Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Stewart, David M.
Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
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CHAPTER 9

The Joys of Seduction

How did antebellum couples find pleasure amid the fears and recriminations of sexual intimacy? We have noted Carpenter’s swaggering negativity in announcing his Cotillion date. Jousting between James (“I will cut your head off”) and Augusta (“tickle your neck, pull your nose, bite your ear . . .”) also suggests bad feelings eroticized by way of a social poetics where violence enacted creative irreverence. The same might be said of various exchanges between Mose and Lize, the couple from A Glance at New York whose wordplay suggests intimacy in violence more specifically sexual. Lize likens Mose’s private affections (“he thinks there’s no gal like me”) to his public prowess: “De way he takes hold of de cleaver and fetches it down is sinful!” Violence that Lize identifies with Mose’s sexual appeal reverses his own earlier the same day, again by way of a phallic instrument, except this time a woman does the fetching down. About Lize’s book, Matilda, the Disconsolate, Mose asks, “Have you come to where Lucinda stabs de Count yet? Ain’t dat high?” (23). He is aroused by a reversal common in seduction narratives when the victim captures her seducer’s weapon and turns it against him. Mose enjoys Lucinda’s usurping of male sexual prerogative, which, while figured as a knife attack in a gothic novel, suggests the risks that were encountered in the arms of one’s intimate, and were desired as such. Related, perhaps, is that whatever “high” Mose gets from the exchange, his lover does not get hers: “No, Mose, I ain’t,” replies a now disconsolate Lize, “I just wish you wouldn’t splice the story by tellin’ me” (23). Reaching the novel’s climax before her, he prematurely spills the sexual

1. Benjamin Baker, A Glance at New York, 32. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.
beans. Not that the moment is ruined: “Say Lize, you’re a gallus gal, anyhow.” Scolding heightens Mose’s pleasure, and hers: “I ain’t nothin’ else.”

In what follows, I treat the fraught poetics of domestic intimacy in two ways. One is through the language used to represent it, which was necessarily evasive. If sex occurred behind closed doors, talk of sex was just as guarded. Unlike other objects to be reformed, like drink, sex could not be directly depicted. This left considerable room to maneuver, especially for those like Henry Ward Beecher who were determined to avoid equivocation about wrong, even while capitalizing on it. The room for poetics in the rapidly expanding antebellum sex print culture occurs at what Helen Horowitz calls the “blurred boundary” between sex-reading meant to instruct and sex-reading meant to turn a profit. Indeed, Americans courts found it hard to distinguish between pornography and legitimate advice literature, as blurring became a marketing tactic rather than categorical ambiguity. The “slide from reform physiology to erotica” was caused by competition to sell reading material together with the medical goods it advertised. For their part, pornographers avoided obscenity prosecution by disguising their work as medical literature. Both joined prescriptive moralizing and suggestive style to achieve a successful commercial product.2 From the discrete placement of a bed in antebellum visual culture to more elaborate insinuations of language, the evasions of innuendo provide clues as to the sexual canons of working couples and the pleasures obtained in their breach.

The second way I treat the poetics of sexual policing is suggested by Lize’s Matilda, the Disconsolate. The passage Mose cites from the book signals one of the central concerns of antebellum reform, the demise of female chastity, which became an object of some ambivalence for workingmen, who saw in ruined innocence both a threat to their existing social status and the objectified promise of vertical desire: in recovering his rightful place in society, Henry Stuart beds the very girl he denied “ordinary laboring men” at the outset of the novel. Moral reform (anti-seduction, anti-prostitution) literature ranged from tracts and testimonials to recreational genres that sought drama in sexual violation—The House Breaker being one of several novels we have seen that do this. Preoccupation with chastity was due in part to the large numbers of single women who migrated to cities along with men, removing them from family protection. It stemmed, too, from anonymity in an urban world where the intensions of strangers were always finally inscrutable. The result was an emphasis on performative style, especially where affect was involved. As dis-

2. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America, 272.
tance and financial autonomy freed couples from parental oversight, courtship increasingly became the test of a potential partner’s finer sensibilities, which many believed could not be counterfeited. If, as Lindholm says, romantic bonds stabilize reproductive relations in circumstances of the kind found in antebellum America, the instability of these bonds themselves as specifically emotional was not lost on those who were wary of bodies in any state of arousal, especially women’s. While city crime and maternal affection internalized constraints in general, sexual danger policed love in particular. Ada Shepard knew Franco from countless books in which women fell victim to the seducer’s arts; Frank Ward feared that if he gave her Hollick to read, Lizzie would think he was using such arts on her. Seduction brought ruin, which in its countless literary enactments began with a turned head and ended in lost honor, pregnancy, and death—for men and women alike.

Seduction stories were not new. Lost innocence was the main conceit of eighteenth-century sentimental and gothic fiction. But in the 1820s, reformers began to use conventions associated with such fiction to persuade Americans that seduction was an actual pervasive social evil. Such reading appeared in periodicals like *The Advocate of Moral Reform*, which warned that young women flooding American cities were at the mercy of libertines who used them to satisfy their depraved appetites, then cast them off to make their living in commercial sex. Other movements turned to rape and seduction as the ultimate form of victimization in demonizing conduct like drinking and slavery. But of all the seduction that occurred in print, the most prominent was that used to heighten the recreational appeal of urban exposés, crime fiction, and the sentimental novel.

Whether women were indeed seduced is not important. Rather, by dramatizing the dangers men and women encountered in each other, seduction stories serve as a proxy poetics of how these dangers were transformed not into violence and misery, but domestic intimacy. This intimacy included pleasures of the kind Cretan villagers enjoyed by committing anti-social acts that advanced them socially in the community and, if skillfully handled, in the affections of their victims. Inasmuch as rhetoric that produced social canons also produced their violation, seduction stories suggest the potential of looks and gestures performed poetically “in front of” everyday (or night) expectation. What I called bizarre enactments of practical intimacy (Ada, Frank, James, Augusta) stemmed from relations haunted by the evils of seduction. Marriage resolved

3. Indications are that sex outside of marriage was declining and what did occur involved partners of proximate social rank. So despite claims by reformers, there is no evidence that seduction was a problem or that it was caused by wealthy men who preyed on poor women. Cf. Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition*, 59.
little, according to Herbert, a view he seems to share with Thompson, if we indeed take the assault on Henry Stuart’s sister to represent the consummation of his triumphant betrothal to Jane Carr, pure and emasculating.

Returning repeatedly to the closing scene of The House Breaker indicates an already significant interest in the poetics of sexual risk. But the next two examples deal specifically with seduction, each in the context of marriage betrayed. The first is from The Quaker City, George Lippard’s bestselling novel of urban vice set in Philadelphia. The Quaker City made twenty-two-year-old Lippard famous, spinning together numerous characters and storylines in a narrative labyrinth that makes Thompson seem like a master plotter by comparison. Two things keep the novel from spinning out of control. One is that most of the action occurs in one location, Monk Hall, a decrepit pre-Revolutionary mansion where members of the city’s elite engage in secret debauchery. A maze of halls and chambers joined by hidden passages and trap doors, Monk Hall figures the city beyond, where spatial rationalization was undercut by a criminal underworld with direct ties to social privilege. This underworld is personified by Devil Bug, the keeper of the house, who when not arranging the ruin of young women or bashing out the brains of old ones, is an oddly appealing character with, like Thompson’s “Dead Man,” the heart of a loving father.

The other cohering feature of The Quaker City is that bracketing its narrative chaos are two events with which readers were very familiar. These Lippard based on a murder that occurred a year before when one young man, Singleton Mercer, killed another, Mahlon Heberton, for seducing his sister. The trial mesmerized Philadelphians, especially after the jury freed the accused, not because he was innocent, but because they decided that Heberton got what he deserved. The novel opens with Mary Arlington, lovely daughter of a successful merchant, arriving at Monk Hall to meet Gus Lorrimer, a libertine who has promised to marry her. He has no such intention, of course, and when his “arts of seduction” fail, he rapes her. Three days later, Mary’s brother, Byrnewood, catches Lorrimer on the Camden ferry and shoots him. To the bare facts of the case, Lippard adds poignant details, one of which is to place his hero at the scene of dishonor. Byrnewood is a friend of the libertine who watches from the wings, unaware that the victim that particular night is his own sister. Lippard also ends with Byrnewood acquitted at public trial and caring for his sister, who goes mad from her ordeal. His experience causes Byrnewood to change his ways and marry a young woman he himself has ruined. His wife is the daughter not of a wealthy merchant, but a penniless carpenter.

4. Thus confirming Henry Stuart’s claim before he kills Flash Bill that the “law will hold me guiltless, and men will applaud me” (Thompson, The House Breaker; or, The Mysteries of Crime, 47).
Like Eugene Sue in France and G. W. M. Reynolds in Britain, Lippard was popular with working readers. And he, like them, embraced the cause of labor—in this case, labor’s virtue. In a preface to the 1849 edition, Lippard explains what made him write *The Quaker City*:

I was the only Protector of an Orphan Sister. I was fearful that I might be taken away by death, leaving her alone in the world. I knew too well that law of society which makes a virtue of the dishonor of a poor girl, while it justly holds the seduction of a rich man’s child as an infamous crime. These thoughts impressed me deeply. I determined to write a book, founded upon the following idea:

*That the seduction of a poor and innocent girl, is a deed altogether as criminal as deliberate murder. It is worse than the murder of the body, for it is the assassination of the soul. If the murderer deserves death by the gallows, then the assassin of chastity and maidenhood is worthy of death by the hands of any man, and in any place.*

Social interests are again linked to female chastity. Lippard’s politics differ notably from Skidmore’s, however, in that the latter sought to maintain male sexual prerogative against Owen’s plea for self-denial. *The Quaker City* defends innocence, doing so by identifying male prerogative with libertinism and with evil inherent in social privilege.

Or so it would seem. Lippard struggles with the contradiction between sexual parity with “the cultivated classes” and the rise of a sexual free market. The original preface of *The Quaker City* says nothing about an orphan sister for whom he feared. Indeed, the story of the poor girl Byrnewood seduces and later marries is a minor strand in a much larger narrative that dwells on the sexual crimes of the rich. And the status of these crimes is dubious, as contemporary critics pointed out. Lippard claims a political object in writing *The Quaker City* to defend against charges that it was salacious trash meant to titillate and corrupt. “I can say with truth,” he proclaims, “that whatever faults may be discovered in this Work, that my motive in its composition was honest, was pure, was as destitute of any idea of sensualism, as certain of the persons who have attacked it without reading a single page, are of candor, of a moral life, or a heart capable of generous emotions” (1–2). It will soon be clear what caused a lack of “generous emotions.” My point is not that Lippard used politics to hide the salaciousness of his reform, or that this salaciousness reveals politics hopelessly conflicted about female chastity. *The Quaker City* stages a poetics of

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5. George Lippard, *The Quaker City*; or, *The Monks of Monk Hall*, 1–2; original emphasis. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.
violation that suggests that sex for workers was always seduction, specifically that of a merchant’s daughter, a figure that embodied the moral and economic conditions that a good man would provide. Victim and libertine enact vertical desire betrayed by an act of social violence that cut both ways across the purity Lippard purports to defend.

Representation was not the only way this violence became intimacy for working men and women. *The Quaker City* aroused readers at the same time that it reformed them, and how it did this explains a great deal about the embodied canons of domestic sexuality. No doubt high on the list of passages thought to be salacious was the one in which Mary Arlington fails to do what Stuart’s sister does: preserve her honor. This is the subject of chapter thirteen, “The Crime without a Name.” Not to disappoint Mary, Lorrimer arranges a mock wedding for the evening of her arrival, which, had all gone according to plan, would have delivered Mary directly into his arms. Byrnewood’s objection when he learns the identity of the victim forces the ceremony to be halted. In the melee that follows, he is knocked unconscious, while Mary faints. When she wakes, she is alone in a bedchamber that Lorrimer (she knows him by an alias, Lorraine) has prepared to aid in his conquest. This includes a book left by her bed, open to a story that, like his name, is “full of Romance” meant to “wake her animal nature” (127). Mary is about to sleep when Lorrimer arrives to comfort her, having concocted a lie to explain her brother’s appearance and assure her that the wedding will continue the next day.

Lippard devotes ten pages to the murder of Mary’s soul, a euphemism that does little to obscure what in fact occurs. Six pages relate Lorrimer’s attempt to succeed using various means he boasts are foolproof. When he finally resorts to force, the lights go out, but the story continues.

Darkness! There was a struggle, and a shriek and a prayer. Darkness! There was an oath and a groan, mingling in chorus. Darkness! A wild cry for mercy, a name madly shrieked, and a fierce execration. Darkness! Another struggle, a low moaning sound, and a stillness like that of the grave. Now darkness and silence mingle together and all is still. (134)

In pace, detail, and narrative trajectory, Mary’s undoing performs the rhetorical work of pornography. If Lippard follows the classic progression from equilibrium to disequilibrium, back to equilibrium, it is predicated on the rhythmic, linear needs of male arousal and ejaculation. These needs were not fulfilled by Lorrimer. Pornography, Linda Williams says, serves male sexual pleasure through a female body the arousal of which attests to the viewer’s vicarious
control over it. Lorrimer also becomes excited, his “sensual volcano” erupting finally in the groans and oaths that end the chapter and bear involuntary witness of the kind that Williams identifies in the “money shot.” But Mary’s body is the clear focus of attention.

And she is aroused. Holding her close, his arm curled beneath her thinly clad bosom, Lorrimer relates a series of romantic fantasies involving a wild mountainous region he once visited and his intuition that he would someday take her there as his bride. He speaks in short vivid paragraphs interrupted by Mary’s brief, increasingly agitated responses. We frequently are reminded what is really going on, directly (“Before the day break she would be a polluted thing”) and indirectly, through Lorrimer’s looks, his gestures, and by the subliminal weaving of his desire into the scene he describes.

“I looked upon this lovely lake with a keen delight. I gazed upon the tranquil waters, upon the steeps crowned with forest trees—one side in heavy shadow, the other, gleaming in the advancing moonbeams—I seemed to inhale the quietness of the place, the solitude of the place, as a holy influence, mingling with the very air, I breathed, and a wild transport aroused my soul into an outburst of enthusiasm.” (128–29)

Mary becomes flushed, her breath thick and heavy, her eyes swimming amid “the humid moisture of passion.” Lorrimer feels her against him, “panting and heaving, and quivering with a quick fluttering pulsation.” A “delirious languor” steals over her.

Soft murmurs, like voices heard in a pleasant dream, fell gently on her ears, the languor came deeper and more mellow over her limbs, her bosom rose no longer quick and gaspingly, but in long pulsations, that urged the full globes in all their virgin beauty, softly and slowly into view. Like billows they rose above the folds of the night robe, while the flush grew warmer on her cheek, and her parted lips deepened into a rich vermillion tint. (131)

Lorrimer removes her robe. “Her bosom, in all its richness of outline, heaving and throbbing with that long pulsation, which urged it upward like a billow, lay open to his gaze” (132).

Readers were just as excited as Lorrimer, and all were inspired by the same

7. Williams, Hard Core, 93–119.
object, his aroused victim. Pleasure was brief, however. At just that moment, Mary covers herself and runs, an “instinctive” response that betrays not Lorrimer’s lie, which readers well knew, but its effect: “Lorraine! Lorraine!” she shrieked, retreating to the farthest corner of the room—“Oh, save me—Save me—” (132). Here Lippard delivers on his reformist promise. Mary’s terror locates the pleasure she provides not beneath abstract notions of honor and purity, but in shame generated the usual way, through feminine suffering. Outrage aside, many critics of *The Quaker City* used this device themselves, though for less volatile purposes. In addressing a riskier subject, Lippard attached bad feelings not only to a form of conduct, but to the state of arousal obtained reading his novel. Mary exposes the treachery of readers’ desire, begging not to be violated in just the way they had come to want, and with utmost urgency.

Lorrimer, too, is described in some detail, although his arousal seems to have been intended to produces not desire, but dread of the kind we saw in Arthur’s *Married and Single*. Physical signs of excitement include his “glow of sensual passion” and “eyes filled with thick red blood.” And if Lorrimer also runs, he does so after lust gets the better of him. “Stricken with remorse,” he is “torn by a thousand opposing thoughts,” struggling “to drown the voice within him, and crush the memory of the nameless wrong” (146). Lorrimer then experiences a psychotic attack, complete with a hallucinatory vision of his own death. All again link him to Mary, who also suffers a mental collapse following sex.

None of this is hyperbole in characterizing intimacy policed by rhetorics of violation: Lorrimer and Mary are driven insane, one by marriage that failed in its romantic promise, the other by guilt. Yet Mary’s plea, at the height of arousal, has another effect, which is to excite similar passion related to the reader’s sexual identity. Taking the form of what Andrew Ross calls a “stroke book,” *The Quaker City* shamed not just bad actions, but bodies in a state of masturbatory excitement. This created conditions similar to the swaggering body, a self constituted in the lived physicality of shame. Mary identifies this self in the terms she uses to defend her honor. “Foiled in the very moment of triumph,” Lorrimer asks the pleading girl what she wishes to be saved from. “From yourself,” Mary cries, “Oh, Lorraine, you love me. You will not harm me. Oh, save me, save me from yourself! [. . . ] This is not you, Lorraine; this cannot be you. [. . . ] It is not Lorraine that I see—it is an evil spirit—” (133; original emphasis). Using the same method that Sophia Hawthorne employed to discipline Julian, Lippard banishes desire beyond limits of a “you” defined by the identity-constituting look of an aroused mother’s love.

Doing so creates a specifically sexual “evil genius,” one that battles Lorrimer’s “voice within” for his mind and body. It also creates terms whereby to talk about sexual swaggering enacted not in public, but private space, where the only spectator was a lover whose sexual status was also seriously compromised. Returning to the scene of the crime, Lorrimer finds Byrnewood clutching his sister and pledging revenge (figure 22). In what Devil Bug calls a “leetle family party,” Lorrimer confronts his fate as defiantly as Flash Bill: “An invisible hand is leading me to my doom. There is Death before me, in yonder river, and I know it, yet down, down to the river banks, down, down to the red waters, I must go. Ha! ha! ’Tis a merry death! The blood red waves rise above me—higher, higher, higher!” (148).

The river in Lorrimer’s vision foretells the one on which his crime is finally avenged when Byrnewood shoots him. But he does more than laugh in the face

Figure 22. Frontispiece from George Lippard, The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall (Philadelphia: Peterson, 1845). Woodcut by F. O. C. Darley. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.
of death. Speaking as a libertine whose identity is predicated on the deflowering of virgins, Lorrimer’s account of being drawn irresistibly to river’s edge and beneath its “blood red waves” verges on a sex joke. There is no reason to think Lippard was joking, even while he intended to infer sexual temptation. Yet his “leetle family party” joins the terror of this temptation—drowning in the blood of breached innocence—with discipline meted out by a rising class of merchant’s sons driven by the virtue of their women. Lorrimer laughs on behalf of those for whom sex was always the seduction of a merchant’s daughter.

Lorrimer epitomized sexual danger identified with antebellum men and enacted in activities from pornographic reading to an expanding sphere of urban sexual commerce. But when men went home, swaggering assumed a subtler poetics, one in which sexual intimacy was a social act that involved fear and disgust as much as affection and desire. This we find in the drift between subtext and insinuation in Lippard’s language. While short of an outright gag, sex in Lorrimer’s vision operates across a line dividing the history of evangelical reform and an account of sexual crime made more provocative by the metaphor used at once to hide and to condemn it. The same occurs in “The Strange Woman” when Beecher calls for plain speech, condemning “inuendo—which is the devil’s language,” only to use an allegory that maps stages of sexual experience onto the floor plan of a brothel.9 Both writers wished to avoid obscenity. But apocalyptic language was meant to address sexual misconduct not in the abstract, but by “speaking plainly and properly” to those who did it. They succeeded by shaming bodies aroused by reading, including the interpretive act whereby readers actively joined figurative language and sexual content. By enabling this act, inuendo also succeeded in selling books at rates that convinced many that they got more corruption than reform when they bought The Quaker City.

Either way, what readers bought were the bodily terms of canonic sexuality and poetic violation. Like Lorrimer’s river of blood, the landscape he describes gazing on Mary’s “steeps crowned with forest trees” prompted readers to link literal and profane (128).10 This also corrupted an idealist rhetoric, not

10. Earlier on the same page Lorrimer describes:

“a calm lake . . . but a mile in length, and half that distance in width. On all sides, sudden and steep, arose the circling wall of forest trees. Like wine in a goblet, that calm sheet of water, lay in the embrace of the surrounding wall of foliage. The waters were clear, so tranquil, that I could see, down, down, far, far beneath, as if another world, was hidden in their depths. And then from the heights, the luxuriant foliage, as yet untouched by autumn, sank in the waves of verdure to the very brink of the lake, the trembling leaves, dipping in the clear, cold waters, with a gentle motion. It was very beautiful Mary and—”

“Oh, most beautiful!” is Mary’s excited response.
evangelical in this case, but romantic. Lorrimer says that the natural world he witnessed had a “holy influence,” which “aroused my soul into an outburst of enthusiasm.” The story had just this effect on “the mind of the Maiden,” whose sensibilities were supposed to authenticate social legitimacy, but which many worried were susceptible to manipulation, especially where they were increasingly the basis for marriage. Anticipating a “grateful conquest,” Lorrimer’s confidence is as absolute here as his collapse later when he walks from room to room raving that Mary’s power now doomed him.

Such confidence recalls posturing in other intimate moments we have witnessed. Carpenter exhibits insecurity and nonchalance simultaneously when he says that he “did not get the mitten.” Frank Ward writes just as coolly that he “forgot” to remove Hollick from his bag when he and Lizzie went out walking—although his “enthusiasm” was so great that when he finally pulled *The Origin of Life* from his bag, he could not perform. James Bell also gives his lover a book, not on sex, but with similar anxiety extending from the instructional nature of their erotic life. A collection of didactic tales by Mary Howitt was unavailable, he explains, and in its place the bookseller sent another, which he declines to name. “I guess it wont hurt you to read it,” he writes, trying to hide embarrassment with sarcasm (March 31, 1958; original emphasis). Augusta gives no quarter. She says nothing about his gift; but in a return letter she does tell him that she purchased her own reading. No doubt befitting a serious “school Marm,” the six large volumes of “Tuppers Complete Works” confirmed the inadequacy of Jim’s (May 2, 1858).  

Waggish, flip, petulant: all are false in their assurances. While far from the disgust of Owen’s critic who thought that contraception would turn love into “indecent ribaldry,” all reflect the dread of Lorrimer’s vision.  

Hollick’s acceptance thirty years after Owen should not be overstated. While still a mechanic earning wages in a Pennsylvania factory, Frank Ward already displays learning that leads to an academic career. More important, numerous entries suggest that *The Origin of Life* helped him contain anxiety that romance would not. Even after tasting “the joys of love and happiness which only belong to a married life,” he continues to call Lizzie “the girl,” preferring, like Carpenter, to keep his sexual exploits veiled. Reticence in a diarist as candid as Ward translates into little general commentary on sex, despite the increased legality of publishing on the subject. And if dread is hard to detect, swaggering is harder, unless we infer it from James Bell, who, despite bouts of intense remorse, seems at times only too pleased with his role as Augusta’s bad student.

But it is between hope and oblivion—between Lorrimer’s anticipated tri-
umph and his deranged post-coital laugh—that reticence most obscures our view of antebellum sexual life. And here Lippard stages his baldest innuendo, joining seducer and seduced at the moment of sexual consummation. His “animal nature” sparked by the very arts used to awaken Mary’s, and heightened “too far to recede” by her resistance, Lorrimer “stood before the crouching girl, a fearful picture of incarnate LUST.”

His form arose towering and erect, his chest throbbed with sensual excitement, his hands hung, madly clinched, by his side, while his curling hair fell wild and disordered over his brows, darkening in a hideous frown, and his mustachioed lip wore the expression of his fixed and unalterable purpose. His bloodshot eyes, flashed with the unholy light of passion, as he stood sternly surveying the form of his victim. (133)

To the extent that they too passed the point of no return, readers sided with Lorrimer. Yet if various body parts identify their excitement (chest throb-bing, hands clinched, hair wild and disordered), all merge in one part widely associated with incarnate male lust: Lorrimer “towering and erect.” In addition to the threat that lust posed to reason, compassion, and self-preservation, identifying Lorrimer with his specifically male part became more than literary fancy when he commits the crime that defines his character. Violating that figure which served as the final measure of male shame meant that those who joined Lorrimer in taking pleasure in Mary’s pain deconstituted/reconstituted themselves (Sedgwick’s term) as sexual selves far more self-consciously than formal reticence indicates.

Cock and crime can thus be treated the way we did working bodies generally, where pretense extended from the rhetorical means used to socialize them. Here men swaggered not on city streets, but in private embrace. Enacted countless times in the popular press, Mary’s fall made all sex seduction and all men libertines. But intercourse did more than confirm the social meaning of these stories. It embodied that meaning, while also closing the self-objectifying split that intercourse produced through orgiastic contact with a figure whose suffering moralized everything. In performing the most dangerously real act of their lives, workingmen did not transform conjugal love into redemptive bliss; nor was it a source of unredeemed domestic strife. Rather, in making such love they enacted a social poetics the risks and violations of which constituted their intimacy.

Further intimations of this poetics appear a few lines later in the rape passage, which combines the respective vulnerabilities of Lorrimer and Mary concealed by way of a device that again insinuates the very act it hides. “Darkness!”
joins literal and profane both in its parallelism and in a form of concealment associated with love made not just behind closed doors, but with lights out. Yet dark as it is, Mary’s look has all the force of the wife’s in “Specie Claws” when a “wild cry for mercy” is followed by a “name madly shrieked.” The name she shrieks is “Lorraine,” and by doing so the moment he violates her—hailing in effect the romantic “you” of his alias—Mary splits Lorrimer between the promise of courtship and “evil genius” of sexual penetration. Mary doesn’t give the crime of seduction a name, but identifies it with the reader’s own—or as the earlier identification would have it, with his own self-defining body part.

Mary’s shriek is intimacy enacted by way of the reciprocal terms of canonic sexuality. Moans and cries “mingling in chorus” enact not an auto-poetics of style, but a social poetics of bodies locked in mutual violation and desire. Such bodies mingled “in front of” sexual expectations, which were born less in looks, than cries, gestures, and insinuation. These were impulsive and inarticulate, yet coherent to the extent that seduction follows its own canonic path. Social poetics derive from norms acknowledged in their violation. If this violation delineated individual style, it also located intimates in a sphere of performative relations where not just any violation will do. More important was the finesse with which it was enacted: conduct familiar, yet removed from the everyday; novel, yet departing from the “ideological propositions and historical antecedents” of quotidian life. Lorrimer and Mary—Ada and Clay, Frank and Lizzie, James and Augusta—engage in a social poetics implicit in antebellum sexual culture.

My second seduction story also employs innuendo to address sexual intimacy. More important, it does so from the perspective of a female protagonist. Told in the first person by twenty-nine-year-old Amanda Bannorris, The Female Land Pirate is a gallows narrative, a genre of crime literature whose defining conceit was that it purported to be the confession of a convicted criminal awaiting execution. Amanda’s crime is the murder of her husband. She kills others too, including the man who seduced her, initiating a life of criminal “voluptuousness.” But it is for killing her husband that she is sentenced to death. This she does after she tracks him to a magistrate’s office where he flees to escape her wrath. As Amanda enters, he identifies her as “my  

13. The full title is The Female Land Pirate; or, Awful, Mysterious, and Horrible Disclosures of Amanda Bannorris, Wife and Accomplice of Richard Bannorris, a Leader in that Terrible Band of Robbers and Murderers, Known Far and Wide as the Murrell Men. Allegedly written by a woman, authorship of the twenty-eight-page pamphlet is unclear. Most gallows narratives were fiction, however, and I have found no evidence that anyone named Amanda Bannorris ever existed. The title also points to the fictitious 1835 account of legendary outlaw, John Murrell: Augustus Q. Walton [Virgil A. Stewart], The Life and Adventures of John A. Murell, the Great Western Land Pirate.
wife and accomplice.” Thus betrayed, she shoots him twice in the chest.14

Female vengeance is nothing new. Young Thompson escorts Mrs. Raymond to her seducer’s office where she kills him, an act that figures the victim-driven power of reform. In *The House Breaker*, Stuart’s sister enacts two forms of this power: preserving her virtue by inflicting preemptive pain on men who desire her; and obliging men to avenge those deeds that cause her pain. Amanda is less passive, and her retaliatory capacities extend to revenge in sexual kind: she seduced men. Amanda most resembles the figure of the vengeful prostitute, not the merely biological danger identified by health reformers, but a woman determined to punish all men for the initial betrayal that set her upon her current course. Her method is to use the female arts to prey upon men’s animal natures. George Foster reports interviewing such a woman who, having told the usual tale of ruined innocence, declares that all she has left is to inflict “revenge on all mankind, and at the same time to indulge my perverted appetites.”15

Amanda turns the sexual tables at the very scene of her initial violation. Born in Cincinnati to a poor cooper, Amanda’s parents die when she is thirteen, leaving her alone and defenseless. A wealthy man, Henry notices her on the street and in an act of apparent charity he arranges that she live in a comfortable apartment and be cared for by an accomplice, Aunt Patterson. For three years Amanda is told that she will someday become her benefactor’s bride. Then one evening, right after she turns sixteen, he arrives and takes her to her room. After locking the door, he states his desire to marry and with “a strange light in his eyes,” he embraces her passionately. “I shall not enter into particulars, reader; suffice that I left that room a guilty woman” (9). After this, her lover comes every night, promising all the while that marriage will soon validate their passion. But there are delays, suspicions grow, and eventually she learns the truth: Henry is “a married man!” “All my love was turned to hate,” she writes, “I had been duped, degraded, ruined! . . . My whole nature was changed. All the dark passions of Hell seemed to have centered into one, that one into the core of my heart, and that one was revenge! REVENGE!! REVENGE!!!(9).

Guilty or not, Amanda continues to enjoy a fine life in the weeks after her fall and in a home to which her lover returns each night like a good husband. We are reminded of the “leetle family party” Devil Bug witnesses between Lorrimier and Mary. A syntactical slip also likens Amanda’s dilemma to domestic ambivalence. On learning the truth, she likens herself to Henry’s wife: “think

of her, thy wife, whom thou hast sworn to protect, love, and cherish; think of her, of me, whom thou hast raised to affluence, but to plunge deeper into misery” (11). Joining wife and victim suggests a self-objectifying split, not in men this time, but in their wives, a split between her identity as a proper merchant’s daughter and as the polluted object of male lust. Now awake, her own appetite enables her to avenge the wrongs done to her without the aid of a properly socialized man.

Amanda’s initial attempt to avenge her honor occurs, once again, in the very place she lost it (figure 23). Luring Henry into the bedchamber, she is now the one who locks the door, an act whereby she, like Lucinda, usurps his sexual prerogative. After a few minutes of polite conversation, she reveals herself, declaring her knowledge of his crime and attacking him with a knife. Yet if Amanda now wields the male apparatus, its power is less sexual than moral. Her scolding, which captions the illustration, again reminds us of Mrs. Raymond’s violation: Crying “Now, then, treacherous villain, think on thy crimes!” she aims a figurative “blow at his heart” rather than a literal one (11). Amanda’s aim is not as sure as Mrs. Raymond’s, however. Flying at him from the direction of the bed on which she was ruined, she fails in her phallic fury. Henry blocks the thrust with his arm and flees. She has mistakenly left the key in the door.

Yet, where shame fails, material methods succeed, and these are figured in terms not male, but female. Having herself escaped from her home of three years, Amanda moves to a house some distance away. There, she bakes a loaf of bread laced with poison, sending it to Aunt Patterson, who eats it and dies. Domesticity also turns up in her final reckoning with Henry. After leaving Cincinnati and joining a criminal gang operating in the Mississippi, she spots him in Vicksburg one day and arranges for a female accomplice to entice him “blinded by passion” back to their hideout, a cave where she awaits. Amanda is now the one with a “wild light” in her eye. Discovering that he is now the one seduced, he begs for mercy; but she will have none of it. “‘Fool,’ I exclaimed, my passion getting the mastery, ‘talk you of making amends now, after having ruined me for time and eternity.’”

“You shall be placed, bound in a damp dark hole, without fire or light. Your bed shall be the bones of murdered men,—your pillow shall be skulls. Your food shall be carrion, dealt out in just sufficient quantity, to keep life in your body, two months: your blood shall be let, a few drops each day. You shall be goaded with pins, and other instruments of torture, until you have felt the pangs of death a thousand times, and prayed for death as many!” (23)
Figure 23. Illustration from Amanda Bannorris, The Female Land Pirate (Cincinnati: Barclay, 1847), 6.
Amanda gets revenge in her criminal home and she does so by torturing her seducer through a wife’s domestic duties: feeding, sewing, nursing—although letting his blood “a few drops each day” implies something else, as we will see. This bleeding occurs in a genitalized space (a cave, a “damp dark hole”) where Henry is lured by arts of female seduction. All reflect dangers found in the arms of a woman, especially when her animal desires are aroused. If Henry enters the cave in a passion, it is Amanda who finally gets “the mastery.”

Here the “devil’s language” tells a sexual story different from Lippard’s. Mary may lure Lorrimer to his doom beneath her “blood red waves,” but this is neither a conscious act nor one meant to punish him. Amanda sets out to satisfy her own “voluptuous” needs, while retaliating for them insofar as they were induced initially by a man. In part, this stems from sexual desire as essentially male and corrupt, which when women acquire it, makes them lose the virtues “for time and eternity” that make them women. But more than personal ruin, Amanda’s rage stems from love’s failure to sustain those virtues by transforming domestic sex from animal appetite to redemptive passion as promised in courtship. This promise joined or turned into other forms of emotional relationship: for James and Augusta, it was patriotism; Clay and Ada bore the threat of sexual betrayal; Frank feared sexual impropriety would cause Lizzie to reject him. Insecurity was often incited in the manner of what Lystra calls “testing,” provocations whereby couples sought reassurance before tying the knot. All heightened desire to a point that could well be redemptive, at least for a time: “never until now,” Augusta writes a few months before losing James forever, “have I fully realized how much I loved you” (Nov. 15, 1861).

Many warned against such feelings. Michael Floy comments that reading produced them, together with “a greater part of the prostitutes in the world.” In doing so, Floy identifies one of “Lorraine’s” devices: romantic literature.

Many rush right into the married life after reading novels; they will do the same, they will be gallant, heroic, chivalric; but they find it to be a different matter from what they expected; they fret and foam but they are tied fast, and the poor lady is made miserable for life. This is supposing the best, but suppose the gentleman has no design to marry; he wins the heart of the foolish creature, seduces her, and then leaves her to her fate.

Romance didn’t just fill popular fiction. It grew in importance as a basis for reproductive relations as Americans encountered unstable conditions of the

kind Lindholm describes. And Floy was not alone in his warning. T. S. Arthur made it the theme of “Romance and Reality,” a story about a young couple who finds love’s romance frustrated by the reality of marriage. Arthur is characteristically bland in his concern; but others adopted a tone more like Floy’s, where romance failed to maintain “the tender prattling of infantile innocence” and the wider social good. Whatever unlikely events reunite Arthur Remington with his lost love at the end of The Burglars, just as often such couplings were thwarted, some by circumstances, others by choice.18

Sex joined Floy’s two scenarios—seduction and domestic misery—insofar as “fret and foam” eroded the romantic promise of marriage. Such erosion occurs in the hours after Henry Stuart declares publicly his passionless love for Jane, only to return home and find what Herbert calls the “fittful expression” of romantic disillusion, as passion behind closed doors is projected onto violence that Bill and the sister inflict on each other.19 Romance is eroded between Amanda Bannorris and her seducer as their passions compete for mastery. In addition to its focus on the woman’s role in this competition, The Female Land Pirate differs from other seduction stories in that its violence initiates domestic life. The House Breaker concludes with marriage and the death of innocence, while Mary vanishes from The Quaker City after she is raped. Yet Amanda’s seduction begins a story of connubial sexual intrigue. Amanda’s account of her life is one of marriage that sex transforms into a criminal enterprise.20

18. In Chandler Potter’s 1844 novel, Mysteries of Manchester, heroine Caroline Houlton marries a prosperous grocer rather than a “young country farmer” she loves, calculating that “a merchant’s wife . . . would be a much more comfortable personage” (19). Misery follows. Yet after a long series of events reunite her with her lover, she chooses to return to her grocer. Asked to choose between them, and with financial constraints removed, she declares: “Oh, take me to my husband! Take me to my husband and let me die in peace!” (40). With this, the novel then ends. In The Mysteries of Lowell, protagonist Osgood Bradbury is similarly baffled by choices like Caroline Houlton’s, saying that more than crime, the “greatest mystery is the female heart” (10). His heroine, Augusta Walton, also finds herself trapped between two men. In this case, she is saved from the painful situation by a bizarre plot twist, which in the final pages reveals that she is half sister to both men, and that they are half brothers to each other. All have the same father, a mill owner who once preyed on his female workers.

19. “Once sexual experience moved beyond the playful,” T. Walter Herbert says of the Hawthornes, “and the full force of passionate desire entered their relationship . . . underlying dread was stirred into fitful expression” (Dearlest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family, 146).

20. We have seen this before. Recall George Thompson’s Dead Man (from City Crimes; or, Life in New York and Boston), who in “a singular perversity of nature” marries a respectable woman whose husband he murdered, whose children he blinded, and whom he has raped and beggared. They raise a family of their own, a boy, “Jack the Prig,” who picks pockets and sings filthy songs. Jack’s mother adds to the family economy by soliciting men on the street whom she later robs and murders. When the woman is killed, the Dead Man is furious for the loss not of love, but of income. The economic exploitation of a wife occurs elsewhere in City Crimes as part of a general deromanticizing of marriage much as occurs in Amanda’s relationship with Richard.
This transformation occurs between Amanda’s seduction and her enlistment in the gang that finally becomes her family. After leaving Cincinnati, she poses as a rich woman, hoping to catch a husband. She meets the dashing Richard Bannorris, also apparently rich, who she believes can support her in style. He declares eternal love, she reciprocates, and they wed. But again she is duped—although no more than he is. Bannorris too has married for money. Angry, but stuck with the arrangement, they take a house and he gambles to support them, coming home every night once again like a good husband. Soon though, he begins to stray, often disappearing for weeks at a time. After one absence, Richard returns and begins conducting secret activities. These occur at night with people who come and go in disguise. Finally, Amanda learns that he is using their home to operate a counterfeiting ring. More shocking, those involved are men and women she knows and thought respectable.

What seems a loose allegory of married life as dull, false, and mutually exploitative takes a sudden turn toward sex, with innuendo again playing an important role. Richard—Dick to his friends—catches Amanda spying and condemns her to die, a sentence to be carried out in the cave where her seducer later meets his end. She saves herself by joining the gang, a process described in a series of passages that suggest sexual awakening. The first involves two “stout fellows” who come to take her away. “Their first operation was to blindfold me, which done, one of them seized me in his brawny arms, bore me out, mounted me on a horse before him, and rode swiftly away” (17). Arriving at the cave, Amanda finds it prepared for a rite of initiation in which the sexual roles of getting there are reversed. Before her is a man “stripped entirely naked, and bound to a low bench” (17). From his thigh protrudes a knife oozing blood, and Amanda is told she must take it and “plunge it to his heart,” thus repeating the act of phallic usurpation that failed earlier, this time with a knife taken from a man’s body, while also suggesting the nature of her power as a sexual victim, who in being “mounted” and “rode” ruins her rider as much as herself (19). Gathering her courage, she draws the knife from the man’s thigh and “pressed it home, while the hot blood spouted over my dress and hands. One groan and the victim was in eternity” (19). Using her victim’s blood as ink, she writes an oath proclaiming guilt and allegiance to the gang, while denying all attachments to others, including family and friends. During the entire affair, Dick stands and observes.

Taken inside the churchlike “Cave of Skulls,” and witnessed by an organization that calls itself “The Order of Black Friars,” Amanda’s oath echoes

21. Notice ambiguity in language like “plunge it to his heart,” “pressed it home,” and “the victim was in eternity,” all of which leaves room for epistemological play in what exactly was plunged where and to what end.
another signed in the “church of St. Paul.” But for Amanda, sex and sacrament are not split the way they are in *The House Breaker* between public ceremony and private violence. Rather, they are joined in a Gothic rite that saves her life at the cost of her heart—and his. The next day, Richard congratulates her on “last night’s proceedings.” Passion once redeemed by love, is reduced to a criminal conspiracy that produces domestic union based on fear and remorse.22

“I felt rather gloomy for a time, but it gradually wore off, from my continual association with persons of the same stamp, and I soon learned to look upon a murder as indifferent, as a butcher would look upon the death of an animal; so great is the force of habit” (20). It is now that her seducer, Henry, reappears to have *his* blood let not in the spouts of newly-wedded ecstasy, but the “few drops a day” of domestic routine.

So once again, where in this was joy?—or intimacy? As I suggested, both emerge in reading insofar as it engaged the reciprocal terms of canonic sexuality with an eye to profit as much as reform. One way reading did this was the poetics of seduction. If *The Female Land Pirate* is any indication, ruin was not the end of marriage, but the start, and whatever “fittful expression” it produced was not entirely unpleasant. Risk had its pleasures, not the least of which was escaping routine. When Henry disappears into Amanda’s cave never to return, the gang’s activities are suppressed. She and Richard flee to Mobile, where their attempt to lead legitimate lives is spoiled when neither can resist temptation, and polite society brands them, in effect, counterfeit. But among those of “the same stamp,” they find acceptance, and sexual trouble: both take lovers. The game ends one day when Richard kills her lover and Amanda then kills him. Passion driven by complicity in evading public morality is again less useful than an account where men and women policed each other, competing for mastery within intimate relations, indeed, constituting them as such. Competition too bore joys, as did female power based not on feminine suffering, but the material life of the home, where women had significant power, including sex—men die in Amanda’s “Cave of Skulls.” But hers is not the only satisfaction: pressing the knife home sends her victims to eternity and their hot blood spouting.

This suggests the second place reading engaged in sexual poetics: the innuendo of representation. Beyond the raw thrill of danger, knives spouting blood and Amanda tied and mounted by a brawny armed brute turns mutual policing into sexual play of the kind Mose and Lize enjoy in their erotic banter. Matil-

22. On hearing the terms of gang membership, Amanda writes: “My brain reeled, my sight became dim, and I felt sick and faint. I had murdered, it is true; but I had done it in a spirit of revenge. I was now to do it in cold blood, on one I did not even dislike, much less hate, and then while in the agonies of death, I was to dip a pen into his heart’s blood, and write myself damned forever!” (19).
da’s titillating skill with a knife and Mose’s with a cleaver (“sinful!”), are only obvious examples of domestic life more broadly eroticized, including Mose’s fear that Lize will eat “all de man has in de house!” and her pique when he reaches the book’s climax first. Humor in staging such moments can also be found in Henry fleeing terrified by Amanda’s wrath before the bed he seduced her on, or later in the cave when he pleads for his life and she declared that he will die a long slow death as a result of domestic services she provides. Readers too were lured, not by passion into a cave, but by innuendo across layers of meaning from literal to profane, with dull domesticity between.

The poetics of intimacy we find in such reading helps us understand the fitfulness of those relations we began with. If Ada Shepard learns about male sexuality from books, she also learns it the same way the Templeton ladies did, not just by reading “The Strange Woman” or by having it in their library, but by concealing it in a public catalogue. As a woman who had daily contact with a seducer and fiancé, Ada’s virtue was not a sign of weakness, or lack of passion. Had Clay’s letters held vengeful feelings, we might well imagine them from Frank Ward’s anxiety about Lizzie potential rejection. And in our most fully reciprocal example, Augusta Elliot and James Bell trade barbs every bit as violent as those that pass between Mose and Lize. While their play was never sexual, it was passionate, and with consequences decidedly material: Augusta marched her “Golden Boy” off to war; and not to be outdone, “Your soldier Jim” dies. “I left it all to your judgment,” were his last words. Or this is what she transcribed sitting beside him as he expired, an act every bit as voluptuous as Amanda’s in the Cave of Skulls.