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Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City (book review)

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Bruce Dorsey. *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* .

Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City by Bruce Dorsey

Review by: By Karin E. Gedge

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letter denying that the two were engaged, all the while assuring her privately, until the end of his life, of his deep (though obviously ambiguous) concern for her.

Chapin gives his audience—both general readers and professional students of American cultural history—much more than an analysis of the “culture of curiosity.” His story affords as well an unusual and revealing vantage point on the play of class and gender within this culture. He invites us to recognize that spirit rappers and scientific lecturers alike walked an extraordinarily fine line, always situating their presentations somewhere between sensationalism and moral uplift. By skillfully manipulating his stories, public and private, Kane was able to stay on the right side of that line, becoming an American hero. Fox had a tougher choice: continue as a fraudulent but successful spirit rapper, living outside middle-class definitions of womanhood and lacking any others, or accede to Kane’s wishes by renouncing her career and independence, hoping that he might at last carry her into married respectability. When Kane died without doing so, Fox attempted to reinvent and support herself (first repudiating spirit rapping, then awkwardly returning to it), and she tried to exploit the “culture of curiosity” one more time by publishing *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* (1866). Her last years were marked by alcoholism and dire poverty, and when she died in 1893 at age 59 (only days before she was to be evicted from her New York tenement), there was no national expression of grief. Her funeral was attended only by spiritualists—and, according to them, by the spirits of several quite distinguished dead people. Kane was not among them.

ELIZABETH ELKIN GRAMMER

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BRUCE DORSEY. *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. 2002. Pp. xi, 299. \$39.95.

Bruce Dorsey demonstrates the advantages of applying gender analysis to a topic already well worked by historians of politics, religion, and women. His examination of reform movements in the antebellum North yields valuable new insights into the ways that men and women of various classes, religions, and ethnicities addressed the social problems of the new republic and simultaneously reconstructed gender ideals, identities, and roles. Dorsey diligently traces economic, political, social, and ideological change over time, lucidly explaining why an evolving democratic republic, a market economy, wage labor, and evangelical Christianity combined to make poverty more visible and problematic, change patterns of alcohol consumption, exacerbate awareness of the political and moral inconsistencies of slavery, and raise questions about citizenship in general and immigration in particular.

As evidence of the multiple meanings of gender for various groups, Dorsey cites the public rhetoric of leaders as well as the diaries, correspondence, minutes, and membership records of more ordinary participants in

reform. He also employs graphic evidence, songs, novels, plays, and blackface minstrelsy to bolster his argument. By acknowledging diversity and the contradictions between values and actions that reformers struggled to reconcile, Dorsey avoids ascribing one set of motives or actions to a single group. Although he focuses on rich resources from Philadelphia, Dorsey offers ample context from a broader northern urban context.

Dorsey’s complex approach of considering multiple facets of change over time, as well as the intersections of gender, class, race, and age, complicates our understandings of organized benevolence. In the early republic, men and women, blacks and whites, all drew upon “manly” virtues of feeling and sympathy to justify the civic virtue of benevolence. Over time, however, white male leaders’ attitudes toward benevolent activities became less charitable and more political. Poverty resulted from the victim’s own improvidence, not economic change or divine providence, and was better solved by Christian evangelism than by charity or poor relief. Drink was no longer a masculine ritual but contributed to poverty; dependence on it was a form of slavery. Removing newly emancipated blacks to Africa and barring the door to impoverished Irish immigrants were additional reforms consistent with growing hostility toward the poor. Such “masculine” approaches to reform were not shared by all men or women. Recognizing the limitations placed on their poor sisters, middle-class women retained more empathy for the objects of their benevolence, reinforcing the notion that sentiment was a feminine and private virtue. Working-class men, white and black, created their own mutual benefit and temperance societies, redefining their masculinity through independence. By showing that temperance began as a young men’s movement, Dorsey challenges previous historiography that credited the “status anxiety” of bourgeois men or the proto-feminism of middle-class women for imposing their values on the poor.

Dorsey’s discussion of slavery is an especially good example of the ways he challenges historical assumptions about reform by analyzing the efforts of men and women, black and white, in the colonization and abolition movements. The mostly white men who vigorously supported black emigration to Africa prefigured later justifications for American imperialism as patriotic, benevolent, and masculine, while Africa and Africans were seen as passive, feminine, and sexualized objects of aggressive male sexuality. One of many ironies that Dorsey identifies is the colonizationists’ embrace and exploitation of racist stereotypes even as they blamed racism for necessitating black emigration.

By contrast, those few blacks who supported colonization constructed more positive rationales, a “creolized interpretation of the meanings of manhood and womanhood within strategies for black nationalism, citizenship, communal and individual survival” (p. 155). Debates between emigration supporter Martin Delany and abolitionist Frederick Douglass defined powerful sources of black manhood, while Mary Ann Shadd’s ab-

olitionist editorials simultaneously defended her independence and black womanhood. Likewise, the rhetoric of colonizationist Catharine Beecher and the abolitionist Grimké sisters revealed how white women negotiated and constructed models of womanhood to justify their opposing political activities. Dorsey challenges the male-centered historiography of antislavery and the split over the “woman question,” asking whether a disagreement between men was not better characterized as a “man question.” He complicates a white-women-centered history of feminism by pointing out the “tutelage” white women received from black women activists.

A brief review does little justice to Dorsey’s nuanced examination of men—representing different races, classes, and religions—as gendered beings, interacting with and reacting to women and each other in order to define their political and social identities. His strength is to uncover the multifaceted and competing visions of manhood and womanhood in a wide variety of sources. This approach obviously challenges the reader, as Dorsey’s abundant evidence and fruitful observations sometimes obscure the finer points of his argument. But he succeeds in making sense of multiple perspectives, and his work will serve as a model for other historians willing to examine the new complexities of gender analysis.

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ALISON PIEPMEIER. *Out in Public: Configurations of Women’s Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina. 2004. Pp. 278. Cloth \$49.95, paper \$19.95.

Alison Piepmeier examines various ways that women’s bodies were “out” in nineteenth-century America. In so doing, she joins the effort to challenge and complicate the familiar dichotomies of women’s history: public versus private, agent versus victim. Situating herself “within the field of poststructuralist feminist scholarship” (p. 4), Piepmeier draws upon multidisciplinary approaches to the body. Her study spans from the 1830s to the close of the nineteenth century as she rereads the texts and lives of five women—Anna Cora Mowatt, Mary Baker Eddy, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Sarah Josepha Hale—all the while placing the female body at the center of her interpretation. Piepmeier analyzes each woman’s discursive strategies as she presented herself in public, repeatedly reminding readers of the material and cultural limitations at work upon these particular bodies.

Piepmeier opens her study with a consideration of Mowatt, a popular stage actress and the least familiar of the women studied. The chapter devoted to her focuses on her *Autobiography of an Actress; or Eight Years on the Stage* (1853). Piepmeier uses this text to lay out the themes and strategies of nineteenth-century female embodiment that unify her study. Mowatt’s book offers a catalogue of female bodies: “traveling bodies, athletic

bodies, and sick bodies” as well as “violated and freakish bodies” (p. 18). Piepmeier then shows how Mowatt juxtaposed these bodies to present herself as a respectable woman in public—no easy trick for an actress at this time.

If Mowatt manipulated the various discourses of nineteenth-century female embodiment, Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, sought to erase the body all together. In *Science and Health* (1875), she rejected the importance of the material body, instead asserting the ultimate power of “Mind.” This emphasis freed Eddy and her female followers from the judgments of medical science as well as from the popular sentimentality surrounding women and illness. More important, Eddy escaped Victorian gender dichotomies and gained access to male spaces and discourses. In short, she emerges as an important subject for feminist scholars, a woman who “by denying the body . . . could write the woman herself” (p. 86).

Chapters three and four focus on two women already well studied by feminist scholars, Truth and Wells, respectively. Yet Piepmeier offers new insights with her focus on female embodiment, a problem rendered more complex for Truth and Wells given nineteenth-century assumptions about racial and gender difference. Sidestepping questions of authenticity, Piepmeier uses both the 1851 and 1863 versions of Truth’s famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech to explore the abolitionist orator’s public persona. She situates Truth within the tall-tale genre, comparing her to Davy Crockett, and concludes that Truth appropriated and transformed the conventions of the genre to “define herself as heroic and powerful rather than as either sentimental or freakish” (p. 102).

As a journalist and antilynching crusader, Wells also struggled with the public presentation of black female bodies. Piepmeier argues that Wells’s pamphlets, especially *Southern Horrors* (1892) and *A Red Record* (1895), reinterpreted black female victimization in order to make a case for “a fully embodied black female citizen” (p. 130). By describing racial violence against black women, Wells refuted the white narrative of lynching as the justified killing of black men who raped white women. She insisted on the public visibility of black women’s bodies, even calling attention to her own body by weeping during her public lectures. Significantly, Wells’s texts also undermined male authority, vilifying white men and depicting black men as victims unable to defend the race. As Piepmeier concludes, “the most powerful, articulate, civilized and corporeally self-controlled figure in Wells’s writing is Wells herself” (p. 169). Thus, she embodied the citizenship she hoped to claim for black women.

The concluding chapter examines Hale, editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Here Piepmeier argues that *Godey’s*, a publication associated with woman’s private sphere, served as an embodied space—a surrogate for Hale’s own body. According to Piepmeier, “Hale’s work demonstrates the ways in which a woman could identify with the material constructs of print culture and thus