

Chapter 1

The Problem of the Woman Prisoner, 1820–70

In 1819 the male managers of the New York Society for the Prevention of Pauperism described the women's quarters at the Bellevue Penitentiary as "one great school of vice and desperation," replete with "prostitutes, vagrants, lunatics, thieves, and those of a less heinous character." What shocked them as much as the indiscriminate mixing of "every kind of female convict" was the lack of attention paid to these outcasts by the more fortunate of their sex:

Why this melancholy spectacle of female wretchedness has claimed no more attention, and excited no more sympathy, in a city like ours, where scenes of exalted benevolence and acts of religious devotion are continually displayed, we cannot say. Why no female messengers have entered this gloomy abode of guilt and despair, like angels of mercy, and seraphs of peace and consolation, is a matter of deep reflection and regret.

After citing the example of British reformer Elizabeth Fry, the managers expressed their hopes that a similar "benevolent spirit will take root in our own country."¹

This plea for "female messengers" rested on two assumptions that would eventually provide a foundation for American women's prison reform: first, that women constituted a special category of prisoners, and second, that women more than men had a responsibility to come to their aid. In 1819 these ideas were not yet widely shared and the angels invoked by the managers did not materialize. But soon three historical preconditions for a movement to aid women prisoners occurred. First, most northern states adopted the prison as a primary means of punishing and reducing criminal activity. Second, a small but significant number of women became inmates of these prisons, especially after 1840. Finally, middle-class American women, motivated by both religious benevolence and their growing consciousness as a sex, became active in reform movements that brought them into contact with their imprisoned sisters. To understand why reformers would view

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women as a special group of prisoners in need of their care requires an examination of woman's place in nineteenth-century prisons.

The Use of the Prison

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Americans engaged in the restructuring of their economic, political, and social institutions. Commerce and later industry gradually replaced agriculture as the base of the economy. National political parties superseded local deference politics. Public educational institutions supplemented familial and religious training. At the same time, new legal and penal systems, partly adapted from European models, reorganized criminal justice and punishment.

Systems of criminal justice in Europe and the colonies had begun to change rapidly during the period of the American and French revolutions. Formerly, capital punishment had predominated as the ultimate deterrent to crimes ranging from murder to adultery. Lesser punishments were still severe, corporal, and usually executed in public. In the American colonies, for instance, both men and women who broke the law were publicly hanged, whipped, ducked, or placed in stocks or pillories, thus adding humiliation to their physical discomfort. Local jails served mainly to detain those awaiting trial or punishment.² In the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic began to reject the widespread use of capital punishment. They argued that carefully designed criminal codes provided a more rational and humane deterrent to crime. Soon after criminal law reform began, however, the concept of prison reform seized the imaginations of many Americans.³

The term "prison reform" has come to refer to efforts to improve prison conditions, but it has a more basic meaning as well: the use of prisons to re-form, rather than merely to detain, criminals. Advocates of prison reform in the early nineteenth century favored the establishment of prisons which, through their influence on prisoners' behavior, would encourage repentance. The penitentiary, they believed, best combined the goals of punishing criminals and re-forming their characters so that they would not break the law again. The penitentiary ideal consisted of extreme isolation of criminals from society, extensive supervision over their daily lives, and compulsory productive labor.

Although it originated in eighteenth-century England and France,

the penitentiary had its most enthusiastic reception in the United States. After 1815 dozens of American states, counties, and municipalities constructed penitentiarylike institutions. American advocates of prison reform, men like Louis Dwight, Matthew Carey, and John Griscom, elaborated the penitentiary ideal into two competing models. One, the Pennsylvania system, used by Quakers in Philadelphia since the turn of the century, isolated each prisoner in a separate cell and required total silence, both day and night. Left alone, except when the Bible was read to him, the prisoner might repent his crimes and even achieve religious conversion. The alternative Auburn plan, named for the congregate-style prison that opened in Auburn, New York, in 1817, introduced a variation of the silent system. After 1825 Auburn's inmates, though isolated in separate cells at night, worked together during the day in silence under an elaborate system of regimentation and surveillance which included the lockstep, striped uniforms, and extensive corporal punishment. Less concerned with spiritual redemption, the Auburn system attempted to remold inmates through "prison discipline."⁴

Historians have speculated widely about the rise of the penitentiary, its appeal to nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans, and its effect on both prisoners and the society as a whole. One set of scholars has debated the motivations of the middle- to upper-class men who founded American institutions for the "deviant and dependent." Gerald Grob has emphasized the humanitarian impulses of the institutional founders, while David Rothman has insisted that the reformers were responding to fears of social disorder and acting from their need for social control.⁵ Other writers have assessed the penitentiary within the context of the nineteenth-century capitalist political economy. As the wage-labor system enlarged the dependent, unproductive classes, Michael Katz has explained, transients and criminals had to be retrained as productive laborers. The factorylike penal institutions served this purpose.⁶ Transcending questions of individual motivation and economic function, French historian Michel Foucault has approached the penitentiary as an expression of the "political anatomy." According to Foucault, the distinguishing feature of the penitentiary—surveillance, or discipline—reproduced the power mechanism of the larger social body, the "disciplinary society" of the nineteenth century.⁷

Whether the isolation and regimentation of the penitentiary was intended to convert, control, or retrain prisoners, the institution

ultimately failed to achieve its founders' goals. Most writers agree that prisons, like other nineteenth-century asylums, deteriorated rapidly into purely custodial institutions. They then provided a convenient storage system for individuals who were no longer defined as members of the body politic.

This approach meshed well with the new perception of criminals. No longer seen as individual sinners who remained integral members of the community, those who committed crimes now acquired new identities as members of a separate criminal subculture. The "dangerous class" of anonymous vagrants, thieves, and prostitutes who were increasingly noticed on European and American city streets after 1815 were seen as a threat to property and public order.⁸ Since the traditional community sanctions of public humiliation, excommunication, or banishment were ineffective in a mobile, heterogeneous, urban society, new forms of control evolved that included professional police forces and prison systems. Arrest and incarceration helped to seal the identities of criminals and segregate them further from the society.

Although historians of prison reform have concentrated largely on male criminals and reformers, women also entered the new penal institutions as inmates and eventually as keepers. Some European reformers expected women to serve in the penitentiary,⁹ but Americans rarely mentioned female prisoners as a special group. In fact, very few women served in the earliest American prisons, and women were not at first considered a significant part of America's dangerous classes.

The initial infrequency of women's incarceration can be explained by their different historical relationship to institutions of social control. As several historians have noted, imprisonment developed simultaneously with the growth of "republicanism," the extension of political liberties and economic rights to men.¹⁰ The punishment for abusing these privileges was the denial of political and economic liberties through imprisonment. Women, however, had fewer liberties to abuse. Because their place in the republican society remained in the home, they had less opportunity to commit crimes. More importantly, women remained under the traditional controls of family and church longer than did men. Because women's behavior was more closely regulated by these private institutions, they were less likely to become the subjects of new public agencies of punishment, at least for the reasons that men were. Only after certain categories of female crime emerged within a

sexual ideology of female purity were more women punished in jails and prisons.

Although the fragmentary evidence left by prison reformers and state officials does not reveal how often women committed crimes, it does show the limited use of imprisonment for women up to 1840 and the types of crimes for which women were convicted. In four state penitentiaries observed by Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, an average of only one in twelve prisoners was female, ranging from one in nineteen in New York to one in six in Maryland.¹¹ In 1850 women constituted only 3.6 percent of the total inmates in thirty-four state and county prisons. New York's penitentiaries received the highest proportion of women, 5.6 percent; the Massachusetts state prison, on the other hand, held no women because women convicts were sentenced to local institutions. In 1850 women represented 19.5 percent of the inmates of the Massachusetts county jails and houses of correction.¹²

The small number of women in state prisons as opposed to local jails was due in part to the different types of crimes for which men and women were convicted. Of the three major categories of crimes—against person, property, and public order—only the last included a significant number of women. In New York state, for instance, men's convictions outnumbered women's by fifteen to one in the Courts of Record, which tried person and property crimes. In the Courts of Special Session, however, which tried drunkenness, vagrancy, streetwalking, and petty larceny, the ratio of male to female convictions narrowed to five to one for county courts and four to one for city courts¹³ (see table 1). When convicted for murder, manslaughter, arson, or burglary, women did serve in penitentiaries. The most frequent women's crimes, however—the petty street crimes and those governed by moral and sexual codes—usually led to jail terms.

American officials and foreign observers commented on the small number of women convicted of "serious" crimes in the United States. New York Secretary of State John Dix noted in 1838 that while in England the ratio of male to female criminals was five to one, in New York it was sixteen to one, a comparison he found "very highly in favor of the morals of the female sex in the State." Dix also cited Belgian criminologist Adolphe Quetelet's theory that the strict sexual division of labor in America, which kept women closer to the home than in Europe, provided fewer

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opportunities for female crime.¹⁴ Another New York secretary of state elaborated on the lower incidence of female crime when he reported in 1842 that women accounted for only 1/114th of the state's criminal convictions, even though they constituted almost half of the population. "This is a very remarkable disproportion," Secretary Samuel Young noted, "which may be accounted for partly by the reluctance to prosecute females, partly by their domestic life and habits, leaving them less exposed to temptation, and partly by the unavoidable inference that they are superior to men in moral honesty."¹⁵

Whatever protection from temptation or prosecution women enjoyed soon proved to be temporary, for the criminal statistics began to reveal a startling trend. New York and Massachusetts records show that after 1840 women joined the ranks of the criminal class in America, though in smaller numbers and for different crimes than men. In New York courts, convictions of women increased between 1847 and 1860 at a much higher rate than that of men's convictions (appendix A). Consequently, the ratio of male to female crime fell from over six to one in 1840 to under two to one in 1860 (table 1). The ratio gradually rose at the end of the century

TABLE 1. New York Sex-Crime Ratios, 1833-92 (Males: 1 Female)

	Courts of Record	Courts of Special Sessions		Sum of All Criminal Courts
		County	City	
1833-37	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	6.02
1838-42	14.14	6.40	4.01	6.40
1843-47	13.89	5.79	3.83	5.90
1848-52	17.80	6.76	3.92	3.46
1853-57	14.85	4.50	1.70	2.01
1858-62	9.41	3.04	1.69	1.94
1863-67	11.62	4.14	1.56	2.32
1868-72	15.71	4.97	1.90	2.89
1873-77	16.78	4.54	2.27	2.99
1878-82	20.00	5.88	2.51	3.27
1883-87	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	3.85
1888-92	<u>21.00</u>	<u>8.06</u>	<u>0.27</u>	<u>4.21</u>
Average	15.52	5.40	2.37	3.77

Source: New York Secretary of State, *Convictions for Criminal Offenses, 1830-1899*.

Note: The figures from which the ratios are derived represent male convictions per 100,000 adult males/female convictions per 100,000 adult females.

but it never returned to the earlier extreme disparity. Imprisonment rates in Massachusetts revealed a similar trend. Shortly after 1840 the incidence of incarceration rose for both sexes, but after 1860 the female rate continued to climb despite a drop in the total rate. The ratio of all women committed to Massachusetts jails (per 100,000 women in the state) increased from under 300 in the 1840s to over 400 in the 1860s. The proportion of women among the total commitments to jails and houses of correction rose in Massachusetts from 20 percent in 1842 to a high of 37.2 percent in 1864.¹⁶

The most dramatic increase in women's criminal convictions and imprisonments occurred during the 1860s. In New York City, Buffalo, Boston, and Detroit, female crime rates soared during the Civil War years. During this period the female populations of Massachusetts and New York prisons increased by a third while the number of male prisoners declined by almost half. As the warden of the Eastern State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania noted, "while the number of male prisoners has been diminished by the civil war now raging, the number of female prisoners has been increased."¹⁷

In addition to the relative shift attributable to men's absence during wartime, the 1860s witnessed an independent rise in criminal convictions of women. The traditional offenses against public order accounted for part of this trend, with a probable increase in the visibility of prostitution during the war as one factor. But contemporary observers expressed more alarm over the frequency of women's serious crimes. In New York the number of women convicted for crimes against the person more than tripled between the 1850s and 1860s, although comparable male convictions declined. Women's conviction rates for crimes against property also rose during the 1860s—ten times as fast as men's.¹⁸ Some commentators blamed women's increasing practice of abortion for the rise in crimes against the person, although stricter statutes and enforcement may have been equally responsible.¹⁹

The conviction and imprisonment of women resulted from many of the social changes that fostered a general increase in European and American crime rates between 1815 and 1860. Movement from rural to urban areas, or across the Atlantic, as well as the gradual transformation from a family to a market economy, disrupted the lives of migrant, immigrant, and working-class men and women. A growing number of individuals lived outside of the traditional institutions of church, family, and community. Many led economically marginal and geographically mobile lives.

Especially in the rapidly growing cities, they came into conflict with new agents of social control, such as urban police forces and moral reformers. Not serious crimes against person or property, but unlawful personal behavior—drunkenness, idle and disorderly conduct, and vagrancy—brought the majority of criminals of both sexes into courts and prisons.

Women's crimes, however, had additional economic and sexual origins. The limited opportunities for wage earning and the lower salaries paid working women placed them in the most marginal economic position in the society. Prostitution provided a temporary source of income for poor women throughout the century. At times of stress, as when the Civil War removed male wage earners from many families, women may have had greater need to resort to crimes, whether theft or prostitution.²⁰ Equally important, though, was the sexual definition of women's offenses. A subcategory of public order offenses, sometimes called crimes against chastity or decency, applied almost exclusively to women. Although laws against sexual misconduct had regulated both women and men in colonial America, a stricter code of female morality in the nineteenth century led to the overrepresentation of women in this category of crimes. A wide range of behavior, including lewd and lascivious carriage, stubbornness, idle and disorderly conduct, drunkenness, and vagrancy, as well as fornication and adultery, brought women, more often than men, into conflict with law enforcers.

Arrest, conviction, or imprisonment for offenses against chastity, decency, or public order carried a unique penalty for the nineteenth-century female criminal—the label of “fallen woman.” In the past a woman convicted of even a sexual offense might repent, accept her punishment, and return to society.²¹ Now, however, a new moral standard helped create a permanent category of female criminals. No longer the perpetrator of a single immoral act, those who crossed the boundary of chastity gained a lifetime identity as a “fallen woman.”

A nineteenth-century fallen woman experienced a greater stigma than did contemporary male criminals or than had women criminals in the past. Many women and men refused to associate with or employ even a suspected fallen woman. Thus outcast, the first offender often entered a vicious cycle which led her directly into the criminal class, often as a prostitute, as case histories illustrate. A respectable young widow left penniless, for example, became the mistress of a man who later abandoned her. “The poor woman

had sinned away her right to return to her friends at home—men despised her—*decent* women here could not speak to her! She had recourse to the Lethe of our Christian age, and after a series of miseries was found . . . in the Tombs.”²²

The penitentiary had not been designed with the fallen woman in mind. Yet female inmates who carried this special stigma did enter state and local penal institutions in antebellum America. Their increasing numbers and their special status posed unique problems for both prisons and reformers.

The Treatment of the Fallen Woman

The women who served in penal institutions between 1820 and 1870 were not subject to the prison reform experienced by male inmates. Officials employed isolation, silence, and hard labor to rehabilitate male prisoners. The lack of accommodations for female inmates made isolation and silence impossible for them, and productive labor was not considered an important part of their routine. The neglect of female prisoners, however, was rarely benevolent. Rather, a pattern of overcrowding, harsh treatment, and sexual abuse recurred throughout prison histories.

The Auburn, New York, penitentiary combined most of these features. In the 1820s the prison had no separate cells designated for the twenty to thirty women who served there at any one time, some of them for sentences of up to fourteen years. Lodged together, unattended, in a one room attic, the windows sealed to prevent communication with men, the female prisoners were overcrowded, immobilized, and neglected.²³ Although they escaped the isolation and regimentation imposed on male inmates, their quarters, as a member of the Board of Inspection reported in 1832, presented “a specimen of the most disgusting and appalling features of the old system of prison management at the worst period of its history.”²⁴

In 1826, despite the attempt to keep women segregated, prisoner Rachel Welch became pregnant while serving a punishment sentence in a solitary cell. As a result of a flogging by a prison officer, Welch died after childbirth. A grand jury investigating the flogging seemed unconcerned about her pregnancy or the condition of other women at Auburn. The public scandal, however, may have influenced the passage of a law in 1828 requiring county prisons to separate male and female inmates. In 1832 Auburn hired a matron for the women's quarters.²⁵

Neither public attention nor the presence of a female guard alleviated the plight of Auburn's women. Both overcrowding and disinterest in women's rehabilitation continued to bring harsh treatment. As English visitor Harriet Martineau observed after touring Auburn in 1838:

The arrangements for the women were extremely bad. . . . There was an engine in sight which made me doubt the evidence of my own eyes: stocks, of a terrible construction; a chair, with a fastening for the head and all the limbs. . . . The [warden] liked it no better than we. He pleaded that it was the only means of keeping his refractory prisoners quiet with only one room to put them in.²⁶

Little wonder that the prison chaplain once proclaimed of Auburn: "To be a male convict in this prison would be quite tolerable; but to be a female convict, for any protracted period, would be worse than death."²⁷

In jails, prisons, and penitentiaries established throughout the East and Midwest, the difficulty of housing and supervising women prisoners in institutions that had not been designed for them produced wretched conditions. In 1838 the New York City Tombs had only forty-two cells to hold up to seventy women inmates, while in the Albany, New York, jail, "fifteen females were in one room with bed, so far as they had beds, on the floor."²⁸ In Michigan in the 1850s, ten women—three of them pregnant—were confined in two small, poorly ventilated rooms, where only male keepers entered. An 1859 newspaper account described an overcrowded Michigan prison ward as "hot and putrid." The inmates, it reported, "dwell as in Pandemonium."²⁹ Although almost every account of prisons and jails mention illegitimate births by female prisoners,³⁰ in one state, Indiana, the sexual exploitation of inmates was overt and systematic. A corrupt administration at the Indiana state prison operated a prostitution service for male guards, using the forced labor of female prisoners.³¹ The Illinois state penitentiary opened a separate women's building during the 1860s, but in 1870 the twenty-two female inmates were removed to the fifth floor of the warden's house. They remained in this so-called Chicken Coop for the rest of their sentences, sitting all day in rows of chairs, mending the male prisoners' stockings. A warden later described their annual outing: "They were allowed a holiday stroll in the yard—to the accompaniment of the whistles and cries from the locked-in and eagerly watching male prisoners."³²

Although the women's quarters of nineteenth-century penal institutions contrasted markedly with prison reformers' ideals of order, discipline, and silence, only rarely did male officials address the problem of women prisoners. When they did, little came of it. In 1828 New York Governor DeWitt Clinton recommended the establishment of a separate penitentiary for women, but the legislature decided against it because the women's washing, ironing, and sewing saved the Auburn prison money.³³ Massachusetts Governor Emory Washburn in 1854 commissioned a survey of women in the county jails. Although the report revealed poor physical conditions, few matrons, and little work for inmates, it recommended only that matrons be hired under the authority of jail keepers and that women nursing infants be transferred to the poorhouse.³⁴ A report on whether to establish an institution "for the punishment and reform of abandoned women," made to the Connecticut legislature in 1860, resulted in the founding of a home for delinquent girls, but adult women criminals remained in mixed jails and prisons.³⁵

Why did male reformers and state officials so neglect the state of women prisoners at a time when they were occupied with methods for curing or controlling men's criminality? One historian of prisons, W. David Lewis, has suggested a relationship between the sexual double standard and the treatment of women prisoners. "Especially if she had been sexually promiscuous," he wrote, "the female convict was a veritable pariah" who was viewed with "a special degree of aversion and despair." He summarized her treatment in New York prisons as "The Ordeal of the Unredeemable." Or, as a nineteenth-century prison official explained: "The opinion seems to have been entertained that the female convicts were beyond the reach of reformatations, and it seems to have been regarded as a sufficient performance of the object of punishment to turn them loose within the pen of the prison and there leave them to feed upon and destroy each other."³⁶

The statements of other male prison reformers support the view that the fallen woman was considered beyond hope. They suggest that the condemnation of women criminals derived in part from the pressures placed on women to maintain a morality superior to men's. Francis Lieber, for example, argued that men's crime was more "rational" than women's, for men were made for an "agitated life." Because she had denied her own pure nature, the female criminal was more depraved than her male counterpart. Therefore the fallen woman, Lieber believed, was more likely to reach the

depths of sinfulness and commit the most heinous crimes.³⁷ Or, as the Reverend James B. Finley, the chaplain of the Ohio state penitentiary, wrote in 1851, "No one, without experience, can tell the obduracy of the female heart when hardened and lost in sin. As woman falls from a higher point of perfection, so she sinks to a profounder depth of misery than man."³⁸

Instead of sympathy for her plight, however, most men expressed outright hostility to the fallen woman and blamed her for men's crimes as well. Her defiance of the law, they reasoned, had more serious social consequences than a man's, for by removing her influence as a virtuous wife and mother she undoubtedly encouraged male criminality. Dr. Lieber pointed to "a worthless mother who poisons by her corrupt examples the souls of her children—or a slothful intemperate wife who disgusts her husband with her home" as the cause of men's crimes.³⁹ Another male reformer lamented: "Worse than outer darkness ensues when the light of a household has gone out in the one most essential particular . . . the pure mother's influence has no equal; for its loss there is no earthly substitute and for criminal default the world tolerates no expiation."⁴⁰

Not only by default, but through direct assault the fallen woman disrupted society when she, like Eve, tempted men to sin. The Prison Association of New York cited an incident at the Connecticut State Prison to illustrate "the influence of licentiousness on the production of crime." A chaplain explained that although born virtuous, when "a woman had once fallen she desired to revenge herself not only on her seducer, but on all his sex." One woman whose case the association detailed had caused the "downfall" of thirty-two erstwhile innocent young men.⁴¹ Henry Lord warned charity workers in the 1870s of the young courtesan who "goes forth to prey upon mankind" and of the "wanton women" who could make life "dangerous for your sons in their necessary walks and journeys."⁴²

Although not all officials shared this extreme hostility toward the fallen woman, the attitudes expressed by these influential men do help explain the neglect of women in American prisons. They also raise an important question for nineteenth-century women's history: Why was the fallen woman so feared and despised? Part of the answer lies in the dominant sexual ideology of the Victorian era.

The nineteenth-century sexual system has often been described in terms of the ideology of the separate sexual spheres. White,

middle-class men and women inhabited sexually differentiated social spaces with distinct values and manners. The model of the self-made man who was adventuresome, mobile, aggressive, and competitive predominated in Jacksonian America. These men entered the public spheres of paid labor, the professions, or politics. Women, in contrast, were supposed to remain in the home where they cultivated the virtues of piety, purity, and submissiveness.⁴³

Although this ideology limited women to unpaid labor in the domestic sphere, it placed a high cultural value on the tasks they performed there. Because women reared children, managed the household, and maintained spiritual and moral values, men could specialize in wage-earning tasks. As men entered the impersonal world of the marketplace, moreover, they knew they could return to the domestic sanctuary, where a pure woman waited inside to refresh them. As novelist James Fenimore Cooper explained, in order to ease, console, and correct her husband's "sordid struggles with the world," woman had to be "placed beyond their influence."⁴⁴ The idea of women's superior morality thus provided a foundation and justification for the sexual division of labor.

Interestingly enough, nineteenth-century sexual ideology began to suggest that purity came naturally to women, in contrast to men, who had to struggle to control their innate lust. Influential Victorian authorities argued that women had little or no sensual appetite and that they submitted to sexual intercourse solely for the purpose of procreation.⁴⁵ Born innocent, woman had a natural self-control which could counterbalance man's lust. Female sexual desire seemed pathological to many medical and moral authorities; unchaste behavior signalled deep depravity. According to one popular novelist, "even as woman is supremely virtuous, [she] becomes, when once fallen, the vilest of her sex."⁴⁶

The impure woman presented a serious threat to a society that relied on women's chastity for important symbolic functions. Female purity, historian Ben Barker-Benfield has argued, upheld the "spermatic economy" by channeling men's energies away from sex and into the economically productive tasks required during this period of capital accumulation.⁴⁷ Whether or not there was a direct relationship between economic change and sexual ideals, the social changes accompanying the early phases of American capitalism did influence sexual ideology. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has characterized the concentration on sexual purity among Jacksonian male reformers as the result of a deep fear of social disorder, for which sexual pollution functioned as a central symbol. The

men who helped establish purity as a cultural ideal, she argues, were experiencing “psychosocial tensions” as their familial and economic relations were transformed by commercial and urban growth. Uncontrolled sexuality represented for them potential chaos. Women had to be pure to enforce male continence; and this emphasis on their purity gave women enormous power. The impure woman had the capacity to unleash not just male sperm, but more importantly, the social disintegration that sexuality symbolized.⁴⁸

Within the context of this ideology of sexual purity it becomes clear why responses to the impure or fallen woman were so emotionally charged. She represented, on a basic level, a symbol of women's resistance to the ideal of purity and their misuse of the sexual power granted them. In addition, as male prison reformers pointed out, an impure woman had not only sinned, she had also removed the constraints on men's virtue—both those on the men in her family and, potentially, those on men in the streets.

Although the fallen woman lost her usefulness as a check on male behavior, she could become an example to other women of the high cost of resistance. The social stigma attached to fallen women, the belief in their total depravity, and the treatment they received in penal institutions thus helped control the behavior of all women.

By the 1840s a significant number of women served in prison, and their neglect, if not abuse, set them apart as a special category of prisoners. Nineteenth-century penitentiaries were never intended to rehabilitate women. In practice they rarely reformed criminals of either sex and probably served to confirm a prisoner's membership in the criminal class. Male reformers had several reasons for ignoring women prisoners: the small number of women in penitentiaries, the logistical and economic problems of caring for them, the disdain they felt for the fallen woman. But the question posed by New York reformers in 1819—why no female “angels of mercy” cared for women prisoners—remains to be answered.

Pure women had to surmount an ideological barrier before they reached out to female prisoners. The line that separated the pure woman from the fallen demarcated privilege on one side and degradation on the other. By not crossing that line, pure women could retain their class privilege at the expense of their outcast fallen sisters. However, these two groups of women remained separated only if pure women agreed that the boundary dividing the pure

and the fallen, a class division, was stronger than the sexual division between women and men. Both the ideology of the separate sexual spheres and women's personal experiences over the course of the century supported a definition of women as a sexual class, an identity that contradicted and potentially weakened the purity boundary. Eventually some women would find the concept of a common womanhood stronger than the boundary of moral purity. A few would cross the line and cautiously enter the "gloomy abode" of women prisoners.