The founders used the stock figure of the Bachelor to identify the lowest rung of manhood. The Bachelor symbolized the dangers of democracy and the corruption of patriarchy. He was the male who failed to invest liberty in responsibility, only to foster disorder in the ranks of men. He refused to assume the family obligations of the traditional patriarch or participate in the benevolent governance of women and other dependents, as required by republican manhood. Sometimes he exhibited the manners of aristocratic manhood to mask his lustful desires, and often he wore the guise of self-made manhood to justify his selfishness. The Bachelor broke all the rules in the grammar of manhood. He was unsettled in intergenerational time and continental space, unfit for fraternal society and estranged from its natural leaders, and destructive of republican virtues and institutions. The founders associated him with the promiscuity, licentiousness, sex crimes, itinerancy, pauperism, frontier lawlessness, racial taboos, and martial violence that destroyed families, fostered social anarchy, and invited political tyranny.

American leaders applied the grammar of manhood to stigmatize, ridicule, degrade, and humiliate the Bachelor by portraying him as a man-child who did not merit the rights of men, fraternal respect, or civic standing. Their informal but influential message was that immature males were not free and equal men so much as overgrown children who should be excluded from public discourse, citizenship, and authority. Males who heeded the message might avoid exclusion by conforming to consensual norms of manhood and settling into family responsibilities and community respectability. Those who ignored the message exposed themselves to a coercive criminal justice system designed to control and penalize but also to rehabilitate males identified with subordinated masculinities. When James Winthrop wrote that “it is necessary that the sober and industrious . . . should be defended from the rapacity and violence of the vicious and idle,” he was asserting polite society’s demand to be protected against the Bachelor and other disorderly men.1
The English Bachelor and Redcoat

Late-seventeenth-century England hosted a debate on liberty and disorder. The Bachelor represented disorder. Mary Astell expressed a common viewpoint: “He who lives single that he may indulge licentiousness and give up himself to the conduct of wild and ungovernable desires . . . can never justify his own conduct nor clear it from the imputation of wickedness and folly.” The Bachelor’s wickedness was manifested in his unrestrained sexuality. He seduced women but refused to recognize his offspring. Aphra Behn wrote, “The roving youth in every shade / Has left some sighing and abandon’d Maid / For tis a fatal lesson he has learn’d / After fruition ne’re to be concern’d.” Critics attacked “the compleat beau” who produced ruined women and bastard children, cursed “predatory males” for leveraging lust into drinking, gambling, and crime, and linked the libertine to gangs such as the “Roysters, Hectors, Bucks, Bravados, Blades, [and] Bloods” that wreaked havoc in towns. Critics also condemned the Bachelor for spreading an antimarital gospel that equated bachelorhood to freedom and marriage to slavery. For instance, Robert Gould warned men who valued their liberty to steer clear of the “wild, rocky matrimonial sea.”

Writers stigmatized the Bachelor as more slave than man. The Bachelor was a slave to lust, impulse, and avarice. He lacked self-restraint, rationality, and virtue, and lived by his “appetites” in a “lapsed state of mankind.” He suffered an “inconstancy” that rendered his word meaningless, his behavior frivolous, and his actions erratic. Women could not trust him to be other than a rogue, and men did not expect him to be a trustworthy neighbor. He also was a slave to “unnatural” proclivities associated with the effeminate “fop” who dwelled on appearances, haunted sporting, gambling, and prostitution houses, and cleaved to the latest fashion in “Gallic lust.” One satirist wrote, “Far much more time men trifling waste / E’er their soft bodies can be drest / The looking glass hangs before / And each o’ th’ legs requires an hour.” Critics often condemned the fop’s abnormal sexuality. One pamphleteer announced, “The world is changed I know not how / For men kiss men, not women now . . . / A most unmanly trick / One man to lick the other’s cheek.” The Bachelor’s lust drew him alternately to the prostitute’s parlor and to a comrade’s chamber.

Some writers saw the Bachelor as seditious. He failed to father legitimate sons to replenish the ranks of freeholders dedicated to defending liberty: “A bachelor of age has broken the laws of nature [and] contributes little or nothing to the support of our freedoms. The money he pays in taxes is inconsiderable to the supplies given by others in children, which are an addition to the
native strength of the kingdom. . . . A bachelor can, in no sense, be esteemed a good Englishman.”4 The Bachelor was isolated in time. Having squandered any patrimony and sired no legitimate children, he was estranged from the intergenerational bonds of family and nation. The Bachelor was also unsettled in space. He wandered the English countryside and cities in search of pleasure, threatened other men’s families and property, and claimed rights without responsibilities.

What should be done with this parasite? Proposed solutions included preventive education and political remediation. John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was a primer for fathers to teach sons self-discipline and social civility in anticipation of manhood, marriage, and citizenship. Others recommended sanctions. Magistrates should arrest “strumpets and harlots” who made “the lewder sort of men out of love with matrimony,” and legislators should enact “compulsive laws” to force bachelors to marry. One satirist suggested that a twenty-four-year-old bachelor should be taxed to defray costs resulting from his failure to procreate freeholders, and a twenty-five-year-old bachelor “ought to be reckoned superannuated and grown an old boy and not fit to be trusted with what he had, as not knowing the use and benefit of riches.” Regardless of actual age, “a bachelor is a minor” who “ought to be under the government of the parish.”5

Critics hoped to hasten the Bachelor’s progress to marriage by reforming male manners and female morality. Locke’s protégé, the third earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper), praised the “man of sensibility” who claimed “manly liberty” to unite “a mind subordinated to reason, a temper humanized and fitted to all natural affections . . . with constant security, tranquillity, [and] equanimity.” Unlike flatterers, seducers, and bullies, the genteel man knew that marriage to a good woman wed virtue to happiness.6 Others emphasized women’s morality. David Hume saw male lust as an immutable reality. What prompted men to accept the “restraint” of marriage and “undergo cheerfully all the fatigues and expenses to which it subjects men” was their egotistical desire to clone themselves by siring legitimate sons. Men could satisfy that desire only if they could find faithful wives. Accordingly, the Bachelor was more likely to choose marriage when female fidelity was fortified.7

Where education and remediation failed, the Bachelor was apt to embroil himself in family feuds, gambling debts, and crime. He often escaped harm’s way by being sent to or enlisting in England’s standing army. John Trenchard complained, “Our prisons are so many storehouses to replenish [the king’s] troops.” Trenchard considered the marginal males who composed the army’s rank-and-file redcoats to be rogues and mercenaries whose anarchist bent was
commandeered by corrupt, aristocratic officers using draconian discipline to mold the army to the king’s despotic will. Critics accused the officer corps of synthesizing libertinism and brutality into an instrument of monarchical tyranny.8

Observing the standing army in peacetime, William Prynne asked, “What do these soldiers do all day?” He answered, “These lusty men spend their time eating, drinking, whoring, sleeping and standing watch . . . make off with wives and daughters and leave not a few great bellies and bastards on the inhabitants of the country’s charge.” Trenchard noted that the army rendered “men useless to labor and almost propagation, together with a much greater destruction of them, by taking them from a laborious way of living to a loose idle life.” That loose idle life encompassed “the insolence of the officers and the debaucheries that are committed both by them and their soldiers in all the towns they come in . . . and a numerous train of mischiefs besides, almost endless to enumerate.” John Toland listed among redcoat mischiefs “frequent robberies, burglaries, rapes, rapines, murders, and barbarous cruelties.” Andrew Fletcher accused libertine officers of “debauchery and wickedness” as well as “frauds, oppressions, and cruelties.”9

If the Bachelor’s wickedness was evident in his tendency to see a woman’s ruin as “a step to reputation” as he built “his own honor on her infamy,” the Redcoat’s vices were manifested in his tendency to speak patriotism but practice selfishness. Toland noted, “If one . . . who would pass for a patriot has an interest separate from that of the public, he is no longer entitled to this denomination; but he is a real hypocrite that’s ready to sacrifice the common good to his private gain.” The idea that only “sober, industrious freemen” in the militia (as opposed to “ignorant, idle, and needy” redcoats) were sufficiently trustworthy to bear arms was the basis for a century-long attack on the standing army as an engine of anarchy and tyranny. That attack often returned to the Bachelor. Demobilized soldiers were mostly single males, many of whom traveled to London where they joined “loose fellows” engaged in antisocial activity and criminal behavior.10

Toland condemned the Bachelor and the Redcoat for being estranged from the deepest stirrings of manhood, the desire for symbolic immortality that inspired self-sacrifice from the procreative father, industrious freeholder, and patriotic militiaman. He wrote:

All men would live somewhere eternally if they could, and they affect to become immortal even here on earth. To have their names perpetuated was the true spring of several great men’s actions; and for that only end have they patiently undergone all manner of toil and danger. But this inclination never dis-
covers itself so plainly as in the care men take of their posterity. Some are con-
tent to live beggars all their days that their children after them may be rich, for
they look upon these as their own persons multiplied by propagation; whence
some as had none themselves adopted the children of others to bear their
names.11

English critics stigmatized the Bachelor and the Redcoat for sterility. They
demonstrated no commitment to family, friends, or nation. They procreated
nothing of public value. They were destructive children who lived solely in the
present, where they generated social disorder and fostered political tyranny.
Like minors, they needed to be governed.

America’s Vilest Race of Men

The English introduced the Bachelor into American discourse as early as 1623,
when Sir George Ferrars condemned Virginia colonizers as “unruly sparks, . . .
poor gentlemen, broken tradesmen, rakes and libertines, footmen.” Sir Edwin
Sandys hoped to calm colonial disorders by sending women to America to
marry these disorderly men and make them “more settled.” Colonial adminis-
trators experimented with land incentives to encourage men to marry and
penalties to discourage lengthy bachelorhood. Nonetheless, a 1708 missionary
report criticized the inhabitants of Carolina as “the vilest race of men upon the
earth . . . bankrupts, pirates, decayed libertines, sectaries, and enthusiasts . . .
of large and loose principles.”12 These men did not measure up to manhood.

No American enjoyed ridiculing the Bachelor more than Benjamin
Franklin. In “The Speech of Polly Baker,” he told the story of a trial in which
Polly stood accused of bearing bastard children. She defended herself with
three arguments. First, she stated that it could not possibly be a crime to prop-
agate the species and add subjects to the king’s dominions. Second, she sup-
ported her own children who, therefore, were no burden to the community.
Third, she had consented to a marriage proposal from the father of her first
child, but he abandoned her and the child. Polly concluded that the Bachelor
was the real culprit: “Take into your wise consideration the great and growing
number of bachelors in the country, many of whom, from the mean fear of
the expenses of a family, have never sincerely and honorably courted a woman
in their lives; and by their manner of living leave unproduced (which is little
better than murder) hundreds of their posterity to the thousandth generation.
Is not this a greater offense against the public good than mine?” The Bache-
lor’s selfishness was a crime against nature and nation that was magnified by
what Robert Gross characterizes as an “epidemic” of premarital sex and children conceived out of wedlock in the last half of the eighteenth century.13

The founders also ridiculed the aged bachelor for promiscuity and irresponsibility. When Abigail Adams wrote John Adams that a canister from Philadelphia had not arrived, John replied that he had given it to Elbridge Gerry, “an old bachelor” wont to get distracted. Abigail speculated that “perhaps he finds it very hard to leave his mistress.”14 She added to the fun a year later by telling John about an old Boston merchant, “a bachelor,” accused of hoarding goods and price gouging. One hundred women “seized him by the neck and tossed him into the cart.” Next, they broke into his warehouse and distributed his goods, while “a large concourse of men stood amazed, silent spectators of the whole transaction.” John’s light-hearted response was that “the women in Boston begin to think themselves able to serve their country.”14 The remarkable thing about this exchange is that both Adamses were consistently horrified by mob actions but responded here with humor, apparently because the “victim” was a bachelor who stood beneath men’s contempt and, importantly, beyond the protection of law.

Early American fiction was filled with morality tales about selfish bachelors who schemed to conquer girls’ chastity and acquire their family fortunes. Royall Tyler’s “The Contrast” focused on young Mr. Dimple, who set his sights on the hearts and purse strings of several innocent girls. Tyler made it clear that Dimple was no man. Rather, he was a “depraved wretch whose only virtue is a polished exterior; who is actuated by the unmanly ambition of conquering the defenseless; whose heart, insensitive to the emotions of patriotism, dilates at the plaudits of every unthinking girl; whose laurels are the sighs and tears of the miserable victims of his specious behavior.” Fortunately, the aptly named Colonel Manly saved the women by unmasking Dimple’s deceptions and banishing him from polite society. Manly was a “good” bachelor, but he was atypical. He considered his “late soldiers” his family; he was so virtuous that women mistook him for a married man; and he still hoped to wed one of “his fair countrywomen.” Most writers recognized that women could not count on a Colonel Manly to defend them. Joel Barlow suggested that women don the armor of virtue to protect themselves from “the powder’d coxcomb and the flaunting beau,” and Judith Sargent Murray advised that women acquire a substantial education to set themselves “above the snares of the artful betrayer.”15

Ideally, the identification of the Bachelor with unmanly conduct was sufficient to prompt most young men to discipline their sexuality as a means to achieve manhood. A young George Washington recognized the danger of sen-
The older Washington warned young male relatives to beware of lust. He wrote a grandson that he had been told “of your devoting much time and paying much attention to a certain young lady” and counseled that “this is not the time for a boy of your age to enter into engagements which might end in sorrow and repentance.” He cautioned other young men to avoid “scenes of dissipation and vice which too often present themselves to youth in every place and particularly in towns.” Instead, they should keep company only with “the best kind.” Similarly, James Madison warned a classmate to avoid improper company: “Pray do not suffer those impertinent fops that abound in every city to divert you from your business. . . . [Keep] them at a becoming distance.” John Adams detested urban infestations of impertinent young men. He advised Americans to learn from the example of “the Covent Garden rake” who “will never be wise enough to take warning from the claps caught by his companions.” Enslaved by passion, “three out of four” young men who were “poxed” became “even by their own sufferings more shameless instead of being penitent.”

Unfortunately, the Bachelor’s perversity was infectious. The libertine who bragged about his sexual conquests was likely to influence impressionable boys with misguided notions of manhood. A 1763 Boston article contrasted a sensible manhood based on “knowledge and civility” with a false masculinity constituted by “cavalier-like principles of honor” which declared that “boxing, clubs, or firearms are resorted to for deciding every quarrel about a girl, a game of cards, or any little accident that wine or folly or jealousy may suspect to be an affront.” The author noted that a “delicate and manly way of thinking” was conducive “to the peace of society,” whereas the Bachelor’s false “gallantry” produced among the educated a “smooth-speaking class of people who mean to get their living out of others” and, in the lower ranks, “a disrespect to every personage in a civil character.” The Bachelor’s mischief had to be stopped lest it foster among young men the growth of upper-class corruption and lower-class chaos.

Sometimes, the founders chastised the Bachelor by accusing him of effeminity and luxury; often times, they degraded him for his unmanly selfishness and slavery to desire; most of the time, they humiliated him for being less than a man—for being a boy. Benjamin Franklin pointed out that the Bachelor often consorted with boys. He lured them into vice by filling their heads with visions of “gay living,” distracted them from “the dull ways of getting money by working,” and tempted them into little dishonesties, followed by “others a
little more knavish,” until a youngster became “a consummate rascal and vil-
lain.” The Bachelor himself was but a grown boy, in that “a man’s value” was
diminished when he did not head a family. He was only “half a man.” Label-
ing an adult male a “grown boy” or “half man” had consequences. A whole
man had a presumptive claim to manly freedom and independence, but a boy
was still a dependent minor in need of guidance and governance. Jeremiah At-
water likened libertines to boys who lacked “manliness of manner and per-
sonal independence” to legitimize disciplining them; another writer went so
far as to recommend that “the whole power of government should be exerted
to suppress them.”

The Bachelor within All Men

The Bachelor could not be wholly suppressed because he existed within all
men. Most founders saw males as inherently passionate creatures whose sex-
ual propensities were emblematic of their overall inability to resist temptation.
Benjamin Rush typified men as self-absorbed individuals who engaged in the
“solitary vice” of masturbation as well as the social vice of promiscuity. Ben-
jamin Franklin thought young males were especially lustful creatures subject
to “violent natural inclinations.” They sought and enjoyed sex but failed to
recognize or respect the obligations attendant to paternity. They also failed to
demonstrate much concern for their own health, morality, wealth, and family
prospects. Franklin confessed that the “hard-to-govern passion of youth” had
hurried him “into intrigues with low women,” and he employed Poor
Richard’s voice to warn young men, “Women and Wine / Game and Deceit /
Make the wealth small / And the wants great.”

Thomas Jefferson agreed that nature embedded lust in men’s constitution
and that “the commerce of love” was indulged on “this unhallowed principle.”
Unfortunately, “intrigues of love [that] occupy the young” tended to “nourish
and invigorate all our bad passions” rather than prepare men to achieve “con-
jugal love” and “domestic happiness.” According to Bernard Bailyn, Jefferson
viewed “sexual promiscuity [as] the ultimate corruption.” He confessed to his
own youthful indiscretions with “bad company” and urged young men to
practice sexual self-denial. He warned a grandson to avoid “taverns, drinkers,
smokers, idlers, and dissipated persons,” especially loose women. He opposed
sending a young man to polish his education in Europe, where he was likely
to be “led by the strongest of all human passions into a spirit of female intrigue
destructive of his own and others’ happiness, or a passion for whores destruc-
tive of his own health.” However, he praised a French mother who sought to save her seventeen-year-old son from European “excesses” by sending him to America, because education was “more masculine here and less exposed to seduction.” George Washington made a finer domestic distinction. He advised one of his grandsons to transfer to a college in Massachusetts, where young men “are less prone to dissipation and debauchery than they are in colleges south of it.”

The founders feared that youthful debauchery had lifelong consequences. Thomas Paine stated that a young man who consorted with prostitutes was “unfitted to choose or judge of a wife.” Jefferson added that such a youth “learns to consider fidelity to the marriage bed as an ungentlemanly practice.” Sexual license in boyhood undermined a young man’s chance for marital happiness. It either confirmed him in bachelorhood by exposing him to alternative sexual outlets or drew him into unworkable marriages. Charles Carroll fretted that few males restrained lust long enough to choose a proper spouse. He warned, “Beauty . . . affects our propensity to lust so strongly that it makes most matches, and most of those miserable.” John Adams asserted, “The first want of man is his dinner, and the second his girl. . . . the second want is frequently so impetuous as to make men and women forget the first and rush into rash marriages, leaving both the first and second wants, their own as well as those of their children and grandchildren, to the chapter of accidents.” To avoid this chapter of accidents, Noah Webster proposed that “a young man’s best security against . . . dissipated life” was to cultivate “a fondness for the company and conversation of ladies of character.”

Young men who rushed into bad marriages could expect pain and humiliation. Many would experience misery in their family lives, lending credence to the libertine’s definition of liberty as freedom from marriage. Others would betray their marriage vows and suffer the sting of public disapprobation. Jacob Rush condemned men’s adultery as “a cruel breech of trust” that “tends directly to destroy families” and “tears up the very foundation of society.” When men “abandon themselves to adulterous courses,” they nullify the “solemnities of an oath” and foster a “universal depravity of morals” that “must utterly destroy society.” Even youth who chose virtuous wives were adultery-prone. In 1797, Alexander Hamilton published a remarkable pamphlet to confess that “the ardor of passion” led him into an adulterous affair with Maria Reynolds. He apologized for the pain that he caused his wife (“a bosom eminently entitled to all my gratitude, fidelity, and love”) but explained that public confession was his only defense “against a more heinous charge” of financial corruption made by Reynolds’s husband. Hamilton suffered humiliation.
when critics attacked him as an faithless man “who had the cruelty publicly to wound and insult the feelings of his family.” Still, his apology implied that all men have an ardor of passion, many give in to it, and most rely on virtuous wives to pardon them for it. Ruth Bloch reminds us that a common figure in early American fiction was “the adulterous husband redeemed by his faithful and forgiving wife.”

American civic leaders who denounced promiscuity wanted to do more than monitor male sexuality. They believed that men’s “inability to control sexual impulse indicated a more dangerous inability to control all vicious impulses of the self.” Authorities stigmatized male promiscuity to deter it and legitimize coercive controls on the men most closely associated with it. Colonial governments often required bachelors to live in family households, assuming that single males “lack someone . . . to hold them within the bounds of order.” Connecticut fined bachelors who did not reside in family dwellings, and Maryland enacted punitive taxes on them. Meanwhile, magistrates and courts made bachelors liable for their sexual misdeeds. Especially in New England, governments prosecuted white bastardy cases to establish paternity, force fathers to support their illegitimate families, and “prevent fatherless children and unwed mothers from becoming town charges.” Though this juridical quest for sexual purity and financial responsibility flagged by the mid–eighteenth century, leaders’ suspicions of male desire persisted.

Most founders saw male sexuality as a seedbed of disorder. They urged young man to channel sexual energy into monogamous marriage which, Mary Beth Norton notes, was conceived as an “indispensable duty” and “debt to society.” Their efforts were abetted by writers who portrayed bachelorhood as painful and marriage as pleasurable. On the one hand, Judith Sargent Murray proclaimed, “The life of the bachelor is almost invariably gloomy.” He was “alone in the universe.” He confessed to himself, “No young props list their green heads for my support; not an individual of the rising generation is bound to me by the silken bands of attachment. . . . When I expire, my name will be extinct, and all remembrance of me will cease from the earth!” The Bachelor was “truly pitiable.” On the other hand, Benjamin Rush proposed, men could achieve a sense of fulfillment in marriages founded on shared affectation, mutual respect, and children. His letters to his betrothed, Julia Stockton, oozed republican romance. Rush decried his years as a selfish bachelor. He looked to Julia to “point out to me the duty and happiness of a life of piety and usefulness.” He forswore the ostensible joys of bachelorhood “as nothing when set in competition with you” and pledged to earn Julia’s eternal love by serving the poor and becoming a better patriot. Colonial leaders often relied
on coercion to prevent the Bachelor from infecting other men; the founding generation usually solicited men’s consent to sexual self-discipline in anticipation of monogamous marriage.

Other Disorderly Men

Some men were unmoved by threats of coercion or pleas for self-discipline. They indulged their desires to criminal extremes. They were guilty of sex crimes such as rape and sodomy or engaged in lawless conduct associated with itinerancy, vagrancy, pauperism, and frontier anarchy. These disorderly men may have been relatively few in number, but their “seditious and disorganizing spirit” was thought “contagious.” Nathanael Emmons contended that men infatuated with themselves were apt to reject all authority and “imagine that there is little or no criminality.” A few disorderly men could be a “leaven of rebellion” that “poisoned the minds of many” and destroyed “the bands of society.”

In postrevolutionary New York City, young men joined “crowds of ‘bloods’ . . . who lounged on city sidewalks and, affecting the contemptuous stance of the aristocratic libertine, tossed provocative remarks at any single woman who passed.” These “self-styled libertines” were known for their sexual aggression and their tendency to make contempt for women an “emblem of high style.” Some went beyond provocative words to violent deeds, to be charged with “attempted rape” or “rape.” The former charge referred to coercive sexual acts up to and including forcible penetration. The more serious latter charge involved penetration and ejaculation. New York legislators wanted to penalize unbridled male sexuality, especially when it was apt to produce dependent bastards.

Marybeth Hamilton Arnold states that the founding generation condemned rape as “a horrid crime” that excited “universal abhorrence.” Certainly, some American men blamed the victim. In one case, the defense attorney claimed his client, the accused rapist, had been seduced by a carnal thirteen-year-old girl. However, the founders mostly blamed male rapists for violence against innocent females. Josiah Quincy was outraged by the “brutal ravisher.” John Adams attacked redcoats for having “debauched” Boston girls and David Ramsay cursed British and Hessian troops for “rapes and brutalities committed on women and even on very young girls.” Criminologist William Bradford condemned rape as an unmanly crime that demanded manly vengeance: “Female innocence has strong claims upon our protection,
and a desire to avenge its wrongs is natural to a generous and manly mind."27

Penal codes commonly called for capital punishment.

Abhorrence of rape, laws forbidding it, and hanging for those convicted of it resulted in few prosecutions, convictions, or executions. American jurists seemed nearly as eager to coddle the criminal as to condemn the crime. William Penn tried to liberalize colonial Pennsylvania’s rape law by reducing a first-time rapist’s punishment to a fine and one year in prison and by reserving for the repeat offender a penalty of life imprisonment. Penn’s reforms were vetoed by the Crown. After the Revolution, Pennsylvania led the nation in liberalizing English law. It eliminated the death penalty for rape and substituted a maximum penalty of property forfeiture and ten years imprisonment. Why condemn the crime but reduce the penalty? William Bradford explained that rape was rooted in “the sudden abuse of a natural passion” and “perpetrated in a frenzy of desire.” It was an “atrocity” that should be punished. But because it was an atrocity rooted in natural passion rather than in the “incorrrigibility of the criminal,” the rapist did not suffer an “irreclaimable corruption” that demanded death. He could be rehabilitated. As Joel Barlow put it, “a wise and manly government” administered “a tender paternal correction.”28

Bradford observed that judges and juries rarely convicted a man of rape when they knew the penalty would be death. No jury would convict a husband for forcibly exercising his sex right within marriage, and few jurists would hang a man for submitting to frenzied desire. One reason for leniency was the widespread belief that the injury to the rape victim was largely a matter of perception. Bradford wrote, “It cannot be denied that much of [rape’s] atrocity resides in the imagination.” Rape was thought most injurious when committed against a woman of high “rank” and “character,” less so when the victim was a servant girl, and least harmful when it involved “the violation of a female slave.” Because rape was often a class crime committed by high-status males against lower-class women, juries “frequently treat this charge so lightly as to acquit against positive and uncontradicted evidence.”29 Judges and juries were reluctant to impose lethal penalties on perpetrators. Nonetheless, antirape rhetoric and laws communicated the cultural message that men should exercise sexual self-restraint and deserved punishment when they failed to do so.

The founding generation allied sexual self-restraint to avoidance of same-sex relationships, which represented a “potential in the lustful nature of all men” and “a potential for disorder in the cosmos.” During the eighteenth century, public perception transformed sodomy from a mortal sin against God
into a passion “against the order of nature” and, therefore, an abuse of the natural laws that regulated “the peace, government, and dignity of the state.” Why did private sexual acts have public meaning? John Winthrop’s explanation was the enduring one. Like libertinism and masturbation, same-sex relations “tended to the frustrating of the ordinance of marriage and the hindering [of] the generation of mankind.” The sodomist separated sex and pleasure from marriage and procreation to unleash passion and cause chaos. Jonathan Edwards, Jr., condemned ancient Greeks for glorifying “the most abominable practices openly” and ancient Cretans for encouraging sodomy “to prevent too great an increase of the people,” because he believed that same-sex relations eroded men’s commitment to family responsibilities.30

Sodomy, like rape, was a capital offense that was rarely prosecuted. Bradford wanted to eliminate the death penalty for “the crime against nature.” After all, America was “a country where marriages take place so early, and the intercourse between the sexes is not difficult.” With females abundant and accessible, no mature male had good reason to be drawn into a same-sex relationship. Indeed, “the wretch who perpetrates [sodomy] must be in a state of mind which may occasion us to doubt whether he be Sui Juris at the time; or whether he reflects on the punishment at all.” Bradford saw sodomy as a manifestation of a sort of temporary insanity in a man enslaved by unnatural, excessive sexual appetites.31 Because the insanity was temporary, a man convicted of sodomy could be rehabilitated.

If American leaders saw rapists and sodomists as sex criminals, they considered itinerants known as the “strolling poor” as suspects. The strolling poor were young men who roamed from town to town in search of work, land, or adventure. Townspeople greeted these strangers with grave distrust. After all, they were young, rootless, and unpredictable males—threats to daughters’ virtue, wives’ fidelity, men’s property, and public coffers. Officials examined them for signs of drunkenness and poverty lest they become a source of disorder or a burden on the community. Villages often “warned out” itinerants. Magistrates gave these transients a few days to secure a sponsor, post a bond, or exit. Those who failed to sink roots or leave could be sent to the stocks or the whipping post. Many were escorted to their last known residence, where they might again be removed “until they reached the end of the line—usually their birth place.”32

The stigma against transience was pervasive. Local leaders distrusted itinerant preachers who traveled from town to town, scorned established ministers and fixed houses of worship, and held religious services in open fields. Analogously, most founders feared the public’s “transient impressions” and re-
lied on elites to protect men against their fleeting fancies. Civic leaders especially despised transient vagrants and paupers who did not fit into orderly society. They were rootless men thought to wed moral deficiency to poverty. Benjamin Franklin was horrified that Great Britain exhibited the “unexampled barbarity” to “empty [its] jails into our settlements” and fill colonial America with “vagrants and idle persons” who “continue their evil practices [and] contribute greatly to corrupt the morals of the servants and the poorer people among whom they mix.” After the Revolution, Raymond Mohl writes, civic spokesmen denounced the “idle, ignorant, immoral, impious, and vicious” paupers whose ranks included “immigrant wanderers, soldiers, sailors, prostitutes, peddlers, beggars, thieves, and rogues [and] the idle and profligate banditti,” who “begged, stole, disturbed the peace, drank to excess, and . . . committed ‘shameful enormities.’” These unsettled men were a significant source of disorder.33

The frontier version of vagrants and paupers was backwoodsmen. Crèvecoeur’s American Farmer saw backwoodsmen as men driven by misfortune into the wilderness, where they roamed about with little or no government supervision. They tended to be intemperate, greedy, profligate, lawless men prone to conflict and violence. They survived by hunting, led “a licentious idle life” of “rapacity and injustice,” and behaved “no better than carnivorous animals.” George Washington called them “banditti” because they stole the “cream of the country” despite the fact that “officers and soldiers . . . fought and bled to obtain it.” Washington also rebuked frontier “land jobbers, speculators, and monopolisers” as “avaricious men” whose “unrestrained conduct” caused conflict and promised “a great deal of bloodshed.” White backwoodsmen and speculators met their anarchic match in American Indian peoples. Many founders admired Indian cultures but attacked Indian men as savages. Franklin stressed that they were “apt to get drunk” and become “very quarrelsome and disorderly,” and Jefferson warned that their intemperate use of “spirituous liquors” often led to violence. While Franklin saw Indian alcoholism as part of “the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for cultivators of the earth,” Jefferson hoped that Indians would enter into “a state of agriculture.”34 Either way, the founders agreed that earth belonged to sober, settled farmers.

This juxtaposition of disorderly backwoodsmen and greedy speculators on the one hand and intemperate, itinerant Indians on the other made the frontier a dangerous place. Doreen Álvarez Saar reports that American leaders worried that the conjuncture of these peoples would produce a promiscuous mixing of European stock with the indigenous population. The result would be “a
mongrel breed” that combined the vices of both populations and created a people “of unpleasant and immoral character.” Founders such as Washington saw the frontier as combustible. Whites sold liquor to Indians, deceived and defrauded them, and stole their lands only to inflame the passions of Indians, who reacted like “wild beasts of the forest” by taking up “the hatchet.” He hoped that white men would purchase Indian land. That way, “the gradual extension of our settlements will as certainly cause the savage as the wolf to retire, both being beasts of prey.” For many founders, disorderly white men were the primary problem on the frontier but the removal of Indians was the preferred solution. Their analysis of slaveholders and slaves was quite similar.

**Slaveholders and Slaves**

White male slaveholders faced daily sexual temptation. David Ramsay criticized them for engaging in “early, excessive, and enervating indulgences” with slave women. A South Carolina champion of slavery warned that white men’s “inconsiderate debaucheries” with female slaves were producing a “jumble of colors” in the population. A Kentuckian opposed to slavery bemoaned the loss of “worth and dignity” among those “pernicious pests of society” who “gratify their lust” by raping slave women who might be “their own sisters or even their aunts.” A Connecticut abolitionist attacked white males who “procreate slaves” only to degrade, tyrannize, and sell their own sons and, in the case of daughters, “force [them] to submit to . . . horrid and incestuous passion.”

White males with easy access to female slaves regularly surrendered to carnality and incest.

Theodore Dwight worried that this surrender weakened white men’s commitment to family responsibilities and sensibilities. White males compounded the sin of adultery with female slaves when they failed to exhibit “the protection, the support, and the affection of a father” toward their mixed-race children. Jefferson suggested that white self-indulgence tended to transform liberty into license: “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this and learn to imitate it.” David Rice thought that master-slave relations undermined white manhood by allowing masters to forsake industry by relying on slave labor. After all, “To labor is to *slave*, to work is to *work like a Negro*, and this is disgraceful; it levels us with the meanest of the species.” White idleness, in turn, beckoned kindred vices such as “gaming, theft, robbery, or
forgery, for which [youth] often end their days in disgrace on the gallows.” John Taylor disagreed. Slavery did not inspire “furious passions” among whites because slaves occupied an incomparable, distant, and lowly rank. Indeed, slavery invited white children to learn virtue and feel benevolence when “seeing the bad qualities in slaves.” Taylor believed that slavery made liberty more precious to whites and pointed out that slave societies such as ancient Greece and Rome, as well as modern America, produced “more great and good patriots and citizens than probably all the rest of the world.”

Though the founders disputed the justice and impact of slavery, they uniformly denounced tendencies toward miscegenation. They saw whites as a distinct species. That was John Witherspoon’s contention when he located the tragedy of the Revolution in the fact that men “who are the same in complexion, the same in blood . . . should, notwithstanding, butcher one another with unrelenting rage and glory in the deed.” Most founders saw blacks as “outsiders” or “outcasts from humanity.” They had difficulty imagining the two distinct species living together in freedom and harmony. Jefferson’s well-known assertions about inherent racial differences and antagonisms were adopted by Jeffersonians such as Tunis Wortman, who argued that interracial mingling and marriage were tantamount to a “universal prostitution” that would produce “a motley and degenerate race of mulattos.” Other founders ranted against “the infamy of such a mongrel coalition,” condemned “the disgraceful and unnatural” evil of interracial unions, and proclaimed that a “free nation of black and white people [will] produce a body politic as monstrous and unnatural as a mongrel half white man and half negro.”

Why were the founders so fearful of race mixing? Many founders saw black males as oversexed creatures whose passions threatened to degrade the white race. Jefferson observed that black males were “more ardent after their female” but lacked “a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.” He attributed this combination of black lust and coarseness to black inferiority in “body and mind” as well as in “imagination,” where blacks were “dull, tasteless, and anomalous.” Jefferson described black males as sexually promiscuous and culturally sterile. He wrote, “Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.” Frank Shuffelton remarks that Jefferson was blind to the richness of slaves’ African cultures and to the creativity of black artisans in his own household. This blindness allowed him and other founders to see black males as creatures without culture and to rank them on a scale of manly refinement well below licentious libertines.

While whites sometimes perceived black women to be “remarkable for
their chastity and modesty,” they almost always considered black males’ lust to be immutable. Early New England rape narratives centered on black lust. A 1768 narrative titled *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur* was typical. Arthur was a black slave who discarded piety and industry for a “licentious liberty” that included drinking, promiscuity, running away, theft, and the rape of a white woman, for which he was hanged. Daniel Williams suggests that Arthur’s story helped solidify the stereotype of the African male as an “immoral, hypersexual black wildly pursuing women to satisfy his prodigal lusts.” The stereotype was not new. In 1682, when Pennsylvania Quakers tried to eliminate the death penalty for rape in the belief that rapists could be rehabilitated, they wanted to retain hanging for black rapists, apparently because they believed black males were beyond redemption.40

One reason the founders thought black male slaves beyond redemption was that they could not assume patriarchal family responsibilities. Slave status meant that black males had little control when it came to starting families, keeping them together, preventing wives’ victimization, or protecting children. Many male slaves lived in small households where they were isolated from potential brides. Slave traders sometimes forced slave husbands to separate from wives and children, and slaveholders wrote wills that distributed slave family members among dispersed heirs. Benjamin Rush pointed out that overseers often made slave husbands “prostitute their wives and mothers and daughters to gratify the brutal lust of a master.” As a result, male slaves had little confidence “in the fidelity of their wives” and little certainty that their wives’ offspring were their own, and they showed comparatively little regard “for their posterity.” Even when male slaves were confident of their paternity, they could not “partake of those ineffable sensations with which nature inspires the hearts of fathers” because their “paternal fondness” was compromised by the knowledge that their children would always be “slaves like themselves.”41 Male slaves were in no position to achieve manly mastery in their own families.

Perhaps most founders opposed slavery and many stigmatized slaveholders for lust and brutality. Simultaneously, they saw black males as dangerous creatures who were not and never truly could be “men” because they lacked independence, self-discipline, family integrity, mastery of women, and concern for posterity. They were hypersexual, coarse beings who did not fit into polite society. Jefferson feared a race war fueled by white bigotry and black rage: “Deeply rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances divide
us into parties; and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in
the extermination of the one or the other race.” John Taylor opposed slavery
but detested the abolitionism that encouraged the “black sansculottes” to cut
masters’ throats. Jefferson, Taylor, and other founders felt that disorderly
white males caused most problems associated with slavery, but they believed
the removal of blacks to Africa was the primary cure for racial conflict.42

The Refuse of the Earth

The founders hoped disorderly white men could redeem themselves. The
idea of “starting over” was embedded in the myth of an American Adam freed
from old-world corruption to cultivate the New World’s Edenic garden. It
also was etched into the image of the prodigal son who put away the past and
undertook a noble pilgrimage to posterity. Most founders held out the pos-
sibility of rebirth but they did not count on it. They were alarmed by men’s
“general sense of lawlessness” and by “disorders and deviances” that easily es-
calated into social chaos and political instability. Their grave concern for the
dangers associated with disorderly soldiers highlighted the possibility that li-
centious males were less likely to be reformed than sober men were apt to be
corrupted.43

Americans inherited from Whig ancestors a loathing for redcoats. The
British quartered redcoats in the colonies after the French and Indian War. At
first, many Americans welcomed the troops as protection against hostile Indi-
ans and as consumers of local goods. Kermit Hall observes that colonists soon
grew contemptuous as “the bored troops” of idle youth “engaged in whoring
and petty thievery.” In 1768, Samuel Adams joined with others to start the
Journal of the Times, a scandal sheet that attacked redcoat misdeeds. A. J.
Langguth notes that a typical story reported that a local citizen “discovered a
soldier in bed with his favorite granddaughter.” Don Higginbotham high-
lights patriot press stories that decried “insults to city officials, assault, theft,
and rape committed by Red Coats.” Many Americans blamed redcoats for ru-
ning America’s finest young men. “This idle and dissipated army,” wrote
Mercy Otis Warren, “corrupted the students of Harvard College and the
youth of the capital and its environs, who were allured to enter into their gam-
bling parties and other scenes of licentiousness.”44

Colonists considered redcoats “the refuse of the earth.” Their officers were
“effeminate and delicate soldiers who are nursed in the lap of luxury and
whose greatest exertion is . . . tedious attendance on a masquerade or mid-
night ball.” Benjamin Franklin attacked the British army as organized slavery. After all, “The sailor is often forced into service. . . . The soldier is generally bought.” Redcoats were lost in time and space. They were “generally such as have neither property or families to fight for, and who have no principle either of honor, religion, public spirit, regard for liberty, or love of country to animate them.” Many were young men “dragged up in ignorance of every gainful art and obliged to become soldiers or servants or thieves for a subsistence.” Simeon Howard focused on their instability. Their sole “temporal interest” was “the promise of larger pay”; they “have no real estate in the dominions which they are to defend”; and “they become distinguished by their vices.” The only reason to gather such men into an army, concluded Mercy Otis Warren, was to eradicate America’s “manly spirit of freedom.”

Patriots advertised redcoat sex scandals and depravity to rally Americans to the cause of liberty. Warren counted up “the indiscriminate ravages of the Hessian and British soldiers” in coin of the “rape, misery, and despair” suffered by “wives and daughters pursued and ravished in the woods” while “unfortunate fathers in the stupor of grief beheld the misery of their female connections without being able to relieve . . . the shrieks of infant innocence subject to the brutal lust of British Grenadiers and Hessian Yaughers.” Phillips Payson asked the rhetorical question, “Is it possible for us . . . to hear the cries and screeches of our ravished matrons and virgins . . . and think of returning to that cruel and bloody power which has done all these things?” Thomas Paine used hatred of redcoats and mercenaries to shame American men into service: “By perseverance and fortitude we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad choice of . . . our homes turned into bawdy houses for Hessians, and a future race to provide for, whose fathers we shall doubt of.”

The founders contrasted redcoat corruption to American militiamen’s “manly resistance” and “manly spirit.” They idealized militiamen as family farmers who mustered for service as dutiful citizen soldiers. One officer explained, “There is a difference between troops that fight only for the mastery and 6d. Sterling a day, and those that fight for their religion, their laws, their liberties, their wives and children and everything else that is dear to them.” For the next century, Americans would attribute to regular soldiers all variants of vice and criminality but project onto militiamen all the virtues of republicanism. Simultaneously, however, Americans knew that militia virtues were often more symbolic than real, and they worried that sober family men who
entered the militia would revert to bachelor-like licentiousness. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich comments that New England ministers and wives complained that freeholders in the militia were corrupted in camp by drink, profanity, and blasphemy. Don Higginbotham reports that Virginia parents demanded local militia officers be held accountable for overseeing their sons’ “moral conduct,” primarily by keeping them away from “gaming, profaneness, and debauchery.”

General Washington did not idealize militiamen. He complained, “The militia instead of calling forth their utmost efforts to a brave and manly opposition . . . are dismayed, intractable and impatient.” Militiamen were unskilled and apt to be “timid and ready to fly from their own shadows.” They were “accustomed to unbounded freedom and no control” and often refused to submit to “the restraint which is indispensably necessary to the good order and government of an army, without which licentiousness and . . . disorder triumphantly reign.” Washington’s alternative to the licentious militia was a continental standing army. This proposal encountered considerable criticism because, as Russell Weigley suggests, “The dangers of a standing army as a threat to liberty were close to everyone’s thoughts.” For example, “Caractacus” argued that yeomen and artisans serving in a standing army would lose “the gentleness and sobriety of citizens,” while Samuel Adams and Benjamin Rush asserted that regular officers and soldiers would develop a sense of separateness and superiority tending toward tyranny.

Americans accepted the standing army during the war, but they maintained suspicions of it that were periodically reconfirmed. When voluntary enlistments flagged and desertions flourished, the Continental army turned to bounties, bribes, and coercion to fill troop quotas. After 1778, Robert Gross notes, towns that once warned out transients began to welcome them if “they stayed only long enough to have a drink, take their bounty, and go off to fight.” Even slaves were allowed to become “men” just long enough to enlist. Meanwhile, many freeholders took advantage of laws that allowed for marriage exemptions, hiring substitutes, or paying monetary fines. The result was that America’s regular army was filled with indentured servants, vagrants, felons, and slaves—the same riffraff that wore red coats. Furthermore, critics charged the American military with aristocratic corruption. One fruit of that corruption, Franklin argued, was the Society of the Cincinnati, which was composed of former officers who had “been too much struck with the ribbons and crosses they have seen . . . hanging to the buttonholes of foreign officers.” William Manning condemned the Cincinnati as a conspiratorial, aristocratic elite leading “a standing army of slaves to execute their arbitrary measures.”
Antifederalists zeroed in on the U.S. Constitution’s unification of purse and sword as a foundation for tyranny. The “Federal Farmer” warned that the new government would create a standing army that would serve as “a very agreeable place of employment for the young gentlemen” who would delight in gutting the treasury and serving tyranny. “John DeWitt” argued that the new regime would provide emoluments to young aristocrats practiced in arms and ardent for a government “of force” that would absorb every other authority on the continent. A ratified Constitution would be “a hasty stride to universal empire in this Western world, flattering, very flattering to young ambitious minds, but fatal to the liberties of the people.” An anonymous Philadelphia man went further: he was certain that American aristocrats already had usurped liberty and were now trying to formalize their power by means of a Constitution that was part of “a deep-laid scheme to enslave us . . . probably invented by the Society of the Cincinnati.”

Antifederalists also worried that a peacetime standing army would have decent citizens living amid armed thugs. “John Humble” called the standing army a home for “the purgings of the jails of Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany.” Benjamin Workman argued that the army would recruit “the purgings of European prisons” as well as “low ruffians bred among ourselves who do not love to work.” John Dawson stated that the soldiers’ “only occupation would be idleness [and] the introduction of vice and dissipation,” while an “Impartial Examiner” added that the officers would force soldiers into “unconditional submission to the commands of superiors,” reduce them to “slavery,” and make them “fit instruments of tyranny and oppression.” Eventually, these “dregs of the people” would return to society to “become extremely burdensome.”

Federalists did not wholly disagree. Alexander Hamilton advocated a standing army but showed little trust in it. When he suggested that freeholders did not want to be “dragged from their occupations and families” to perform the “disagreeable duty” of manning western garrisons, he reinforced the belief that only marginal men would voluntarily enlist. When he argued that Americans need not fear the officer corps because the military would “be in the hands of the representatives of the people,” he lent credence to Whig suspicions that officers were corrupt men who needed external governance.

The founders saw bachelorhood, libertinism, rape, sodomy, itinerancy, pauperism, frontier violence, slave unrest, and military disorder as the crest of a wave of male degeneracy that was swelled by men’s daily dealings in blasphemy, alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, adultery, fighting, dueling, thiev-
ery, and murder. So many men seemed to be “intemperate zealots”; so many men participated in “the most shameful depredations”; so many men demanded liberty and asserted democracy only to join mobs that committed “indecent outrages”; so many men followed “factious demagogues” who beckoned tyranny. The founders employed the grammar of manhood to stigmatize, ridicule, degrade, humiliate, and shame disorderly men to consent to and comply with consensual norms of manhood but, cognizant of men’s corruptibility, they also relied on state coercion to control, punish, deter, and possibly reform disorderly men.53

State Coercion

Death was the prescribed punishment for most serious crimes at the time of the Revolution. However, Enlightenment criminology considered the death penalty a relatively poor deterrent. Cesare Beccaria explained, “It is not the terrible but fleeting sight of a felon’s death which is the most powerful brake on crime” but “the long-drawn-out example of a man deprived of freedom.” A male deprived of independence, separated from his family, and made dependent on his captors lost not only his liberty but also his manhood. Capital punishment, in contrast, gave him an opportunity to redeem his manhood. That happened at a double hanging where, Benjamin Franklin reported, one convict was “extremely dejected” but the other exhibited “a becoming manly constancy.”54

The most striking instance of a criminal being executed only to redeem his manhood occurred when British Major John André was hanged for spying during the Revolution. Upon his capture, André sent to General Washington a letter marked “with a frankness becoming a gentleman and man of honor and principle.” He asked to “die as a soldier and man of honor [by being shot], not as a criminal [by being hanged].” Washington denied the request but praised André for exhibiting “that fortitude which was to be expected from an accomplished man and gallant officer.” When a teary-eyed servant brought him a dress uniform for the scaffold, André ordered, “Leave me until you show yourself more manly.” When he was hanged, “the tear of compassion was drawn from every pitying eye that beheld this accomplished youth a victim to the usages of war.” Alexander Hamilton was one of many notable Americans who memorialized André for having been “a man of honor” whose final request was that “I die like a brave man.”55

Nearly two decades later, Benjamin Rush was still rankled by André’s
celebrity: “The spy was lost in the hero; and indignation everywhere gave way to admiration and praise.” Men who saw courage before the gallows as a short-cut to manly dignity had an incentive to commit capital crimes. Furthermore, the “admiration which fortitude under suffering excites has in some instances excited envy [and] induced deluded people to feign or confess crimes which they had never committed on purpose to secure to themselves a conspicuous death.” Rush asserted that a proper punishment protected society from the criminal and dissuaded others from emulating his actions. Following Beccaria, he argued, “The death of a malefactor is not so efficacious a method of deterring from wickedness as the example of continually remaining . . . a man who is deprived of his liberty.”

A man deprived of liberty suffered a living death of emasculation, family separation, and social isolation. Reformers opposed public punishments (such as cleaning streets and repairing roads) that afforded criminals an opportunity to see family members or engage “crowds of idle boys” in “indecent and improper conversation.” Criminality was infectious; it needed to be quarantined. Rush supported sending convicts to isolated prisons. He proposed, “Let a large house . . . be erected in a remote part of the state. Let the avenue to this house be rendered difficult and gloomy by mountains or morasses. Let its doors be of iron; and let the grating, occasioned by opening and shutting them, be increased by an echo from a neighboring mountain, that shall extend and continue a sound that shall deeply pierce the soul.” Within these soul-piercing prisons, older convicts were to be isolated from younger ones, and the most vicious were to be locked in isolation cells. Rush reasoned that “attachment to kindred and society is one of the strongest feelings in the human heart” and, therefore, isolation from family and friends “is one of the severest punishments that can be inflicted upon a man.”

Most founders agreed that isolation was painful. James Otis, Jr., called “solitude” an “unnatural” state in which men “perish.” John Dickinson thought “that to be solitary is to be wretched.” Thomas Jefferson stated that isolation from loved ones “is worse than death inasmuch as [death] ends our sufferings whereas [isolation] begins them” and transforms a man into a “gloomy monk sequestered from the world.” Samuel Quarrier put it best. Petitioning to be released from a debtors jail, he wrote President Jefferson, “This ignominious imprisonment unmans the heart.”

The belief that isolation “unmans” the heart made imprisonment both painful and promising. Isolated men suffered a humiliating loss of manhood. Officials locked them up and treated them as children. Their sole hope for reclaiming self-respect and social status was to cooperate with reformers who
urged them to use solitude to repent, suppress passion, and learn useful trades. Rush rhapsodized at the prospect of a reformed convict returning to society: “I already hear the inhabitants of our villages and townships . . . running to meet him on the day of his deliverance. His friends and family bathe his cheeks with tears of joy; and the universal shout of the neighborhood is, ‘This our brother was lost and is found—was dead, and is alive.’” One can imagine a similar reaction by family and friends when an apparent lifelong bachelor announced plans to marry a virtuous woman.

The founders also considered punishing disorderly men by banishing them to distant places. Debating a new state constitution in 1783, a South Carolina writer noted that the main problem with banishing a criminal was that other states or nations might retaliate and “cast forth their outlaws upon us.” This was what happened when libertines were banished from polite society in one village only to appear at social gatherings in another locale, or when itinerants were sent packing from one town to the next, or when disorderly slaves were sold from one plantation to another. Still, banishment had big benefits. It removed the immediate danger. It was an effective deterrent because it threatened to isolate men from their land, family, and community. Finally, it afforded a chance for rehabilitation because, if a man’s character “is not absolutely forfeited, he is laid under a necessity of behaving with more prudence in another society, lest he should again be subjected to the inconvenience of a removal or to a less mild punishment.” Alexander Hamilton generally agreed, arguing in 1794 that Whiskey rebels should “be compelled by their outlawry to abandon their property, houses, and the United States.”

The founders’ most extensive experiment in banishing disorderly males was the practice of sending regular troops to the frontier. From the beginning of nationhood, American legislators limited the number of regular soldiers in the standing army, governed them with severe rules, and sent them far from civilized society. Americans exhibited a lasting hostility to “military institutions and the military function” by refusing to support a large peacetime establishment. They distrusted rank-and-file soldiers and subjected them to drastic discipline, including flogging, branding, hanging, and the firing squad. Most important, they isolated soldiers from respectable society by marching them to the frontier, where their lust and licentiousness were sublimated into building roads and forts and keeping peace between settlers and Indians. Hopefully, some soldiers would take advantage of their situation to mature into manhood, acquire frontier land, start their own families, and assume the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
Marginal Men

George Washington wrote a nephew, “You have now arrived to that age when you must quit the trifling amusements of a boy and assume the more dignified manners of a man.” The Bachelor and other disorderly men did not quit the trifling amusements of a boy. They were marginal men who indulged passion, impulse, and avarice to foment disorder in the ranks of men as well as to seduce innocent women, patronize prostitutes, rape lower-class and slave women, commit incest, marry for lust or money, and cheat on wives. Jeremiah Atwater declared, “Man is always prone to what will center in himself only; hating restraint of any sort and considering it, of itself, as an evil; aspiring at domination over others; fond of possessing power, and prone to abuse it. Human nature appears in its true colors, without artificial disguise, in children. It is, in general, very hard to make children submit to what is proper. They are self-willed and extremely apt to rebel. What children are in a family, mankind are as subject to the restraints of law and order.”

One reason the founders disputed emerging ideals of self-made manhood was that they believed men’s self-centered childishness and rebellious selfishness had to be restrained if they were to assume the more dignified manners of manhood and submit voluntarily to the restraints of law and order.

The founders used the grammar of manhood to encourage the Bachelor and other disorderly men to exercise liberty with self-restraint and assume adult responsibilities consistent with civic order. They stigmatized marginal men as effeminate, slavish, and especially childish creatures who did not merit the rights of men or the respect of society. This informal pressure was generally sufficient to encourage most young white males to conform to consensual norms of manhood. Youth with libertine tendencies could achieve self-mastery and independence by disciplining their sexuality; single men could measure up to manhood by marrying, siring legitimate children, and governing their dependents; itinerants, vagrants, paupers, backwoodsmen, and soldiers could reform themselves by acquiring land and settling into stable families and communities. The founders believed that men who conformed to hegemonic masculinity in order to avoid humiliation and earn esteem were likely to comply with legitimate political authority.

The founders’ grammar of manhood did not and could not motivate all males to conform to hegemonic norms. On the one hand, some white males continued to engage in lustful deceit, commit rape and sodomy, brutalize slaves, provoke conflict with Indian peoples, and commit other crimes and outrages that fostered conflicts in society. On the other hand, white prejudice...
precluded black and Indian men from manhood, and formal laws excluded them from citizenship. The founders spoke as if all of these marginal men suffered a case of male immaturity; they were grown children in need of guidance and governance. This was the discursive context in which the founders invoked hegemonic norms of manhood to legitimize discretionary use of state coercion, in order to control and discipline men’s childish conduct and to promote their reformation and maturation. Magistrates could refuse to act when the victim was a greedy old bachelor, or they could enforce breach-of-promise laws to punish libertine treachery. Ultimately, they could imprison disorderly men who exhibited what “Amicus Republicae” called a “licentious disposition” that invited “tumults and insurrections.”

The grammar of manhood contained an idiom of childishness that many founders used to criticize, stigmatize, and penalize what Washington described as “unmanly behavior” in “refractory individuals.” For example, George Rogers Clark tried to win over Britain’s allies by persuading them that the English “are no men . . . and are become like children,” while Alexander Hamilton emphasized General Charles Lee’s misconduct at the Battle of Monmouth by labeling his acts “truly childish.” Leaders debating the Constitution employed the same idiom. David Ramsay dismissed state constitutions as “hastily instituted by young politicians,” and Edmund Randolph thought them “too youthful to have acquired stability.” Simeon Baldwin wanted to lop off “the libertinism of juvenile independence” manifested in the Articles of Confederation. Federalists then appropriated maturity for the new government. Tench Coxe applauded the requirement that the president be “matured by years of experience.” Also, he was pleased that “no ambitious, undeserving, or unexperienced youth” could acquire a seat in the House until “thirty years have ripened his abilities.” For “Civic Rusticus,” that rule ensured the election of men “past the heyday of the blood,” weaned from the intoxicating dissipation of youth and the hot allurements of pleasure.” Similarly, Noah Webster portrayed the Senate as a place for men “venerable for age and respectability” and free from “the bias of passions that govern the young.” Antifederalists responded in kind, claiming that their opponents were guilty of launching “projects of young ambition.” Ratification debaters regularly accused each other of throwing “fits of passion” that were “perfectly boyish,” making “childish arguments,” behaving like “disgraced school boys,” “children in the marketplace,” and “children making bubbles,” or simply “act[ing] like children.”

The idiom of childishness identified a subterranean level of manhood. The founders portrayed the Bachelor and other disorderly men as immature, childish minors who disregarded or denied consensual norms of manhood.
They were males who did not aspire to or achieve manly independence, family continuity, and patriarchal governance. Instead, they were itinerants in time and space, who fit in nowhere and deserved to be distrusted everywhere. They were destroyers, not procreators. They congregated in the democratic mobs that elevated passion over virtue and they filled the ranks of libertine suitors who manipulated, deceived, and abused women rather than loved, governed, and protected them. They were the Other—what young males had to outgrow to gain respectability as family men and to attain civic standing as citizens.