effects of poverty, before women would become fully visible in the discourse of the working-class family. Nevertheless, considerations of women were *inscribed* early on in that discourse, and a politics of gender was implied in this nascent politics of the family.

In a period that so idealized maternal influence (the courts themselves increasingly cited it as a reason to award children to mothers in contested custody cases), the alienation of children from their "natural" ties required seeing the mothers in those cases in a different light. Domesticity, with its overwhelming thrust toward universal standards of womanhood, provided the means to do so. Authorities could not have gained such wide powers to intervene in parental rights had it not been for assumptions in the making since the 1820s about the depravity of poor women as mothers. Certain kinds of mothers, by their social behavior, denied the womanly nature which gave them their claim to their children. Gender was on its way to becoming public policy.

Conclusion

In 1789, New York's laboring women lived and worked primarily within the sphere of the family. Submerged within domestic production, women depended on household members—fathers, husbands, children and (as servants) on masters—for their livelihoods. To a great extent, families—and the patriarchal order of power on which families were based—absorbed conflicts between the sexes: Women and the problems women posed went largely unnoticed in the policies and actions of the municipality and the new federal government. The system of household production, although under considerable stress, was still sufficiently stable to accommodate most women; single women living completely on their own were virtually absent in eighteenth-century American society.

In the next half century, metropolitan industrialization was to strengthen many elements of this gender system, particularly women's economic dependence on men. But neither did capitalism simply mesh with patriarchal relations. By 1860, both class struggle and conflicts between the sexes had created a different political economy of gender in New York, one in which laboring women turned certain conditions of their very subordination into new kinds of initiatives. Collectivities of laboring women—a city of poor women—spilled out of family households to stake out a presence in New York's economy, culture and its ideological conflicts. A female working class labored at the very center of the manufacturing economy, including women living outside families as well as those within. In the context of paid work that denied most women a living wage, they con-

tinued to depend on family ties to men as the most secure means of livelihood. But immigration, widespread misery and the casualization of male labor made those dependencies all the more precarious and forced women to seek other means of support. They did so by becoming family heads themselves and utilizing their children's labor, by depending on other women and by pressing their needs upon the municipality. The problems of supporting women and the problem of controlling them overstepped the boundaries of the family and entered into formal politics, to be taken up by city officials, social reformers and trade unionists.

The terms of accommodation and struggle between men and women of the emerging working class were in flux. The transformation of productive households into family wage economies had proved to be more than simply an adaptation to the hardships of proletarian life. Although family cooperation did serve the needs of employers looking for efficient and profitable ways to exploit labor, wage earning in the industrial city also put considerable strain on corporate family forms, especially in the case of young women. Daughters worked to help their families, but they also used their wages to distance themselves from parental authority. The independence they fashioned for themselves was slight and existed only at the margins of working-class life; nonetheless, it represented an important challenge to a gender system predicated on the control of daughters' labor and daughters' sexuality.

Working-class women helped to modify the masculinist culture of the city into one in which, by the Civil War, they played an acknowledged, if peripheral role. In the daily life of the neighborhoods, mothers and wives developed a style of life that reconciled anonymity with intimacy, an order that served as a basis for neighborhood community and fostered a peculiarly urban ethical mixture of watchful generosity and communal judgment. Young women's presence in the milieu of commercial leisure contributed to a cultural imagery betokening a prideful working-class female independence distinct from the imagery of female virtue produced by bourgeois culture. The image of the Bowery Gal was quite different from the contemptuous depictions of laboring women that had haunted masculine lore since the eighteenth century; similarly, it transcended the dichotomous depictions of female vice and virtue used by Victorian sentimentalist writers, male and female, in their renditions of workingwomen's lives. The Gal of commercial culture signified a female presence where once existed only others' projections of the female; as such, she represented for laboring women a break with misogynistic culture something like that which the "true" woman represented for middle-class women.

One response of workingmen to the heightened presence of women was an ideological paternalism, associated in New York with growing labor

radicalism. The new protectionism, most clearly expressed in the labor movement's call to remove women from wage labor, was in one sense an attempt to preserve male prerogatives, but it also embodied the success of workingwomen in pressing some of their own claims on men. In working-class commercial culture, too, men's paternalist views of women as members of their own class to be protected pushed to the margins earlier views of laboring women as fair game for all.

As gender identity became a contested issue in conflicts of class, reformers drew part of their own sense of mission from combatting this expansion of working-class female culture. Especially on the streets, both the sexual culture of daughters and the domestic culture of mothers were antithetical to the terms of home life and womanhood developed and championed by urban ladies. Sympathy for their working-class sisters and a rudimentary perception of the debilities they shared with them did motivate female charity workers and reformers. Ultimately, however, the bonds of womanhood depended on notions of "true" gender identity based on a particular class experience, and sympathy for the "virtuous" working-class woman—she who conformed to the ladies' standards—was conferred at the expense of all the "vicious" who did not. The vision of universal sisterhood elevated bourgeois women and their imitators above misogynist ideology, but left unchallenged—indeed perpetuated—misogynist views of the mass of working-class women.

The idea of sisterhood was thus inextricable from the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie in New York to cultural and political dominance. By the 1850s, the reform of the working-class gender system had become a programmatic goal of many municipal leaders. A movement largely dominated by men institutionalized domesticity into laws which sought to enforce genteel family practices among working-class people, laws that implicitly sought to transform the character of working-class womanhood into one resembling more closely the female identity that the cult of domesticity celebrated.

The 1850s set the terms of both female struggles and female accommodations across class lines for the next half century. In the new school attendance law and the work of the CAS female volunteers lay the roots of the Americanization campaign which at the end of the century reshaped the lives of so many working-class immigrants to New York. Then, the settlement houses and public schools were to expand the antebellum mothers' classes and girls' housekeeping lessons into a vast program of nativist assimilation as well as female self-help. Women social workers and teachers, many of them inspired by feminist impulses to help their poorer sisters, would assure immigrant mothers and daughters that the key to decent lives lay in creating American homes within the immigrant neighborhoods—homes

that aspired to a particular bourgeois configuration of possessions, housekeeping practices and family relations. As in the 1850s, the effort to domesticate the plebeian household would be linked in the Progressive era to a campaign to eradicate a ubiquitous and aggressive working-class culture.

The women's rights movement before the Civil War was too absorbed in middle-class women's dilemmas in marriage, work and property relations to learn much from working-class women. Only in the 1870s did Susan Anthony begin to turn away from abstract, sentimentalist images of workingwomen popular in her social milieu to begin learning about the concrete debilities of working-class women's lives. Even then, Anthony mostly had to do the investigating for herself; working-class women still lacked a collective language in which to articulate publicly their particular grievances. Male-dominated trade unions, increasingly committed to the family wage, provided few ways for women to express either the troubles they endured or the desires they might conceive in the social terrain outside the male-headed family. Even the Knights of Labor, which actively sought out women's participation, did so under the beacon of a higher working-class domesticity, to be achieved when (male) workers finally earned the full value of their labor. The family wage—and the ideology of gender that encompassed it—served well enough for women attached to men. For them, it meant a liberation from the double shift of wage earning superimposed on household work. And certainly when the labor movement at its most radical mobilized entire communities—as in the great railroad strike of 1877, the eight-hour day strikes of 1886 and the IWW strikes of the early twentieth century—it incorporated many concerns of wives and mothers. Nonetheless, what Sally Alexander has written of the Chartist women in England in the 1830s and 1840s was also true of the militant wives in the small Ohio railroad towns on strike in 1877, the German women who cheered the May Day demonstrators in Chicago, 1886 and the Italian mill-worker mothers who marched for bread and roses in Lawrence, 1912: "Women could only speak as active subjects at selective moments, and within the community."¹ The language of feminism subsumed working-class women's experience into categories of victimization, and the language of class struggle blurred the particularities of their lives into the unified interests of the working-class family.

Only with the historic rising of the daughters in the great women's strike of shirtwaist makers in 1909 did the possibilities of a distinct working-women's feminism in New York, so briefly kindled in the 1830s, take fire. The young women's hopes and their militance grew out of the socialist and anarchist ideas of their Italian and Eastern European Jewish families, and they drew their collective strength from the solidarities of the immigrant

neighborhoods. But something of their aspirations came as well from a collective imagination nourished by the urban culture of the young of which they were a part.

At first glance, that shabby milieu of cheap cafés, tacky clothes and shady negotiations with men seems a world away from the high-minded rhetoric of the rebel girls. And in some ways it was. Its sexual latitude and material delights, in cutting working girls adrift from the family ties that had sustained as well as oppressed them, could certainly numb the soul. In the 1890s, the city's sexual opportunities and fancy clothes had completed the transformation of the farm girl Sister Carrie into an amoral demimondaine; and there must have been many more like her. But in the same years, New York culture also provided another newcomer, a young Russian Jew named Emma Goldman, the materials to turn the fleeting experience of the undutiful, pleasure-seeking daughter into a political vision of women's freedom.

All through the nineteenth century, working-class New York was like that. It led women astray; then again, it made something new of the ones who had gone bad. It was a place where the dialectic of female vice and female virtue was volatile; where, in the ebb and flow of large oppressions and small freedoms, poor women traced out unforeseen possibilities for their sex. Therein lies the importance of its tenements, sweatshops, promenades and streets for the history of American women.

Sexual prohibitions in the *middle* class might account for the decrease after 1841. It is worth noting, however, that for most of the period under consideration, prenuptial pregnancies remained quite high, never dropping below one in four live births.

If prenuptial pregnancies *did* decrease among the urban working class toward midcentury, did illegitimate births increase? That is, in the cities, were men less likely to marry after having conceived a child? In general, the trend of illegitimate births follows that of prenuptial pregnancies (Peter Laslett, *Family Life and Illicit Love in Earlier Generations* [London, 1977], p. 539), but it would be interesting to know if this indeed was the case in nineteenth-century cities.

Birth statistics should not be taken as the sole indicator of sexual activity. In cities, abortions were readily available. Young women would have had access to information about abortionists as well as to "folk" techniques of contraception (which, contrary to common belief, could often be quite effective) through networks of female workmates and fellow lodgers. See Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, "Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology," in *Powers of Desire*, pp. 58-61.

It is also possible that working-class intercourse did decline as young women were better able to control their sexual lives; in a peer group culture where female friends helped to restrict men's sexual activity, young people might have developed other forms of sexual play. Heavy petting, for example, is often carried on when there is strong peer group supervision of courting couples. Kathy Peiss's description of working-class couples in the late nineteenth century shows that working-class girls could draw a strict line between petting and intercourse. Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality," in *Powers of Desire*, pp. 78-79.

CHAPTER 6: HARROWING TRUTHS

1 Report from the Pennsylvania Society for the Promotion of Public Economy (Philadelphia), quoted in the *Commercial Advertiser*, August 19, 1817; Carey, "Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia," p. 154.

2 Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York," pp. 105-106, 124-25. Degler found that women were prominent in 46 (14.3 percent) of 321 trades listed in the 1860 census. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-26. He found the following industries dominated by women workers:

INDUSTRY	PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO WERE FEMALE
Paper boxes	66.3
Hoopskirts	87.6
Shirts and collars	95.6
Millinery	94.8

INDUSTRY	PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO WERE FEMALE
Miscellaneous millinery goods	85.7
Artificial flowers	91.7
Umbrellas and parasols	75.5
Ladies' cloaks and mantillas	95.4

3 Minute Books, November 1859, SRPW.

4 Cf. Egal Feldman: "The outside shop was almost completely dominated by female labor." *Fit for Men: A Study of New York's Clothing Trade* (Washington, D.C., 1960), p. 102. On male outside workers see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, pp. 113, 122-24, 126-27, 155. McDougall concurs that in the case of nineteenth-century Europe, women were especially vulnerable to outside work. "While the overall number of domestic workers declined in the process of industrialization, mainly men gave it up, leaving behind a preponderance of women." "Working Class Women," p. 266. For the same pattern in London, see James A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industry and Sweated Labor: The London Clothing Trades, 1860-1914* (Urbana, Ill., 1984).

5 The clearest and strongest statement of this theoretical position is Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York, 1979), pp. 206-47. Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, is a rich and sweeping historical analysis of the problem.

6 See, for example, Eric Hobsbawm, "The Formation of the Industrial Working Classes: Some Problems," *3e Conférence Internationale d'Histoire Économique, Congrès et Colloques* (The Hague, 1965), 1: 176-77. Marx speaks of domestic manufactures as peripheral to the central tendency of industrialization "to conversion to the factory system proper." *Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, n.d.), 1:445. See also Sidney Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp. 34-35.

An essay that maintains this focus on factory labor, and at the same time takes female employment as its central analytic problem, is Claudia Goldin and Kenneth Sokoloff, "Women, Children and Industrialization in the Early Republic: Evidence from Manufacturing Censuses," *Journal of Economic History* 42 (December 1982): 741-74.

7 For London, see Alexander, "Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London," pp. 63, 65; for Paris, Henriette Vanier, *La Mode et Ses Métiers: Frivolités et Luttés des Classes, 1830-1870* (Paris, 1960); for Holland, Selma Leydesdorff, "Women and Children in Home Industry" (Paper presented at the International Conference in Women's History, University of Maryland, 1977); for Germany, Barbara Franzoi, "Domestic Industry: Work Options and Women's Choices," in *Ger-*

man *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John C. Fout (New York, 1984), pp. 256–69.

For a general discussion of the importance of hand technology in industrialization, see Samuel, "Workshops of the World."

8 Clark, *History of Manufactures*, 1: 465. On early manufactures, see the compilations for 1810–20 in Franklin B. Hough, *Statistics of Population of the City and County of New York* (New York, 1865).

9 See the eighteenth-century seamstress's notice quoted in Flick, *History of the State of New York*, 3: 297–98.

10 Abbott, *Women in Industry*, p. 217; Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 1–2.

11 For sailors' slops, see Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 1–2; Edwin T. Freedley, ed., *Leading Pursuits and Leading Men* (Philadelphia, 1856), p. 89. For uniforms, see Flick, *History of the State of New York*, 3:315. In 1819 the ladies of the House of Industry acquired a contract for navy blankets and uniforms to avert insolvency. *Evening Post*, November 29, 1819. For journeymen sewing slops, see Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 77–78; Jesse Eliphalet Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia, Mo., 1905), p. 11. For mentions of women sewing slops, see Ely, *Visits of Mercy*, p. 32; Minute Books, 1798, January 10, 1803, April 8, 1807, SRPW.

12 Ibid., November 17, 1817. On the dumping of British goods, see Albion, *Rise of New York Port*, pp. 12–13; Flick, *History of the State of New York*, 5:350.

13 Clothing manufacture was the leading manufacturing employer of women in the city well into the twentieth century. I have traced it in the United States census for manufactures as far as 1940, when it still outstripped by far any other industry.

The 1860 figures come from *Manufactures of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1865), calculated from returns for New York County, pp. 380–85.

Precisely because of the prevalence of outwork among women wageworkers, we can only take these census statistics as rough estimates of the number of women in the labor force. Any discussion of female labor-force participation in industrializing countries must take account of this serious problem of underenumeration.

14 Feldman, *Fit for Men*, p. 3; Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 122; Freedley, *Leading Pursuits*, p. 89; Chauncey M. Depew, *One Hundred Years of American Commerce* (New York, 1895), p. 565; *New York Herald*, October 25, 1857.

15 Ibid. See John C. Gobreight, *The Union Sketch-Book: A Reliable Guide . . . of the Leading Mercantile and Manufacturing Firms of New York* (New York, 1861), pp. 40–41 for the national market.

16 Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 138.

17 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 113; for the attractions of the clothing trade for immigrants, see Ernst, *Immigrant Life*, p. 93. After 1835, when the commercial district was rebuilt after the great fire of that year, rents soared in lower Manhattan.

Sidney Pollard assesses the importance of subcontracting in early industrial capitalist enterprises in England. The large entrepreneur could thereby reduce his supervisory activities and to some degree stabilize his cost structure by paying the subcontractor a fixed price. *Genesis of Modern Management*, pp. 38–39.

18 Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York City," p. 111. See also Freedley, *Leading Pursuits*, pp. 126–27, for the difficulties of small manufacturers.

19 Quoted in Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 136.

20 Cf. Virginia Penny on the "tears and sighs of hardworking women." *Employments of Women*, p. 345; Burdett, *The Elliott Family*; "the poor helpless females" mentioned by the National Trades' Union, quoted in Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 141. For the parallel imagery in England, see T. J. Edelstein, "They Sang 'The Song of the Shirt': The Visual Iconography of the Seamstress," *Victorian Studies* 23 (Winter 1980): 183–210.

21 Minute Books, November 15, 1855, SRPW.

22 *Herald*, June 7, 1853. Stott discusses seasonality in the clothing trade and in dressmaking. "Worker in the Metropolis," pp. 147–48. He also notes that women suffered more heavily from unemployment in periods of contraction; at least in the Panic of 1857, when female employment dropped by almost half in comparison to 20 percent for men. Ibid., p. 160. See also Walt Whitman on the sewing women in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, N.Y.), November 9, 1846.

On the importance of dovetailing employment in a casualized labor market, see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (London, 1971), pp. 39–41. For mentions of both weekly and seasonal unemployment, see Carey, "Report on Female Wages," *Miscellaneous Essays*, p. 267; "Circular of the Shirt Sewers' Association," *Shirt Sewers' Cooperative*, Broadsides Collection, NYHS; *Daily Tribune*, June 8, 1853; Minutes, November 16, 1854, SRPW; Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 114–15.

23 Greeley quoted in Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 136. The German Jews of Chatham Street were the perennial scapegoats of denunciations that depended heavily on anti-Semitic connotations. "A class of beings in human form," angry seamstresses called them after a wage cut in 1831, and two decades later a journalist sympathetic to the seamstresses conjured up the stereotype of the avaricious Jew, the "shopkeeping, pennyturning genius." More prosperous businessmen liked to see themselves as superior in benevolence and moral scruples to the immigrant entrepreneurs and were quite content to see issues of ethnicity obscure those of class. In actuality, their firms—respectable concerns like Brooks Brothers—profited equally from rate cutting, although its practice was less visible. They kept their hands clean because they did not set the piece rates for their outside workers but left it to the contractors, men who were the worst gougers in the trade. *Working Man's Advocate*, September 6, 1831; Foster, *New York in Slices*, p. 13.

24 Carey, "Report on Female Wages," *Miscellaneous Essays*, p. 280. Workingwomen also suffered from underbidding from farm women in the surrounding

countryside. Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 140; Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 112, 345; Freedley, *Leading Pursuits*, p. 127.

25 *Daily Tribune*, June 8, 1853; the workingman's budget is from the *Times*, November 10, 1853.

26 An English traveler in 1819 noted that women who did the skilled work of sewing coats and jackets earned 25–50 percent less than men doing similar work. Stokes Collection Typescript, p. 314. In 1836, journeymen tailors reported they were earning 15 shillings (\$1.87) per day with a female helper; until the 1850s, reports state that women's wages at any work remained at or below two shillings per day. *National Trades' Union*, March 12, 1836. See also Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 112–14.

27 Adams, Jr., "Wage Rates in the Early National Period," p. 406; see also *Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1845. On turnouts, see Gilje, "Mobocracy," pp. 175–83. The *Daily Tribune*, July 20, 1850 reported wages for unskilled immigrant men in the city at 9 shillings (\$1.12) per day.

Badly off as the outside workers were, there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of women who could work for less. In 1830, for instance, an employer "sought up emigrants, or went to the almshouse, to have his work done; if he could find no women in his neighborhood willing to undertake it . . . so that he forced them to come to his own terms." *Working Man's Advocate*, September 11, 1830; see also *Herald*, October 21, 1857.

28 Bobo, *Glimpses of New York*, p. 109; see also pp. 107–110. Other references can be found in the *Herald*, June 7, 1853; October 25, 1857; *Daily Tribune*, August 7, 1849, June 8, 1835; *Working Man's Advocate*, April 6, 1844; William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York, 1859), p. 527; *Jonathan's Whittlings of War* (April 22, 1854), pp. 102–103; *The Subterranean*, February 7, 1846.

29 *Daily Times*, February 24, 27, March 1, 1855. A third seamstress sued her employer in court on March 1.

30 "Needle and Garden," p. 170; *Jonathan's Whittlings* (April 22, 1854), p. 102; Bobo, *Glimpses of New York City*, p. 109.

31 *Daily Tribune*, March 7, 1845.

32 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 111, 114, 356. See also Pollard, *Genesis of Modern Management*, pp. 33–34. The inefficiency of putting out is also discussed in Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750–1850* (1930; New York, 1969), p. 137.

The other drawback of the outside system was the opportunity it gave workers to embezzle goods. Stephen Marglin has argued that embezzlement was widely practiced by English cottage workers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He believes that embezzlement was the most serious of the many problems of labor discipline which led capitalists to factory organization: not because factories were initially technologically superior to outwork, but because direct supervision could better control such refractory practices. "What Do Bosses Do? The Origins and Functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist Production," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 6 (Summer 1974): 33–35, 50–51.

There is some evidence of embezzlement among New York workers. One employer told Penny that he had incurred serious losses from unreturned work: "On inquiry at the place where the women said they lived, they would find they had never been there." Another mentioned a blacklist of women who did not return their work, and a third corroborated the existence of a blacklist but claimed that he himself had never had any problems with embezzlement: "If they [the women] should keep them, they would soon be known at the different establishments, and have no place to go for work." Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 112, 115, 352. There were arrests of tailors for embezzlement during the tailors' strike of 1850, and one employer raised the issue as a general problem. See *Daily Tribune*, July 26, August 14, 1850. There was an extensive network of illicit trade in New York, comprised of secondhand stores and pawnshops. Evidence that women utilized these networks to sell embezzled sewing is in *CGS, People v. Riley*, September 10, 1830, and *People v. Stebbins et al.*, December 8, 1834.

33 *Herald*, June 11, 1853; Freedley, *Leading Pursuits*, p. 130.

34 Mayhew elucidated this principle in his investigation of London slop-workers: letters subtitled "Over-work makes under-pay" and "Under-pay makes over-work," in Eileen Yeo and E. P. Thompson, *The Unknown Mayhew* (New York, 1971), pp. 384–88.

35 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 350–51; evidence on the length of the workday is in Carey, "Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia," p. 167; "Address of the Shirt Sewers' Cooperative"; Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 356. See also "Needle and Garden" on the sewing machine.

36 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 310.

37 The doggerel beat of Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt" captures something of the drudgery of the work itself. The poem is reprinted in "Circular of the Shirt Sewers' Association"; a more accessible reprinting is in *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse*, ed. Alan Bold (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1970), pp. 66–68.

38 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 311.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 356; *Herald*, June 7, 1853; "Circular of the Shirt Sewers' Association."

40 The problem with any sample of outside workers is that the census would have underenumerated the number of outworkers in general and the number of married outworkers in particular. Married women were less likely than single women to declare any paid employment to a census taker: because their work was intermittent, because they deemed wage labor unrespectable for a wife, or because they considered domestic labor their primary employment.

41 Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, pp. 27–29.

42 There are allusions to family labor in waged employment throughout New York House of Refuge Papers, HRCH, 1825–60, and the published reports of the Children's Aid Society. For other references and examples see "Needle and Garden," p. 91; *Daily Tribune*, August 28, 1845; *The New-York Cries in Rhyme* (New York, 1832), p. 18; *Herald*, June 11, 1853, October 25, 1857; *Young America* (New York),

October 18, 1845; Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 155; Mariner's Family Industrial Society, *Twelfth Annual Report* (1856), pp. 6-7.

43 Abbott, *Women in Industry*, pp. 221-22. For contemporary references see Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 114, 264, 310-11, 312-14, 355; Freedley, *Leading Pursuits*, p. 129; *Daily Tribune*, September 5, 9, 1845; *Working Man's Advocate*, July 27, 1844.

44 Computations are from New York State Census, 1855, Population Schedules, Wd. 4, E.D. 2.

45 Conrad Carl, a New York tailor testifying before a Senate investigatory committee, cited this proverb. Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Testimony As To the Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 48th Cong., 1885, p. 414.

46 Ivy Pinchbeck makes this point about women in household units of production, although she does not extend it to the development of a system of wage differentials. *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution*, p. 2.

47 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 113-14, 342-43. The wage differential in these "helping" arrangements was 2:1, reported the *Working Man's Advocate*, July 27, 1844. The women earned about \$1.25/week, the men \$2.50/week after rent.

48 Penny refers to the learning system throughout *Employments of Women*. See also *Herald*, October 21, 1857. For the Irish garret mistress, see *ibid.*, June 8, 1853.

49 *Daily Tribune*, November 12, 1845. References to the many different kinds of sweaters can be found in the following: *Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1845; *Herald*, October 21, 1857; Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 112, 312, 342-43, 356, 452. In *Hunt's Merchant Magazine*, January 1849, is the very interesting piece of information that piece masters in the large establishments of New York made anywhere from \$25 to \$150 a week, an indication that they were engaged in quite lucrative subcontracting. George C. Foster mentions sweaters and undersweaters in *New York Naked*, pp. 137-38.

50 Depew, *One Hundred Years of American Commerce*, p. 525; Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 106-107. Several inventors had taken out patents on sewing machines in the 1840s, but the stitches unraveled too easily, and the power came from an unwieldy hand crank. In 1846, Elias Howe devised a lockstitch which imitated the hand sewers' sturdy backstitch. Ruth Brandon, *A Capitalist Romance: Singer and the Sewing Machine* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 42-89.

51 Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Relations between Labor and Capital*, pp. 413-14. A machine in the early 1850s was quite expensive (\$100-\$150) but by 1858 the price had dropped to \$50 and there was a substantial secondhand trade. Feldman, *Fit for Men*, pp. 108-109. For another account (from Philadelphia) of how the machine encouraged sweating, see "Needle and Garden," pp. 173-75. Sally Alexander observes that the introduction of the sewing machine had more to do with the available skills and flexibility of the labor market than with the technical requirements of the trade. "Woman's Work in Nineteenth-Century London," p. 97.

52 Thomas Dublin, "Women and Outwork in a Nineteenth-Century New England Town," in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America*, ed. Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (New York, 1986).

53 Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979), pp. 14-22.

54 "Needle and Garden," p. 173.

55 See, for example, *Jonatban's Whittlings* (April 22, 1854), p. 102.

56 Children's Aid Society (CAS), *Seventh Annual Report* (New York, 1860), p. 5.

57 My census sample shows this age distribution among workingwomen in identifiably inside trades.

AGE	NUMBER
10-15	5
16-20	38
21-25	15
26-30	5
31-40	7
41-50	4
50+	6

N = 80

69 were single, 2 married and 9 widowed.

Source: New York State Manuscript Census, 1855, Fourth Ward, E.D. 2, Seventeenth Ward, E.D. 3.

58 Sumner, *History of Women*, p. 158; *Herald*, June 7, 1853.

59 *Ibid.*

60 The same writer, for example, refers to the constant rate cutting to which the straw sewers were subjected. *Ibid.*

My argument about the significance of inside wage work for women is based on a different premise from Edward Shorter's paean to the effects of wage labor on women in *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, 1975). But neither do I agree with his critics Joan Scott and Louise Tilly in *Women, Work and Family* that single women's wage work was altogether incorporated into family economies and traditional family values.

61 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 305-307, 321, 344, 348; see also pp. 295-98, 301-303, 312-14, 319-20; *Daily Tribune*, September 17, 1845.

62 In England, factory owners by midcentury had given up employing children in large numbers. Pollard, *Genesis of Modern Management*, p. 185. Pollard also describes similar practices of adult supervision in those English workshops or factories that continued to employ children. On New York, see Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 305-307, 319-20, 371.

63 *Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1845; Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 295, 364; on the foreman's power over learners see *ibid.*, pp. 292-95, 364; *Daily Tribune*, August 19, 20, 1845.

- 64 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 306; Sanger, *The History of Prostitution*, pp. 533-34. This is consonant with Engels's observations of English factory supervisors at about the same time in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (Leipzig, 1845; Moscow, 1973), pp. 186-87.
- 65 Printers' report on the state of the trade in 1850, reprinted in Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 7:117.
- 66 See Penny, *Employments of Women*, passim on the sex of supervisors. Mentions of "foreladies" are in the *Herald*, June 7, 1853, October 25, 1857; *Young America*, November 29, 1845. Caroline Dall, reformer and feminist, makes reference to a common belief that women were unfit by nature for the technical skills required in a supervisory role: "an idea has gone abroad, that no slopwork will be fit for sale unless a man inspects it." "*Woman's Right to Labor*"; or, *Low Wages and Hard Work* (Boston, 1860), pp. 69-71. Here was another ramification of the view of women as "outside" the manufacturing system.
- 67 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 392.
- 68 Marx, *Capital*, 1:380. For more quotations from employers on female labor, pro and con, see my dissertation, "Women of the Laboring Poor in New York City, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979), pp. 104-108.
- 69 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 356.
- 70 E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967): 56-97; see also Herbert Gutman's reinterpretation of Thompson's analysis for nineteenth-century America, "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," in *Work, Culture & Society*, pp. 3-78.
- 71 *Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1845.
- 72 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 218-19, 281, 331-34, 392, 438, 458.
- 73 William Burns, *Life in New York, In Doors and Out of Doors* (New York, 1851), n.p.; Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 113, 136, 250, 344. For a mention of a common rule against talking in mixed workrooms, see *ibid.*, pp. 313-14 and *Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1845. There is also counterevidence of women *disliking* to work with men. We need to know more about antebellum working-class women before we know how to weigh this evidence and distinguish between the cases. For example, were married women less likely to take jobs in workrooms where there were men? Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 233, 386, 449.
- 74 CAS, *Seventh Annual Report* (1860), p. 6. "The class frequently labor in company with men or bold women; they are fagged out at the end of the day; they are ignorant and have few resources of an intelligent kind, and with the passion for amusement, or the impulse of vanity, they are often easily led away. There is danger of the same sad state of morals arising among this class, as exists in some of the large English manufacturing towns."
- 75 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, pp. 534-35: "The employment of females in various trades in this city, in the pursuit of which they are forced into constant communication with male operatives has a disastrous effect upon their characters." Cf. *Young America*, September 6, 1845: "the want of education and the out-door temptations which belong to the fortunes of so many of them . . . beget habits of levity and idleness," the newspaper charged of the book folders.

76 Engels, *Condition of the Working-Class*, pp. 185-86; the English debate on the morality of female operatives is chronicled in Hewitt, *Wives & Mothers in Victorian Industry*, pp. 48-61.

77 Cf. Sally Alexander on skilled English workers: "Men's desire to confine women to their proper place must be understood—at least in part—as a desire to (legally) control and (morally) order sexuality." "Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s: Some Reflections on the Writing of a Feminist History," *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984): 144.

In their objections to inside employment for women, laboring people may have been in part expressing their dislike of the sexual harassment that could go on there. Penny gives one small example of the kind of sexual scrutiny factory girls could encounter: In one building she visited, the stairs were open so that, as women walked up and down, male workers could look up their skirts. See also the case of sixteen-year-old Catherine Runnett, who went to work in a pen manufactory in 1850 and ended up pregnant by the foreman. Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 377-78; Runnett v. Bagley, Superior Court, reported in *Daily Tribune*, April 9, 1850.

78 Burn, *Three Years Among the Working-Classes*, p. 85.

CHAPTER 7: WOMEN AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

- 1 Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (1946; New York, 1975), pp. 139-66.
- 2 Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1919), chapter V; (on America) Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Dames and Good Wives* (Boston and New York, 1895), pp. 55-56.
- 3 *Evening Post*, July 13, 1819.
- 4 John R. Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York, 1918-35), 1: 472-83; U.S. Congress, Senate, *History of Women in Trade Unions*, by John B. Andrews and W. D. P. Bliss, pp. 22-49. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, S. Doc. 645, 61st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1910, vol. 10. (Hereafter cited as Andrews and Bliss, *History of Women in Trade Unions*.)
- 5 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 21.
- 6 The society's membership of 500 women must have included a substantial number of the city's needlewomen. Although the society may have been a successor to an earlier craftswomen's association, its size, as well as its inclusion of all grades of work on the price list, suggests that it also admitted unskilled women. The listing of forty-two women as "tailoresses" in the city directory for 1825 is one sign that there was still a group in the city who identified themselves as established craftswomen. *Longworth's American Almanac . . . and City Directory* (New York, 1825). On the price lists and membership of the society, see *Daily Sentinel* (New York), February 12, July 19, 1831, and *Working Man's Advocate*, July 3, August 6, 1831. I am indebted to Dolores Janiewski for her unpublished essay on the New York sewing women, "Sewing with a Double Thread: The Needlewomen of New York 1825-1870" (M.A. thesis, University of Oregon, 1974).

see also Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 424; Burn, *Three Years Among the Working Classes*, p. 84. One of the points Irish women bargained for was time off to wash their own clothes. Foster, *New York In Slices*, p. 2; *Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1845; Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 149.

63 Ibid., pp. 233, 426; see also p. 424 for the difficulty of getting Sundays off.

64 Bobo, *Glimpses of New-York*, p. 193. See also Sedgwick, *Live and Let Live*, pp. 49–51, 100. There is a vivid description of the Sunday night promenade on Broadway of domestic servants who had just gotten off work in Foster, *New York In Slices*, pp. 99–100.

65 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 517. The function of intelligence offices in recruiting prostitutes is evident in the HRCH, 1825–60, passim; it is also mentioned by contemporaries: Dall, "Woman's Right to Labor," p. 174; Foster, *New York In Slices*, p. 39; *Irish American*, September 10, 1853.

66 Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 427.

67 Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants, *Third Annual Report* (1828), p. 23.

68 Beecher and Stowe, *American Woman's Home*, p. 313.

69 Ibid., p. 322.

CHAPTER 9: WOMEN ON THE TOWN

1 Two recent works, Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society* and Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, Md., 1982), set the historical discussion of prostitution on a new footing.

2 *Columbian* (New York), December 30, 1818. Whiteaker also notes the general tolerance for prostitution in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. "Moral Reform and Prostitution," pp. 21–26.

3 J. R. McDowall, *Magdalen Facts* (New York, 1832), p. 7. A Grand Jury investigation of the extent of the problem in 1831 found only 1,388 prostitutes in a ward-by-ward survey taken by the watch. *Working Man's Advocate*, August 20, 1831.

4 National Trades' Union "Report . . . on Female Labor" in Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 6:217, 282; *Working Man's Advocate*, March 8, 1845; Carey, "Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia," pp. 154, 161; *Daily Tribune*, June 8, 1853. In the comments of the *Working Man's Advocate* on prostitution and on the Magdalen Society, one can see the similarities of the evangelical analysis to that of supporters of labor. Ibid., September 11, 1830, July 30, 1831.

5 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 29. Public interest in New York was also prompted by concerns about syphilis. See the comments in the reports from the Penitentiary Hospital contained in Commissioners of the Almshouse, *Annual Reports* (1849–60).

6 Matsell's letter is reprinted in Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 576.

7 Commitments of disorderly house keepers to the First District Prison rose from 17 in 1849 to 90 in 1860. Commissioners of the Almshouse, *Annual Reports*. The magnitude of vagrancy commitments in the 1850s is especially striking compared to the figure of 3,173 commitments for the entire decade 1820–30 a Grand Jury gave

for commitments exclusive of assault and battery (which mostly comprised drunkenness and vagrancy). Report quoted in *Working Man's Advocate*, August 20, 1831.

Commitments to the city prisons for vagrancy rose from 3,552 in 1850 to 6,552 in 1860.

YEAR	NUMBER OF MEN	NUMBER OF WOMEN	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN
1850	1,148	2,204	3,552	62
1851	1,305	2,225	3,530	63
1852	1,797	3,396	5,193	65
1853	2,417	3,824	6,241	61
1855	1,656	3,598	5,254	68
1860	1,816	4,736	6,552	72

Source: Commissioners of the Almshouse, *Annual Reports*. There are no complete figures for 1849, 1854, 1856–59.

Commitments of females aged ten to thirty years old comprised between 49 and 65 percent of the total female commitments in those years in the 1850s when age breakdowns are available (for the First District Prison, the largest in the city).

8 Eighty-eight percent of Sanger's interviewees were fifteen to thirty years old. *History of Prostitution*, p. 452. These women were around marrying age, and there was a demographic undercurrent to their situations: The disproportional sex ratio in New York lessened their chances of marrying.

9 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 29.

10 Ibid., pp. 549–59.

11 Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, pp. 32–33.

12 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, pp. 559–73.

13 Citizens' Association, *Report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health*, p. 26. For descriptions of a similar variety of establishments in London, see Dr. Fernando Henriques, *Modern Sexuality* (London, 1968); Kellow Chesney, *The Victorian Underworld* (New York, 1972), pp. 307–365.

14 The beginnings of the sex trade were already evident in the 1830s, when John McDowall sought to expose the traffic in pornography in the city. Whiteaker, "Moral Reform and the Prostitute," p. 182. George Foster provides a tour of commercial sex establishments in *New York by Gas-Light*. See also Batterberry, *On the Town in New York*, pp. 102, 104 for some of the "lowest" of the city's night spots. Indictments for various kinds of "indecent exhibitions" can be found in CGS, *People v. Brennan* and *People v. Fowler et al.*, March 22, 1848; *People v. Hamilton et al.*, March 24, 1848 and for obscene reading matter and prints, *People v. Ryan*, September 28, 1842, *People v. Shaw*, July 1844, *People v. Carns*, June 21, 1844, *People v. Miller et al.*, October 16, 1835.

15 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 492. Sanger estimated that the Panic of 1857 had sent 500–1,000 new prostitutes out on the streets. Ibid., p. 34.

16 Ibid., pp. 524, 528, 529; see also p. 532.

- 17 Peiss, " 'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures," pp. 74-87.
- 18 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, p. 491.
- 19 Ibid., pp. 473, 475, 539.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 506-508.
- 21 The European writers are analyzed in Walkowitz, *Prostitution in Victorian Society*, pp. 36-47.
- 22 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, pp. 488-89.
- 23 Ibid., p. 488.
- 24 Ibid., p. 524; see also McDowall, *Magdalen Facts*, p. 53.
- 25 The Irish were overrepresented in Sanger's sample (28 percent of the total population was Irish in 1855); the Germans (16 percent of the population) were underrepresented. Ibid., pp. 460, 536.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Commissioners of the Almshouse, *Annual Report* (1849), pp. 160-61.
- 28 HRCH, cases # 232 (1827), # 191 (1826).
- 29 Quoted in Robert S. Pickett, *House of Refuge: Origins of Juvenile Reform in New York State, 1815-1857* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1969), p. 3.
- 30 HRCH, cases # 60 (1825), # 1559 (1835), # 538 (1828). My interpretations of children's lives in this chapter and elsewhere are based on my reading of 455 girls' cases from the House of Refuge—all girls committed each year at five-year intervals 1825-60—and assorted other cases of both boys and girls, totaling about 700 cases.
- 31 On the Victorian gentleman's erotic fascination with working-class life, see Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England." The pedophilic propensities of late Victorian men are described in Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens: The Origin and Development of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (New York, 1976), pp. 90-100 and Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (London, 1969), pp. 350-63. Many of Carroll's photographs are in Graham Ovenden and Robert Melville, eds., *Victorian Children* (New York, 1972).
- 32 Obviously there are problems with using rape records as evidence of sexual expectations and practices; the investigation of a crime is necessarily limited in what it can tell us about legitimated forms of sexuality. Court cases themselves, as I have noted before, present many problems in the authenticity of evidence which was, after all, constructed to persuade a judge and/or jury. Nonetheless, much can be learned. The descriptions of rape, however distorted in the courtroom setting, reveal something of where people, especially women, drew the line between licit and illicit sex. And conflicting evidence in the trials themselves can also be a source of historical understanding, illuminating the different ways in which the (female) victims and the (male) perpetrators perceived and experienced certain sexual acts.
- 33 In a random sample of 101 rape cases between 1820 and 1860 tried before the Court of General Sessions, 26 involved complainants who were under 16 years of age. Of these, 19 were under 12 years old (the youngest was 4), 5 under 16 and 2 of age unknown.
- 34 CGS, *People v. Hynes*, February 17, 1842.
- 35 *People v. Foyce*, May 11, 1854, *People v. Plonsha*, June 14, 1848.

- 36 *People v. O'Connor*, August 10, 1849.
- 37 HRCH, case # 712 (1830).
- 38 McDowall, *Magdalen Facts*, p. 53; Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York, and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* (New York, 1872), p. 135.
- 39 HRCH, case # 61 (1825).
- 40 McDowall, *Magdalen Facts*, p. 53.
- 41 HRCH, case # 1421 (1834), # 2480 (1840).
- 42 Ibid., case # 209 (1826).
- 43 *Diary of George Templeton Strong*, 2:57 (July 7, 1851); see also Robinson, *Hot Corn*, p. 267.
- 44 [Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents in the City of New York], *Examination of Subjects Who Are in the House of Refuge* (Albany, N.Y., 1825); HRCH, case # 5 (1825).
- 45 Records of the County Coroner, passim; New York City Inspector, *Annual Report* (1849); Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, pp. 26-71.
- 46 Ibid., pp. 203-204.
- 47 HRCH, case # 2513 (1840).
- 48 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, pp. 488, 500, 502.
- 49 HRCH, cases # 2487 (1840), # 3628 (1845), # 4882 (1850).
- 50 HRCH, cases # 326 (1827), # 737 (1830), # 2555 (1840).
- 51 Ibid., case # 2442 (1838).
- 52 Quoted in Sedgwick, *Poor Rich Man*, p. 168.
- 53 HRCH, case # 576 (1829).
- 54 Ibid., cases # 1613 (1835), # 1585 (1835).
- 55 Sanger, *History of Prostitution*, pp. 494, 496, 536; an early example of the seduced-and-abandoned tale is in Prime, *Life in New York*, pp. 15-30.
- 56 Ibid., p. 536.
- 57 HRCH, cases # 261 (1827), # 1548 (1835).
- 58 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, p. 118.

CHAPTER 10: THE USES OF THE STREETS

- 1 CAS, *Third Annual Report* (1856), pp. 26-27.
- 2 Smith Rosenberg gives a general account of this shift in *Religion and the Rise of the American City*.
- 3 "Semi-Annual Report of the Chief of Police," *Documents of the Board of Aldermen*, vol. 17, part 1 (1850), p. 58.
- 4 Short biographies of Matsell can be found in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*; *The Palimpsest* 5 (July 1924): 237-48, and Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement 1829-1837* (Stanford, Calif., 1960), p. 103.
- 5 *The Subterranean*, January 2, 1847; Walsh quoted in James F. Richardson, *The New York Police: Colonial Times to 1901* (New York, 1970), p. 56.
- 6 "Semi-Annual Report," pp. 58, 62, 59, 63.
- 7 Buckley, "To the Opera House," pp. 353-66.

- 8 Emma Brace, ed., *The Life of Charles Loring Brace . . . Edited By His Daughter* (New York, 1894).
- 9 Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841; New York, 1977), p. 14.
- 10 *Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1850.
- 11 Bell Diary, entry for April 19, 1851.
- 12 A striking case of overcrowding is reported in the *Daily Tribune*, June 8, 1853: Eleven women and children were living in a cellar on Avenue C, with "nothing in the world but what they stood up in; and some had even borrowed their rags from their companions." By 1865, overcrowding in New York was greater than in London or any other European city, one investigating committee claimed. Density in the Fourth Ward was an estimated 192,000 persons per square mile, as compared to the recent estimate of 175,816 for East London. Citizens' Association, *Report*, pp. lxxi-lxxii.
- 13 Statistics on public health come from Duffy, *History of Public Health*, pp. 447, 452-53, 587, 577-79; quote is from Citizens' Association, *Report*, p. 180. On Britain, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966), pp. 326-27.
- 14 Quoted in Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, p. 366.
- 15 Schneider, *History of Public Welfare*, p. 269; Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York," pp. 188 and 157-97 passim; *Herald*, October 21, 1857. The quote is in Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York," p. 196.
- 16 Smith Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City*, pp. 186-273. To be sure, these reformers had not abandoned the Christian mission of their predecessors. The AICP, the city's largest and most powerful charity at midcentury, was an offshoot of the NYCTS and maintained close intellectual and professional ties with it. Robert Hartley, head of the AICP, was an evangelical convert of the 1830s. The NYCTS itself shifted its aims to more temporal goals during the 1840s. By the late years of that decade the members were presenting information about wages and the cost of living in their annual report along with customary tabulations of the number of souls saved. While the "secular" charities infused the physical surroundings of the poor with moral character, the "religious" charities became interested in the physical character of the immoral life. Charles E. and Carroll S. Rosenberg, "Pietism and the Origins of the American Public Health Movement," *Journal of the History of Medicine* 23 (January 1968): 16-35.
- Scientific environmentalism, in secularizing moral concerns, probably popularized reform among a broader clientele—people indifferent or disinclined to organized religion, like Matsell himself, who had grown up in the freethinking milieu of the Owenites and the Workingmen's Party.
- 17 The conflict between the Methodist ladies and the forward-looking environmentalist Louis Pease over the direction of the Five Points Mission is one example. Pease won. Smith Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City*.
- 18 Griscom, *The Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population*.
- 19 New York Assembly, *Report . . . into the Condition of Tenant Houses*, p. 8. See also Citizens' Association, *Report* (1865).
- 20 New York Assembly, *Report . . . into the Condition of Tenant Houses*, p. 8.

- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., p. 14.
- 23 Ibid., p. 31. There is more than a hint of racism here, contingent upon a largely immigrant poor: The emphasis on deformed bodily features, and the buried allusions to animals become at moments more explicit. Babies are "weazened" like monkeys and the prevalence of pink-eye among the children invites comparisons to troglodytes, bats and moles.
- 24 Ibid., p. 12. Poverty, the committee added, was "to be seen in its real aspect at home, and no where else." (Ibid., p. 13.)
- 25 AICP, *Thirteenth Annual Report* (1856), p. 23; New York Assembly, *Report . . . into the Condition of Tenant Houses*, p. 50. Cf. *Diary of George Templeton Strong*, 2:200: "If the word 'home' can be applied to their wretched abiding-places," he wrote of working-class children (entry for November 30, 1854).
- 26 AICP, *Fourteenth Annual Report* (1857), p. 21.
- 27 New York Assembly, *Report . . . into the Condition of Tenant Houses*, p. 32. On the conflation of the problem of poverty with that of public health, see Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago, 1962).
- 28 For the New England situation, see Dublin, *Women and Work*, p. 140 and Prude, *Coming of Industrial Order*, pp. 85-87; on the paucity of apprenticeships, Stott, "Workers in the Metropolis," pp. 116-22; also John Commerford, quoted in Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York," p. 157 and CAS, *Seventh Annual Report* (1860), p. 7.
- In the visibility of its population of juvenile casual laborers, New York resembled London, where crowds of ragged street children similarly fascinated the respectable. In both cities, children constituted almost one-third of the population. The proportion of children under fifteen years in the total urban population was, in London in 1851, 31.9 percent; in New York in 1850, 31.6 percent. In Paris, in contrast, children under fifteen made up only 19.6 percent of the total population. These figures are computed from Hough, *Statistics of the Population . . . of New York*; Great Britain, Parliament, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852-53, vol. 88, part 1 (*Population*, vol. 8), p. 1; Louis Chevalier, *Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973), pp. 224-25, 233 ff.
- 29 *Diary of George Templeton Strong*, 2:149 (entry for January 14, 1854).
- 30 Penny, *Employments of Women*, pp. 133-34, 143-44, 150-52, 168, 421, 473, 484; Burns, *Life in New York*; Phillip Wallys, *About New York*, p. 50; CAS, *First Annual Report* (1854), pp. 23-24, *Seventh Annual Report* (1860), p. 16. For the butterfly seller, see Penny, *Employments of Women*, p. 484.
- 31 The aggressive character of juveniles on the streets and the prevalence of juvenile petty theft is discussed in David R. Johnson, "Crime Patterns in Philadelphia, 1840-70," in *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower Class Life, 1790-1940*, ed. Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller (Philadelphia, 1973).
- The Common Council periodically tried to limit street hawking because of the facility it provided children to steal. *MCC*, 13:393 (December 15, 1823); 17:606 (January 26, 1829); 17:744-45 (March 23, 1829). There were also attempts to constrain scavenging and the trade in scavenged goods. In 1809, a group of citizens petitioned the

council to outlaw the secondhand trade in articles from "children, apprentices and others." *Ibid.*, 5:515 (April 17, 1809). By 1817, the council had passed the statute which William Bell was to enforce in 1850, prohibiting the secondhand dealers from trading with minors. *Laws and Ordinances . . . of the City of New-York* (1817), p. 112. In 1823, in consultation with the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents, the city's ship carpenters passed a rule forbidding chip-picking in the shipyards, thus abrogating a customary gleaning right of the poor. Pickett, *House of Refuge*, pp. 41-42.

32 HRCH, case # 5420 (1852).

33 Wallys, *About New York*, p. 43.

34 HRCH, cases # 6032 (1854), # 6354 (1855); "Semi-Annual Report," pp. 59-60.

35 See Commissioners of the Almshouse, *Annual Report* (1851), p. 64 for the rising alarm over juvenile crime. Vagrancy figures are also in the *Annual Reports*.

36 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, p. 135.

37 Foster, *New York in Slices*, p. 20.

38 CAS, *Fifth Annual Report* (1858), p. 38.

39 See the Bell Diary, *passim*, for examples of the ease with which children sold stolen goods.

40 *Daily Tribune*, June 3, 1850.

41 "Semi-Annual Report," p. 65; CAS, *Second Annual Report* (1855), p. 45; HRCH, case # 6032 (1854).

42 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, p. 91. Cf. CAS, *Second Annual Report* (1855), p. 4: "to have no home, but only some lodging-house cellar, or a corner of a garret in which to live; to be cold, and drenched, and hungry all day, pushed, kicked and beaten; to have the child's eager want for affection and love, and to receive only abuse or neglect." Two tales of urban waifs are Maria S. Cummins's immensely popular *The Lamplighter* (1854) and John Treat Irving, *Harry Harson: or, The Benevolent Bachelor* (1844).

43 CAS, *Fifth Annual Report* (1858), pp. 39-40; *Second Annual Report* (1855), p. 45.

44 *Ibid.*, *Sixth Annual Report* (1859), p. 67; *Third Annual Report* (1856), p. 39; *Fifth Annual Report* (1858), pp. 38-39.

45 Groneman Pernicone presents a compelling picture of the ability of immigrant families in the city's most "depraved" neighborhood, the Five Points, to expand and encompass those temporarily or permanently detached from nuclear families in "The Bloody Ould Sixth."

46 CAS, *Sixth Annual Report* (1859), pp. 67-68; *Fifth Annual Report* (1858), p. 61.

47 *Ibid.*, *Sixth Annual Report* (1859), p. 58; *Fourth Annual Report* (1857), pp.

43-44; Bell Diary, July 18, 1851.

48 AICP report is from *Fifteenth Annual Report* (1858), p. 38; quote from CAS, *Third Annual Report* (1856), p. 27.

49 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, p. 47.

50 CAS, *Sixth Annual Report* (1859), p. 9; figures are from Miriam Z. Langsam, *Children West: A History of the Placing-Out System in the New York Children's Aid Society* (Madison, Wis., 1964), p. 64.

51 An important study of the CAS is Bruce Bellingham, "'Little Wanderers': A Socio-Historical Study of the Nineteenth Century Origins of Child Fostering and Adoption Reform" (Ph.D. diss., U. of Pennsylvania, 1984). Bellingham stresses the semi-independent status of the emigrants, who were largely adolescents, and also emphasizes the parents' own role in sending children West.

52 Lydia Maria Child, *Letters from New York* (London, 1843), p. 62.

53 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, p. 234.

54 Lees, *Exiles of Erin*, pp. 35-36. See Bellingham, "'Little Wanderers,'" pp. 84-204 for a complex and nuanced analysis of parental motives in agreeing to send children West.

55 CAS, *Third Annual Report* (1856), p. 8.

56 Pickett, *House of Refuge*. This is similar to the shift in criminal law from corporal punishment to the more "enlightened" environmental techniques of the penitentiary. See Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: the Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1850* (New York, 1978).

57 CAS, *Second Annual Report* (1855), p. 5. Bender notes that Brace was deeply influenced by Horace Bushnell, a Connecticut minister important in the dissemination of liberal theological ideas of influence and women's crucial role in moral education. *Towards an Urban Vision*, p. 137.

58 CAS, *Fifth Annual Report* (1858), p. 17.

59 Boyer also notes Brace's fascination with street boys. *Urban Masses*, pp. 94ff. Exemplary passages from Brace's writing are in *Dangerous Classes*, pp. 80-82, 98-99; "sturdy independence" is from *ibid.*, p. 100.

60 Brace, *Dangerous Classes*, pp. 97-113.

61 CAS, *Ninth Annual Report* (1862), p. 13; *Tenth Annual Report* (1863), p. 23; *Seventh Annual Report* (1860), p. 8.

62 *Ibid.*, *Ninth Annual Report* (1862), pp. 17-18; *Eleventh Annual Report* (1864), p. 28.

63 One historian of social welfare claims the CAS was more influential in the second half of the nineteenth century than any other child welfare agency. Henry W. Thurston, *The Dependent Child* (New York, 1930), p. 92.

64 Jamil S. Zainaldin, "The Emergence of a Modern American Family Law: Child Custody, Adoption, and the Courts, 1796-1851," *Northeastern University Law Review* 73 (1979): 1038-65; Frederick L. Faust and Paul J. Brantingham, *Juvenile Justice Philosophy* (St. Paul, Minn., 1975), pp. 52-118; Michael Grossberg, "Law and the Family in Nineteenth Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1979), pp. 257-322.

65 Ex parte Crouse, 4 Whart. 9 (Pa., 1838); Pickett, *House of Refuge*, pp. 75-77.

66 The law is reprinted in the AICP, *Eleventh Annual Report* (1854), pp. 61-62. On conditions of relief, see *Seventeenth Annual Report* (1860), pp. 31-33.

CONCLUSION

1 Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Difference," p. 136.