

Predatory Men and Virtuous Maidens

Saving Young Women from Ruinous Seduction

Introduction

In the spring of 1848, shortly before the nation's first woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, the American Female Moral Reform Society (AFMRS) succeeded in persuading the New York legislature to enact a criminal anti-seduction law.¹ Deeply concerned about the welfare of young women who were flocking to the nation's emerging urban centers in pursuit of both employment as well as leisure activities, this unprecedented effort to enlist the power of the state as an agent of moral transformation for the benefit of young women was a critical strand in the female moral reformers' plan to reshape the behavior of licentious men for the protection of youthful female virtue.

Although their efforts were firmly rooted in a traditional view of respectable womanhood, as they set out to rein in male lust, the female moral reformers simultaneously advanced a bold, and at times quite radical, critique of the presumed right of male access to the youthful female body—a right which, they forcefully argued, was enshrined in a masculinist legal code that implicitly sanctioned the sexual double standard. Fierce in their resolve, they insisted that this legislative body had a moral duty to divest the legal code of its tilt toward evil, and they vowed to return to the legislature year after year even though their “continual coming” might “weary both friend and foe,” until such time as the lawmakers approved a righteous law holding the “destroyer of innocence” accountable for his actions.²

Discursively constituting them as the passionless victims of licentious men, this early effort to rewrite the law in response to mounting social concerns about the fate of young women adrift in the city raises enduring questions about the appropriate role of the state with respect to the regulation of youthful sexual expression that are woven into the structure of this book. Firmly grounded in the sexual ethos of the time, as they sought to hold the seducer accountable for his sexual overreaching, female moral reformers did not consider the possibility that some encounters may actually have been consensual rather than exploitative. Young women were thus to be written into the criminal code as the intended beneficiaries of laws designed to rein in the unruly male body; as discussed in chapter 3, it would not be until the Progressive Era that they would come to be regarded as regulatory subjects whose sexualized bodies required the oversight of the state.

Although uniquely focused on the particular vulnerabilities of young women, the female moral reformers were not alone in their preoccupation with sexual danger. Reflecting the evangelical fervor of the times, their campaign emerged out of a broader moral reform crusade to cleanse the nation of sin, which included an effort to save the souls of fallen women. Accordingly, before focusing on the American Female Moral Reform Society's multipronged strategy for rewriting the sexual script in order to save young women from ruin, we look at these earlier stage-setting efforts.

A Nation Awash in Sexual Sin

In the summer of 1830, John McDowall, a young Princeton divinity student who would soon spearhead the moral reform movement, came to New York City as a volunteer missionary for the American Tract Society. Hoping to “diffuse a knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of sinners, and to promote the interests of vital godliness and sound morality”³ through the publication and distribution of religious pamphlets across the nation, the Tract Society was but one of many ecumenical benevolent organizations that sprung up in the United States during the early part of the nineteenth century as an intense evangelical fervor spread across the land.

Preaching in religious revivals across the nation, evangelical ministers associated with what is referred to as the Second Great Awakening rejected the Calvinist view that salvation lay entirely in the hands of God. Anchored in the conviction that by working “ceaselessly to make themselves and others perfect,” individuals could help usher in the Millennium and bring about the Second Coming of Christ, adherents stressed the obligation of

individuals to help cleanse the nation of sin.⁴ As a “wave of evangelistic fervor surged] toward a peak in the mid-twenties,” countless pious reformers, such as McDowall, who were inspired by this message, set out into the field to purify the land and hasten the return of Christ.⁵

Shocked by the wretched conditions of New York’s notorious Five Points neighborhood, McDowall decided to remain in the city and dedicate himself to the eradication of urban misery and sin. Struck by the pervasiveness and visibility of prostitution, he adopted “prostitute reform as his cause.”⁶ Seeking to save those who were sincerely penitent, he helped found the New York Magdalen Society, which opened a house of refuge for prostitutes who were willing to accept the “evangelical moral code and behavioral standards” in their effort to leave their former life of sin behind.⁷

Reclaiming the Fallen Victims of Male Lust

McDowall’s commitment to the cause of prostitution reform was a sign of the changing nature of the trade in women’s bodies. Although prostitution was certainly not new in this country, it had traditionally existed outside of public view. Tucked into discreet corners of the social landscape, the purchase of sexual services was typically arranged through a diffuse and largely invisible network of personal contacts. Tolerated as a necessary evil in light of prevailing beliefs about man’s naturally lustful tendencies, prostitutes generally operated below the social and legal radar, although they were not immune from prosecution as vagrants or disorderly persons. Moreover, as prostitutes became somewhat more visible in major seaport cities over the course of the eighteenth century, growing public concern about their presence resulted in the occasional police raid or mob attack on brothels. However, mirroring the law’s tendency to characterize prostitution as a disruptive force, rather than as a wrongful sexual exchange, these actions were generally intended to restore public order rather than to suppress immorality.⁸

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, prostitution moved out of the shadows as a growing number of women began plying their trade on the streets of the nation’s burgeoning large cities, and by mid-century “the sexual services sold by women had become a highly visible, profitable, and public urban occupation.”⁹ Of particular concern to many was the fact that as they moved out into public spaces, prostitutes did not confine themselves to the poorer neighborhoods in which most of them lived. Raising the specter of social disruption, Dr. William Sanger, author of an influential study on the “extent, causes and effects” of prostitution, warned that disreputable women were infiltrating respectable neighborhoods:

Unlike the vice of a few years since, it no longer confines itself to secrecy and darkness, but boldly strides through our most thronged and elegant thoroughfares, and there, in the broad light of the sun, it jostles the pure, the virtuous, and the good. It is in your gay streets, and in your quiet, home-like streets, it is in your squares, and in your suburban retreats and summer resorts; it is in your theaters, your opera, your hotels; nay, it is even intruding itself into the private circles, and slowly but steadily extending its poison.¹⁰

Beneath the surface of Sanger's lament, one can read a quiet fear that as spatial boundaries began to dissolve, the line separating the virtuous woman from the fallen one would begin to blur.

By the mid-1830s, it was evident that the trade had acquired the "characteristics of a rather complex system, including territorial boundaries and clearly defined classes of prostitutes . . . [and] that both prostitutes and their patrons were very aware that a system existed."¹¹ Illustrating the growing visibility of prostitution, by 1840, the notorious "third tier"—an area of the theater set aside for prostitutes and their customers—had become a clearly "understood theatrical appendage" in major cities across the country.¹² Although upper-class prostitutes who serviced wealthy patrons freely mingled with their clients throughout the theater, in what Claudia D. Johnson refers to as the "ritual of the third tier," ordinary prostitutes were directed to this designated area where they would meet with regular customers and be introduced to new patrons who had been "brought up from other parts of the house" by mutual acquaintances. To accommodate this practice, urban theaters were actually designed with a side street entrance with a separate stairway that led directly to the third tier.¹³

Further highlighting the increased visibility and organized structure of this burgeoning urban profession, if a prospective customer was not fully aware of the local options, he might purchase a "brothel guide" to acquaint himself with the available offerings. Presumably geared to the discriminating customer, these guides were particularly useful for locating a city's finer brothels, which were often discreetly tucked away in elegant townhouses in fashionable neighborhoods.¹⁴

As an integral part of his reformation effort, McDowall sought to recast the classic lascivious harlot into the innocent victim of the predatory male. Challenging the traditional explanation that women were drawn to prostitution because of their innately lustful natures, McDowall instead argued that prostitutes were typically desperate women who had been robbed

of their purity by a wily seducer, and consequently could no longer hope to marry or to otherwise maintain a place in respectable society. Forced to choose between a life on the streets or an early grave, he compassionately argued that fallen women who opted for a life of infamy over an untimely death were deserving of a second chance.¹⁵

McDowall's rejection of a carnal explanation for why women became prostitutes was consistent with a broader reconceptualization of female sexuality that was closely associated with the rise of evangelical Christianity during the early decades of the nineteenth century. According to Nancy Cott, as ministers increasingly came to rely upon women, who had become the majority of church attendees, as "worthy allies and agents of Protestantism," the historic Anglo-American understanding of them as the lusty "inheritors of Eve's legacy of moral danger," was displaced by a vision of the morally pure female who symbolized God's grace. Elevated as "moral and intellectual beings," women—or more particularly, white, middle-class Protestant women—came to be regarded as inherently pure.¹⁶ Although grounded in an assumption of innate female purity, Cott argues that the recasting of women as lacking sexual passion benefited them by elevating their moral stature, which gave activists, such as the female moral reformers, a firm platform from which they could move out into the world in order to improve the human condition.¹⁷

Although the opening of the Magdalen Society's house of refuge did not attract much attention, upstanding New Yorkers were scandalized by the society's first annual report. Penned by McDowall, its frank discussion of indelicate topics and its bold assertion that the city was home to more than ten thousand prostitutes whose customers not uncommonly included men from prominent and well-connected families drew an avalanche of criticism. Stung by the response, the society collapsed under the weight of public condemnation.¹⁸

However, as Daniel Wright details, the report also helped to feminize the predominately male moral reform movement. Using it as an occasion to boldly assert that rather than disqualifying them from working with their fallen sisters, the "peculiar influences" of virtuous women uniquely qualified them for this task, McDowall exhorted them to take up the cause.¹⁹ Accordingly, when McDowall, who had grown weary of trying to save women who showed little interest in their own reclamation,²⁰ decided to shift his focus from rescue to prevention work, a small group of women, who were drawn to the idea of launching a far-reaching "crusade against evil," came together to establish the New York Female Moral Reform Society (NYFMRS), which soon evolved into the nationally focused American

Female Moral Reform Society (AFMRS).²¹ As developed below, their commitment to cleansing the nation of sexual sin soon led them to focus their efforts on the particular plight of young woman who had moved from the countryside to the nation's burgeoning urban centers.

Stepping into the Breach: Ruin and Reform

The American Female Moral Reform Society was founded at a time when the nation was experiencing the interconnected dislocations of industrial and urban growth. Like others of their era, the society's members were deeply concerned about the threat that these changes posed to the long-standing American agrarian ideal that had been woven into the founding vision of the nation, serving to proudly distinguish the New World from the corrupt ways of the old. This bucolic vision was closely associated with Thomas Jefferson, who confidently predicted that "our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural" and cautioned that if they were to become "piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe."²²

Agreeing with Jefferson's observation that "large cities are great sores,"²³ female moral reformers warned that the nation's teeming urban streets were the "gathering-places of the most skillful, daring and dangerous of the enemies of morality and piety" and were where "the wicked have great influence upon those who are not yet corrupted."²⁴ Of greatest concern to them were the unsuspecting young women from the countryside who had been drawn to the cities in pursuit of work or possibly by their glamorous allure. Leaving home at younger ages than was typical of past generations, in contrast to the pattern in rural settings, these urban transplants were coming of age beyond the watchful gaze of their parents and community. Seeking to fill this void, the female moral reformers mobilized to protect innocent country girls from the dangers and temptations that they faced as they reached maturity in settings wholly unfamiliar to their parents.

To this end, the female moral reform publications, specifically, the *Advocate of Moral Reform* and the *Friend of Virtue*, were filled with dire warnings about the dangers that lay in wait at every corner to "ensnare" the innocent maiden.²⁵ According to one such account, each year countless young women forsook "their friends, their parents, and their accustomed moral restraints," to seek employment as domestics in the city, only to "like a great holocaust . . . be offered upon on the polluted shrines of lust!"²⁶ Similarly, in an "Address of Ministers of Boston to Their Fellow Citizens,"

the audience was warned that “[h]undreds—we speak within bounds and moderately when we say hundreds of young women are enticed to Boston, or entrapped when here, by the arts of those who care for nothing but vile pleasure and shameful gain. Even girls, who have scarcely passed the age of childhood, are misled; all their fair hopes blighted, their names tarnished, and the restoration to peace, purity, and happiness, often rendered all but impossible.”²⁷

Penning tragic tales of seduction to draw attention to their cause, a story in the *Advocate of Moral Reform*, aptly named “Beware of Strangers,” provides a heartrending example of the terrible fate that could befall those unaccustomed to the ways of the city. In this tale, a trusting sixteen-year-old girl who was drawn to the “novelty” of the city accompanied her cousin on a business trip to Boston. While in the city, her delight in “the variety of beautiful objects that met her view on every hand” served to blind her to the lurking presence of the “destroyer,” who, disguised as an amiable young gentleman, soon led her to a brothel on the pretense that he needed to visit a dear relative who was like a mother to him. Once there, she was imprisoned by the madam, whose “fiendlike tones . . . contrasted sadly with the sweet voice of maternal affection she had been accustomed to hear from her infancy,” thus leading her to realize the true value of her “virtuous happy home” in the peaceful countryside in contrast to the false allure of the city.²⁸

Although they were not their primary focus, female moral reformers also expressed concern about the plight of rural young men who, as recounted in the *Friend of Virtue*, often abandoned “their peaceful and quiet homes for the city,” under the mistaken belief that they would “do better for themselves when away from the parental fireside.”²⁹ Initially shocked by the “scenes of dissipation” these country innocents soon came to relish the corrupt pleasures of urban life.³⁰ Highlighting the potentially tragic outcome of yielding to such pleasures, the *Advocate of Moral Reform* tells of a young man who, as he stood upon the scaffold awaiting execution for murder, used his final moments to warn others about the temptations that destroyed him. Noting that his downward spiral began when he first “visited the wretched place beside the railroad,” he felt it incumbent to caution other young men about those ruinous places before he left the world.³¹ Hoping to save them from such tragic ends, reformers thus implored young men to resist the false allure of the city: “We say then, for your own sake, for your parent’s sake, for humanity’s sake, young men, stay upon the farm.”³²

As poignantly conveyed in the female reformers’ tales of ruin, it was the nation’s young women (and men) who, as they exchanged the “green

fields, the groves [and] the garden” of their parents’ homes for the “noise and bustle, and impurity and vice” of large cities containing “places which the Bible calls ‘the way to hell,’” were traversing the symbolic border between America’s idealized past and its rapidly changing and highly uncertain future.³³ Compelled by a profound sense of urgency, female moral reformers sought to expose and reform, and ultimately, if these efforts failed, to punish the wily seducer who stood poised to destroy their hopeful futures.

In focusing their gaze on the city, despite an occasional sympathetic mention of the plight of their “colored sisters in bonds,”³⁴ and their emulation of female abolitionists as a model of effective activism (discussed below), the female moral reformers do not appear to have been particularly concerned about the rampant sexual exploitation of young enslaved women. It is unlikely that their silence on this matter can simply be explained by a lack of knowledge on their part about the true conditions under which female slaves labored, as abolitionists, particularly those who were aligned with the woman’s rights cause, such as Sarah and Angelina Grimke and Lydia Maria Child, wrote passionately about their plight. Thus, for example, in her 1837 letter “On the Condition of Women in the United States,” Sarah Grimke wrote as follows:

There is another class of women in this country, to whom I cannot refer, without feelings of the deepest shame and sorrow. I allude to our female slaves. Our southern cities are whelmed beneath a tide of pollution; the virtue of female slaves is wholly at the mercy of irresponsible tyrants, and women are bought and sold in slave markets, to gratify the brutal lust of those who bear the name of Christians. In our slave States, if . . . a woman desires to preserve her virtue unsullied, she is either bribed or whipped into compliance.³⁵

Striking a similar chord, the Ladies Department of the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* “admonished its female readers to work for the immediate emancipation of their one million enslaved sisters ‘exposed to all the violence of lust and passion—and treated with more indelicacy and cruelty than cattle.’”³⁶ The fact that there was considerable crossover between the various reform movements of the time, and that, more specifically, many female moral reformers were also active in the abolitionist movement, makes the possible claim of a lack of knowledge even less probable.³⁷

A more likely explanation is that like many white Northerners, including the abolitionists themselves, the female moral reformers had complicated

views about the morality of enslaved women. Although undoubtedly less likely than Southerners to see black women as naturally “governed almost entirely by [their] libido,”³⁸ many abolitionists nonetheless believed, as Ronald G. Walters writes, that “‘illicit intercourse’ was embedded in the very conditions of Southern life,” and that its geographical “libidinousness” could “only be compared to other examples of utter depravity and dissolution.”³⁹

Although generally placing the white slave owner at the center of the sexual narrative, abolitionist writings also expressed the fear that his corrosive influence would lead to the sexual corruption of enslaved women that in turn would put the purity of white women at risk. Thus, for example, although writing with a sense of “the deepest shame and sorrow” about the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, in the above-referenced letter on “The Condition of Women in the United States,” Sarah Grimke also comments that they do not “suffer alone” but that the “moral purity of the white woman is [also] deeply contaminated” as a direct consequence of this mistreatment:

In the daily habit of seeing the virtue of her enslaved sister sacrificed without hesitancy or remorse, she looks upon the crimes of seduction and illicit intercourse without horror, and although not personally involved in the guilt, she loses that value for innocence in her own, as well as the other sex, which is one of the strongest safeguards to virtue.⁴⁰

Although, as we have seen, moral reformers relied upon the seduction narrative in order to strengthen the public’s commitment to the cause of purity, in the present context, exposure to the sexual corruption of the slave owner was not seen as having the same salutatory effect, but rather was viewed as posing a direct threat to the moral integrity of white women.

This dissimilarity may well reflect the view that sexual exploitation impacted the bondswoman differently than it did the innocent country girl. As the seduction narratives make clear, the fate of the latter was an inevitable slide into ruin and possibly even death. In contrast, rather than passively accepting her fate, the wronged slave woman was presented as more likely to take matters into her own hands. As one abolitionist suggested, she may well have been tempted to lure “young slaveholders into illicit attachments as a way of lessening chances that the favored slave might be sold—and to destroy the master’s constitution through physical indulgence.”⁴¹ Similarly portrayed as intent upon retribution, another warned that enslaved women “who have been drawn into licentiousness by

wicked men, if they retain their vicious habits, almost invariably display their revenge for their own debasement, by ensnaring others into the same corruption and moral ruin."⁴² Revealed here is a clear attribution of sexual agency to the wronged enslaved women, thus suggesting that black women were more naturally libidinous than white women—a view that located them outside the boundaries of respectable womanhood despite existing expressions of concern for their plight.⁴³

In this regard, Karen Sánchez-Eppler makes the interesting argument that although feminist-identified female abolitionists frequently emphasized “the similarities in the condition of women and slaves . . . their treatment of the figure of the sexually exploited female slave betrays an opposing desire to deny any share in this vulnerability.” To the point, she further explains that the “figure of the slave woman, whose inability to keep her body and its uses under her own control” allowed white women to project their own “sexual anxieties onto the sexualized body of the female slave” who became “a perfect conduit for the unarticulated and unacknowledged failure of the free woman to own her own body in marriage.”⁴⁴

Although it is difficult to know with certainty whether these complex views about the sexuality of enslaved women were responsible for the moral reformers’ lack of attention to their plight, it is certainly a reasonable assumption that they both would have known about their circumstances and been influenced by the complex views that abolitionists expressed with respect to the morality of enslaved women. Intent upon filling the vacuum resulting from the erosion of traditional village life, it was thus the wily seducer of innocent country girls rather than the powerful slaveowner whom they sought to bring under control in order to safeguard female virtue. Although unspoken, the complexities of these racial attitudes indicates that the bodies of young white women, who were the ones most likely to be making the perilous journey from the bucolic country to the city, were regarded as more deserving of protection than the marginalized and potentially corrupting bodies of young black women.

Attacking the Sexual Double Standard

Like their male counterparts, female moral reformers were steeped in the evangelical fervor of the times. Inspired by their deep faith, they believed that only by the “unremitting and continued holding on to the arm of the Lord”⁴⁵ would they succeed in saving the youth of America from ruin. Piety, however, was not the sole wellspring of their activism. Augmenting the power of their faith and thus distinguishing them from the men in the

purity reform movement, a deep distrust of and anger toward male sexual privilege infused their crusade to expose licentiousness and purify the nation.

To the reformers, the sexual double standard—"that perverse maxim . . . that licentiousness in man is but a venial offence; while in woman it is a sin of the blackest dye—corrupting her whole soul, and utterly unfitting her for decent society"⁴⁶—embodied the corrosive force of male desire. Rather than regarding this gendered characterization of human sexuality as an expression of natural or divinely sanctioned differences between men and women, they boldly sought to expose it as an artificial construct that had been "invented by base men themselves, in order to cover up their own deformity;—while they have heaped upon the victims of their own baseness a large measure of that odium which justly belongs to themselves."⁴⁷

Compounding their anger over the asymmetrical consequences of the double standard, female moral reformers also made it clear that while women took the fall, it was men who were responsible for initiating most sexual encounters: "[M]an, as we think, is the *great* destroyer. In the pride of his heart, and prompted by the indulgence of lust, he goes forth, finds his victim, lays her on the impure altar, and there leaves her in all the agonies of woe."⁴⁸ Although certainly refracted through the existing moral code that extolled female virtue and passivity, the reformers' fears about the young man who considered it a "sport and pastime . . . to destroy female innocence, and to scatter desolation and death through the community,"⁴⁹ also reflected the very real dangers that young women faced, particularly if alone in the city. Indeed, this was the era of the Jacksonian "rake culture," which valorized unrestrained male sexuality. Reveling in the lifting of traditional familial and community restraints, rakes "took to the streets to enjoy their freedom," while also enjoying an emerging domestic market in pornographic literature that was "characterized by 'unbridled sensualism and sadomasochistic violence.'"⁵⁰

Seeking to raise public awareness, female moral reform periodicals were filled with seduction narratives in which a sexually aggressive male destroyed the life of an innocent and trusting young woman. For example, in a rather typical tale, Mary, a young woman of fifteen, confides in her mother that she longs for someone to love. Soon afterward, impressed by his gentlemanly ways, Mary's father extends the "hospitalities of country life," to a Mr. Everett, who is vacationing from the city. Had, however, Mary's father, "known more of the character of his guest he would sooner have cherished a serpent," but so great was Mr. Everett's charm that he unfortunately failed to realize that along with "all the polish of a great city," his guest has also imbibed "all its vices."⁵¹

Having “determined upon the ruin” of Mary, whose innocent and confiding nature “never dreamt of deception or dishonor,” Mr. Everett seduces her with the promise of marriage, and then promptly returns to the city. The tale ends with a typically melodramatic recounting of the stark differences in the fates that awaited the seducer and his victim:

Would you see that family mansion now? The grass has grown in the pathway, the loaded vine has fallen to the ground, and the owl hoots from the deserted chamber. Would you see that outraged host and father? Behold him weeping over the newly made grave of his wife. Would you view that loving, betrayed, and forsaken daughter? Harken to her screams as she clanks the maniac’s fetters and calls for her unweaned infant. And would you look upon that vile, and unpunished deceiver? There he goes in his gilded carriage, beside him sits his wedded wife, around him are his baptized children, and he is a candidate for the State Legislature.⁵²

Here was the hated double standard in stark relief. Not only was the libertine admitted into the sacred realm of marriage and able to sire children who were blessed by the church, he was also free to make his mark in the public realm of politics, while his victim and her family were left to face a future beset by madness, grief, and ultimately death.

Determined to protect young women like Mary from “sinking lower in degradation and sin, until the last gleam of hope has faded away” due to the treacherous seducer who, after securing the confidence of his victim, “finds it comparatively an easy task to accomplish her destruction,” the reformers argued for a single standard of sexual behavior.⁵³ Challenging existing conventions, they insisted that “moral purity in both sexes . . . be regarded in the same light and be esteemed and treated by the same rules.”⁵⁴ Although advocating the replacement of the double sexual standard with a single standard of expected behavior, they also clearly believed that it was the seducer who deserved greater social censure than his victim. In a further effort to reverse the historic pattern of condemnation, they thus argued that “[i]f there is an individual who merits the deepest disgrace, who should be denied admittance into respectable and virtuous society . . . who should be loathed and shunned as the insidious poisonous serpent, or the foetid death breeding carcass, it is the libertine.”⁵⁵

In keeping with the sexual ethos of the time, as they sought to replace the double standard with a single standard of morality, the female moral

reformers did not consider the possibility of giving young women a wider berth within which to explore their sexuality, but rather, as discussed, they focused on persuading men to control their lust. Although their approach certainly reinforced prevailing notions of female purity and passivity, it also advanced a bold critique of male conduct on both an individual and a societal level. As Nancy Ryan writes: "Female moral reform . . . constituted a concrete, specific attempt to exert women's power. . . . [I]t was a direct, collective, organized effort, which aimed to control behavior and change values in the community at large."⁵⁶ Suggesting a degree of agency that was arguably at odds with their vision of the sexually passive female, these activists employed a multipronged strategy to bring about the desired change in sexual norms and behavior, which, as we will see, included the courageous demand that the state treat the seduction of an innocent girl as a punishable offense.

THE INCULCATION OF INTERNAL RESTRAINT

Reflecting the growing importance of maternal nurture within the increasingly privatized and non-economically productive domestic realm (see chapter 4), one strategy the female moral reformers adopted for advancing a single standard of morality was to call upon mothers to develop appropriate standards of behavior in their children. Honoring women's special capacities and responsibilities, members of the AMFRS adopted the following resolution at their 1841 annual meeting: "That as the principles of licentiousness are often implanted or developed in early life, it is therefore the peculiar duty of mothers to attend strictly to the private habits, and carefully guard the associations of their children while very young."⁵⁷

This vigilance could not start too early. Pregnant women were accordingly advised to avoid certain stimulating beverages, such as tea, coffee, and alcohol, based on the belief that the ingestion of these stimulants would encourage the "precocious development" of their baby's organs, thus unleashing "their animal propensities" and dooming the child to a life governed by the "dominion of appetite and lust."⁵⁸ Following birth, mothers were advised not to overfeed their children so as to not stimulate their bodies and prematurely inflame their passions. Reformers warned that if indulged, a child's "disposition to yield to unshallowed desires [would be] greatly increased."⁵⁹ In this regard, the eating of sweets from the confectioner's shop was thought to be particularly dangerous, and mothers were warned that the consumption of these "poisonous articles . . . benumbs the moral and intellectual powers, inflames the passions and leads to impurity in heart and life—to the ruin of body and that of the soul too."⁶⁰

Excess salt was also cited as a possible source of “licentious tendencies,” thus provoking the question as to “whether the fabled notion that Venus rose from the sea, had not its origins in the general notion among the ancients, that the salt of the sea water had the tendency in question.”⁶¹ Of particular concern was its “excessive use in the way of pickling or preserving food,” which one article seems to suggest that by being “incorporated into the texture of . . . food,” was more likely to “implant” a “love of excitement” than when simply added to food after its preparation.⁶²

Novel reading was likewise regarded as a source of dangerous corruption that mothers needed to carefully guard against. Highlighting these dangers, Miss M. V. Ball, who introduced a resolution against the reading of novels at the 1847 annual meeting of the New England Female Moral Reform Society, cautioned that “[p]rinciples thus embraced will not remain dormant. Action will follow—dark and fearful action . . . that in multitudes of cases brings the individual to an untimely grave.”⁶³ According to one physician who had apparently treated a number of young women who had overindulged in this pastime, excessive novel reading could actually result in a particular type of mental derangement known as “*moral insanity*.”⁶⁴

Mothers were also advised to inculcate internalized standards of appropriate moral behavior in their children so that they would gain self-mastery over their impulses. Children were thus to be provided with predictable schedules and clear behavioral expectations to help them develop into self-regulating adults who would not be led astray by temptation.⁶⁵ To further enhance the development of internal controls, children were also to be given a sound moral education, which, in a marked departure from the conventions of the time, was to include information about sex, albeit in veiled and highly moralistic terms. Directly challenging the prevailing view that this would lead to immoral behavior, female moral reformers firmly believed that only by directly addressing the evils of licentious behavior “in the nursery and family circles” could parents hope to protect their children from the corrupting influences of an impure world.⁶⁶

Although the principles of right living and the love of virtue were to be inculcated in both sons and daughters, a mother’s responsibilities were thought to take on a heightened urgency when it came to her sons, as it was unbridled male lust that threatened to plunge the nation into a vortex of sin. A mother was thus advised to spend time with her son before he took leave of the family home for life in the city. She was to sit quietly by his bedside and explain the importance of resisting temptation and preserving his sexual purity, and it was recommended that she extract a promise from him that “he would return to her as virtuous as he left.”⁶⁷

By internalizing a mother's image and words, it was hoped that a young man would have a well of strength to draw upon when temptation beckoned. In a paean to his mother's beneficent influence, one grateful son wrote:

Five years I lived in the western part of New York where . . .
[t]emptation after temptation assailed me, and many a time was
I almost carried captive by Satan at his will. But when on the
very verge of the precipice, the bulwark of my mother's instruc-
tions would rise up before me, and I started back with horror
from that awful abyss before me.⁶⁸

Sadly, however, as captured in the following sorrowful excerpt from a poem by an inmate in the Massachusetts State Prison, the reformers also recognized that a mother's love and guidance might not always be sufficient to save her son from ruin:

I'm thinking of those days, mother,
When, with such earnest pride,
You watched the dawning of my youth,
And pressed me to your side. . . .

I'm thinking of the day, mother
I left thy watchful care,
When thy fond heart was tilted,
To Heaven—thy trust was there . . .

I would not have thee know, mother,
How brightest hopes decay—
The tempter, with his baneful cup,
Has dashed them all away.⁶⁹

Rooted in the fear that maternal influence might not be powerful enough to save all sons from ruin as they faced the temptations of the city, reformers also called upon virtuous women to cast out the rogue from civil society thus depriving him of access to the intended targets of his sensual longings.

CASTING OUT THE LIBERTINE

Directing their attention to the wily sensualist, female moral reformers implemented the dual strategy of exposing and shunning the libertine. Far bolder

than the turn to mothers, this approach openly challenged male privilege and gave young women a concrete strategy for resisting sexual pressure.

With respect to public exposure, the female moral reformers announced in the *Advocate* that where the mask of the offender “renders the accomplishment of his villainous schemes comparatively easy,” it was incumbent upon them to reveal “him to the world as he really is” in order to “forewarn the victims he designs to entrap.”⁷⁰ Thus, for example, the *Advocate* warned its readers that: “[t]wo young men of the village of Oswego whose names are *Young* and *Cochran*, have pursued for many months a course of atrocious villainy. It is thought proper to give their *names* and characters that their iniquities might be rebuked.”⁷¹ In another issue, noting that not even in “puritanic New England” were young women safe from male predation, the *Advocate* warned its Vermont readers, particularly those in Rutland and Windsor counties, that a “walking pestilence,” named Morgan was passing himself off as a dance instructor, but in reality, was nothing but “a monster in bodily size” who preyed upon those entrusted to his care.⁷²

Presumably in an attempt to deflect anticipated criticism, the reformers insisted that if newspapers had the right to publish the names of common criminals, they certainly were entitled to publish the name of a thief who stole from a woman the “very life of life—her priceless virtue.”⁷³ Drawing upon a central theme in their legislative campaign to criminalize seduction, we see here the reformers’ effort to impress upon their readers that the taking of a girl’s virginity was a matter of grave social concern that demanded a visible public response in order to disarm those with evil intent.⁷⁴

In addition to insisting that the sexual rogue was an enemy of virtuous women who deserved to have his name imprinted upon the public’s mind, reformers further sought to exclude him from respectable society. To this end, members of female moral reform societies were required to sign a pledge to not associate with the libertine so he would know that “his conduct is abhorred by the virtuous [and] is an abomination in the sight of God.”⁷⁵ Aware that this strategy was unlikely to deter the hardened destroyer of virtue from his evil ways, reformers focused their efforts on the rising generation. By sending a strong message to young men that their unchaste behavior would no longer be greeted with a wink and a nod, but, as in the case of women, would result in their being “cast out of society and shunned as contaminating and vile,” reformers hoped they would come to embrace the principles of righteousness living.⁷⁶

Perhaps even more importantly than seeking to alter male behavior, the female moral reformers hoped that by making it socially acceptable to withdraw from unacceptable society, the young women, who were the

“objects sought, with a truly satanic avidity by all the panders and votaries of lust who prowl through the land,”⁷⁷ would be provided with the tools they needed in order to “protect themselves from profligate men.”⁷⁸ Declaring that in “[u]nion is strength,” young women were thus encouraged to band together in moral reform societies in order to “be mutual helpers, and to stand by each other’s welfares.”⁷⁹

By “firmly and unitedly,” declaring that they would have “no social intercourse with a young man who is known to be lewd or even suspected of it,” young women were thus encouraged to carve out a social space in which they could be free from unwanted sexual advances, even if this meant cutting themselves off from male companionship.⁸⁰ Exemplifying this resolve, one story tells of a “respectable young female” who chastised her friend for refusing to take her brother’s arm the previous evening. Explaining that she refused to do so because she understood that he was licentious, the sister responds: “Pshaw . . . if you refuse young men on that account, you will not have many to wait upon you, I can assure you.” Nobly, the friend responds “then I will do without their attention.”⁸¹

By insisting that the redemption of society depended upon the isolation of the libertine, reformers invested the rejection of predatory men with a profound social and spiritual significance, thus signaling that young women had the right, if not the duty, to resist unwanted sexual attention. Although this strategy reflected the prevailing belief that women lacked sexual agency, the female moral reformers clearly did not equate female passionlessness with female powerlessness.⁸² Aware that their cause was highly unpopular, they claimed a right to remake male sexual behavior for the betterment of women, even if this required revealing the sexual habits of prominent men, or pushing them to the margins of respectable society. Deeply steeped in a sense of female identity, they sought to harness women’s “moral power” as a powerful force for change.

Turning to the State: The Legislative Campaign to Criminalize the Act of Seduction

A decade before the first Woman’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, the AFMRS moved into the political realm with the demand that the New York legislature reform its criminal code to take account of the ruinous injuries of seduction.⁸³ Acutely aware that as women they had no “voice in electing our law makers, except by the influence we may properly exert over those with whom we are connected,”⁸⁴ and that they were unlikely to persuade

their male relatives to focus on the “important question of morality,” given their investment in partisan politics,⁸⁵ female moral reformers launched a petition campaign to let their lawmakers know that “the female portion of their constituents [had] some claim upon them.”⁸⁶

Eschewing, as Anne M. Boylan discusses, the deferential and highly individualistic approach that female benevolent groups typically adopted when requesting support or assistance from politicians, the leaders of the AFMRS sought to mobilize the collective power of their supporters in to advance their cause.⁸⁷ Accordingly, they vowed to act with “unceasing firmness,”⁸⁸ and to resubmit their petitions each legislative session, even if their “continual coming, might weary both friend and foe,” until lawmakers took “right action” against “the destroyer of innocence whatever may be his garb or profession.”⁸⁹

Despite this sweeping call to action, the AMRFS’ legislative campaign remained tightly focused on New York. Although the New England Moral Reform Society (NEFMRS) eventually launched a similar campaign directed at the Massachusetts legislature, according to Daniel Wright, theirs was a “comparatively half-hearted effort,” and when the “anti-seduction law failed to pass after three legislative sessions, the NEFMRS gave up the campaign, settling for an anti-abduction bill,” which was limited to punishing the luring of young women into prostitution.⁹⁰ Although other states eventually followed New York’s lead and passed similar anti-seduction laws, in contrast to the campaign to raise the age of sexual consent (see chapter 2), this early foray into the legislative arena to protect the interests of young women did not blossom into a coordinated national effort, but instead remained the province of locally focused activists.

Although, as discussed above, the female moral reformers were not particularly concerned about the sexual exploitation of young slave women, in seeking to influence the political process, they invoked the activism of female abolitionists as a source of inspiration. Lauding the abolitionists’ petition campaign as a proud example of what collective and sustained female activism could accomplish, in 1841, in an effort to energize a membership that was continually disheartened by the disregard in which their cause was held, the AFMRS adopted a resolution calling upon its members to emulate the “zeal and energy” of women in Britain who had collected a “roll of petitions reaching one mile and a quarter in length, and requiring the strength of four men to raise it from the floor of the House of Parliament” in support of the anti-slavery cause.⁹¹ Similarly, in its 1841 Annual Report, the Utica Female Moral Society noted that “[i]t was woman’s petitioning the British Parliament that gave the death-blow and

final overthrow to the system of English slavery,” and asked its members to similarly commit to doing “as much work towards rescuing [their] sisters from the fell destroyer of virtue.”⁹²

In insisting that, as described below, a recalcitrant and frequently belligerent audience listen to their testimony regarding women’s sexual grievances, this effort signaled, as Boylan asserts, that “organized womanhood had the right to formulate its own political agenda.”⁹³ At the center of this political agenda was an unprecedented demand that the state align itself with the interests of young women by punishing men who tricked them into relinquishing their virginity. Although not challenging existing beliefs about female purity, this demand was nonetheless quite subversive on several mutually reinforcing levels.

First, despite their formal exclusion from the political realm, reformers insisted that as women they had a “right to petition the legislature” in order to make their collective voice heard.⁹⁴ Second, and again despite their formal exclusion from the political realm, the moral reformers insisted that young women were entitled to legal recognition based upon their distinctive needs. Seeking to render them visible as political subjects, they cast them as juridical persons with an unmediated claim upon the protective authority of the state. Thirdly, their effort was a broad frontal attack on male sexual privilege, which carried with it a presumed right of access to youthful female bodies. Lastly, building upon these inherently disruptive claims, their demand for a criminal anti-seduction law also sought to destabilize the presumed objectivity of the legal system by exposing the fact that in an “age of reformation and improvement—when statutes on almost every subject have been revised” the laws that impacted women remained “unimproved . . . [and] defective” as evidenced by their continued privileging of male lust over youthful female virtue.⁹⁵

The response of lawmakers to the reformers’ petition campaign is clearly indicative of its subversive and destabilizing nature. Deriding their ill-advised attempt to regulate private morality, one elected official commented that while his colleagues laughed at the first two or three petitions as “ridiculous absurdities, springing from the fruitful brains of some wags, who adopted this expedient to amuse themselves,” once they recognized that “these wags” were actually serious, he suggested the bill proposed by these “sagacious statesmen in petticoats” should be entitled “an act to subdue the passions and control, the thoughts, intents and motives of the human heart.”⁹⁶

Making clear that this was not an isolated reaction, an article in the *Advocate* complained of the fact that “the rights, the feelings, the welfare,

temporal and eternal, of women, [were] not among the subjects of their legislative guardianship,” and that lawmakers not uncommonly responded to the “applications of honest and honorable women for legislative attention to their own rights, and to the crimes especially affecting their sex,”⁹⁷ with “heartless cavils, frivolous objections, and unkind insinuations” which were “sharper than a serpent’s tooth to the sensitive heart.”⁹⁸ In a similar vein, E. P. Hurlbut, a prominent member of the New York bar, recounted that when last presented with the reformers’ petitions: “[t]hese grave legislators ill concealed their mirth at this outbreak of humanity. It was a capital joke, and made them merry for a season.”⁹⁹

Underscoring the depth of the legislative resistance to enlarging the concept of criminal harm to encompass the wrongs of seduction, Hurlbut further commented that if instead of presenting a petition praying for protection from licentious men, “these ladies had presented a petition, praying for further protection of their wardrobes from theft, a bill for that purpose would have been passed by this gallant legislature.” However, although valuing “silks and laces,” these “Solons” derided “the holiest sentiments of the being they adorned—they ‘could pity the plumage—and forget the dying bird.’”¹⁰⁰ Although it is easy from a modern sensibility to dismiss Hurlbut’s comments as simply another manifestation of the overarching emphasis on female purity, they can also be read as a demand that the law take the claims of women to bodily integrity as seriously as it took other injuries, such as the theft of one’s material possessions—a theme that, as discussed in the next chapter, would become popular in the campaign to raise the age of sexual consent.

In a rather daring critique of male authority, the reformers charged that the lawmakers’ resistance to change stemmed from their unwillingness to subject their own sensual passions to the authority of the law. Identifying their “secret love of vice,” as a fertile source of resistance to this “wholesome” law, they stressed the importance of electing virtuous men to office, so as to avoid the moral taint of corrupt rulers.¹⁰¹ In fact, as the *Advocate* pointed out, this “secret love of vice” was not so secret, but rather was a visible and well-enjoyed prerogative of office, noting that: “[w]henever a legislature is in session at Albany, Harrisburg, Columbus, or any other inland seat of government, including Washington, abandoned women seek each of these places by dozens or scores, and remain there during the session, for the *especial accommodation* of Senators and Representatives.”¹⁰² Acting under these influences, was it thus any wonder, the *Advocate* opined, that legislators responded to the reformers’ petitions with a “contemptuous and indecent laughter” better befitting the “libertine and the profligate” than the Christian or the “good member of society.”¹⁰³