

*Disorderly City,
Disorderly Women:
Prostitution in Ante-Bellum
Philadelphia*

UNTIL THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, the wards of Philadelphia were a disorderly mixture of the rich, middling and poor; of native and immigrant; of black and white. Amidst the rush of growth and change, there was little room for privacy, no premium on decorum. The city was an urban frontier; people were bound together in neighborhoods where they lived and worked, and as time and money permitted, played. Such boundaries as distinguished between races were evident and deepening. The modern city was to bring with it more rigid rules of behavior and formal standards that set groups off from each other. But this development was neither simple nor smooth. The reshaping of the old city was as much a reshaping of the people who lived in it as it was a recasting of the urban horizon. It was a struggle fought many times over between the old habits of some and the new priorities of others.

Prostitutes—or disorderly women as they were frequently called—were familiar figures in the landscape of the disorderly city. They moved freely and openly in parks, on the streets, and in places of amusement. Along with paupers and peddlers, they used public spaces to their own advantage. Like more substantial citizens, they sometimes came before local magistrates to complain of wrongs against them; on other occasions, they might have been brought before the bench as vagrants and thieves. They were “public women,” symbols of long-standing sexual disorder, tolerated as necessary nuisances.

This essay attempts to re-create in ethnographic style the “disorderly” world in which prostitutes lived and to examine their lives and careers in the context of those of their peers among the laboring

poor. To date, very little has been written about prostitutes in the early decades of the nineteenth century, prior to the time when prostitution emerged as the great "social evil." Evidence from this early period suggests that prostitutes were primarily public nuisances like noisy public houses and street fighting. Their disorderly occupation did not single them out for especially harsh treatment from city officials; nor did it isolate them from their peers. Their brothels were households in mixed neighborhoods, but their working environment included the streets, the parks, the theaters and local taverns. They were public women at a time when prostitution was less marked by extensive commercialization; prostitutes themselves were not the center of a social debate on sexuality and moral order. The epilogue explores one unsuccessful attempt in the 1830s to remove prostitutes from one of their traditional haunts, the theaters. This effort by concerned citizens intimates the kind of challenges prostitutes would later face as the modern city took form and public opinion about the profession changed.

The Disorderly City

William Penn's design for Philadelphia called for systematic development of the land between the Schuylkill and the Delaware Rivers. The growth was to follow a grid pattern of wide east-west streets cut by north-south streets running parallel to the two rivers. Development was to move inward—westward from the Delaware River and eastward from the Schuylkill River—meeting at Broad Street, the intended city center. But, in practice, the less accessible Schuylkill River frontage remained sparsely populated, while the area along the Delaware River grew crowded. The congestion that Penn so hated in European cities appeared in Philadelphia in spite of his plans for a city of spacious, symmetric blocks. The elegant city that he envisioned for country squires grew into a commercial city of merchants who lived and worked on bits of land close to the bustling ports from which they drew their livelihoods. They lived in large houses along the fronts of streets that Penn laid out; but behind them, in unplanned streets and alleys, lived the unplanned urban poor.¹

¹ The description of Philadelphia geography is drawn in part from Emma Jones Lap-

In 1800, Philadelphia had a population of 81,000; by 1840, the city had 200,000 inhabitants. During those years of growth, disease and disorder were a part of life in the crowded city. Yellow fever scourged the city in 1803, in 1805, and again in 1820; influenza appeared in 1807; cholera, in 1832. In these years, death stalked through the small streets and back alleys and along the open boulevards. Disorder, however, was a daily occurrence.²

Up and down the narrow streets, courts, and alleys of Philadelphia there was disorder. Columns of the pennypress regularly carried accounts of incidents in such seemingly colorful locations as Gillis Alley, Nanny Goat Alley, Ram Cat Alley, and in Baker Street, Bedford Street, Small Street, and St. Mary's Street. One neighborhood's reputation for continual fighting and drunkenness earned it the name "Brickbat Row." In one month of 1836, a variety of residents of Sassafra's Alley appeared in the Magistrate's Court. Amanda Smith was found drunk with a gang of boys collected around her, taunting her. Her neighbor, Catherine Deal, had to be brought in for disorderly conduct on the streets. Catherine Dawes called the watchman to protect her from her husband, Thomas, "a loafer who refused to work then came home to kick up a row." All the while, poor old "Lady McGuire," an insane widow, wandered the streets. Years ago, it was said, her husband had mistreated her, and she turned to drink. Now, her face, once "one of considerable beauty," was bloated. Without husband or property, she was a hopeless vagrant in the city of brotherly love.³

sansky, "South Street Philadelphia, 1762-1854: 'A Haven for Those Low in the World.'" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1975), chapter 1.

² Ibid.

³ See the work of Dennis Clark on the Irish in Philadelphia, especially "'Ramcat' and Rittenhouse Squares: Related Communities" in William W. Cutler, III, and Howard Gillette, eds., *The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800-1975* (Westport, 1980), 125-140. On the problem of changing notions of order and disorder, see Susan G. Davis, "'Making Night Hideous': Christmas Revelry and Public Order in 19th Century Philadelphia," *American Quarterly* 34 (1982): 185-199. On the violence in mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia, see Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, 1975) and David Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underworld: The Impact of Crime on the Development of the American Police, 1800-1887* (Philadelphia, 1979).

Contemporary accounts include *The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia: A Sketch of the*

For an annual salary of \$365, watchmen patrolled those crowded neighborhoods where the rough and respectable of the laboring population lived. Their charge in 1836, unlike their wage, had not changed since 1771. It was "to apprehend all nightwalkers, malefactors, rogues, vagabonds, and disorderly persons whom they shall find disturbing the public peace, or shall have cause to suspect of any evil design." With more than 2,000 licensed hotels and taverns in the city and county of Philadelphia, not counting the oyster cellars and other unlicensed "tippling shops" where rum was sold in small quantities, cheap liquor was often the fuel that sparked the fights that led to the watchman's troubles.⁴

The women of Philadelphia figured prominently in public records, both as victims of disorder and as violators of the public order. Some were, like Johanna Lee, "tidy looking white girl[s]." Lee was first arrested in February, 1837, for being drunk on the street; by November, 1839, she was described as "an incorrigible girl" who delivered her "customary shower of abuse" on the court before being sent to Moyamensing Prison for the eleventh time that year. Others, like mulattos Jane Green and Sarah Crosby, were among those women arrested for disturbing the peace with their "furious and sacreligious language."⁵

On numerous occasions women called the watchmen to restore order in the family. Frequently, however, the wives then refused to press assault charges in court. After Samuel Ross was charged by his wife with cruelty, she begged the judge "as is usual in such cases," the judge commented, not to send her husband to jail. When Michael Conway was charged by a neighbor with having beaten his wife, Ann, she testified that the fight was "a little bit of flogging, which she deserved." Although we may recognize the outlines of what we now describe as a "battered woman syndrome" in the actions of the women

Condition of the Most Degraded Classes in the City (Philadelphia, 1853), located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Specific instances of disorder appear almost daily in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (hereafter *PPL*). See for instance, *PPL*, November 21, December 9, 22, 1836, January 13, 1837, May 4, 1839.

⁴ Philadelphia City Councils, *A Digest of the Ordinances of the Corporation of the City of Philadelphia and the Acts of the Assembly Relating Thereto* (Philadelphia, 1834), 24; *PPL*, July 3, 1837.

⁵ *PPL*, February 14, 1837, November 5, 1839, October 11, 1836.

who refused to press formal charges in court, their actions may also suggest something of the attitudes toward allowable disorder in the 1830s. If the occasion of the mistreatment was "all through liquor," as it often was, the women who suffered merely wanted immediate protection from physical abuse. Calling the watchman was protecting the family in a time honored way; putting the husband in jail was not.⁶

Evidence suggests that women of varying degrees of vulnerability and respectability used the Magistrate's Court as an arena for conflict resolution. Sometimes women used the court for protection from charges of having acted like prostitutes. This was the case for Widow Anderson, who successfully sued her brother-in-law when he spread the rumor that she slept with several men. Other times, prostitutes themselves used the court to press charges against those who preyed upon them. For instance, Susannah Gore, a known (white) prostitute, pressed charges against Joseph Smith, in whose house she was an inmate, for stealing a gold watch from her. He was found guilty of the larceny while Gore went away without court action against her. A madame, like any other bar or tavern keeper, could press charges against her patrons if they acted out of order. On one occasion, Mrs. Sarah Jagers, who kept a house in New Market Street, charged a drunk customer with assault and battery. He was committed, solely on her word. Another woman, Susan M'Kane, took three customers to court when they created a ruckus in her house, breaking a clock, a punch bowl and assorted furniture. Later M'Kane appeared to charge another patron with assault. The man evidently had made what she felt were "disparaging remarks" about one of her "girls," and an argument followed. During the argument, the man pulled a knife, and M'Kane pulled two pistols. In the end, the court held them both accountable for charges of assault and battery. The focus of the court was the nature of the crime and not the moral standing of those involved.⁷

⁶ Information on the issue of family violence is drawn from a daily reading of the *Public Ledger*, 1836-1838. For cases cited, see *PPL*, February 1, March 10, 1837. For more systematic research on domestic violence in mid-nineteenth-century London, see Nancy Tomes, "'A Torrent of Abuse': Crimes of Violence Between Working Class Men and Women in London, 1840-75," *Journal of Social History* 11 (1978): 328-45.

⁷ For examples, see *PPL*, August 20, 1836, June 20, December 9, 1837. Gore's case

The Geography of Disorder

Indication of the place of prostitution in the disorderly city can be drawn from the information about the places prostitution was practiced. We know something of the trade from a surviving mid-nineteenth-century guidebook to Philadelphia brothels. Some brothels cited in the guidebook were adjacent to respectable working-class families in new working-class neighborhoods. Others were situated along the older waterfront area and in the notorious South Street corridor.⁸

The corridor stretched a quarter of a mile along the southern boundary of the city, an area in which Philadelphia's sizeable free black population lived. Described as "a haven for those low in the world," it was the site of inter-racial violence in 1834, 1835, 1838, 1842, and again in 1849. There, in the underbelly of the city, taverns with bright and lovely names but dark and dismal interiors beckoned to passers-by. Prostitutes, their neighbors, and customers drank in The Rising Sun, The Break of Day House, and The Morning Glory. Others flirted in taverns named The Girard, The Columbia, and The Tremont in mockery of the city's fashionable hotels. Duffy's Arcade—the underworld's Astor House—was on Baker Street, below Eighth Street in Moyamensing. According to a report in a Philadelphia newspaper, it was a large, frame building, renting eight-by-ten foot rooms, each of which was lighted by a square hole sawed in its door.⁹

Dandy Hall was a landmark of the old demi-monde. A three-story brick building, it was a hotel, dance hall, gambling "hell," and brothel. To get there, the curious traveler had to walk down Fourth Street below Shippen, then turn eastward on Plum Street, a small dark

appears in *PPL*, July 20, 1837. Cases about the madames appear *PPL*, October 5, November 18, 1837, November 24, 1838.

⁸ *A Guide to the Stranger, or Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing a List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure in the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection* (Philadelphia, 1848) located at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Other locations are drawn from Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underworld*; *The Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia*; and The Society of Friends, "Census of the People of Colour of the City and Districts of Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1848), which is located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The research on the colored census was begun by Alan Dawley, who shared it with me. I am further indebted to Jeffrey Roberts for conversations about the urban development of Philadelphia.

⁹ *PPL*, March 3, 1846; Lapsansky, "South Street Philadelphia." The contemporary was George G. Foster, "Philadelphia in Slices," George R. Taylor, ed., *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 93 (1969): 23-72.

alley. One mid-century journalist wrote that it was at the center of the most concentrated region of white prostitution in the city.¹⁰

There was some truth to that observation. A string of brothels extended down South Street and Bainbridge Street from the Delaware River to Eighth Street. However, the guide to the city's brothels identified the occupants of one house in the area as mulattos, "a swarm of yellow girls who promenaded up and down Chestnut Street every evening, with their faces well-powdered." The census enumerator listed the same building as a "house of assignation," headed by Maria Burries and occupied by seven other women and one small child. The customers were merchants and merchants' clerks, the guidebook noted. They were part of the new urban culture, while Burries' neighbors—laborers, draymen, rag and bone men who lived in cellars—were symbols of long-standing poverty.¹¹

There was another cluster of brothels at the corner of Twelfth Street and Pine Street, still another just to the west of Washington Square. These brothels were newer than those in the area around Dandy Hall; their numbers continued to grow as the decades passed. In the Pine Street area, one brothel run by Mrs. Louisa O'Neil was described as a "palace of love" and a resort for the best men in the community. Mrs. O'Neil lived with Francis O'Neil, a seaman, possibly her husband. One next door neighbor was an Irish grocer who had six children and \$4,000 worth of personal property. Other neighbors included Elizabeth Hewett, a middle-aged madame who ran what the guidebook described as a "tolerable second-rate house," and Mary Yeager, a younger madame, who ran a "first-class house for first-rate boarders."¹²

Brothels also stood among the homes of respectable working people around Washington Square. Here Mary Shaw operated "a bed house, well-furnished and neat," and Isabella McDaniels ran what was described as one of the best assignation houses in the city. There were still other brothels between Arch and Vine on Eighth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Streets, north of a concentration of boarding houses on

¹⁰ Foster, "Philadelphia in Slices," 38-41.

¹¹ *A Guide to the Stranger*; United States Census of Population, Characteristics of the Population, Pennsylvania, 1850.

¹² *A Guide to the Stranger*.

Market Street in which clerks and shop girls lived. This was a neighborhood of artisans' families. The guidebook described a brothel here operated by Josephine Somers, "an accomplished lady," as a "Temple of Venus." The census showed that the household, located near Wood and Eleventh Streets, was composed of Somers, thirty-six, and four white prostitutes ranging in age from twenty to twenty-seven; all were born in the United States. Nearby was "a good and safe second class" brothel run by Mrs. Eliza Thompson, a thirty-five-year-old black woman who boarded two black women, the child of one of them, and a black drover, Charles Thompson, possibly her husband.¹³

More tantalizing than conclusive, this evidence further suggests that the best houses were run by white women, slightly older than the women who boarded with them. Second-class houses were run by older women, and black women sometimes were among the boarders. What the descriptions and colorful designations show is that in the eyes of those who rated such houses, it was not the location of the brothel but the women who boarded there and the company they kept that determined the status of the house.

Sometimes brothels were merely lodging houses, like those west of Washington Square lining Walnut and Spruce Streets, an area populated by laborers, artisans, and a growing number of workers employed in area shops. The prostitutes who lived here solicited in nearby theaters or taverns and then brought customers to their rooms.

Prostitutes had displayed themselves from the third tier of the theater from the beginning of American drama. They came to the theater from the brothel-households in groups, often several hours before curtain time. Once there, they made contact with customers, old and new, in the upper gallery, to which there was a special entrance for their use. The other sections of the theater were visible from the upper gallery; but the upper level was not visible to people below, unless they turned around. Occasionally, however, prostitutes solicited in the pit, for which the admittance fee was the same as for the upper gallery. At times the women in Philadelphia were reported to have stood on the benches, blocking the view of others as they waved to men they knew in the first and second tiers.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Claudia Johnson, "That Guilty Third Tier: Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Amer-

Prostitutes reportedly strolled slowly through the parks after lamps had been lighted in the evening. Solicitation also occurred along the busy streets of the business district in daylight. Two unlucky women, Harriet Robinson and Margaret Murdoch, "well dressed and of fair appearance," solicited the mayor and a friend as they were talking on Walnut Street one day in 1841. Others like Maria Walsh advertised themselves through their dress. When she was arrested, Walsh wore "a revealing calico dress" and bright copper earrings. She was also bonnetless, a mark of a public woman. Women who paraded the streets might be arrested for vagrancy, which carried a one-month jail term.¹⁵

A concerned contemporary was in some respects accurate when he complained that vice "was fearless of rebuke stalking with giant strides through our streets." Disorderly people did seem to act openly without fear. They did not concede that public spaces ought to be restricted to the use of those who acted with more decorum.¹⁶

The Public Women

From specific information for roughly one hundred prostitutes who lived in Philadelphia brothels from 1806 to 1818, it appears that they were primarily young and city-born. Fifty percent were between the ages of fifteen and twenty; another 29 percent were between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five. Of the eighty-four women for whom place of birth is known, about half grew up in Philadelphia; another 8 percent grew up in New York City. Among the others, 14 percent were immigrants; a mere 3 percent were country women who had come to the city.¹⁷

ican Theaters," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975): 575-84. The tradition, according to Johnson, was well established in New York, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Mobile, and New Orleans. Incidents in Philadelphia appear in *PPL*, February 2, August 10, 1837, December 1, 1838.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Policing the Urban Underworld*; and *PPL*, September 8, October 31, 1841. For the dress code in Victorian England, see Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (New York, 1980), 26.

¹⁶ *PPL*, May 3, 1836.

¹⁷ *Register*, Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, 1806-18; located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Of the admissions to this rescue home, I used only those women who were cited as having come from a brothel. Such an approach limits the evidence but assures me that I have not included others who came to the home but did not live as prostitutes.

As a group, these young women shared certain similarities with the women who went to work in the Lowell Mills and women who later moved into industrial occupations. In the Lowell Mills, more than four-fifths of the early workers were between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Like Philadelphia prostitutes, they lived in communities of women and were paid in cash for their labor. However, they came to the mill because of active recruiting efforts of the agents of mill owners who went to the countryside to encourage them to come to the mills. The energy with which these women and their employers continually asserted their virtue might have been a reflection of their awareness that they shared, on the surface, some characteristics with women with whom they claimed to have nothing in common. For some observers going to work in the mill was like "going on the town." Both occupations exposed a woman to an independent way of life that ran counter to the developing ideals of true womanhood.¹⁸

Compared to other working women in their own neighborhoods, many prostitutes were well paid. Although evidence for income is difficult to locate in these early years, some houses charged \$2 per visit. Other prostitutes would have received more, for the hierarchy of houses and inmates described above suggests a variation in price according to the status of the establishment. Even the lowest paid women would have received more than the majority of women workers. The favorable comparison is, however, as much commentary on the sorry state of women's wages as on the size of a prostitute's income.¹⁹

A prostitute's work, like that of others among the working population, was dependent on economic cycles. This shared dependence furnished the occasion for a comic broadside published in Philadelphia in 1834. *Support the Trade* appeared in bold letters across the top of the document. Below, the text began: "The present state of the currency and the failures of many of our most opulent merchants, have induced the undersigned to call a meeting of the 'Ladies of

¹⁸ Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work and the Family: Female Operatives in the Lowell Mills, 1830-50," *Feminist Studies* 3 (1975): 30-39.

¹⁹ For a discussion of women, work and wages, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out To Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), chapters 2 and 3. The pamphlets Mathew Carey published about the oppression of working women in Philadelphia are cited in note 21.

Easy Virtue'” to discuss the suffering experienced by prostitutes as a consequence of the economic downturn. “Already we have felt the change,” the broadside reported; should it continue, “one and all will be reduced to PENURY and WANT.” The five hundred women alleged to have supported the appeal wished to send a delegate to Washington to investigate the money shortage: “Without MONEY, we cannot nor will not accomodate gentlemen with the LUXURY which our SEX ALONE CAN AFFORD.” Humor aside, there was some truth to the appeal. Even if the broadside were a male’s parody of the needs expressed by all laboring women, the broadside—despite its humor, perhaps because of it—identified with some accuracy the prostitutes’ financial difficulties. The trade depended on cash; there is no evidence of bartering between prostitutes and their customers even in the turbulent 1830s when the economy was most unstable.²⁰

There were also serious calls for relief from poverty for Philadelphia’s women, like those issued in the 1830s by the crusading publisher Mathew Carey. In his pamphlet *Female Wages and Female Oppression* addressed to the “Ladies of the United States,” Carey wrote that virtuous women were “in spite of their utmost industry and talents, and merits, actually driven to pauperism which grinds them down to the earth,” because they were refused adequate wages for their labor. Like the “Ladies of Easy Virtue,” the ladies to whom Carey addressed his pamphlet depended on the good will and hard cash of the men in the city. Virtue was a luxury some could not always afford or achieve. Sometimes it was weakness, but other times it was chance and circumstance that made some oppressed females starving seamstresses and others public prostitutes.²¹

Entry into prostitution was less orderly than recruitment to other occupations in which women received wages. Prostitution appears to have been one of the few trades a woman entered without references or recruitment if her traditional life course had been disrupted. Rachel Brooks, for example, became a prostitute after her marriage failed.

²⁰ *Support the Trade* (Philadelphia, 1834). Located at the Library Company of Philadelphia. This document was probably intended to mock the broadsides that called attention to the plight of working men in Philadelphia at this time.

²¹ Mathew Carey, *Female Wages and Female Oppression*, No. III (Philadelphia, 1835); and Carey, *Essay on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1829); PPL, June 17, 1836.

Brooks married a man from Maryland at twenty, bore him four children (all of whom died), and contracted syphilis from him. In disgrace and despair, she returned to her native Philadelphia and lived as a prostitute until at twenty-seven she was too diseased to continue. Another woman, Christiana Phillips, became a prostitute when her husband deserted her. Sophia Smith, an Irish immigrant, was married, widowed, and "seduced" while a domestic servant before she was twenty years old. She then lived as a prostitute for six years until she landed in prison as a vagrant.²²

Some women were, no doubt, misguided by those who abused the new "intelligence" offices where young women came for help in locating employment. According to one source, women applying at some of these offices were charged fees for worthless bits of information. With their money gone, they might have been introduced to someone who supposedly needed a servant or seamstress. But the women would be taken to a brothel to be kept, until they had no choice but to cooperate with their deceivers.²³

Friends and relatives enticed some women into the trade. One young woman from New Jersey reported that she had been convinced by a friend who described "in glowing and attractive colors the pleasures of the life" to come to a brothel in Philadelphia. One thirteen-year old was lured into the life by a friend, a dancer at the Walnut Street Theatre, and by her parents, who ran the "Texas Oyster House." Still another young woman told a magistrate she had run away from an aunt who ran a bawdy house because she did not want to entertain men as her aunt wanted her to do.²⁴

The careers of prostitutes were as varied as their beginnings. Some women, like Ellen Hughes, a resident of Sassafra's Alley, started their careers when young. Ellen was a daughter of an army officer whose widow was thought to have "an indifferent reputation herself." Al-

²² *Case Records*, Magdalen Society of Philadelphia. Early case records contain some biographical information. See Marcia Carlisle, "Prostitutes and Their Reformers in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia." (Ph. D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1982). See also Steven Ruggles, "Fallen Women: The Inmates of the Magdalen Society of Philadelphia, 1836-1908," *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983): 65-82.

²³ *PPL*, August 17, 1836.

²⁴ *PPL*, June 2, 1836, May 28, 1839, Ezra Stiles Ely, *Visits of Mercy*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1829-31), I, 87-88.

though at age thirteen Ellen was reported to have "superior personal charms," the "effects of prostitution and intemperance" were also visible. By the time she was fourteen, she appeared in court records as "a cyprian of ordinary caste." Another, Mary Ann Brown, "an insolent and abusive woman," was described in 1837 as "an old frail sister," and was reported to have been "on the town" for fifteen years. Still others, like Caroline Brown, tired of the life before that. Caroline Brown, described as a young and good-looking white woman, was first arrested in May, 1837. She was arrested again in January, 1839 for fighting in the Arch Street Theatre. She hanged herself in January, 1843, with a white muslin kerchief she had attached to the bedpost in her room in a South Street brothel.²⁵

Sometimes coerced, sometimes fully aware of what they were doing, women continued to move into prostitution. Although first-hand accounts of how that move took place are rare, some insight might be drawn from the case of Harriet Sperry. Sperry, a seamstress, sued James Reed for bastardy. In her testimony, she described how she had come to have sex with Reed, accepted money from him at various times, but evidently did not think of herself as a prostitute. As the court reported her words, she said:

I got introduced to him by a girl named Mary Fisher at the corner of Sixth and South Street. I had a slight conversation with him; he asked me if I would walk up? I said I did not care. We walked up as far as Mrs. King's house in Seventh between Pine and Spruce Streets. He said we will go in here. I said very well. He locked the door. I went upstairs. He followed me with a lamp. 'Twas there the child was got. We staid there about an hour. I saw him about a week afterwards in the same house, about two or three o'clock in the afternoon. I got there before him about a quarter of an hour. He then had connexion with me again. About a week afterwards I met him again at the same house and probably three or four times were all the times I had connexion with him. In regard to my age, I will be 18 on the 22nd day of next March. I did not know what kind of house he took me into but after the door was locked I found it to my sorrow. I could not make resistance; he put his hand or his handkerchief over my mouth. He gave me no

²⁵ PPL, June 22, 1836, September 1, 1837, May 12, 1836, October 23, May 16, 1837, January 11, 1839, September 21, 1842, January 7, 1843.

money the first time. We were upstairs about one hour. I did not undress and go to bed. I did not the second and third times; I did not undress at all. I was never at a house of that kind before; the second time he gave me about \$2; the third time he gave me about \$2. I can't say for what.²⁶

In further testimony, Harriet Sperry claimed she had thought Reed's conduct—but not, evidently, her own—that first evening “highly improper,” and added “I only met him afterwards because I was afraid he would expose me.” But other testimony presented Sperry as a woman who carried around “handfuls of shinplasters” (paper money) even though she was not known “to follow anything productive of money.” Another witness, a woman bookfolder, testified that Sperry had set out to entrap Reed. “She told me if I would swear that he was the father of the child, she would give me handsome recompense.” The testimony is noteworthy in that Sperry apparently did not believe accepting money for sex would alter her chances in her lawsuit. Reed was found not guilty, but the court ruled that he would pay the court costs—a further sign that the court found Reed partly responsible even in dealing with a woman he treated as a prostitute. The case, regardless of the “truthfulness” of Sperry's account, indicates central ambiguities about entry into prostitution and public response to it.²⁷

From the narrative evidence of their lives, there is little to indicate that there was any glamour associated with the profession of prostitution. On the other hand, in spite of their often grim situations, prostitutes did not always see themselves as outcasts. One woman remarked that she did not consider herself “a great sinner.” Another refused to believe she was a sinner at all because she had a good heart. With the firmness of a still proud woman, she maintained “I've done all I could and behaved as well as I knew how.”²⁸

Other women had few illusions about their lives. As one stated, “I ain't learn'ed in these things, but I hope I sha'nt go to a worse world than this.” In 1810 another prostitute claimed “she had been seven years in the professional business, had never been caught before,

²⁶ Harriet Sperry's case appeared in the *Public Ledger* on December 14, 15, and 19, 1837.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ely, *Visits*, vol. II, 420.

and since she took up the trade to get a living, she is determined to die in it." Another echoed similar sentiments when asked why she continued to prostitute herself. "I have never been taught to do any kind of work; I have few friends that will receive me; and I must proceed or perish with hunger." Such statements, though few, reflect both the absence of opportunities for women who needed to work to support themselves and their determination to survive in spite of the difficulties of this work.²⁹

Prostitutes, like drunken husbands and contentious neighbors, contributed their share to the general disorder of the city. They were not arrested for prostitution, however. They were brought before magistrates for the same crimes as their neighbors: vagrancy, drunk and disorderly behavior, assault and battery. The legal definition of a prostitute as a woman who supported herself by the sale of sexual favors or who solicited sex resulted from the need of reformers in the early twentieth century to define prostitution as an act in order to make it a crime. In early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, such precision would have been as out of place as precise street addresses for the homes crowded into alleys and lanes.³⁰

Frequently prostitutes appeared in court because they were accused of robbing their customers. As a crime, such theft may be compared to the persistent problem of petty theft among the servant class. It was common but not condoned. The crime was considered more serious if the alleged perpetrator were black, as the cases of Eliza Lennox and Maria Gray suggest. Eliza Lennox, a black prostitute, was accused of stealing a watch she said had been given to her as a deposit for a debt owed her. The man who was pressing charges against Lennox did not appear in court to testify. In most cases, especially in those of white women, when plaintiffs failed to appear the cases were dismissed. But Lennox, a black, was committed to trial

²⁹ Ely, *Visits*, vol. II, 41, 22; I, 14.

³⁰ For relevant discussion of prostitutes later in the century, see Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*; Robert D. Storch, "Public Control of Street Prostitution in Victorian London: A Study in the Contexts of Police Action," in David Bayley, ed., *Police and Society* (Beverly Hills, 1977), 49-72; Christine Stansell, "Women, Children and the Uses of the Streets: Class and Gender Conflict in New York City, 1850-60," *Feminist Studies* 8 (1982): 309-35. See also Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore, 1982).

by the judge. In a similar case, Maria Gray, a mulatto, was charged with robbery by John Roberts, a white man. He claimed she lured him into an alley. She claimed he offered her the money to go into the alley with him. According to the account in the newspaper, the court "was disposed to believe her story but as such cases of connection of the most revolting description between blacks and whites are of late not uncommon," Maria Gray was held to answer a larceny charge; she was unable to raise the \$800 bail the court set.³¹

Recent research on the free black population in urban America between 1800 and 1850 demonstrates that blacks were not prosecuted disproportionately for drunkenness, fighting, gambling, and illicit sexual activities if they engaged in such disorder in their own neighborhoods. The unarticulated assumption seems to have been that such disorder was intra-racial. When inter-racial sexual activities came to the attention of the court, the cases evoked a special concern because of long-standing fears of miscegenation. Black prostitutes who sold sex to white men were a stark symbol of that reality.³²

Further information about the relationship of prostitutes to each other and their neighbors can be drawn from reports of sporadic raids on disorderly areas of the city. Often, a motivating factor in a reform drive was the location of the disorder in relationship to potential city development. Thus the commissioners of Southwark were anxious to clear several notorious streets as a way to improve the business potential of the area. One policing effort in 1852 forced the evacuation of a series of "haunts" deemed public nuisances along Plum Street, long a center of low-life in the city. In 1854, Blackberry Alley was the target of a nine-house raid that resulted in the arrest of sixteen men and thirty-eight women. All were brought to jail for the night although

³¹ Occasionally the "theft" was a dispute between the prostitute and the customer over what price had been agreed upon. There is also some evidence to show that prostitutes did use such games as the "panel routine" and the "angry husband" routine to get more money from their customers. *PPL*, November 24, 1838, September 13, 1836.

³² Leonard Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago, 1981). The history of racial violence in Philadelphia during this time period lends credence to the evidence in the *Public Ledger* about the especially harsh treatment of black prostitutes in the courts. In the case cited, the woman was essentially bound over because of the fears of racial mixing. Although no systematic study of such inter-racial sex for money exists, the evidence in Philadelphia suggests the need for one.

"every conceivable method was attempted by the proprietors of the houses and the male visitors to get released from custody."³³

In the Blackberry Alley raid all of the proprietors arrested were women, several of whom owned the houses in which they lived and worked. For these women, prostitution was a business requiring entrepreneurial attitudes, business acumen, and the capital necessary to buy the buildings in which their businesses operated. The rapid growth and the absence of established municipal institutions in ante-bellum Philadelphia seems to have allowed disorderly women more opportunities for participation in various aspects of the trade. This possibility is reinforced by the experience of prostitutes and madames on the frontier. In Helena (Montana), in San Francisco, and on the Comstock Lode in Nevada, women controlled the business of prostitution and the property in which it was transacted until those areas became more "civilized."³⁴

This evidence suggests that at certain times, at least, women rather than men controlled prostitution. In ante-bellum Philadelphia, the participation of men in the world of prostitution seems to have been limited to their roles as customers, supporting rather than profiting from disorderly women. Sometimes men lived in households in which prostitutes lived; and sometimes "fancy men," frequently gamblers, were associated with prostitutes. But there is little evidence that pimps controlled the women, the hours they worked, or the earnings they accumulated.³⁵

The accounts of the raids on the brothel-household in the 1850s call to our attention the attempt by the authorities to get the women of the household to testify against the brothel-owners. In one raid a

³³ See for instance, *PPL*, October 22, 1841. For the raids on Plum Street, see *PPL*, June 3, 16, 28, 1852, for the raid on Blackberry Alley, see *PPL*, September 9, 1854. See also Roger Lane, *Policing the City Boston, 1822-1885* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

³⁴ See the work of Paula Petrik, "Prostitution in Helena, Montana, 1865-1900," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 31 (1981): 28-41. See also Jacqueline Baker Barnhart, "Working Women: Prostitution in San Francisco from the Gold Rush to 1900" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Santa Cruz, 1976) and Carlisle, "Prostitutes and Their Reformers."

³⁵ For a discussion of pimps with which I am in agreement, see Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, chapters 1 and 10. For a discussion with which I disagree, see Marion S. Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Social Life on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor, 1981), chapter 5.

madame, Mary Lamotte, was arrested. Eight women lived in her house, all of whom were released on their word that they would testify against her. Similar offers were made to other boarders, although no follow-up story appeared indicating whether or not the proprietors were convicted. Against these sporadic policing efforts, both bawdy house owners and inmates had little protection except a common understanding that none of them would provide evidence, especially willing witnesses, necessary to prove a charge in court. Disorderly "Ladies of Easy Virtue" and saloon keepers alike used this strategy to frustrate authorities' efforts to force compliance with the wishes of those citizens who desired a more orderly city.³⁶

Signs of What Was to Come

The 1830s brought an effort by some private citizens to enforce new standards of order and decorum. The theaters—long plagued by prostitutes—were one of their first targets. Citizens' complaints were numerous enough that in June, 1836 a grand jury presented the Walnut Street Theatre as a public nuisance. Outside the theater, passers-by had claimed they were regularly insulted. Inside, the audience was bothered by noise and shouting from the upper levels. In September the managers asserted that all was orderly. But beginning in February, 1837, a newspaper correspondent complained that prostitutes were again causing commotion by soliciting in the third tier and in the pit as well.³⁷

"Billy Pitt" (as the letters in the series were signed) believed it was the duty of the theater managers to keep the pit free of prostitutes. He called on the newspaper, as a friend of morals, "to satisfy yourselves of these facts above asserted and then to aid public opinion in purging the best places for seeing and hearing in the whole theatre." In another letter, the correspondent reasserted his claim that the pit was increasingly "a place of assignation for prostitutes and young men and boys ripe for temptation." Theater managers countered that

³⁶ Lamotte's case appeared in the *PPL*, September 9, 1854; see the *PPL*, March 31, 1837 for the law under which the police operated. See also *Police Manual* (Philadelphia, 1835), Section 89. Roger Lane also cites the difficulties various mayors in Boston faced as they tried to deal with prostitution and other disorderly behavior. Lane, *Policing the City*.

³⁷ *PPL*, June 22, September 3, 1836, February 2, 1837.

respectable people sat there. The conflict then disappeared from the paper.³⁸

It reappeared several years later in August, 1839. An editorial reminded theater managers that it was illegal to sell liquor on their premises. The following day, the paper charged, as "Billy Pitt" had years before, that "loose women" plied their trade openly. According to the account, they "flaunt and flare without any regard to the proprieties of decorum," exposing virtuous women to the sight of "bold and unblushing hardihood in women." Although theaters were public places and prostitutes had long used them, the editors of the paper threatened a grand jury investigation if such activities continued. The author of the article further enlisted the aid of virtuous women to help "purge what should be a refined and chaste means of amusement" by boycotting the theaters until loose women were kept out.³⁹

Virtuous women responded in another way, however, to the call for aid. They reached out to the prostitutes to help them. In 1847, a group of concerned women formed the Rosine Society to assist "their fallen sisters" to a better way of life. The organizers included several boarding house keepers, gentlewomen, wives of small businessmen and of clerks, all of whom vowed not to judge the women who worked as prostitutes but to help them find "more dignified labor." Their motto—"You shall support yourself honestly by the labor of your own hands"—reflected their purpose. The organizers criticized the only existing organization in Philadelphia dedicated to helping prostitutes, the Magdalen Society, because it was "under the superintendence of men" and was little more than a "magdalen prison." Although the initial enthusiasm waned by 1860 when the goals of the Rosine Society focused more on the moral rather than the economic welfare of women, the issue of prostitution remained on the feminist agenda throughout the nineteenth century. For many women the issue was one of sexual disorder in which men played a significant role. Prostitutes were public women who sold sex but the charge of "disorderly behavior" was hurled at many other women

³⁸ *PPL*, February 2, 21, 1837, May 12, 1836.

³⁹ *PPL*, August 31, September 12, 1839.

who attempted to move into the public sphere for a variety of other reasons.⁴⁰

The work of the early female reformers probably had more lasting effect on their own lives than on the lives of the disorderly public women whose presence prompted them to action. Prostitutes remained part of what would come to be seen as persistent urban disorder. They lacked respectability in the eyes of some, but they held a place among the people with whom they lived and worked. In ante-bellum Philadelphia, they used the courts to settle disputes. They complained of wrongs against them and expected to be dealt with as others were. When times were good, they were lucky. When times were bad, they suffered as others did. Drink, disease and death were as much a part of their lives as they were of other people. In later years, links between commercialized prostitution and the leisure industry would reshape the trade and tie it to urban bosses, who, like prostitutes, were viewed as an urban problem. By then, the terms *public women* and *public houses* would no longer be used. Public interest came to define a new public order that did not include "those hordes of beggars, of unlicensed pedlars and hawkers, and prostitutes who nocturnally swarm in some of our more frequent streets and public walks." *Public* became a respectable word, but prostitution became a women's issue. A concern for public disorder was replaced by a concern for sexual disorder and inequality that threatened to undermine—more than prostitution did—the modern city.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ For the classic discussion of Jacksonian era women and the problem of prostitution and sexual disorder, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23 (1971): 562-84. For a more recent treatment of the effects of reform work on women reformers themselves, see Mary P. Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York, 1981). For a discussion of the Rosine Society, see Carlisle, "Prostitutes and Their Reformers." The records of this society are located at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Those that are relevant to this discussion are *The Constitution and Address* (Philadelphia, 1847); and the *Annual Reports*, 1847-92. In order to determine the status of the reformers, I located as many as possible in the 1850 Census and in the local directories.

⁴¹ PPL, May 3, 1836.