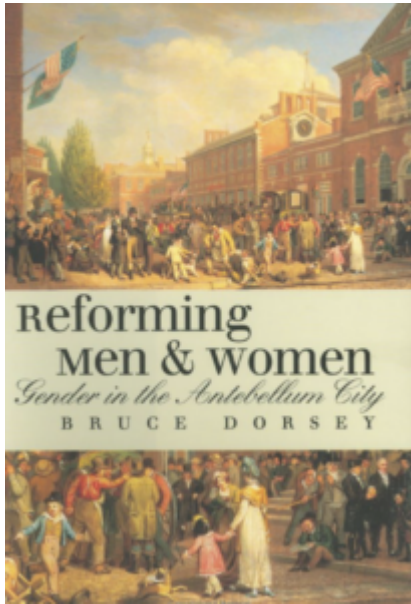


Engendering the City



Reforming
Men & Women
Gender in the Antebellum City
B R U C E D O R S E Y





Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City

Once marginalized in a male-dominated profession, insights from the study of women's history are coming to reshape the entire discipline, even in such seemingly unlikely specialties as foreign policy and political history. Similarly, attention to race has spread beyond the study of African American social history. Historians increasingly recognize the influence of gender and race on virtually all aspects of American life, both among women and among men.

In *Reforming Men and Women*, historian Bruce Dorsey now draws together ideas from a wide range of recent studies in gender and racial history. He builds on the insights of such scholars as Gail Bederman, David Roediger, and Anthony Rotundo (who provide flattering blurbs on the dust jacket), and applies their ideas in an intricate reinterpretation of antebellum reform. Dorsey proposes to create "a holistic history of gender and reform by documenting and exploring the life experiences of both men and women reformers, and the contested meanings of manhood and womanhood among urban Americans, both black and white, working class and middle class, in the antebellum North. More than simply bridging the gap between two phases of the historical literature on reform, [Dorsey] offer[s] a different perspective on this history of topics—antislavery, temperance, poor relief, and nativism—that have produced a trail of historical interpretations." In so doing, he contributes to a larger "intellectual quest to engender all of American history"(4).

The city of Philadelphia (with its early working-class suburbs) is the setting for most of the events discussed in this book, but Dorsey places greater emphasis on the national context. He begins by examining women's activism within the public sphere of the early republic. Differing from earlier work by Linda Kerber, he suggests that early reformers did not present themselves as republican mothers whose public speech was an extension of their maternal duties. Instead, free African American women, unmarried Quaker women, and others found alternative strategies in defending their right to speak on public issues—including appropriating "a set of widely accepted masculine symbols,

masculine language, and in some cases a masculine persona" (30). Like men, they defined their benevolent activity in opposition to selfish luxury, and presented themselves as fully capable of independence and civic virtue.

In his chapter on poor relief in the early nineteenth century, Dorsey examines a growing Northern contempt for the poor. "In the eyes of the middle class, a poor person had changed from a neighbor into a stranger," partly because the classes were indeed more spatially separated (60). Male-led societies soon embraced the idea that the poor were to blame for their poverty, and sought to put them to work in a "house of industry" that was little more than a sweatshop. Women reformers were more hesitant to blame the poor. The divergent responses of male and female reformers, Dorsey suggests, may have reinforced a middle-class male perception that compassion was a sign of feminine weakness. But as reformers of both genders accepted a view that poverty was the result of sin, women retained an important niche in benevolent work based on what was believed to be their special "influence" over the souls of others.

Just as poverty was believed to be the fault of improvident males (while exploited female workers faded into invisibility), so did drunkenness come to be seen as a problem mainly of young men—a crisis of young manhood vaguely associated with the pursuit of self-interest in Jacksonian America. Drink was not seen as a problem limited to any class. In denouncing drunkenness, "white middle-class men were engaged in a battle over gender identity that was not exclusively an attempt at class domination against working-class men. It also involved, significantly, a conflict *within* the middle class over rival forms of masculinity"(107). Working-class white and African American reformers also used temperance to explore the meanings of manhood—respectively seeing sobriety as a marker of whiteness and of freedom from the slavery of drink.

Dorsey's chapter on antislavery examines the centrality of masculinity in the African colonization movement. Colonizationists portrayed African American men as having been emasculated by slavery and white prejudice, and thus in need of emigration to Africa in order to regain their manly independence. White fears of black men's social and sexual engagement with white women contributed to denunciations of abolitionism and to the notorious burning of the abolitionist Pennsylvania Hall in 1838. Blacks also drew on the language of manhood in their debates over emigration. White abolitionist women linked the plight of women to the plight of the slaves, and thus attacked both forms of oppression together.

In conflicts over Irish immigration, a tangle of ideas about white manhood shaped the discourse of natives and newcomers alike. Native white men doubted the manly independence of the supposedly priest-ridden Irish. Native women launched what the author calls "the first political newspaper in the republic operated exclusively by women," in order to slander the Irish and promote Anglo-American women's patriotism (213). The editors defended their entrance into the public sphere by asserting that Irish Catholic immigration threatened values dear to women, particularly the religious instruction of children in the public schools. Irish immigrants also developed a complicated, gendered

discourse about their place in the United States. They divided among themselves over the manliness of drinking; their effort to claim the rights of white Americans contributed to their growing racism, even in the face of Irish nationalists' call for racial unity.

Dorsey's argument is far too complex to adequately summarize in a brief review. Each page introduces new insights—most of them not wholly original to Dorsey, but woven by him into a coherent whole. As the author moves methodically from topic to topic, examining the thoughts and actions of people in various social categories, historians will be impressed by the breadth of his research in primary and secondary sources. Readers outside the profession may be discouraged by the plodding prose, but those who persist will see a solid synthesis, and application, of insights from recent gender and racial history.

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