A Moral Economics

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In a letter to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* in February 1850, Henry Mayhew wrote of his investigative project into the London laboring poor: “I made up my mind to deal with human nature as a natural philosopher or a chemist deals with any material object; and, as a man who had devoted some little of his time to physical and metaphysical science, I must say I did most heartily rejoice that it should have been left to me to apply the laws of the inductive philosophy for the first time, I believe, to the abstract questions of political economy.” While Mayhew’s claim to originality in applying the “laws of the inductive philosophy” to the “abstract questions of political economy” is disingenuous given the long history of debate upon the issue of what method was best suited to the new science, his statement of his aspiration exposes an extremely important and often unremarked aspect of his work: his self-conscious engagement with classical economic theory. Furthermore, his opposition between the implicitly concrete aspects of an inductive investigation and the abstract “laws” of a deductively formulated science point to one of the central tensions of his work—the tension between particulars and generalities, between the recording of concrete details and the derivation of abstract truth statements from those details, and between the proximity of immediate, direct engagement with his investigative subjects and the mediated distance of a scientist analyzing his data.

The cultural historians Anne Humphreys and Regenia Gagnier see this tension as a fundamental structure of Mayhew’s work on the London laboring classes. The tension operates at two different levels. First, there is the tension between the specific abstract claims made by classical political economy and the “data” that Mayhew produced through his investigations. As both Humphreys and Gagnier explain, the further Mayhew pursued his “inductive” research into the relationship between “labor” and “poverty” in London, the more he became convinced of the inadequacy of the dominant classical formulations of the “laws” that regulated wages, labor, and price. Mayhew’s
solution to this problem—one that he pursues increasingly in the letters and, later, in the wrappers to his *London Labour* series—is to develop his own alternative theory of wages and labor. Though Mayhew does make some headway in this endeavor, his success is hampered by a second level of tension between the unmediated recording of details and the mediated derivation of abstract truths. As Humphreys and Gagnier explain, Mayhew’s determination to produce an alternative theory of political economy is continually undermined in his written work by his observation of, fascination with, and commitment to recording the material and subjective specificities of his investigative subjects. At the same time, both critics argue that it is precisely his textual engagement with such material and subjective specificities that constitutes Mayhew’s most significant achievement—as a social investigator, as a critic of classical political economy, and as a critic of the capitalist social and economic organization theorized and rationalized by classical economic texts.

Whether the value ascribed to this aspect of Mayhew’s writing is described as ethnographic, humanistic, or literary, it suggests that simply reading through the textual details of Mayhew’s work in order to derive the alternative economic theory he sought to produce is not an adequate interpretive strategy. At the same time, since Mayhew did seek to develop such a theory, his gestures in that direction demand attention. Thus, my reading of Mayhew’s journalistic project is informed by the same tension between concrete and abstract, particular and general, that structures Mayhew’s work. In this chapter, I examine Mayhew’s letters to the *Morning Chronicle* both for their explicit critique of classical economic theory and for his more indirect assertions about the evils of a socioeconomic order organized according to classical economic theory. By developing a “literary” reading of his journalistic text, I show that one of the most subtle and effective of Mayhew’s discursive strategies is to link the situation of the laboring classes to a series of middle-class anxieties about working-class morality, prostitution, and masculinity.

Henry Mayhew’s letters to the *Morning Chronicle* (1849–50), while less well known than his four-volume *London Labour and the London Poor*, served as both the basis and inspiration for the larger study, with some of the letters incorporated into *London Labour* virtually word for word. Despite this overlap, the focus of the two works is very different. While Mayhew’s observations about urban street sellers and costermongers fill most of the pages of the later study, Mayhew’s focus in the *Morning Chronicle* letters is fixed steadily on the working poor of London’s more traditional laboring trades. Assigned to be the “metropolitan correspondent” for a series of articles examining labor and poverty in the period immediately following the cholera epidemic, May-
hew moved steadily through the course of the series toward seeing the two terms—“labor” and “poverty”—as inextricable and often mutually constitutive. In examining the conjunction of these terms, Mayhew’s letters staged his intervention into the cultural debate over the authority and terms of economic discourse. Though Mayhew did continue to pursue the object of an alternative political economy in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861–62), his work there is, with the exception of the opening section of volume 4, much less directly engaged with the problems and language of classical political economy. In the later text, rather than focusing on the working poor as a class, Mayhew’s fascination with the myriad varieties of London street sellers leads him to develop a generic model that tends to erase the very category of class, as Regenia Gagnier has shown. This erasure, of course, constitutes its own critique of the discourse of political economy, but that is a critique that has been ably elaborated by Humphreys and Gagnier. Furthermore, in shifting his focus away from the poor as a laboring class, Mayhew also shifts his attention away from the specific anxieties about domesticity and female labor that pervade his *Morning Chronicle* letters and form a crucial part of their critique.

The significance of this critique should, at least in part, be measured by the responses it produced. E. P. Thompson notes that Mayhew’s letters raised an outcry from political economists, philanthropists, and free-traders alike, even while it was, at its peak, highly popular with the general reading public. Mayhew’s increasingly outspoken critique of free trade ultimately led to a dispute over censorship with the paper’s editor and toward an abrupt termination of the series. In 1851, after leaving the *Morning Chronicle*, Mayhew continued to publish his investigations through a series of pamphlets titled *London Labour*, the wrappers of which became a vehicle for his regular replies to the letters of his smaller, increasingly working-class reading audience. On those wrappers, in the “Answers to Correspondents,” Mayhew began to draw more conventionally formulated economic conclusions from his investigations. Mayhew also began, in November 1851, to publish in parts a longer study called *Low Wages, Their Causes, Consequences and Remedies*. This longer study provides a much more coherent formulation of Mayhew’s investigative “findings” and a much more sustained and extended address to contemporary political economists than the *Morning Chronicle* letters. It is, in effect, more “conclusive” than the letters. There is, however, a very different kind of conclusiveness about Mayhew’s letters than that offered by the more “scientific” prose of *Low Wages*. Rather than a closure that involves the summary of a problem and suggestion of a solution, the conclusiveness of the letters is implicit in the subtler, narrative patterns of repetition, echoing, subtexts, and metaphor that make up a complex web of signification. The championing of trade societies that emerges within the letters as Mayhew’s overt “solution” to
the problems his investigations have uncovered is just one part of that web; the web is also connected to the working-class ideology of the family wage and to middle-class anxieties about prostitution among impoverished needlewomen. By examining the *Morning Chronicle* letters as a discrete text with its own investments and internal economy, in relationship to a complex historical and discursive context, my reading allows me to explore a central concern that has been overlooked in previous readings of Mayhew’s investigative work. That concern, and the link that fuses all the patterns mentioned above, is the image of an autonomous working-class masculinity that Mayhew often indicates by the term “artisan,” and that looks very much like middle-class Victorian masculinity. On the surface, this image involves a man’s ability to support his family in comfort and to provide the family with a solid center of moral integrity and self-development. Underneath that surface, but linked inextricably to it, the image demands a certain independence and psychic integrity that is heavily implicated in the male worker’s relation to the material and social world outside the family bounds. Mayhew’s “conclusion” involves the specter of the destruction of that autonomy and integrity by the working conditions of the competitive trades; much less explicitly, Mayhew’s text asserts the need for domesticated working-class women who, rather than competing with their husbands in the marketplace, will shore up men’s masculine identities by remaining dependent and at home.

In his letters Mayhew reveals a multitude of evils suffered by the workers in these urban trades. The focus of his investigations, however, is the role of the competitive capitalist system in creating these evils. Further, Mayhew presents the essential threat posed by competition as the erasure of the differences that distinguish the “honorable” from the “dishonorable” segments of the trades. The main economic distinction between these two segments was that the wages of the former were regulated by custom—at least to a large extent—while the wages of the latter were determined solely by “free-market” competition. Mayhew’s concern was not solely with the almost uniformly bad conditions for workers in the dishonorable sections, in contrast to the relatively good conditions of those in the honorable portions of their trade. Rather, his concern crystallized around the erosion of the features that distinguished the honorable portions of the trades, for he saw how both laborers and masters in such trades were forced either to adopt practices used in the dishonorable portions or to lose their work through the competition presented by the dishonorable trades. Mayhew identified this erosion as the central threat to the moral and physical well-being of the urban working classes.

Mayhew’s diagnosis of the evils of the metropolitan trades was distinctly
different from the accounts of his middle-class predecessors and contemporaries. Classical political economists and those influenced by political economy explained the causes and effects of poverty among the working classes through three different, but interrelated, concepts. Two of these concepts—a natural, subsistence wage rate and supply and demand—are present in Ricardo’s opening statement of his theory of wages in his chapter “On Wages.” Ricardo writes:

Labour, like all other things which are purchased and sold, and which may be increased or diminished in quantity, has its natural and its market price. The natural price of labour is that price which is necessary to enable labourers, one with another, to subsist and perpetuate their race, without either increase or diminution. . . . The market price of labour is the price which is really paid for it, from the natural operation of the proportion of supply to the demand. . . . However much the market price of labour may deviate from its natural price, it has, like commodities, a tendency to conform to it.13

According to this definition, poverty would be a relatively temporary phenomenon during which the market price of labor falls below its subsistence, or natural, price. Such a fall, in turn, is generally attributed to an increase in the population of the laboring class, creating an excess supply in labor. The economic historian Oswald St. Clair succinctly sums up the connection between these two classical economic concepts: “Thus in the view of Ricardo, and also of Malthus, it is in every country the labourers themselves who determine what their standard of living shall be” (emphasis mine).14

The third Ricardian concept, the wage fund, leaves behind the idea of a natural, subsistence wage altogether. In its place it constructs a theoretical fiction of an absolutely fixed fund of capital out of which wages can be paid during a given period, usually one year. This fixed fund of capital now constitutes the “demand” side of the supply-and-demand equation, once more leaving it in the hands of labor to control its own “supply,” and therefore its market price. The concept of the wage fund uses the “natural” balancing of the law of supply and demand, but it was developed to explain shorter-term alterations in the balance than those that could be explained by the Malthusian principle of population.15 The diagnostic effect of the theory of the wage fund was, however, precisely the same as the Malthusian principle in placing all responsibility for low wages with the laborers themselves. It had the further effect of rendering any demand for higher wages irrational and inevitably ineffective: the wage fund was fixed, so there was no way for masters and capitalists to augment wages, even if they wanted to; only a decrease in the supply of workers could bring an increase in the price of labor.
Competition, the diagnosis offered by Mayhew and many of his working-class interviewees as the cause of poverty wages, was not even a term applied to questions of labor and wages by most political economists. As a term implicit in the law of supply and demand, competition was seen as natural, inevitable, and therefore good. The term became explicit only in relation to “producers.” There it was contrasted positively to price-inflating monopolies, and thus discussed as something to be sought in its purest form. Only under the terms of free competition could the market operate properly and naturally, ensuring the consumer the lowest possible prices—which were the “natural” prices—for commodities. In stark contrast, Mayhew’s letters, like Dickens’s novel *Dombey and Son*, identify competition as the root of the evils they unfold. Also like Dickens, Mayhew presents the essential threat posed by competition as the erasure of differences he considers to be crucially important. Among these foundational differences is that between the honorable and the dishonorable trades. In Mayhew’s texts, however, the erasure of difference results not primarily in a moral or psychological crisis for middle-class commercial males but in a broader cultural crisis for the working classes, particularly for the working-class male.

Mayhew’s first step in textually constructing the central opposition between honorable and dishonorable trades is to reformulate the culturally dominant distinction between the laborer—including the laboring poor—and the pauper. This distinction had a long history in England but was newly and powerfully inscribed in the New Poor Law of 1834. With the criteria of “less eligibility” and the workhouse test, the New Poor Law used “scientific” principles to widen the moral gap between the economic categories of self-supporting and non-self-supporting members of the lower classes. Implicitly, the self-supporting were considered the respectable and relatively comfortable working classes, while the paupers’ inability to support themselves was viewed as moral failure. Pauperism entailed laziness, drunkenness, and thriftlessness and was to be discouraged and implicitly punished by the harsh conditions of the new workhouse.

The New Poor Law’s opposition between laborer and pauper, however, obscured the presence of another category—the poor. The poor often labored but were never “comfortable,” as the definitions of the New Poor Law implied that they would be. Despite long hours and hard labor, the laboring poor were unable to earn enough money to support themselves—either as individuals or as families. One of Mayhew’s central critical strategies in the letters to the *Morning Chronicle* is to focus on the plight of “the laboring poor”; by so doing, he exposes the incompleteness of the categories defined by the New Poor Law. Mayhew begins with the category of poverty and then links it at every point to various relationships to work. As Anne
Humphreys notes, in this regard Mayhew’s letters formed a sharp contrast with those of Angus Reach, the provincial correspondent for the *Morning Chronicle*, who kept the categories of labor and poverty separate in his series.18 Thus, in describing “the task” in his first letter to the *Morning Chronicle*, Mayhew begins with a definition of poverty: “Under the term poor I shall include all those persons whose incomings are insufficient for the satisfaction of their wants—a want being, according to my idea, contra distinguished from a mere desire by a positive physical pain, instead of a mental uneasiness, accompanying it.”19 By basing his distinction on the criterion of “positive physical pain” Mayhew attempts to fix his definition of poverty to something almost objectively observable, while at the same time removing it from moral categories by relating it to something physical, as opposed to mental—“a mere desire.”

As Mayhew goes on to develop his definition of poverty, it seems as if he is returning to the implications of the laborer-versus-pauper opposition by using the terms “honest” and “dishonest.”20 But as he elaborates these terms, the relationship of poverty and the laborer to work comes to predominate: “The large and comparatively unknown body of people included in this definition I shall contemplate in two distinct classes, viz., the *honest* and *dishonest* poor; and the first of these I purpose sub-dividing into the *striving* and *disabled*—or in other words, I shall consider the whole of the metropolitan poor under three separate phases, according as they *will* work, they *can’t* work, and they *won’t* work” (emphasis in original, UM 102). The urban poor whom it is Mayhew’s task to investigate, then, are defined in terms of their relationship to work. Mayhew’s study and interviews of 1849–50 deal almost exclusively with the “honest” poor—those who work and continue to strive for an independent subsistence but are nevertheless unable to obtain sufficient incomes to meet their bodily necessities.

Mayhew, then, focuses his study of the urban working poor on the independent laborer—the artisan—whether that laborer works for an honorable or a dishonorable trade. “Independence” is a crucial term informing Mayhew’s investigations, used both by Mayhew himself and by the laborers he interviews. Sonya Rose explains the significance of the term for the Victorian working classes in relation to an early-nineteenth-century artisanal culture that claimed its independence through its “property” in skilled labor. This culture also linked masculine “independence” to the ideals of female domesticity and the male breadwinner.21 Mayhew’s use of the term “independence” seems at once to draw upon its working-class definitions and to play upon the similarities between the emergent gendered ideology of the working class and the bourgeoisie’s separate-spheres ideology. Thus, while his entire study is a critique of the capitalist labor system, Mayhew adopts as a norm a model of
masculinity that in many important aspects resembles the masculinity of the Victorian middle classes, which profited from that system.22

Independence is the key for deciding questions of morality for the working-class male, as it is for the middle-class male. Just as the male pauper is seen as immoral because of his dependence, the male worker who retains his economic independence is seen as implicitly more moral, at least when defined against the pauper. When Mayhew turns toward the opposition between honorable and dishonorable trades, and with that opposition to the question of working-class morality, he carries into his investigation the ideology that privileges masculine independence. The honorable segments of the trades are regularly noted for maintaining the male worker’s independence in relation to the process of production and traditional middle-class or artisan-class moral values, while what middle-class writers and working-class speakers themselves identify as immoral behavior or situations is almost without exception found in what Mayhew calls the dishonorable section of any given trade. Thus, in Mayhew’s letters, questions of morality—at least among men—are read in terms of the economic system.23

The honorable-versus-dishonorable distinction also governs the organization of Mayhew’s letters. As he studies each trade, his first move is to break it up into these two factions—not really halves because in every case the number of workers in the dishonorable part of a trade far exceeds that of those in the honorable portion. He begins with the honorable part, as if to set up a standard of decency or normalcy, and then moves on to the dishonorable part, allowing the sharp contrasts between the former and the latter to indict the competitive system. In all his investigations Mayhew explores the laborers’ conditions of work and living, but the main force of the interviews emerges when Mayhew focuses specifically on the conditions of a worker’s family life. In the honorable trades Mayhew and the workers he interviews repeatedly draw a picture of the family that resembles the Victorian middle-class ideal. The structure of an independent, working husband and a dependent, domestic wife (and children) was advocated by many middle- and working-class writers as the appropriate familial structure for the English working class.24 For the middle class, this structure was called the “domestic” or “separate-spheres” ideology; for the working class, it was called the ideology of the “family wage.” This ideology either erased female labor or marked it as a sign of deviance—deviance either of the individual woman or of the system that forced her to work outside the home. Maintaining a family wage thus becomes for Mayhew, and for many of the laborers he interviews, a marker of membership in the honorable, rather than the dishonorable, segment of a trade. It signified the ability of a worker to support his family while simultaneously constructing women and children (in contrast to working-class men)
as dependent, and as “dependents” who needed male support in order to live out their proper and “natural” roles. The economics of this familial organization is, in turn, endowed with an aura of “true” domesticity. For example, in an interview titled “A carpenter working for the best prices,” the workman follows an account of his money wages with the claim that “I have always been able to keep my family, [my wife not] having to do anything but the house-work and washing” (UM 342). And of cabinetmakers in the honorable trade, Mayhew writes: “The great majority of the cabinet-makers are married men, and were described to me by the best informed parties as generally domestic men, living, whenever it was possible, near their workshops, and going home to every meal. They are not much of play-goers, a Christmas pantomime or any holiday spectacle being exceptions, especially where there is family” (emphasis mine, UM 367). In this passage, Mayhew constructs an image of the cabinetmakers as prototypical family men. At the same time, the passage repeatedly places “the family” at home, within the domestic sphere. The worker goes home to every meal, implicitly, because his family is already there. Likewise, the exceptional holiday outing noted in the final sentence creates the normative image of a family at home.

The full power of the family image comes into play in the contrast Mayhew sets up between family conditions in the honorable and dishonorable trades. This juxtaposition is drawn by one of the dishonorable workers as he contrasts the days when his trade had no dishonorable segment to the trade’s present condition. Mayhew describes an elderly man with a “heavy careworn look,” at work making tea-caddies with the assistance of his wife and daughter. This situation of joint familial labor is thrown into stark relief by the mechanic’s account of how the trade had changed over the past forty years:

I have been upwards of 40 years a fancy cabinet-maker . . . making tea-caddies and everything in that line. When I first worked on my own account I could earn £3 a week. I worked for the [honorable] trade then. . . . There was no slaughter-shops in those days. And the good times continued till about 21 years ago, or not so much, I can’t tell exactly, but it was when the slaughter-houses came up. Before that, on a Saturday night, I could bring home, after getting my money, a new dress for my wife . . . and something new for the children when they came, and a good joint for Sunday. Such a thing as a mechanic’s wife doing needlework for any but her own family wasn’t heard of then. . . . There was no slop needlewomen in the wives of my trade. It’s different now. They must work some way or other. (emphasis mine, UM 383)
For this worker, the degeneration of his trade—as well as his own passage from its honorable to its dishonorable sector—is marked by his loss of the ability to support his wife and children as well as to keep them comfortable (i.e., to provide the new dress, the good joint, etc.). The emergence of a dishonorable sector within the cabinetmaking trade is signaled by his frequent references to slaughterhouses, a type of warehouse business that gave out work to laborers but paid very low wages and produced low-quality goods. Not only is this worker poor financially and in terms of his conditions of life—such as housing and food—he is also poor in terms of his family life: he has been robbed of his ability to support wife and daughter, who, though they do work within the home, are engaged in long hours of waged labor, which his work requires.

This impoverished worker belongs to the same trade—cabinetmaking—that employs the honorable member who testifies to the domesticity of his class. It is not primarily the trade, then, but rather the line between honorable and dishonorable that demarcates the artisan and family man from the beleaguered laborer. The external factor that delineates honorable and dishonorable in the cabinetmaking trade is membership in the trade association, which is mentioned briefly in Mayhew's statement about honorable cabinetmakers as family men. Mayhew discusses the trade association more fully in a section called “The truth about trade unions.” Here he deplores the general misinformation about the function of trade societies—particularly the public's sense that they are organized solely to extract “an exorbitant rate of wages” from employers and that they are necessarily involved in strikes. After explaining why these ideas are mistaken, Mayhew offers an alternative picture of the trade society: “The maintenance of the standard rate of wages is not the sole object of such societies—the majority of them being organized as much for the support of the sick and aged as for the regulation of the price of labour” (emphasis in original, UM 377). Next follow calculations of the number of trade societies in England, Scotland, and Ireland; the numbers of their membership; and the amount they collect and distribute annually in support of their own poor, aged, and disabled. At the end of these calculations Mayhew proclaims that “the working people of this country . . . contribute therefore to the support of their own poor nearly five millions of money every year” (UM 377).

After this high praise of the ability of workers' associations in the honorable portions of the trade to support their poor, he turns his attention to the dishonorable trades: “It is the slop-work of the different trades—the cheap men, or non-society hands—who constitute the great mass of paupers in this country. And here lies the main social distinction between the workmen who belong to society, and those who do not—the one maintain their own poor, the others are left to the mercy of the parish. The wages of the competitive men are
cut down to bare subsistence, so that, being unable to save anything from their earnings, a few days’ incapacity from labour drives them to the workhouse for relief” (emphasis mine, UM 378). What Mayhew here claims as the “main social distinction” between workers in the honorable versus the dishonorable trades seems to differ from the distinction made by the workers themselves, for they emphasize their relative abilities to support not their own poor but their own families. Yet Mayhew’s criterion for distinguishing the different sections of the trade in this passage so precisely parallels the criterion invoked by the workers—and often by Mayhew himself—that it seems as if he is constructing the trade associations as extensions of the male-supported working-class family. Just as the honorable artisan can maintain his own family independent of the labor of wives and children, the honorable trade society can maintain all its members and all its families (including the families of its widows) when circumstances shift them into the category of dependency. In contrast, workers in the dishonorable portions of the trade fail to sustain not only their families but also themselves. The trade society, then, represents an expanded moral as well as economic family: it not only supports the structure of the worker’s immediate family by helping to keep up wages but also provides an infrastructure that can keep its members from falling into the dependent and morally denigrated category of pauper.25

Even when workers in the dishonorable trade manage to avoid crossing the line between laborer and pauper, they testify repeatedly not only to their inability to support their families but also to what they see as the perversion of their family relations—the ideal of which was constructed retroactively as “traditional” by proponents of the ideology of the family wage. These workers claim that their “natural affections” for their families are being undermined by the extremity of their poverty. One man says: “I can’t say what I thinks about the young uns. Why you loses your nat’ral affection for ‘em. The people in general is ashamed to say how they thinks on their children. It’s wretched in the extreme to see one’s children, and not be able to do to ’em as a parent ought” (UM 114). This Spitalfield silk weaver belonged to a working population infamous for the deterioration of its trade in early- and mid-Victorian England. But such sentiments are not expressed solely by those in such notoriously debased trades. A worker in the woodworking trade tells Mayhew that most of his colleagues marry early and have large families because they need their own children’s labor to make enough to survive. Because of the importance of their labor, he proclaims, having children becomes more like “breeding slaves” than “raising a family” (UM 395).

These references suggest that the beleaguered workers see their own children as a “free” source of labor that allows them to scrape out a bare subsistence and avoid the workhouse. For such workers, the labor of their children
at once jeopardizes and protects their independent masculine subjectivities. But other workers see child labor as explicitly and exclusively threatening, for it lowers wages even further. These speakers see child labor as competition—a nonunionized, cheap form of labor that forces grown men to accept children’s wages. It is not just “child labor” in general that is seen as a competitive threat but more specifically the labor of a man’s own children. A tailor says: “By such means the regular tailor is being destroyed; indeed a man’s own children are being brought into competition against himself, and the price of his labour is being gradually reduced to theirs” (emphasis mine, UM 188).26

By forcing children—those who would normally be dependents—into competition with their fathers, the capitalist marketplace radically perverts the family on which these male laborers’ identities depend. One of the results of such “perversion,” as this passage exposes, is the loss of prestige for the male worker within his own family. When he can be driven out of the market by his own children, he loses the ground of his familial authority and his status as an autonomous, independent agent among dependents. According to this logic, the worker who can support his family without the aid of their labor is more of a man than the worker who must rely on his wife and children; the worker who makes the family wage retains more authority within the household than the man who has to rely on the financial contributions of his wife and children.27 Barbara Taylor writes revealingly of the working-class controversy about whether women should work at wage labor outside of the home: “The wage-earning wife, once seen as the norm in every working-class household, had become a symptom and symbol of masculine degradation: it ‘unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness,’ as Engels wrote of the Manchester working population in 1844.”28 Taylor’s account suggests that for the male worker, having a wage-earning wife could be almost as degrading as being forced into the workhouse and becoming a pauper. In addition, Taylor reveals that, in contrast to the question of child labor, the issue of female waged labor was a point of contestation within the working class itself. While this contestation remains invisible on the surface of Mayhew’s text, the anxieties it provoked for both this middle-class writer and his working-class subjects are intertwined with the text’s more overt anxieties about competition and working-class masculinity.

The destruction of the male-supported working-class family in the dishonorable trades is the most frequently mentioned moral evil that results from unrestrained competition. It is also the most often-invoked marker of whether a worker belongs to the dishonorable or honorable section of a trade—it constitutes a moral measuring stick against which Mayhew judges not the workers but the conditions of their labor. However, Mayhew’s text incorporates another marker that indicates the extreme end of the competitive dishonor-
able trades. This marker is prostitution: prostitutes are not simply women working but women working by selling their own bodies. While Mayhew’s explicit investigation of prostitution is confined to his discussion of needlewomen and female slopworkers, the image he creates permeates his entire text. For Victorians, the prostitute was an image of virtually unrivaled cultural and imaginative power. Lynda Nead writes that “the prostitute stood as the symbol of the dangerous forces which could bring about anarchy and social disintegration” and that “prostitution was a powerful metaphor for the problem of working-class demoralization and radical opposition.” Discussed early in his series of letters, Mayhew’s needlewoman-turned-prostitute haunts his text and his other speakers’ words and carries with her a set of meanings otherwise largely invisible in the interviews.

Even before he presents his study of prostitution among needlewomen, Mayhew offers the comments of a “female operative,” a seamstress who concludes a discussion about the state of her trade with the following assertion: “A mother has got two or three daughters, and she don’t wish them to go to service, and she puts them to this poor needlework; and that, in my opinion, is the cause of the destitution and prostitution about the streets in these parts. So that in a great measure, I think the slop trade is the ruin of the young girls that take to it—the prices are not sufficient to keep them—and the consequence is they fly to the streets to make their living. Most of the workers are young girls who have nothing else to depend upon, and there is scarcely one of them virtuous” (emphasis mine, UM 121). This passage links prostitution to physical destitution rather than to moral degradation. The seamstress’s assertion blames this destitution on the system of labor—the slop trade—under which these women work. Further, it suggests a connection between prostitution and the destruction of the working-class family by noting that most of these workers have nothing else to depend on—a statement that, since it refers to working-class women, implicitly translates as, “They have no male worker to support them.” Finally, the closing statement in its vague all-inclusiveness—“scarcely one of them virtuous”—opens up the image of a pervasive, perhaps even choleric, miasma of immorality threatening not only the laboring classes but the entire city of London.

Prostitution as a contaminating evil was not a new cultural image for Victorians. But a prostitution that was linked to physical want rather than immoral sexual desire, in the same way that poverty was linked to want rather than desire in Mayhew’s opening statement, was not a common configuration in mid-nineteenth-century England. Other writers often ostensibly set out to explore the “environmental”—as opposed to “moral”—causes of prostitution, such as poverty, but their accounts inevitably ended up collapsing these two categories. In contrast, Mayhew’s interviews of needle-
women-turned-prostitutes repeatedly link the women’s “fall” to extreme physical want. At the same time, Mayhew allows the women’s testimonies to humanize them, even while demonizing prostitution itself. For Mayhew, it is prostitution and the conditions that force needlewomen to it that are inhuman; “prostitution” and the “prostitute” are not identical terms. Indeed, as we shall see in the interviews and testimonies of Mayhew’s needlewomen, “prostitution” is itself an extremely broad and flexible category, including everything from living unmarried with a man to solicitation and streetwalking—in short, any female sexuality that manifests itself outside marriage.32 The broadness of this definition makes Mayhew’s collapsing of all these needlewomen’s stories into the story of prostitution all the more significant: he is, in effect, implicated in creating the category of prostitution even as he excoriates it.

Mayhew creates this category primarily to indict the economic system he sees as having created it. For example, one of Mayhew’s interviewees turns out to be the daughter of an independent preacher. Mayhew writes that in his “nearly ten-mile” trek to confirm her story, he hears from two of her former employers (where she had been in service) “in the highest terms of the girl’s honesty, sobriety, industry, and of her virtue in particular” (emphasis mine, UM 149). It is as if by verifying her former “virtue,” Mayhew can separate her from the taint of prostitution, even though the power of her story, and of his retelling of it, depends precisely on that taint. Likewise, Mayhew quotes another needlewoman as saying that she “was virtuous when [she] first went to work” and that she “struggled very hard to keep [herself] chaste,” (UM 148) as if he is trying to purify his spokeswoman so that she can reveal the gap between a moral nature with moral inclinations and a system of competitive labor that forces her into immorality.

The women Mayhew interviews repeatedly emphasize the connection between economic and physical necessity and their acts of prostitution. One of them tells of trying to support her mother and herself, but “found that [she] couldn’t get food and clothing for [them], so [she] took to live with a young man” (UM 148). She continues: “He could make 14s. a week. He told me if I came to live with him he’d take care I shouldn’t want, and both mother and me had been very bad off before. He said, too, he’d make me his lawful wife, but I hardly cared so long as I could get food for myself and my mother” (UM 148). Finally, she states, as if testifying in a witness box, “If I was never allowed to speak no more, it was the little money I got by my labour that led me to go wrong. Could I have honestly earnt enough to have subsisted upon . . . I should not have gone astray; no, never—As it is I fought against it as long as I could” (UM 148). Whether such statements came at Mayhew’s prompting or were spontaneous, they reinforce the opposition between an
implicitly moral female nature that characterizes the needlewomen and the immoral system of competitive labor inherent in slop needlework. This opposition is reinforced through sheer repetition during Mayhew's famous meeting with needlewomen who had turned to prostitution.33 Another of Mayhew's interviewees makes virtually the same statement about herself three times during their interview. She also tells of trying to support her young child as well as herself and includes a vivid scene in which she describes staying out begging all night in the snow, rather than resorting again to prostitution, while her child's legs literally freeze to her body. The title Mayhew assigns this story—“A tragic and touching romance”—suggests a bittersweet rendition of the fallen-woman story.34 The woman is a mixture of madonna and magdalen in her devotion to her child, her attempts to give up prostitution, and her tortured returns to the streets. Mayhew uses the regret shared by all of the women as a bridge between them and the largely middle-class readers of these interviews.

The regret humanizes, individualizes, and psychologizes the women, as suggested by the fictionalizing title “romance.” But a countervailing force is also at work in Mayhew’s interviews—the generalizing force of the social scientist or investigator. Earlier in his interviews Mayhew writes: “I can assure the reader I am at no little pains in order to arrive at a fair average estimate of the state of those persons to whom I direct my attention. I seek for no extreme cases. If anything is to come of this hereafter, I am well aware that the end can be gained only by laying bare the sufferings of the class, and not of any particular individuals belonging thereto” (emphasis in original, UM 127). We can presume that Mayhew intends this statement to apply to slop needlewomen who turn to prostitution as well as to the slopworkers in government-contract clothing or cabinetmaking. The significance of such generalization for Mayhew’s treatment of prostitution can be seen in several senses. First, the generalization links working-class prostitution to the disintegration of the family-wage version of the working-class family that Mayhew documents so explicitly in other portions of his texts.35 Second, it introduces an opposition between the working classes and the middle class.

The first woman Mayhew interviews foregrounds this issue as she compares her situation to that of “gentlefolk.” In order to emphasize the extremity of her own situation, she invokes the moral standard and conditions of a “lady”: “But no one knows the temptations of us poor girls in want. Gentlefolks can never understand it. If I had been born a lady it wouldn’t have been very hard to have acted like one. To be poor and to be honest, especially with young girls, is the hardest struggle of all. There isn’t one in a thousand that can get the better of it” (UM 149). This statement brings us back to the question of working-class morality more generally, and to the relationship between
that morality and prostitution. For middle-class Victorians, prostitution was often considered a sign of the degradation of working-class morality in general: the prostitute was a representation of the class. Through his interviews, Mayhew articulates this connection as well, but he does so in order to make an entirely different point. Prostitution, for Mayhew, represents the extremities to which the working classes are pushed under the system of unrestrained competition and all of its manifestations, such as slopwork, the strapping system, and child labor. By separating the evils of prostitution from the individual needlewomen who succumb to it, Mayhew is able to link those evils directly to the system of labor—a system that threatens not just an isolated group of women but a whole class of workers.

If pauperism is the explicit marker of the far end of the spectrum that runs from honorable through dishonorable labor for both the male and the female labor force, then prostitution functions as an implicit marker of the possibility of falling outside the spectrum completely. Nor does the sign of prostitution mark only the female operative. Part of its threatening symbolic power in Mayhew’s text comes from its ability to cast its shadow over his accounts of the male worker as well. Though never explicitly sexualized, male workers repeatedly represent their own or others’ degradation by images of prostitution or by images that have strong connotations thereof. One of the most powerful of such images comes from a tailor who writes explicitly of the way the slop trade is eroding the honorable trade: “Amongst all the best and oldest houses in the trade at the West-end they are gradually introducing the making of the cheap paletots, Oxonians, Brighton coats, Chesterfields, &c., &c.; and even the first-rate houses are gradually subsiding into the cheap advertising slop tailors. If the principle goes on at the rate it has been progressing for the last five years, the journeymen tailors must ultimately be reduced to the position of the lowest of the needlewomen” (emphasis mine, UM 189). “The position of the lowest of the needlewomen” had been described by Mayhew one month before in his Morning Chronicle letters—and that was the position of prostitution. Whether or not the tailor is consciously drawing upon that image, prostitution is certainly the image evoked for the reader. What makes this passage even more powerful is that this unspoken image is linked not only to the dishonorable trade but, through the image of a progressive downward movement, to the honorable trade as well. Thus, in the very passage where the crucial distinction between honorable and dishonorable is shown to be eroding, Mayhew offers the prostitute to demarcate what is at stake in that erosion.

The most explicit reference to the male worker as prostitute appears in Mayhew’s investigation into what he calls the “kidnapping” system of recruiting hands for sweatwork. Mayhew describes this system as “inducing men by false pretences on the part of the sweaters, or more commonly, of
sweater’s wives, to work for them at wretched wages” (emphasis in original, UM 223). The fact that these men are usually “inexperienced country and Irish hands” only adds to the similarities between this story and that of the young country girl deceived and led astray by a London procuress. Mayhew goes on to tell the story of two Irish hands who were lured away from their hometown by a London sweater’s wife. In London they are forced to work in abysmal conditions for virtually no pay, with none of the training in skilled artisan work they had been promised. After three weeks, the two escape. Mayhew continues: “The sweater traced them to where they had got work again, took with him a policeman, and gave them in charge as runaway apprentices. He could not, however, substantiate the charge at the station-house, and the men were set at liberty. Even after that the sweater’s wife was always hanging about the corners of the streets, trying to persuade these men to go back again. She promised one that she would give him a handsome daughter she had for his wife” (emphasis mine, UM 224). I cite this passage at length because of the multiple levels at which it echoes the conventional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century virgin-seduced-to-prostitute story. The escape, followed by pursuit and an accusation of being runaway apprentices, could, with only the slightest modifications, be the story of the young virgin-turned-prostitute escaping from her madam, only to be caught and accused of robbing the house. The sweater’s wife hanging around street corners seems prostitute and procuress at once, especially when she offers to prostitute her own daughter in order to reclaim the young laborer. It is in her role as procuress, however, that she presents the more threatening image, because if the sweater’s recruiting wife is imagined as a procuress, then the workers she recruits are inexorably placed in the position of prostitute.

By implicitly turning the adult male worker into a prostitute, the competitive system of sweated labor unmans him in the most fundamental way. He is not simply feminized; he is also thoroughly commodified. This transaction strips the man of his masculine independence because his labor is represented as the selling of himself to another. In other words, the sweated laborer not only produces degraded commodities but becomes a commodity himself; as such he is, implicitly, something to be exchanged between men rather than a man himself. This stripping away of masculinity, like the issues of family and self-support, exists on a spectrum or continuum that follows the spectrum of the conditions under which the laborers work. Between the male worker able fully to support his family and the male worker driven to the doors of—if not into—the workhouse are all the laborers who not only rely on their families for additional support but also, even then, exist in conditions that they consider dehumanizing and implicitly (often explicitly) emasculating. The situation of these laborers is expressed through a series of metaphors—used most
often by the men themselves but sometimes by Mayhew—linking them to beasts, slaves (often explicitly black slaves), or machines. The first such metaphor occurs when Mayhew turns from the honorable West End portion of the tailors to the East End slop trade: “The honourable part of the trade are really intelligent artisans, while the slopworkers are generally almost brutified with their incessant toil, wretched pay, miserable food, and filthy homes” (emphasis mine, UM 196). At another point, cheap contract work draws this comparison from one of the laborers: “We are used for all the world like cab or omnibus horses. Directly they’ve had all the work out of us we are turned off, and I am sure after my day’s work is over, my feelings must be very much the same as one of the London cab horses” (emphasis mine, UM 348). The power of this passage comes from the fact that the worker not only compares his condition and treatment to that of an animal but also asserts that such conditions produce in him the feelings of an animal. Psychologization in this case works not to humanize the worker but to expose his dehumanization. At the same time, the passage suggests emasculation, as the worker compares himself to an entity that is literally someone else’s creature.

In an earlier discussion of the dishonorable woodworking trade, psychology is again used to reveal dehumanization when a worker invokes the metaphor of a machine. Mayhew begins by describing an elaborate system of subcontracting and piecework, then explains that “by this process men gradually become mere machines, and lose all the moral and intellectual characteristics which distinguish the skilled artisan” (emphasis mine, UM 340). Mayhew sets up the artisan as a man who possesses a relatively high level of psychological development, marked here by the terms “moral and intellectual characteristics.” Likewise, the pairing of “moral” with “intellectual” suggests a specifically masculine psychology. The stripping away of this psychologized subjectivity emasculates and dehumanizes the workers until they become “mere machines,” an image that leaves the workers even lower than the maltreated cab horses because machines have no “feelings” whatsoever, not even those of an animal.37

Not surprisingly, the most common metaphor for this process of unmanning is that of slavery. This image makes one of its earliest appearances in a description of how low-waged imported foreign laborers are treated. The dishonorable woodworker cited earlier uses the image in terms of child labor—having children, in his trade, is like “breeding slaves” because they work all day and half the night and get no education and because there is no decent or respectable place for them in the trade when they grow up (UM 395). But the metaphor also applies to the adult male English workers and again suggests
the loss of a masculine interiority. Within the strapping system of the wood-
working trades, for example, the method of constant and minute surveillance
of the workmen not only drives the men to work harder than black slaves
(“No slave works like we do” [UM 347]) but also strips the men of any
integrity in relation to their own processes of production. The quality, speed,
and detail of production are all assessed by the overseer, so the workmen are
forced to be always looking over their shoulders—instead of into them-
selves—for judgments of their labor.

Even more telling is the testimony of a seaman in the British merchant
marine service. He states: “It’s a shameful thing to see the way we are treated.
We are not treated like men at all; and what’s more, there’s no dependence to be
placed on us now. If a war was to break out with America there’s thousands of
us would go over to the other country. We’re worse than black slaves;
they are taken care of, and we are not” (emphasis mine, UM 301). Although the most
immediate connection between the slavery image and the men in this passage
is that of being “taken care of,” suggesting dependency, the more powerful
connection is the sailor’s assertion that because they are not treated like
men—that is, they are treated worse than slaves—their loyalty to their coun-
try cannot be depended upon. In other words, their treatment is so demean-
ing and emasculating that they cannot be expected to act with manly integrity
in a time of national crisis; they will turn traitors, and the guilt for that turn-
ing will lie not with themselves but with the system that has treated them as
if they had no manly selves at all. This remark is in sharp contrast to the tes-
timony of a Scotsman in the American merchant marine service who asserts:
“An English seaman is very little thought of in his own country, but he’s well
thought of in America. He’s a man there” (emphasis mine, UM 313). The dif-
fences he cites between the two services are not only better wages and bet-
ter food but also, significantly, more respectful treatment. In other words, he
gives almost an exact inversion of the English seaman’s testimony, with treat-
ment and manliness as the two issues at stake.

Prostitution takes all these metaphors several steps further. First, because
the adult male workman is never explicitly compared to a prostitute, and
because prostitution is exposed as a reality for a number of adult female work-
ers, it retains the potency of a possibility. Mayhew doesn’t need to investigate
the possibility of actual sexual prostitution among working-class males; in
fact, any such specific exploration would disrupt the economy and power of
his implicit prostitution metaphor because it is important to his investigative
critique that current capitalist labor practices, rather than any actions on the
part of the individual worker, position male workers as prostitutes. The pos-
sibility that the adult male worker would actually be reduced to prostitution
is suggested only in vague terms. However, because of prostitution’s status as
metaphoric possibility, allusions to it set up another marker, beyond dependent pauperism, on the three overlapping spectrums of masculinity, humanity, and morality along which, according to Mayhew, the London laborers can fall—or, perhaps more accurately in his account, be pushed.

Second, prostitution signifies not only extreme degradation and the loss of a psychological interior, as do the metaphors of beasts, machines, and slaves, but also the commodification of the essential autonomy of the male laborer and the proffering of it for monetary exchange. In Victorian England, the female prostitute is seen to sell that which makes her a woman—her sexual chastity (which for the Victorians meant specifically sex confined to marriage—with its dependency and power asymmetry). The male worker-as-prostitute sells something much less tangible, and something other than simply his labor, but in selling it, he also loses something central to his masculinity. This “something,” judging from the passages examined earlier, includes most crucially his independence—an independence retained to some degree even by the pauper. For, while the pauper makes him- or herself dependent upon the apparatuses of the state—a state in which he or she can claim a part, and provisions to which he or she can claim a right—the worker-prostitute sells himself and his independence directly to an individual from whom he is otherwise alienated. He thereby makes himself that person’s “creature.”

I have already argued that Mayhew locates the cause of this descending scale of degradation in unrestrained competition. For example, immediately after the quotation about slavery in the strapping shops, the speaker continues: “The men are everyone striving one against the other. Each is trying to get through the work quicker than his neighbors. Four or five men are set the same job so that they may be all pitted against one another, and then away they go every one striving his hardest for fear that the others should get finished first” (UM 347). The strapping system—where the competition among workmen is so structured and so obvious—is actually an unusual case. More frequently, laborers compete among themselves with no knowledge of each other’s existence, wages, or conditions except as vague shadows of themselves and their situations. But it is competition among the masters, most of the workers argue, that sets up and drives competition among the workmen. This assertion is made early in Mayhew’s interviews by the Spitalfield silk weavers with whom he begins his investigations. Mayhew describes the views of, then quotes from, one of the weavers: “The reduction, he [the weaver] was convinced, arose from the competition in the trade, and one master cutting under the other. ‘The workmen are obliged to take the low prices, because they have not the means to hold out, and they know that if they don’t take the work
others will” (emphasis mine, *UM* 109). This worker does not deny competition among the workmen, but he links it directly to competition among the masters in the trade. The same issue is raised later in a meeting Mayhew holds for the tailors; he poses the ascertaining of their opinions about whether the destructive competition in their trade originated with the trading or the laboring classes as the most significant purpose of the meeting. Mayhew receives a direct and resounding answer to this question, which he asks in terms of the cause of the depreciation of prices in the trade; the workmen at the meeting respond unanimously—“Men of capital underselling each other” (*UM* 203). The very fact that Mayhew positions the question of “whose competition” so centrally to his project suggests that in his earlier interviews with tailors, as well as silk weavers, the workers identified competition among capitalists as an urgent evil. Indeed, Mayhew seems to be in the process of being converted to this point of view. Among woodworkers, and boot- and shoemakers too, the laborers see competition among the capitalists, the middlemen, and the masters as driving the prices—and thus the wages—in the trade ever lower.

One of the workmen Mayhew interviews, however, a woodworker in sawyering, identifies competition itself—regardless of who competes—as the most powerful and also the most destructive force in the trades. The sawyer makes this point in terms of the machinery that is destroying sawyering as a trade for laborers: “Even the machines, some of them, can’t hardly raise the price of the coals to get their fire up. When they first set up they had 6d. a foot for cutting veneers, and now they have only 1d. Machinery’s very powerful, sir, but competition is much stronger” (emphasis mine, *UM* 334–35). As I argued earlier, the most threatening aspect of such competition is, for Mayhew, not simply that it reduces the moral and physical conditions of workers in the dishonorable or competitive trades but also that it erodes the distinction between the honorable and dishonorable portions of each trade. In an attempt at fairness, Mayhew interviews some of the masters in the building trade. He reports that he “found the same opinion entertained by them all as to the ruinous effects of the kind of competition existing in their trade to a master who strives to be just to his customers and fair to his men” (*UM* 350). One of the master builders testifies: “Honesty is now almost impossible among us. . . . It is impossible in cheap contract work, for the competition puts all honourable trade out of the field; high character, and good material, and the best workmanship are of no avail. Capitalists can command any low-priced work, by letting and subletting and all by the piece. Most of these speculating and contracting people think only how to make money. . . . Their proceedings are an encouragament [sic] to every kind of dishonesty. They fail continually, and they drag good men down with them” (emphasis mine, *UM* 350).
Even the masters share the sense of a downward pull and an attendant downward slide because of the effects of competition. And though “drag[ging] good men down” in this passage seems to refer to the prospect of bankruptcy, its vague phraseology leaves it open to other interpretations. Tailors and bootmakers echo this sense of the cumulative force of various competitive trade practices, with one bootmaker exclaiming: “I fear that if no check be interposed to the Northampton and slop-system, matters will get worse. The underpaid and inferior workman will drag down the able well-conducted artisan to his level” (UM 272).

“Will drag down the able well-conducted artisan to his level”: this threat haunts Mayhew’s investigations into the dishonorable trade. From the destruction of the family through the dehumanization and emasculation of the workmen to the ultimate evil of prostitution, Mayhew’s investigative revelations act as an imaginative magnet, pulling the reader’s mind from the moral, intelligent, and psychologized male artisan toward the images of degradation and emasculation that potentially await him. While continuing to blame competition as the central factor in the devastation of the dishonorable trade and the threatened destruction of the honorable trade, later in his letters Mayhew turns to one specific tenet of political economy as a means of focusing and localizing his critique: the law of supply and demand, which holds that wages and prices are determined by a relationship between the supply of labor and the demand for it. As stated earlier, this principle renders the evils that Mayhew describes as the result of overpopulation within the trades—in other words, the “fault” of the workmen themselves. Supply-and-demand theory, likewise, from the perspective of the capitalist, renders the conditions and wages of the workers inevitable—just the natural workings of economic law: no one is to blame (except maybe the workers themselves), and nothing is to be done (except maybe forced emigration).

In response to the amoral inevitability of this theory, Mayhew generates his own set of theories, and he offers intricate calculations to support them. He first attacks the law of supply and demand by showing “statistically” how it does not apply in the case of the cabinetmakers, particularly in the slop cabinet trade: “Notwithstanding the number of cabinet-makers in the metropolis, compared with the rest of the population, decreased no less than 32 per cent! between 1831 and 1841, still the wages of the non-society men (whose earnings are regulated solely by competition) have fallen as much as 400 percent [sic]—and this while the amount of work done has increased rather than decreased” (emphasis in original, UM 363). Using the cabinetmakers as his primary example, Mayhew then lays out the two main tenets of his theory: “Over-work makes under-pay” and “Under-pay makes over-work” (UM 384–88). The first of these tenets translates Mayhew’s observation that simply
by increasing the productiveness of the individual laborer, a trade can become, as it were, overcrowded. The result is the same as if there were a sudden glut of laborers—wages are driven lower and lower, to the point where they constitute “underpay.” Once wages begin to be reduced, the individual laborer will work more quickly, for longer hours, and perhaps with less skill and care in order to make up the difference between his earnings and expenditures. Thus, Mayhew arrives at his second tenet—“Under-pay makes over-work.”

Mayhew argues that both of these principles complicate the simple law of supply and demand as it was commonly understood by political economists, capitalists, and the general public of his day. He explains that his two complicating tenets are the result of a new category of labor, what he call “interested labor.” He first uses this idea to explain the “means to increase the productiveness of labour” that lead to “overwork,” which he argues involves “connecting the workman’s interest directly with his labour” or “making the amount of his earning depend upon the quantity of work done by him” (UM 385). In the next paragraph, Mayhew restates this point by arguing that in piecework or interested labor, “the operative unites in himself the double function of capitalist and labourer, making up his own materials or working on his own property” (UM 386). Mayhew repeatedly identifies interested labor as a causal factor in workmen’s increasing their hours of labor and producing inferior, or “scamp,” work. In fact, he calls such “scamp work” “one of the necessary consequences of all interested labour” (emphasis in original, UM 387).

These are the immediate evils that stem from interested labor. But the core problem seems to lie within the term “interested labor” itself, particularly as that term is defined in the passage emphasized earlier: “whenever the operative unites in himself the double function of capitalist and labourer.” It is as if the collapse of the clear distinction between employer and employed, capitalist and laborer, is at the root of the collapse of the distinction between the honorable and dishonorable trades and all that they represent for Mayhew as well as for the laborers themselves. While this connection may seem counterintuitive (wouldn’t it be empowering for the workers to be their own employers, capitalists, and masters?), Mayhew gives an illustration that suggests why the collapse of the laborer/capitalist distinction is, at least in this case, so dangerous. He compares the small manufacturer to the small farmer and argues that the latter labors not for profit but for subsistence. The result is that any increase in his labor contributes directly to his support and comfort. In contrast, “the small master [which is what so many laborers have been forced by the competitive system to become] ... producing what he cannot eat, must carry his goods to market and exchange them for articles of consumption; hence, by overtoil, he lowers the market against himself; that is to say, the more he labours the less food he ultimately obtains” (first emphasis mine; second and third emphases in
original, *UM* 386–87). In other words, the collapse of the distinction between capitalist and laborer is in fact a fissure within the laborer himself. He works against himself; he literally loses his integrity as a laborer.

This fracture makes him like the fragmented commercial men of Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*. More important, however, this situation makes every interested laborer to some degree like the “lowest of the needlewomen”—the prostitute who combines within herself the roles of capitalist, laborer, and commodity. This combination of roles results in the fissure between moral female subject and degraded prostitute that Mayhew dwells on in his discussion of the needlewomen. It also helps to explain the power of the prostitution metaphor. Significantly, this is a power that Mayhew defuses in his representation of the actual prostitutes he interviews. He defuses it precisely by splitting off the woman from the prostitute—making the women tragic victims of their circumstances. The need to diffuse this power when prostitution applies to actual women, rather than metaphorically to men, is explained by Lynda Nead in the following terms: “She [the prostitute] is able to represent all the terms of capitalist production; she is the human labour, the object of exchange and the seller at once. She stands as worker, commodity and capitalist and blurs the categories of bourgeois economics in the same way she tests the boundaries of bourgeois morality.”43 I would add to Nead’s account the point that the prostitute blurs and tests the boundaries not only of bourgeois economics and bourgeois morality but also, through both, of the moral female subjectivity assigned to her by the ideology of the family wage increasingly adopted by the (male) Victorian working class.

Indeed, the prostitute is the prototypical female laborer, one who does not threaten any male laborer’s job but who represents all the female laborers who are seen as threatening male employment, and thus working-class masculinity itself. Likewise, the prostitute is the figure of a woman who refuses to be contained within the domestic sphere and “protected” by a man. Thus, she also suggests all the wage-earning women who Taylor says “had become a symptom and symbol of masculine degradation.”44 Mayhew writes of and investigates wage-earning women other than prostitutes, but always with the presumption that they are forced to labor in the marketplace, never with the idea that their labor might be voluntary. More significantly, Mayhew’s accounts of female labor other than prostitution function to erase that labor by focusing on questions about the male laborer and his ability or inability to maintain his family. Thus, Mayhew naturalizes the public, wage-earning role of the male worker while denaturalizing that role for women; he offers instead a naturalized role within the domestic sphere—a female role on which working-class male subjectivity increasingly depends and in which women’s labor is categorically erased as “unproductive.”
Mayhew’s explicit solution to all of the problems his investigation uncovers goes even further toward establishing gender asymmetry in the workplace and the marketplace. That solution is his support for trade societies. He discusses the benefits of such societies for both workers and masters throughout his letters, ending the series with a paean to the Curriers’ Society. But with only one exception—dressmakers—all these trade societies are male. This exception not only occurs in an all-female trade (like prostitution); in Mayhew’s account, it is the result of the effort of middle-class philanthropic “ladies” rather than the female workers’ self-organization. Thus, when Mayhew invokes the image of the trade society as a large, extended family, he is invoking the image of an all-male family—or at least a family in which all the workers are men, and women and children are dependents. The trade society as a solution to the threats of capitalist competition, then, depends on the erasure of female labor and the occlusion of the wage-earning woman worker. This “solution” is even more significant given Mayhew’s characterization of the dishonorable trade, where workers are completely ignorant of each other. Setting up trade societies within these trades, as Mayhew has minutely described them, seems an impossibility—an example of wishful thinking intended to contain the anxieties his letters have exposed. As such, the wishful solution of all-male trade societies reveals even more powerfully the gender dynamics that Mayhew depends on to rescue the male worker.

The image of the trade society is not potent enough to erase the image of the prostitute-needlewoman Mayhew evoked earlier. That image continues its symbolic work as an emphatic marker of the evils of free-market capitalist competition, as do his images of starving laborers and degraded trades. Yet Mayhew’s critique of competitive capitalism participates in constructing an ideology of the family wage that served not only to shore up working-class masculinity but also to support the capitalist social structures that facilitated the workings of capitalist economics. The image of the needlewoman-turned-prostitute continues to haunt the reader and to challenge Mayhew’s otherwise largely unproblematic erasure of the female worker as well as to indict mid-Victorian competitive capitalism.