Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

Stewart, David M.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Stewart, David M.
Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24287.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24287

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=859854
CHAPTER 8

Sex and the Police

Before examining the poetics of workingmen’s intimacy, we must first say what their canons of social action were and, more important, how they were policed. “One of the more interesting conundrums” of the nineteenth century, Karen Lystra writes, is “the veil of denial that surrounded sexuality among middle-class Americans.”¹ Setting aside for now the class specified, the conundrum Lystra refers to lies less in the performed passionlessness that constituted this veil, than in our recent discovery that behind it Americans enjoyed real sex. We no longer distinguish between real and performed actions, of course; all now reproduce or parody existing cultural norms. But to invoke the real in antebellum sexuality extends to it the kind of rhetorical materialization I have looked for by situating arguments about bodily life in relation to the city grid, eating, and Sedgwick’s turn from parody to a more hard-wired identity category based on shame. Distinguishing real from performed sexual conduct lends solidity to a well-known passage from Foucault’s History of Sexuality that Lystra uses to explain passion in a passionless time. “There is pleasure on the censor’s side,” Foucault writes,

that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure of its pursuing; and opposite it, pleasure in the power of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.

Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement, parents and children, adults and adolescents, educators and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.²

The appeal of this account stems in part from the romantic view it suggests of lovers who in each other’s arms escaped a wider culture of repression. Foucault would not have made such a claim, the emancipatory promise of romance being only one of countless ways the hypothesis of such repression is sustained. The pleasure he describes was transgressive, meaning it was enhanced by evading power, not escaping it.

To add real passion to Foucault’s notoriously thin conception of power—to add material necessity to pleasure largely discursive in its play between sexual dos and don’ts—shifts our view from sexy abstractions (games, spirals, the chase) to the material facts of doing it. One of these is that most did it behind closed doors, hidden from the surveillance to which Foucault refers. This doesn’t void the claim that evading public mores excited private passion. If we use a private–public threshold to delineate sexual risk, men and women bore the reasons for denial with them in whatever sphere they occupied. Yet because sex acts occurred out of sight, we tend to treat the danger they posed in terms more categorical than bodily. Lystra locates this danger in the gap between an ideal of redemptive sexuality and expressions of sexual intimacy in domestic correspondence that suggests spirits that were indeed liberated—which is not to say unequivocally so. While noting the scarcity of sexual content in letters before the Civil War, Lystra finds plenty to indicate that the passion in courtship and marriage could be painful. And while Walter Herbert credits the Hawthornes with achieving sexual bliss as newlyweds, what they actually did behind closed doors eroded the mutual idealization on which their happiness depended, poisoning marriage and family alike.

Yet accounts like these purport to explain intense passions, positive and negative, by way of values that The Voice of Industry called “trashy, milk-and-water sentimentalities” and that Thompson openly ridiculed in domestic fiction.³ Indeed, feelings that Lystra and Herbert find in private writing more often resonate with the sexual violence of Thompson’s “romance of the real.” As we will see, such violence was quite in keeping with how sex was treated

². Lystra, Searching the Heart, 89. Lystra cites Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality, 45; original emphasis.
³. “Factory Life—Romance and Reality.”
in medical and moral reform literature, thus providing a more compelling threshold of risk than romantic idealism. Again we find conduct driven less by self-surveillance (what Franklin deemed self-editing) than fear and rage, feelings some of which may have been left at the door when retiring to bed, but not all. Stakes were further increased by the fact that such feelings were internalized through a highly gendered disciplinary rhetoric. This gendering means that surveillance behind closed doors can be treated more literally, which is to say, socially. The poetics of intimacy involved not complicity in evading power outside those doors or even the ingested self-regulation of shame-constituted identity. This poetics occurred between lovers socialized to police each other.

Social poetics helps us imagine the interdependent fears and pleasures of physical love. Hints of these fears and pleasures occur throughout our examples, including Carpenter when he characterized his success negatively: “I asked a girl to go to the Cotillion party with me tonight & did not get the mitten.” Carpenter tacks his news coolly onto the end of a brief entry about the weather, channeling it through a metaphor of rejection. Both tactics managed insecurity and suggest how he comported himself not walking or lounging, but in courtship and love. Social poetics also helps us finesse the problem of material privacy with a poetics of reading that conditioned the social acts performed out of sight. This does not just return us to the abstractions of discourse. Addressing real passion recalls that reading was action for working-men the same way it was eating. By using feminine victimization to reform sex the same way they did drinking and slavery, reformers made conjugal love the most reading-driven and, so, dangerously real act of male life. Women too were vulnerable, and while their risks were different, pain was administered mutually. Publicly, this occurred in gestures of interest, postures of flirtation, styles of availability and innuendo. All were forms of poetic address that lovers responded to in each other, but were necessarily elusive, leaving traces long forgotten in practice—making passion not a “conundrum,” but enactments of it difficult to see. In private, this address occurred in particularities of arousal, penetration, and sexual release: actions orgiastic in the literal sense of Bataille’s term. Because reading excited such disorder, it provides not an analogy, but a functional correlative. Americans in lovemaking enjoyed an aesthetic of violation implicit in canonic sexuality and the reading that produced it.

The last decades have produced a voluminous literature on nineteenth-century sex, much concerned with what occurred when it passed “through the endless mill of speech”4 “Speech” made sex dangerous not as a moral abstraction, but as a bodily act. Professional and popular journals were awash in debates

about the medical risks of sex. Health reformers in the 1830s followed Sylvester Graham's lead in blaming “the convulsive paroxysms attending venereal indulgence” for a wide range of problems, including epidemic disease and mental illness.5 Masturbation was a major worry. Habit-forming in youth and unjustified by the necessity of reproduction, masturbation caused both local disorders and a general depletion of vigor that had tragic long-term consequences. Writers who sought to curb the practice emphasized the pain of such illnesses and their cures. Anti-masturbation literature was composed largely of grisly case histories, which produced results of their own: Homer Bostwick writes that the only cure for “nocturnal emissions” was “to cauterize the seminal ducts.” Bostwick seldom moralized openly; rather, he begins by listing a patient’s habits, which the patient has himself often concluded are the cause of his problem. Then he relates the procedure, leaving readers to infer a diagnosis by way of their own squeamish identification. “I examined the urethra with a bougie,” begins a passage that must have caused many an onanist to cross his legs,

and found a stricture about half an inch anterior to the mouths of the seminal ducts. There was some difficulty in passing the obstruction, but by keeping up a constant and gentle pressure for ten minutes or more, the instrument found its way into the bladder. He fainted completely away; but, notwithstanding, I allowed it to remain in fifteen or twenty minutes.6

Bostwick’s tactics were typical. Henry Ward Beecher likens the pleasure obtained from prostitutes to the rooms of a house, where desire solicited in the dooryard and sated in the parlor and bedroom leads to illness and death in the backroom and cellar. Entering the “Ward of Disease,” Beecher writes:

Ye that look wistfully at the pleasant front of this house, come with me now, and look long into the terror of this Ward. . . . Here a shuddering wretch is clawing at his breast, to tear away that worm which gnaws his heart. By him is another, whose limbs are dropping from his ghastly trunk. Next, swelters another in reeking filth; his eyes rolling in bony sockets, every breath a pang, and every pang a groan. But yonder, on a pile of rags, lies one whose yells of frantic agony appall every ear. Clutching his rags with spasmodic grasp, his swoln [sic] tongue lolling from a blackened mouth, his bloodshot eyes glaring and rolling, he shrieks oaths; now blaspheming God, and now imploring him.7

5. Sylvester Graham, Lecture to Young Men on Chastity, 49.
“The Strange Woman” was first delivered to a church full of Christmas Eve worshippers who probably didn’t soon forget it—which was the point, as it was for Bostwick. If one was cool and objective and the other outraged and apocalyptic, both sought to influence conduct by instilling patterns of response more palpable and emotionally precise than we usually identify with embodied discipline in the period.  

Such reading circulated widely, defying simple generalizations about class. This was partly a result of market forces. Grahamites William Alcott and Mary Gove typify reformers whom Ronald Walters identify with a generation that looked not only to improve society, but to make a living. This meant cultivating readers where they were found, especially among the masses of young men (and their parents) convinced that success required education. But with word out, a rapidly expanding sex print culture carried it beyond target audiences, even while sex remained sparse in personal writing. Carpenter says nothing on the topic, despite many remarks on health and women. Innocence was not the reason. Raised the son of a country doctor, Carpenter had access to a sizable collection of medical books. Residents of western Massachusetts were also well aware of sex advice literature, as it was here in the 1830s that Charles Knowlton was charged for publishing such material. Fifteen years later, Frank Ward is more open in reading Hollick’s *Origin of Life*, which he later gave to his sweetheart. Ada Shepard cites books on sex, from reading addressed to women, perhaps, or from men’s reading obtained to evade proprieties of gender. A women’s library catalogue from Templeton, MA lists Beecher’s *Lectures to Young Men* (containing “The Strange Woman”) not under “Sermons” or “Domestic Relations and Duties,” but “Miscellaneous,” a category often used to conceal questionable reading.  

Physical peril didn’t end with marriage. While most believed it safer, sex

---


11. Greenfield was the site of Knowlton’s last trial in 1835, and he lectured there during the time Carpenter wrote his diary. Cf. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth–Century America*, 70–122.

12. The *Catalogue of Books in the Library of the Ladies’ Social Circle* was typical of library catalogues of the period. Their purpose was to provide access to collections, most of which had yet to adopt the user-browse system. Catalogues were arranged by some mix of subject/genre, author/title classification. These helped facilitate retrieval. They also provided formal coherence that demonstrated that a library’s holdings were decent and readers serious. The location of Beecher’s scandalous *Lectures to Young Men* suggests the wish to distance it from more discreet advice literature. On libraries as sites for transgressive reading, cf. David M. Stewart, “The Disorder of Libraries.”
in wedlock still involved “convulsive paroxysms” and taxed the “spermati
cconomy.” Restrictionist views on conjugal love inevitably came down to
a number: once a week, twice a month, only for reproduction, never. Again,
indulgence beyond these limits risked illness and disease, a claim that appears
to have had some effect on attitudes toward marriage. As Lystra points out,
William Acton’s famous remark that “the majority of women (happily for
them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings” occurs in a chapter
meant to reassure large numbers of men afraid “that the marital duties they
will have to undertake are beyond their exhausted strength, and for this rea
son dread and avoid marriage.” It is difficult to say how true this was; many
reasons are given for the rising number of bachelors in the nineteenth century.
The same is true of declining birthrates.

But reformers felt the need to resist such trends, and “dread” was cited
as a factor. Milford Lane, a character in T. S. Arthur’s Married and Single; or
Marriage and Celibacy Contrasted defends his bachelorhood by pointing to his
bad health, and in debt into the bargain. Ugh! It makes me shudder to think
of it. I’m afraid, Harry.” While he clearly advocates marriage, Arthur grants
Milford’s point, basing his support on the spiritual gain occasioned by every
“purifying ordeal.” His friend, Henry Trueman, fathers eight children, the
effects of which are born directly by his body: aging, thinning, gray hair, a
careworn face. Lane escapes such misfortune, but celibacy leaves him vain and
selfish, wondering how Trueman thrives despite his burdens. Henry suffers
many problems he could have avoided by staying single: financial difficulty,
infant death, children who stray, the loss of his wife. Direct references to sex
were avoided, as one would expect from Arthur, whose bland moralizing was
favored by a culture industry that increasingly saw its future in mass palatabili-

13. G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and
14. Cited by Lystra, Searching the Heart, 103. Acton’s The Functions and Disorders of the
Reproductive Organs was widely read in the U.S.
15. Howard Chudacoff, The Age of the Bachelor, 21–44. Chudacoff’s material on this period
is sparse, says nothing about the effect of health and moral reform on the growing numbers of men
who did not marry. Rather, he attributes it to insecurity caused by economic change, declining
authority of the family, and the growing prerogatives of women. Birthrates declined from seven per
family in 1800, to just over five by the Civil War, to three and a half at the end of the century. John
D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman summarize reasons that have been given for the drop, which are
predominantly economic, although some emphasize changing religious views and, again, increasing
power of women to control their reproductive lives (Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America,
57–59). Horowitz credits sex reformers like Knowlton for spreading information about birth control
(Rereading Sex, 70–85).
16. T. S. Arthur, Married and Single; or Marriage and Celibacy Contrasted, 5.
17. Arthur, Married and Single, 70.
Figure 19. Frontispiece from Ralph Glover, Every Mother's Book; or, The Duty of Husband and Wife Physiologically Discussed (New York: Glover, 1847). Courtesy of Charles E. Rosenberg and the Library Company of Philadelphia.

Yet if sexual causes remained unstated, readers of *Married and Single* knew them well from a pervasive reform literature determined to teach just that.

Sexual causes are clearer in the frontispiece to Ralph Glover’s birth control tract, *Every Mother’s Book; or, The Duty of Husband and Wife Physiologically Discussed* (figure 19). Six children, most infants, signal a lack of restraint that leaves the man unable to rise or support his family. In back-grounding the composition, the bed says what Arthur cannot, which is that sex is the culprit, while allowing health and economic consequences to merge. Here, ambiguity shifts from sex itself, to its role in causing the man’s distress. His hands suggest illness; but there are other possibilities: anxiety, guilt, stress, depression—all as succeeding chapters in a story of decline that began with bad health and ends with crying children and a haggard, desperate wife. Encircled by family want, the man suffers as much from failed duty as disease. Wife and children register results borne not by him, but by the victims of his indulgence. In an earlier image that precedes the same text, which Glover plagiarized from Robert Dale Owen’s birth control tract, *Moral Physiology*, these results are plainer still, with the mother abandoning her child on the steps of the poorhouse (figure 20). “Alas!” reads the caption, “that it should ever have been born!” In this case, the father’s health is not a concern, the appeal being entirely on behalf of the object of his lust, his wife, and their offspring. In both examples, influence stems not from fear, but from feelings examined in previous chapters produced by victimized innocence.

Another scene of family misfortune appears in an 1838 cartoon criticizing monetary policies of the Jackson and Van Buren administrations, which many felt caused hardship for workers. Concerned directly with neither sex nor male wrong, “Specie Claws” illustrates two points about men in the home (figure 21). First, all eyes are on the husband and father, who is identified by tools strewn about the floor as an unemployed mechanic. Humiliation marks his face. His failure is conveyed less by the children’s plea for food than their worried looks, the force of which is amplified by their mother’s readiness to bear hunger for their sake: “My dear, cannot you contrive to get some food for the children? I don’t care for myself.” Also looking is the landlord at the door asking for rent, his gaze paralleling that of the wife and family. All looks pass before the presidential portraits on the wall behind, implicitly reassigning blame to them, but also suggesting an accusatory web similar to the one formed against Easy Nat, which included his master, wife, and mother. Indeed, the composition of “Specie Claws” isolates the mechanic on one side of the composition against

18. While Carpenter preferred racier writers, Arthur’s ubiquity placed him more than once among authors he cites. He records reading *Insubordination; or, The Shoemaker’s Daughters* and a story, “Where There’s a Will There’s a Way.”
those who shame him. And behind the mechanic is, again, the marital bed, reminding the viewer that his distress is not just financial, but also reproductive.

Beyond the web of family and economic concerns is my second point, which is that this web operated across the divide between public and private, shown here in its quintessential form, the threshold of the home. Joining surveillance across this threshold suggests the effect on domestic relations of reading that put fear in the eyes of wives and children: if husband and father took a drink or spent the evening out, he would return to harm them. Such looks—not just the reading that produced them—saw to it that men indeed drank less, paid their bills on time, and had fewer children.

This is not to say that women’s fear was like city crime: the imaginary effect of reading. The man in “Specie Claws” looks back and it is all too easy to imagine his features turning from despair to rage. Violence was as likely as hunger in working homes, as families experienced a array of ill effects caused by a boom-bust economy—which went decidedly bust the year before “Specie Claws” appeared. Women relied not just on a husband’s temper, but his ability to find work, qualities often linked. Health too was a factor. As Glover’s frontispiece shows, a sick man couldn’t feed his family. He also required medicine and care. A dead one was less trouble, but he might leave behind debts and children. Indeed, he might do this even alive given the mobility often required to find work. Men like James Bell who left home in search of work frequently...
never returned. In an economy that treated women as badly as men, desertion was a not a happy prospect. The anxious looks and sunken cheeks of such figures reveal more than immediate want.

As intimates, men and women threatened each other. Among the dangers comprising this threat, sex occupied a special place. Children were extra mouths to feed and their care constituted the ultimate social responsibility. Economic failure hurt men no more than in the tears of suffering dependants. For women, the sexual stakes were both less and more clear. Depletion of the life force was not a problem, although sexual excess caused other conditions, it was thought, which added to the pressures of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing.\footnote{John Ellis writes that sexual “excesses frequently cause uterine inflammation, and ulceration, leucorrhoea, deranged menstruation, miscarriage, barrenness as well as debility, hysteria, and an endless train of nervous and other diseases” (Marriage and Its Violations, 21).} Women relied materially on their husbands, during gestation and childcare, but also afterward when lower earning ability meant that losing a breadwinner could have tragic effects on family security. Here, too, physical risks were joined with stigma. Women were assigned special duties with respect to children, duties naturalized as maternal bonds that demanded sacrifice: “I don’t care for myself.” Mother love constituted more than the authority of her look; it was also the expectation her husband bears in his. The effects of such looks were cumulative and long term, with performance the main anxiety. Not that they were equal for men and women; this was impossible in a rhetorical field that relied on victimized femininity. Henry Trueman’s sacrifice is exceeded by that of his wife, who in bearing eight children grows pale and thin, cheeks fading and eyes “receded deeply into their sockets.”\footnote{Arthur, Married and Single, 109.}

As fulfilled as she is as a wife and mother, Edith Trueman pays the price.

Any discussion of family reminds us that sexual apprehensions were not limited to the material dangers men and women posed to each other. Risks were based on social values that grew, as we saw, out of childrearing practices that replaced traditional social controls with family affection. Insofar as these practices and the resulting vulnerabilities extended parental influence outside the home, they directly affected bodily life. The dynamics of mother–child socialization were replicated in conjugal relations, where wives, through purity and sacrifice, became arbiters of husbands, and husbands sought assurances of those virtues. Relying on circuits of mutual idealization, such relations admitted sex with some difficulty. Antebellum theorists declared that virtue was preserved in sexual union through love, which transformed it from an act of degrading animal lust into one of spiritual deliverance. Yet, as Herbert tells us, this was hard to sustain in practice, undercut as it was by the act itself, by health-related anxieties, and by disciplinary values assigned
to those who did it: female purity, and the bestial nature of those it was supposed to tame.  

Like Lystra, Herbert treats sexual “meanings in collision” as specifically middle-class, a distinction that seems to be supported by our examples. Arthur’s Trueman is a shopkeeper, and while he and the “Specie Claws” mechanic are both subjected to the expectant looks of wives, their experience in bearing these looks was not the same. The same was true of their wives, who lived differently the duties their husbands policed. Lines usually drawn between craft and commerce are borne out by the politics of the cartoon, which blames others for the mechanic’s failure, and by Trueman’s personal accountability. I have argued throughout, however, that class is less useful in understanding such differences than the more fluid notion of vertical desire. While encouraged by free-market liberalism, this desire was mitigated by residual determinations of origin, upbringing, family loyalty, and developments in individual trades that slowed the formation of binary class identities. This is not to deny the sense of betrayal among those whose labor sustained the promise of capitalism, or entitlement among those who profited from it. But these were still the same people, their feelings muddled by lingering attachments to a pre-capitalist social past, economic reality in which few gained any tangible advantage, and texts like *Married and Single* and “Specie Claws” that spoke across what we too often project as class divisions. Caricature aside, mechanics also sought to be True-men, and shopkeepers felt cheated by unfair government policies.

Wives measured both, and not only by how their material needs were met. A wife’s ability to fulfill obligations written in the eyes of her husband bore status values, as vertical desire was as much sexual as economic. It has long been a commonplace that the middle class justified its privilege in the virtue of its women. To return once again to *The House Breaker*, Jane Carr’s innocence makes her a suitable wife for Stuart, who in assuming his rightful place as family head drops his mistress. But if the Carr-Stuart match confirms a sex–class divide, Thompson knew the vertical stakes were mixed. Recall that after Stuart forsakes “that base love that is born of lust,” he and his bride-to-be retire, at which time Flash Bill tries to rape his sister, killing her in the process.  


and the women, both pure, one the present but not named occupant of such a home, the other a named but not present street waif about to take the sister’s place. Bill’s conduct proves Stuart’s point about “base love” and identifies it with “working men,” whom Stuart rises above by now meriting his own rich home. Yet to whatever extent his sex had become love-making, it is still “born of lust,” which threatens not just his wife’s purity, but that which constitutes his respectability. Sex degraded men by enacting baseness inherent in male nature and corrupting the purity of those who measured that baseness. Jane too paid twice: in her failure of moral responsibility (to tame, not tempt) and in forfeiting that on which their authority depended. Sex was less a “collision” of meanings, than a crisis in the circuit of mutual expectations: bodies that sought in rising passion proof of social value that that passion denied.

Another view of this crisis emerges from debates between labor activists over birth control. Published in 1830 amid the fervor of workingmen’s politics in New York, Owen’s *Moral Physiology: A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* drew criticism that suggests how sex assumed risks associated with the conflicting yearnings and resentments of workingmen. Not everyone who rejected restrictionist sexual scare tactics embraced the “purifying ordeal” of large families. The image fronting *Moral Physiology* marks the rhetorical overture to a book advocating birth control for working families (figure 20). Along with Frances Wright, Owen advanced what they saw as an enlightened view of sex and reproduction. Both taught that sex was a natural function that should be enjoyed. But pregnancy must be limited, if not by denial, then method. The means advocated, by Owen’s account, was the one “universally practiced, by the cultivated classes of Europe, [which] consists of complete withdrawal, on the part of the man, immediately previous to emission.”

It may be objected, that the practice requires a mental effort and a partial sacrifice. I reply, that, in France, where men consider this, (as it ought to be considered, when the interests of the other sex require it,) a point of honor—all young men learn to make the necessary effort; and custom renders it easy and a matter of course. As for the sacrifice, shall a trifling (and it is but a very trifling) diminution of physical enjoyment be suffered to outweigh the most important considerations connected with the permanent welfare of those who are nearest and dearest to us? Shall it be suffered to outweigh the risk of incurring heavy and sacred responsibilities, ere we are prepared to meet and fulfil [sic] them? Shall it be suffered to outweigh a regard for the comfort, the well-being—in some cases the life, of those whom we profess to love?23

Knowlton and Hollick argued similarly in books not addressed specifically to workers. Their effect was what they hoped. Knowlton’s *Fruits of Philosophy; or, The Private Companion of Young Married People* has been credited with lowering American birthrates through mid-century. Hollick’s handiwork we have seen firsthand. All argued that while physical enjoyment was good, men must control themselves in bed. And to make their case, all, like Owen, leveraged the threat posed to women and the offspring produced.

Not that workingmen bought this entirely. When *Moral Physiology* was reprinted in 1847 with another title, the frontispiece featured a suffering man, suggesting it was necessary to add illness to the persuasive force of honor. Indeed, Thomas Skidmore attacked the book immediately after its initial publication, reprinting the original with annotations that criticized Owen’s plan for social progress paid for by the sacrifices of workingmen. These sacrifices were partly economic based on Skidmore’s belief that reducing population restricted markets, which if left alone would produce more jobs and lower prices. But mainly he criticizes the pleasure men would be denied, sexual and family. Reflecting efforts to keep men off the street by idealizing fatherhood, Skidmore asks, “Who is it that is told, that his ear must not be delighted, nor his eye beam with joy, to see the smiling faces, smiling aye, even in the midst of their poverty, of a numerous family of children in his dwelling, if it be not the poor man.”

And on sex: “Who is it, if it be not the poor, that are to be deprived, or rather are called upon to deprive themselves, of a portion, (some small portion, at least, according to his own acknowledgement) of the pleasures

---

24. And this despite giving out what has since been discovered was erroneous advice. Cf. Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 70–85, 454n42.


Yonder comes the laborer. He has borne the burden of the heat of the day; the descending sun has released him from his toil, and he has hastened home to enjoy repose. Half-way down the lane, by the side of which stands his cottage, his children run to meet him; one he carries and one he leads. The companion of his humble life is ready to furnish him with his plain repast. See his toil-worn countenance assumes an air of cheerfulness; his hardships are forgotten; fatigue vanishes; he eats and is satisfied. (2)

Such promise cut two ways. This sketch in “Domestic Happiness” follows another subtitled “The Fallen Family Altar”:

It [the Family Altar] was fair and beautiful when it was standing. Who has demolished it? That pious wife did not do it. Her zeal, and love, and prayers combined to sustain it. Did the lovely little ones of that domestic circle pull it down? Their little hearts felt that something sad had occurred when it fell. They asked a mother’s explanation—she answered with her tears. Did the reason and conscience of the husband and father pull that altar down? His soul has not forgotten the rebuke they poured on it the day it fell. What responsibility is his, who suffers it still to lie in the dust! He robs God of his glory. Robs his domestic circle of the most powerful dissuasive from vice, and support of virtue and piety. He robs his own soul of substantial happiness. He cannot do all this, and not aim a just and holy God against him. (2)
of sexual intercourse?” Skidmore’s pleasure politics are more specific in his next note: “the object and tendency of [Owen's] work is to degrade the poor by placing the right of sexual intercourse below that of the rich.”

Sex linked to republican resentment explains violence that ends The House Breaker, adding politically to our account of male attitudes toward domestic relations. These were deeply ambivalent due to the rhetorical role played by women in manipulating male conduct. In sex reform, this meant attaching shame to what occurred in the conjugal bedroom, where women were not only pure, but allied with owners and employers. Like the mechanic’s wife whose look parallels the rent collector’s, women in bed were disciplinary agents with, by Skidmore’s account, direct ties to capital. That Owen, son of a British industrialist, cites codes of sexual honor practiced “by the cultivated classes of Europe” only made matters worse, especially as his economic rationale permitted “aristocrats” all the sex they pleased.

Social and sexual insecurity merged. Skidmore and others expressed disgust at the prospect of contraception freeing wives and daughters from the risk of pregnancy. The stated concern was the corruption of unrestrained passion, which one critic said would “convert our sacred domiciles into filthy brothels, and change the tender prattling of infantile innocence and love into the indecent ribaldry of the libertin stews.” Talk of brothels and libertines suggests that domestic decency was not all that was threatened. Prostitution was encouraged by social inequity, it was thought, as the rich exploited the poor sexually and economically. This charge contained an internal contradiction, however, as concern for “the chastity of female affection” also recognized the sexual promise of wealth. Indignation bore envy and vertical desire was one with lust. Worse, female affection was neither powerless nor chaste, finding its way all too readily into the sexual marketplace. Such affection long worried men. But warnings by health reformers, the growing autonomy of working women, and rising social stakes made female sexuality an objective monstrosity: “I’m afraid, Harry.” Wives and daughters incited a republican self that identified with the “chastity of female affection” and its demise in a world of would-be libertines.