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Reforming Men And Women: Gender In The Antebellum City

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Prologue

In the manuscript room at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, turning back and forth through the pages of two fraying leather volumes, I double-checked the dates to make sure. Someone had suggested to me just days before that nineteenth-century reformers were a wordy and musing bunch. But I had not expected to see those musings so similarly rendered by men and women. Those dusty volumes were the diaries of Mary and Lewis Ashhurst, who both began to keep personal journals in January 1834. Both twenty-seven years old and married for three years, the Ashhursts had one infant son and had recently experienced the death of another. They were a prosperous white couple who had lived all their years in Philadelphia. Lewis was an aspiring entrepreneur, expecting soon to become a junior partner in a center-city mercantile firm. They attended the “thoroughly evangelical” St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and found an outlet for their evangelical zeal in numerous benevolent societies and charities. Both also found a space for their spiritual introspection in their respective journals.¹

On exactly the same day, February 5, 1834, perhaps inspired by a recent sermon, Mary and Lewis wrote remarkably similar entries, each expressing anxieties about their abilities to exert an “influence” on family and friends. Lewis wrote: “How little influence in religious views, am I able to exercise on my own family. O Lord help me to amend defects in my character, and to be faithful to their souls.” Mary’s entry sounded the same theme: “Fear that instead of exerting any religious influence among my friends I am only becoming too much interested in their worldly concerns.”² That this white middle-class husband and wife chose to think and write about “influence”

reveals a great deal about the history of gender and reform in the antebellum United States. No other term possessed a deeper set of gendered meanings in that culture. "Influence," when used in a positive way, signified the private regenerative quality of womanhood that mobilized both conservative and radical defenses of women's activism and defined benevolent work as essentially feminine. However, it also exposed the ambivalent place that reform-minded men occupied in that feminized culture of reform. And when used in a negative way, "influence" connoted the corrupting masculine temptations and deceptions that young men faced in the city. In all cases, its meanings were shaped by evolving notions of gender. For Lewis, this proved to be the first and only mention of familial influence in his diary. While he remained introspective, Lewis focused his anxieties instead on his own character and his public usefulness in church and reform work. But Mary repeated her concern for a domestic influence throughout the subsequent pages of her journal as she endeavored to lead various relatives and household servants toward an evangelical conversion. She also carried that concern for influence into her activism outside the home. When visiting city neighborhoods for her tract society, she attempted "to influence a woman to give up keeping a dram shop," just as on another occasion, she tried to influence a female beggar to live a more temperate life.³

The significance of this snapshot of two lives rests in the totality of their experience together, as man and woman—and all that those categories meant to them. Simply to view this as a reflection of how Mary and Lewis inhabited distinctly "separate spheres"—a public life for him and a private retreat for her—distorts the shared experiences of these two young evangelicals. Both were benevolent activists and reformers; both participated actively in Sunday school, tract, missionary, temperance, and colonization societies. And yet, even as we glimpse a moment when that shared conception of religious activism might have been a means of bridging their differences, we can see that they encountered that moment—and the gendered meanings embedded in it—in distinctly different ways.⁴ To understand more fully the lives of northern reformers in the years between the Revolution and the Civil War, it is imperative to examine gender as a whole, not only to investigate the experiences of both men and women reformers, but also to interrogate the ideological processes by which reformers invoked concepts and symbols of the masculine and the feminine to fashion and advance their reform agendas, and how those imaginings of gender shaped the ways reformers marked the boundaries of race, nation, and class in the early years of nation-building in the United States.

Historians have passed through two distinct phases in their interpretations of antebellum reformers during the second half of the twentieth century. From World War II until well into the 1970s, historians explained benevo-

lent societies as part of evangelical revivals and a perceived hegemonic Protestant national culture during the early republic. Two seminal books published in 1960 by Clifford Griffin and Charles Foster established this conceptual framework, and coined phrases such as “united evangelical front” and “evangelical benevolent empire” that shaped a generation’s language about pre-Civil War reformers. This first wave of historical writing concentrated on the major national organizations—the American Bible Society, American Sunday School Union, American Temperance Society, American Anti-Slavery Society, and others—and on the men who ran them: wealthy merchants, businessmen, and enterprising clergymen. During this period, historians’ interpretations centered on issues of status anxiety, positing the thesis that these reformers desired and exerted some measure of social control over the objects of their benevolence or over the laboring classes in general.⁵ This focus on male reformers and issues of social control continued through the 1970s. By then, practitioners of the new social history exposed the profound transformations within local communities resulting from industrialization, thereby giving a more sophisticated expression to the social control thesis; yet the first wave of social history scholarship did not contest a narrative that assumed reformers to be elite white men.⁶

A second phase in the historiography of antebellum reformers coincided with the growth of women’s history, which challenged for the first time the preoccupation of antebellum historians with male reformers. Historians of women asserted not only that women were present in grassroots benevolent and reform societies, but also that women frequently surpassed men in their zeal and commitment to this form of activism. Beginning with the work of Nancy Cott, Mary Ryan, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in the late 1970s, and continuing with the contributions of Nancy Hewitt, Suzanne Lebsock, and Lori Ginzberg in the 1980s, women’s historians resurrected reform activism as a space where American women (by which they typically meant middle-class white women) expanded the boundaries of a constrictive gender ideology and created for themselves a visible public presence in antebellum communities. The primary agenda of this history involved discovering a women’s culture within reform activities, determining whether a sisterhood of women transcended race or class divisions and exploring the social functions that reform played in white middle-class women’s lives.⁷ I am deeply indebted to this scholarship. It provides the proverbial shoulders on which this book stands. And yet I wish to push its conceptual boundaries farther and offer a broader history of pre-Civil War reformers.

This book expands the analytical framework for writing the history of gender and reform in antebellum America. It advances the premise that categories of both manhood and womanhood are critical for understanding antebellum reformers and that those categories were inextricably bound

together in the reforming work that men and women shared. The book portrays a holistic history of gender and reform by documenting and exploring the life experiences of both men and women reformers, and the contested meanings of manhood and womanhood among urban Americans, both black and white, working class and middle class, in the antebellum North. More than simply bridging the gap between two phases of the historical literature on reform, I offer a different perspective on the history of topics—antislavery, temperance, poor relief, and nativism—that have produced a trail of historical interpretations. The newness of the interpretation rests not in its use of gender as a category of analysis, but in how it portrays both men and women as gendered beings.

This quest for a holistic history of gender has been informed by the direction that gender studies has taken over the past decade or more. Prophetic voices, such as those of Gerda Lerner and Natalie Zemon Davis, insisted as early as the mid-1970s that the history of gender must encompass more than merely an analysis of the lives of women. In Davis's words: "It seems to me that we should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus exclusively on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the *sexes*, of gender groups in the historical past."⁸ This book shares that objective. It is part of an intellectual quest to engender all of American history, a quest in which my work does not stand alone. I have been influenced by feminist scholarship whose premise is that gender is a historical, ideological process and that gender has been a principal signifier of power throughout history.⁹

Historians of gender are keenly aware that what people in the past designate as gender—the meanings they attribute to "man" and "woman"—has depended on how those historical actors constructed concepts of difference and developed a language for distinct groups of others. Most commonly, gender has functioned so that "man" is constituted as the binary opposite of "woman," and "woman" as the opposite of "man." In other words, what proves that a man is definitely a man is that he is not a woman. Gender has also been a way for historical actors to naturalize inequalities by positing corresponding references to the presumed naturalness of men and women's bodies. But constructing gender on the foundation of difference has never been limited exclusively to the conceptual opposites of male or female. Over time, gender has been constituted against a backdrop of many other contrary images. As Caroline Walker Bynum has noted, "Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it; or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male and female roles."¹⁰ Recently, historians of gender in America have disclosed the ways in which class and racial difference in-

formed dominant gender conventions, shaping the meanings of both masculinity and femininity. Whether this manifested itself in working-class men linking whiteness to manhood or turn-of-the-century bourgeois men and women employing gendered and racial discourses of civilization, ideologies about class and race shaped the meaning of gender for Americans in the past. To say this in another way, in different historical contexts, some men have attempted to prove that a man was truly a man because he was not, for example, a boy, a slave, a savage, a primitive, an American Indian, a Mexican, or a Chinese.¹¹ Gender history exposes the patterns of exclusion that define equality and inequality in a society and the relationships of power that maintain those boundaries.

The history of gender needs to disclose, then, the indistinct lines that delineated public and private, or the visible and invisible, in a society. Scholars in eighteenth-century studies and feminist critics of Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere have highlighted the unstable boundaries between public and private in the late eighteenth century.¹² A deeper understanding of public actions in that age requires an examination of the discursive interplay of notions of patriotism, religious duty, and the passions, as well as contemporary meanings of "public" and "private." The historical development of visibility is equally complex. Part of the irony of gender construction is that men and women, and the categories of man and woman, can be both extremely visible and yet wholly invisible at exactly the same moment. This was certainly true in the early American republic. For example, when white women were assuming an undeniably visible economic presence as northern communities made the transition to market capitalism following the Revolution, they were also made invisible ideologically by a discourse that defined production and commerce as exclusively masculine attributes. At the same time that all women were consciously excluded from full citizenship and participation in the body politic, white women were made conspicuous as the symbols of Columbia, liberty, and virtue on the one hand and the symbols of public danger—irrationality, seduction, prostitution, and luxury—on the other. Although men remained overly visible in the public realm of politics and commerce in the new republic, they remained strangely invisible to themselves (and to later historians) as gendered subjects. Women were considered "the sex," while men spoke a language that positioned themselves as the universal. This is perhaps what Joan Scott means when she writes "that 'man' and 'woman' are at once empty and overflowing categories."¹³ The historian's challenge, then, lies in emptying the full vessels and filling the empty ones; this entails reading the silences as well as listening to the prominent voices that surrounded the construction of gender in American culture.

Religion and reform offer ideal sites for exploring this type of analytically

complex gender history. Both gender and religion have commonly been constituted as moral systems, employing language and performance rituals that both embody and prescribe values. Religious reform, therefore, can illustrate well the blurred boundaries between public and private in early America.¹⁴ Moreover, religious activism stands among the rare arenas of nineteenth-century life where men's and women's lives and identities very closely intersected. Hardly any instances of benevolent or reform work were the exclusive province of men or women. Women created and administered societies, made policy decisions, influenced public officials and institutions, raised money, visited the needy, and distributed spiritual or temporal assistance, just as men did. Both single and married women performed economic and political actions as reformers that otherwise might have been closed to them in a patriarchal legal system, often paralleling and even competing with their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Reform activism, therefore, became a space in which men and women debated, disagreed, and at times reconciled their shifting understandings of gender with their own actions and experiences.¹⁵

Because this is also a book about the history of masculinity in America, I hope to suggest a set of directions for the historical interpretation of early American manhood while this field is yet in its formative stages. One part of this effort involves exposing and analyzing the rival images of manhood that developed within northern communities between the Revolution and the Civil War. While much of the initial writing on the history of early American manhood has concentrated on white middle-class men and the symbols of manhood that they engendered, this book expands the canvas of gender history by also exploring the multiple constructions of working-class, immigrant, and black manhood in this era. White manhood in the antebellum United States cannot be fully understood without examining how white men forged their identities in response to the masculine identity and classification of, say, black men or Irish immigrant men. Yet more important, the manliness enacted by African American and Irish men themselves reveals the creative performances of masculine identity by marginalized men in America that were neither entirely nor exclusively a reaction to dominant ideals of manhood that white men promoted.

Northern communities experienced an immense social transformation during the first half-century of the new republic, an often bewildering array of changes in social relationships, political expressions, print technologies, and spatial organizations. If a Rip Van Winkle had slept through Washington Irving's own adult lifetime, he would have witnessed a world starkly different from the one he knew before his long slumber. Three interrelated developments, in particular, altered the features of society in the northern states between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Each of these develop-

ments was pivotal to the maturing sectional identity of the North, and each posed a specific set of problems that troubled reform-minded individuals and influenced the reform solutions they proposed during the antebellum years.

First, in the years after the Revolution, Americans in the North were forced to confront the demise of a system of bound labor and then to adjust to a different configuration of labor that affected the lives of both workers and those who built their livelihoods upon the labor of others. Historians have devoted surprisingly little attention to the consequences stemming from the end of unfree labor (both white servitude and black slavery) in the North, despite the fact that northern cities had previously relied heavily on bound labor, at least until the Revolution. In New York City, for instance, slaves made up 20 percent of the population and between one-third and one-half of the labor force in 1750, and white indentured servants accounted for an equal proportion of laborers. In Philadelphia, on the eve of the Revolution, more than one-third of the city's laborers were bound in service to someone else. After the Revolution, however, the use of bound labor decreased rapidly. White indentured servitude quickly fell into disuse; and black bondage had completely disappeared in Philadelphia by 1800, thanks to black and white efforts alike.¹⁶ In the wake of bound labor's demise, the concepts of *slave*, *servant*, and *dependent* still retained powerful symbolic meanings; white laborers actively resisted using the label "master" for their employers or "servant" for themselves. The poor found themselves disengaged from a traditional system where support had rested in paternalism and the household, and now confronted the perilous whims of a wage-labor economy and the frayed public safety net of poor relief. Finally, the end of bound labor meant a blossoming of communities of former slaves who created a collective life as free men and women, despite glaring reminders that their freedom was constrained and limited in a white republic.¹⁷

A second major transformation corresponded to a cluster of events that historians now commonly refer to as "the market revolution." Expanding export trade during the European wars between 1790 and 1815, combined with expansive transportation technologies in the years after 1815, produced an economic landscape in which Northerners, both in cities and in the countryside, increasingly encountered international and domestic markets for foodstuffs and manufactured goods. Traditional household economies began to wither under the assault of land and population pressures, the pervasive increase in outwork, and the concomitant rise of industrialization during the antebellum years. Northern cities remained at the forefront of this transformation. Urban working men and women experienced this change most directly as the commodification of numerous facets of their lives and, most important, as a dependence on wage labor for their sustenance and livelihood.¹⁸ For the new urban middle class, the market rev-

olution meant a justification for personal ambition, an increasing identity with nonmanual occupations, and a paradoxical attachment to and detachment from a rising consumer society. The rise of wage labor and a new market economy combined to confirm a separate bourgeois class identity.¹⁹

A third major development that shaped northern society was the making of American nationalism and the expansion of a U.S. empire in the antebellum years. At its core, this involved the ideological project of determining who constituted the nation (or "the people," in the republican language of the era). Urban dwellers in the Northeast did not have to migrate to western territories or fight Indians or Mexicans for additional land to participate in the fashioning of nationalism in the United States. They helped to delineate the boundaries of the nation every time they debated or fought over who should be included among the citizens of the republic. Those issues certainly arose in the reactions to American Indian removal in the 1830s and the Mexican War in the 1840s. But they also emerged as Northerners responded to the problem of slavery and the position of free African Americans in the nation; they arose as well when native-born residents and Irish-born immigrants fought over the citizenship rights of education and suffrage in the cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Colonizationist, abolitionist, and nativist movements were intimately connected to the controversies surrounding American nationalism, as were the violent riots that ensued in the wake of each of these reforms.²⁰

Few historians have associated antebellum reform movements with the project of empire- and nation-building in the nineteenth century, but antebellum Americans clearly did. Catharine Beecher certainly recognized the connection. In the opening chapter of her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1847), entitled "The Peculiar Responsibilities of American Women," she not only linked the subordination of women to these three transformations in northern society, but she also asserted that women's domesticity could be an active agent in conquering the "barbarous" and the "foreign," both within and outside the geographical boundaries of the United States.²¹

These three developments—the end of bound labor, the rise of a market-driven and wage-labor economy, and conflicts over the nature of the citizenry—provide the backdrop for nearly all the reform movements that appeared in the North before the Civil War. They constitute themes that course through a gendered narrative of antebellum reform like streams flowing toward the ocean. A few brief illustrations will make this clear. The meaning of *dependence*—a concept with obvious gendered import—remained inextricably tied to the demise of bound labor and the rise of a liberal market economy in the new republic. Poverty, and its relationship to the population of newly freed slaves, thus evoked concerns about shoring up the boundaries between independence and dependence. Reformers likewise cast the prob-

lem of excessive drinking as dependence and its solution as independence. Little wonder, then, that temperance activists became obsessed with the rhetoric and symbolism of the American Revolution and its ubiquitous references to independence. Images of wage labor (or, as white antebellum Northerners called it, "free labor") and slavery were likewise woven into the controversies surrounding colonization and abolitionism. Yet it is important to remember that concepts of slavery and dependence appeared just as commonly during disputes over increased Irish Catholic immigration to northern cities, proving how crucial they were to defining citizenship rights for black and white Americans alike.

To illustrate these themes, this book is organized around several specific sets of problems that northern reformers wished to redress in the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War.²² Chapter 1 explores the ways in which the stage was set for the gendering of reform activism in the nineteenth century. It examines the question of why the post-revolutionary age produced a particular climate of gender ambiguity that linked notions of manhood with activism in a masculine public sphere and yet, for the first time, also created a space for a new and expanding public presence for reforming women. After exposing the contestability of gender in the revolutionary age and the ways in which women activists exploited those ambiguities to assert a visible role in reform, the next four chapters address four particular problems that inspired numerous and often competing reform societies and movements in the early nineteenth century. This book cannot hope to be a study of all reform movements in the antebellum era, for as Ralph Waldo Emerson once quipped, "What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world!"²³ Centering each chapter around a particular problem, rather than around a reform movement, allows me to develop a gendered history of the full range of organizations and strategies that emerged in response to that issue. My objective in these chapters is not so much to advance a single narrative. Rather, I present in each of these four chapters a comprehensive analysis of the gendered construction of that major social problem and the ways in which gender shaped the reforms generated in response to it. Chapter 2 addresses the problem of poverty; chapter 3, the problem of drink; chapter 4, the problem of slavery; and chapter 5, the problem of Irish Catholic immigration.

The competing perspectives of male reformers and female activists, working-class and middle-class reforms, and white and black organizations can be juxtaposed in the same way that categories of manhood and womanhood must be in a holistic history of gender. Black and working-class activists have too often been ignored in a literature that has privileged white and middle-class voices. As a result, the myriad ways in which class, ethnicity, and race have fashioned the meanings of gender have been overlooked, and voices

outside the white middle classes have been silenced or relegated to their own historical literatures. I have tried to redress that imbalance. Achieving a balance of the voices and perspectives of working-class, immigrant, and African American communities and their institutions, however, is much more difficult for the eighteenth century. Immediately after the Revolution, for instance, northern free black communities struggled against poverty and sought to create social institutions that could remedy their disproportionate hardships; but under these conditions they left behind only a smattering of written sources, with much less introspection for the historian to interpret. Within a few decades these circumstances changed considerably. By 1830, African Americans in the North were publishing their own newspapers, organizing their own national conventions, and creating networks of voluntary associations and other venues for the leadership of black reformers.

I have chosen to focus my analysis on the city of Philadelphia, but always within the larger context of similar developments throughout the urban North. This approach allows me to transcend the problem of typicality and uniqueness that plagued the earliest case studies of the new social history. Although Philadelphia was the republic's largest city during its first thirty years and a leading industrial center until well after the Civil War, to date no book on the history of religion or reform has been written on antebellum Philadelphia. This is particularly surprising since almost every kind of benevolent and reform society (prison, Bible, Sunday school, antislavery, and charity societies) appeared for the first time in this city. Philadelphia thus offers distinct advantages for an examination of the ways northern reformers responded to perceived social problems. After all, Philadelphia was at the forefront of the rapid transition from a bound-labor to a wage-labor economy after the Revolution. The community also exhibited nearly all of the characteristics and new measures of that era's religious awakening. Most important, as the southernmost northern city, Philadelphia possessed the nation's most vibrant free black community, allowing a comparison of black and white reformers and an exploration of the racial dynamic at the core of antebellum reform projects.

The book's first chapter explores the beginnings of reform activism in the United States, focusing an intense gaze on developments in Philadelphia immediately following the American Revolution. From that moment, the regional distinctiveness of the religious culture of colonial Philadelphia, rooted in the cultural prominence of Quakers, gave way to patterns of behavior that nearly all northern cities shared by the beginning of the nineteenth century. By then, Philadelphia's experiences closely mirrored those of Boston, New York, and other northern towns and cities, all of which were transformed in similar ways by the social changes associated with industrialization and the new market economy. Hence, this book tells a story of northern reformers that is set, more often than not, in the city of brotherly love.