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“Commerce in Souls”: Vice, Virtue, and Women’s Wage Work in Baltimore, 1900-1915

PAMELA SUSAN HAAG

Baltimoreans animated the summer of 1915 with lurid talk of urban vice and the “ways of immorality.” An elite, fourteen-member Maryland Vice Commission¹ had spent three years plumbing the sexual “underworld” of Baltimore’s young working women and then cautiously meted out its hefty report to the public. The Maryland commission and forty-three similar committees zealously convened across the nation between 1900 and 1917 ostensibly sought to investigate only “commercialized vice.” Yet Maryland’s investigators, at least, found that “the new methods of dress and make-up on some women’s and girl’s faces, together with their actions,” prevented the commissioners from differentiating “the streetwalker from the respectable girl.”²

Consequently members of the commission cast a probing eye across the entire landscape of women’s work and leisure. They diligently catalogued not only the unabashedly “fallen” brothel “inmate” who “loved the society of real sports” and was “just out for the coin,” but also the seventeen-year-old salesgirl “E.S.,” who merely “flirted with every man in sight” and had “plenty of new clothes.” They recounted trips to “questionable” shore parks that boasted vaudeville stages, well-supplied drinking pavilions and Turkish theaters—hang outs for girls who worked in day time and went out at night—where “all sorts of smutty and suggestive dances are permitted” and girls eventually “wander out into the woods for sexual relations.” They expressed outrage at the novel practice of throwing “parties,” where women and men would drink a great deal and engage in “unrestricted and promiscuous behavior.” In short, the commission “exposed” a robust sexual tableau that seemed to involve virtually all young women and gave Baltimoreans much to whisper, worry, and write about.³ Baltimore’s eight-hundred-page vice report contributed modestly to the almost one billion pages written on “vice” nationwide between 1900 and 1920. Never before had prostitution ignited such an explosion of widely-circulated, sensational tales. As an observer noted in 1921, “it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that the whole country awoke to the disgrace of a system of commercialized vice.”⁴ A pattern of polite neglect had prevailed through most of the previous century.⁵ What suddenly prompted reformers’ interest in the plight of a marginalized, socially alienated element of Baltimore’s

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population; why did the Maryland vice commission construe "prostitution" and sexual commerce in such inclusive—and imprecise—terms?

Progressive reformers "discovered" prostitution when a growing and flamboyant population of middle-class, "respectable" young women—often newly-emigrated from Maryland's rural regions—began to engage in wage labor for consolidated industries and postpone reproductive labor expected in marriage. For a generation of elite reformers who defined "respectable" femininity rather rigidly as motherhood and wifehood and suspected laboring women of being promiscuous or dangerously sexual,⁶ the difference between earning a wage in a factory and earning a fee for prostitution was by no means obvious. Indeed, Progressives in the early 1900s attempted to clarify and redefine, by such means as Baltimore's vice crusade, virtue in a "modern manner."



Victorian conceptions of the "scarlet woman," foundered in the drastically transformed urban culture that reform-minded Baltimoreans confronted in the early twentieth century. With a population of 450,000—a 100 percent increase from 1870—Baltimore in 1913 displayed a panoply of cultures and "public women," female wage earners who walked the streets, socialized in dance halls and alleyways, adorned themselves with make-up and, with these traits, complicated the urban middle class's attempts to understand their morality with the anachronistic nineteenth-century terms of virtue and vice. As one Baltimorean observed in 1914, "the street is the social meeting place... It is the playground...its glitter and glare, its lights and shadow...attract boys and girls.... The call of the street is irresistible."⁷

Progressive reformers—all college-educated, predominantly of the professional or entrepreneurial classes, dramatically represented in Baltimore's *Social Register*—found Baltimore's newly incorporated economy and the "lights and shadows" it generated profoundly disturbing and compelling. To the professional or independent businessman, the industrial sector embodied simultaneously the city's hopes for healthy development and the threat that the consolidation of capital through incorporation and the profits of mass production would deny the middle class financial and, by extension, political or social sovereignty. Hence Progressives envisioned a militaristic opposition between themselves and retailers such as Louis Stewart, who had amassed fortunes rapidly, even mercilessly, in the waning days of Gilded Age prosperity and speculation. The father of Stewart's department stores, Eliot Samuel Posner, first established a neighborhood notion and dry goods store in 1875. By 1891 he was able to open a new store downtown, for which he gratefully thanked the public in a newspaper advertisement. "We are, have always been, the devoted servers of your interest," Posner declared. "We deem it a duty to confer with you, since your best good is interwoven with our own far more than the vine is wound about the oak."⁸ When in 1901 Louis Stewart purchased and incorporated Posner's downtown store, however, the vine loosened from the public

oak until in 1902 the store had become a subsidiary of the Associated Merchants Company and, fourteen years later, the National Dry Goods Association. As Baltimore's elite realized, the number of "independent businessmen" in the city had dwindled. This distressing trend colored almost every reform effort of the Baltimore Progressive alliance, including the anti-vice campaign.

During the tumultuous economic expansion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Baltimore's industrial and corporate growth lagged behind that of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, yet daunting socioeconomic changes did occur in the city. By 1900 Baltimoreans had invested an estimated \$100 million in Southern railroads (Baltimore had been dubbed the commercial "Gateway to the South"), streetcars, cotton mills, coal, iron, and municipalities. Twenty-three oyster-packing companies formed the first Baltimore corporation in 1878, intent on abolishing price-cutting and competition. Between 1881 and 1890, the number of corporations soared from thirty-nine to ninety-seven. By 1905 17.3 percent (374) of all industrial establishments had incorporated. Together they produced 52 percent of the city's goods and employed 50 percent of the working population.⁹

Particularly vibrant industries included tobacco foundry work, tobacco processing, canning, and clothing production. As these businesses relentlessly competed with New York for the West Coast market, they mushroomed into many-storied factories with hundreds of workers. H. Sonneborn and Company, clothing manufacturers, employed roughly 2,500 workers in an eight-story downtown factory; Bethlehem Steel engaged 2,000 male workers; tin manufacturers Matthai, Ingram and Co. operated a 617-acre factory in South Baltimore, and A. Booth and Co., another clothing manufacturer, employed 1,100 workers. Sprawling industrial plants "developing in a haphazard way," according to one 1915 survey, supplanted the waterfront homes of "old seafaring families" who had evacuated to the upland districts. As with the Stewart's retailing chain, local companies also came under national jurisdiction, an even more ominous trend than local consolidation. Standard Oil, for example, effected an 1877 merger of almost every city refinery into the Baltimore United Oil Company, further mocking the community's capacity to regulate its economic and political future. The reordering and consolidation of Baltimore's social and economic landscape led reformers to ask, "would a fairly simple soul who tended to a machine all day long...be the same...lover of his God that he had been when he patiently carved or fashioned a pair of shoes?" An 1897 Baltimore *Sun* editorial answered negatively that monopolies were hostile to the "best interest of American life."¹⁰

The Sun's idealized "American life" included a world in which middle-class women, at least, escaped wage labor and the sentence of "becoming only machine[s] capable of so much net product." In addition to immigration,¹¹ mechanized production sparked an exodus—especially in Maryland—of women from rural regions into the city and factories where they became menial laborers. By 1900 48 percent of Baltimore's industries had been mechanized, and most of these businesses employed women as machinists. Known as "working girls," "women adrift," or "homeless women," white female laborers assumed a visible role in Baltimore's

"public" sphere during the early 1900s. Thirty percent of Baltimore's female workers were women who had left their families to find room and board in the city. Supporting themselves and often sending money to their families, these women were to be found in any industry where the work was light and consisted of a series of regular, simple operations. In canning factories women far exceeded the number of men due to the simplicity of mechanized can production and labelling. Similarly, the use of a cigar mold to streamline production opened the way for Baltimore tobacco factories to employ women as a cheap source of labor. The female to male ratio in Baltimore's tobacco factories leapt from 1:10 in 1880 to 1:2 in 1900, and by 1912, women occupied 40 percent of the cigar and cigarette making jobs. The largest Baltimore industry, men's apparel, usurped a high percentage of the female labor force as the city embraced the "Boston system" of production by which whole garments were manufactured in one factory. Shirt manufacturers divided production into fourteen discrete operations performed by a population of 14,000 working women and girls. Alluring department stores and office buildings employed over 1,500 women as well.¹²

Seasonal employment for women included oyster shucking. "The oyster shucking women are a very hard working, good tempered, not very clean community," commented one observer. "Their morals are not very strict, if their conversation is a criterion." For most unskilled jobs the average daily wage hovered around \$1.25, although women uniformly earned less than men.¹³

The immigrant woman might have preferred working for exploitative wages as low as \$1.00 per day to conditions in Europe. One Baltimore woman recalled, "The Polish women practically worked for nothing. But they were doing a hell of a sight better than in Poland...they all said so!" In winter and spring the women shucked oysters on Fell Street, and in summer they skimmed tomatoes brought in from Pennsylvania. To the native woman, work outside of the home, however monotonous or taxing, might have inspired ambitions of economic achievement. For older women with children to support, prospects for economic security appeared bleaker, as they struggled to integrate the care of their children with wage work. In one vegetable industry where men, women, and children—"laughing and singing"—worked together, women often nursed their offspring "while hulling peas for their own living."¹⁴

Although many of Baltimore's native-born working girls continued to board with their parents, often at a cost of one to three dollars a week, an increasingly noticeable percentage took up residence with friends or alone, perhaps in one of the city's "furnished rooms" that the commission feared encouraged immorality. "E.B.," for example, a twenty-two-year-old sales clerk, had emigrated from rural Maryland because her parents opposed her engagement. She never married her fiancé, however, and earned six dollars a week at a department store, out of which she paid three dollars and fifty cents for a furnished room. Her workday ran from 8:00 A.M. to 8:25 P.M., broken by a half-hour lunch break in which employees used to dance until they became "so free and vulgar in their movements" that management put a stop to the ritual. One-third of E.B.'s colleagues were recent im-

migrants, and there were a few older, divorced or married women. According to one exasperated investigator, "clothes formed the principle object of conversation (punctuated with vulgarity) among them, with men for an occasional change." In the evenings and on Sundays E.B. and her counterparts frequented public and private shore parks as well as the much-talked-of dance halls, where the commission surmised that E.B. supplanted her income by going out with men: "She says she would rather starve than not dress well."¹⁵

It is important to place the 1913 Maryland vice investigation in historical context because the social reformers' goal in the anti-prostitution campaign mirrored and stemmed from their larger goal of battling the reign of capital and the "parasitic" urban structures that made its acquisition so easy. As the Baltimore Women's Civic League proclaimed in its opening meeting on 5 April 1911, the Progressives had initiated the "Crusade Against Ugliness: The organization of the Civic Association marks an epoch in American development, the coming of the time when the reign of the almighty dollar is to be disputed by the love of beauty." To the Progressive sensibility, nothing provided a more effective or lurid object lesson on the general tyranny of the "almighty dollar" in the age of consolidated capital than the corruption of female virtue endemic to the red-light district. The prostitute's world had changed in step with the industrialist's, and by 1900 a system of commercialized vice had permanently displaced the unorganized, comparatively solitary solicitation of centuries before. Progressives feared that a "corporate merger" between saloon owners, merchants, dance hall workers, cab drivers and so on had created a protective wall about the "commerce in souls" and blurred the boundaries between respectable and illicit female labor. Baltimore's reformers sustained an interest in vice precisely because they conceived of prostitution on the one hand and female, waged labor in massive, impersonal work environments on the other as structurally identical examples of femininity commodified and feminine virtue corrupted.¹⁶



The Maryland Vice Commission included four doctors—chairman George Walker, J. M. T. Finney, William Howell, and Women's League member Lillian Welsh—lawyer Louis Levin and several Baltimore businessmen, including Frederick Gottlieb and Simon Stein. Other participants included Anna Herkner, Jesse Brown, Walter Denny, George Dimling, J. W. Magruder and Howard Schwarz. Rockefeller Foundation member George Kneeland, chairman of the "Committee of Fourteen" that investigated prostitution in New York City, wrote the precedent vice commission report (*Commercialized Vice in New York City*) and in 1913 piloted the Maryland Vice Commission as well. Kneeland construed vice in New York as a corporate malaise, a social evil organizationally and structurally linked to the greediness of "big business." His report sensationally concluded not only that prostitution had become a business, its "army of women" exploited in "a thoroughly business-like way," but that "no legitimate enterprise is more shrewdly managed" or adjusts more promptly to conditions. The hierarchy of managers, owners, and prostitutes



Women at work, office of Gardiner's Dairy, Baltimore, ca. 1917. (Maryland Historical Society.)

in a certain vice district of Manhattan, in Kneeland's description, produced extraordinarily high returns for the man who proved capable of maintaining business conditions. "The King," as Kneeland described him, presided over a group consisting of thirty-eight men who owned and operated twenty-eight one-dollar houses. The profits collected from the prostitution cooperative, Kneeland calculated, "are sufficiently staggering," hovering somewhere around \$325 per week per house in the region. If the houses investigated comprised even half of the total number, roughly \$2 million each year would be paid to the inmates, half of which was turned over to the house.¹⁷

Conditions in Baltimore were not so extreme, yet they grew in proportion to Baltimore's corporate-industrial development. Perhaps due to Kneeland's presence on the Maryland Vice Commission, the theme of repudiating the corporate structure that defined the New York report anchored the Baltimore study as well. The commission noted that in Baltimore, too, vice had become a consolidated enterprise. In the eastern and western red-light districts, situated on Fleet and Josephine streets, respectively, one man owned thirteen brothels at an average cost of twenty-two dollars a month, two other men jointly owned five houses, two women owned four houses, and one woman owned two houses. Between 1900 and 1903, in contrast, Baltimore had sported 350 separate houses with a total of 1,400 "inmates."¹⁸

Maryland's vice commission exhibited an obsessive interest in the apparent lawlessness generated by the simultaneous consolidation of the vice enterprise and

Baltimore's "legitimate" industries and viewed the regions as geographically interlocked. Investigators surmised that places of female employment in Baltimore—chiefly clothing, canning, or cigar factories and department stores—dotted the path to the vice district. Baltimore Progressive journalist E. Cookman Baker described what he perceived as the perilous merger of the female laborer's and the prostitute's world: "The streets upon which these houses of shame are located are near the playgrounds of the poor...and through these streets the factory girls pass to and from their work.... Many fall, to rise no more to the things that are pure and good." Baker and his contemporaries objected not primarily to the existence of vice but to its reconfiguration as an inescapable fixture of Baltimore's geography, one that their idealized "virtuous young woman" confronted each day and to which she would invariably succumb.¹⁹

The commission feared, however, that structural similarities between vice and women's work extended beyond the geographic. Investigators finally condemned both the corporate boss and the brothel madam for "capitalizing" on commodified womanhood. The Maryland commission reported that "there are many safe and 'respectable' persons and institutions who, as this investigation shows...contribute to the existence of the system." Madams, in short, were only as successful as the "legitimate" entrepreneurs they cajoled into supporting their trade. Like the business profiteer, madams who colluded with merchants to effect mergers in the red-light districts most "willfully and maniacally converted the wretchedest of all bargains between men and women into an organized industry."²⁰

The vice commission portrayed the madam—usually thirty to fifty years old and "herself a former inmate"—as a figure entirely beyond redemption. "We are disposed to believe that there does not exist a more shrewd, callous and rapacious type," the commission stated, although it gestured at the few madams they judged "kindly and motherly." The madam attended to the daily operation of the house, an endless routine that allowed for few activities "outside of [her] miserable trade," and remained in the trade until forced to retire due to sheer decrepitude. "One," the commission noted, "a poor fat, old rheumatic, [was] still hobbling about with painful stiffened joints and grabbing at the few quarters which the girls hand her." If not begging their subsistence, they might "marry worthless men and spend the rest of their lives quarreling." Paradoxically, the commission also surmised that madams frequently became solvent through their profession. Out of her career, the investigators estimated, a madam might save as much as \$100,000 if she operated one of the better houses that cleared up to \$200 to \$250 a week. One madam who owned three houses with ten girls claimed that each prostitute averaged four men a night and earned \$20 per day, of which the madam exacted one-half of the total earnings. Fifty-cent or one-dollar houses cleared \$75 a week after they paid \$6 in rent, \$14 for a servant, and \$5 for gas and electricity.

In their greedy indifference to the "cost in humanity" of financial profit, admonished the commission, madams embodied in a more dramatic form the values of a corporate economy and society at large, kept running by (male) profiteers. National commentators tended to poise an unprincipled male alliance



FASHIONABLY GOWNED WOMEN FACILITATE THE ENTRANCE INTO THIS COUNTRY OF GIRLS WHO TRAVEL SECOND CLASS ON THE BIG ATLANTIC LINERS.

"Fashionably Dressed Women Facilitate the Entrance into This Country of Girls Who Travel Second Class on the Big Atlantic Liners." Illustration by William Oberhardt from "The Girl that Disappears: The Real Facts About the Social Problem—the Extent of the White-Slave Traffic." *Hampton's Magazine*, 25 (1910): 563. (Enoch Pratt Free Library.)

of pimps, merchants and liquor dealers against the victimized "girl" who produced barely a subsistence from the "cold-blooded traffic." In contrast, Baltimore's investigators ascribed the commercial structure of vice to the madam's cunning, yet they simultaneously preserved their belief in a naturally gentle—and easily beguiled—feminine disposition by treating the shrewd madam as a mutant strain of womanhood: she appeared most often as the ominous androgyne who snared girls into lives of debauchery. Whereas the prostitute was the "girl," the madam was the "old rheumatic," one of the "more intelligent few," one of a "few individuals," a "former inmate," or the "most rapacious type." In effect, she was the (male) "overseer," evocative of exploitative entrepreneurs more broadly construed.²²

The starkest links between the "legitimate" economy and the sex economy surfaced when the madam sought to procure fresh "inmates" for the brothel. It was "her business to acquire and to exhibit the youngest and most innocent girls," the commission said, because the greater the girl's "charm or delicacy, the greater profit she can yield." Once under her "sinister subjection" the madam ensured that "captured" girls were on hand for clients. The commission did not specify the means of procurement, although one madam, who "had no reason to tell anything which was not true," recalled that during her career in the brothel six to eight men

came to her house every week and offered to furnish girls at a price ranging from ten to fifty dollars. In keeping with the rapid in-state migration to Baltimore in the 1910s, the Maryland commission speculated that madams might procure inmates from rural areas by "picturing to the country girl the ease of the life to which they invite her."²³

The commission surmised, however, that most recruitment took place at the confused intersection of legitimate wage work and the "underground" economy with its allure of rapid profit, and in so theorizing conflated the persona of the madam with that of the corporate boss. In some cases, madams apparently cultivated literal bonds with managers or owners of factories and stores employing young women. Two men in an unnamed Baltimore "firm," the commission reported, colluded with a madam who had "free reign over department store girls. Recently she came twice on one day and openly admired one of the young girls and complimented her on her beauty." Alternatively, a madam might wander through stores and lure saleswomen into "the life" with promises of fingers "loaded with diamonds" and "rich men who would give her money and presents,"²⁴ according to the commission's report.

Even if owners or managers did not explicitly create partnerships with madams, the commission implicated them in the vice enterprise, insofar as any suspected sexual transgression or interchange between female employee and boss constituted either a form of prostitution or a prelude to the girl's eventual demise. By this device, the commission identified all bosses as madams, all employees as potential if not actual prostitutes, and all madams as paradigmatic of exploitative bosses. One firm, for example, consisted of five men, two of whom "very much frightened" the female employees: "As soon as one of these men entered the store," the commission reported, "word is passed around among the girls and they are all on the lookout." In several department stores employers purportedly tried to induce "nice girls" to go out with them, sometimes under the promise of presents or increased wages. Floorwalkers and buyers, especially, raised suspicions. "Floorwalker X" had been married three times and called department store girls "dearie or sweetie," although the girls "do not seem to think anything is meant by this freshness, and say he treats them kindly."²⁵

Before even confronting the perils of the licentious department store, girls might have fallen victim to unscrupulous employment agencies or middlemen that for a fee of one dollar, would help convert "an innocent girl into a prostitute." The commission concluded, perhaps hastily, that above-ground agencies in the city only placed male workers—employment agencies presumed that women who inquired for "work" implicitly meant or would accept the job of prostitution. The commission accused hotel and office workers, particularly "negro janitors," as independently facilitating procurement as well. One hotel janitor maintained a list of girls on whom he could call when he had a guest or customer at the hotel who requested a prostitute. Bellboys offered similar lists, one commenting, "last year there were a number of...women who came to the hotel and gave their names and addresses, so that [I] might arrange a meeting with a man for them."²⁶

A motley cast of secondary exploiters shared the ill-gotten profits of commodified womanhood—male procurers, female procurers, cab drivers who lured visiting women into the district, merchants who colluded with madams to overcharge prostitutes, and druggists who offered fraudulent remedies for pregnancy or venereal disease. As with the division of labor in the factory, each of these characters (the “bosses” in the vice system) reaped some profit from the ignorance of female underlings and the abuse of women’s productive energies.

Significantly, the commission cited their interviews with local merchants as “one of the most surprising and painful discoveries of the whole investigation” because “most of the merchants in the city [proved] willing to enter into an agreement...whereby a defenseless group is outrageously cheated.” Investigators posing as madams proposed to all the leading merchants of the city that they overcharge prostitutes for clothes on a kick-back basis. Of the interviews conducted, only seven out of sixty merchants “flatly refused” the offer, thus substantiating the reformer’s pervasive fear that Baltimore’s collective quest for the “almighty dollar” had superseded “the love of beauty.” One investigator reported that merchant “M.B.Y.” “said if she didn’t accept my offer, somebody else would, probably some rich Jew who did not need the money as badly as she did. She herself was a perfectly moral woman, but in a strictly business matter she thought her dealing with my class of women was justified.” M.A.M. responded that “he would add 20 percent to all gowns made. He asked me whether the girls looked and acted like ladies, because he would not want his fashionable trade to know he did business with the ‘sporting class.’ He said of course one person’s money is as good as another and he would be glad to have my trade.”²⁷ From these exchanges the commission surmised that leading merchants colluded with madams to such an extent that their “legitimate” business interests had seamlessly fused with the corrupt.

The vice commission’s investigation of “business conditions” in Baltimore suggested that institutions buttressing vice embraced the entire spectrum of the consolidated urban economy, and that employers who utilized female productive energies for profit often explicitly colluded with madams in “shamelessly exploiting women” for illegitimate financial gain. More interestingly, however, the commission situated female wage work along a continuum of vice-related activities, such that the salesgirl who endured a floorwalker’s “suggestive comments” was judged to be involved in an exploitative sexual transgression vaguely linked or preparatory to prostitution. Finally, it shifted the definitional boundaries of “vice” from a sexual barter or exchange for explicit financial reward to any morally or sexually ambiguous interaction that occurred as women participated in the wage or market economy. In sum, the reformer’s treatment of employment conditions in Baltimore both literally and figuratively conflated structures of “legitimate” business enterprise with the illegitimate red-light industry.

Reginald Kauffman’s *The House of Bondage*, a muckraking novel that went through four editions in the early 1900s, explicitly and sensationally made the connection between feminine virtue, prostitution, “wage slavery,” and an unprotective, corporate culture which the Maryland commission described in more

cautious terms. "Anything like financial independence was...impossible" in the brothel, Kauffman wrote, for "the slaves of [the madams] were as much slaves as any mutilated black man of the Congo or any toiling white man of the factory.... The social system was too mighty. [The prostitute] could not prevail against it."²⁸ Although Progressive reformers averred from any explicit critique of capitalism, they consistently characterized prostitutes as ensnared in the same expansive net of social ills that entrapped the working girl, and more generally assumed that any female productive labor commodified women's sexual nature and thus paid a "wage of sin." Reformers cared about the prostitute in large part not because they viewed her as metaphorically similar to female workers but rather because they did not perceive many meaningful, literal distinctions between the structures of urban sexual commerce and other degrading forms of women's wage work.



Young women's uses of their bodies as marketable objects, whether in the brothel or the factory, profoundly disrupted Victorian, middle-class gender identities, which were predicated on a separation between the "public," where men labored, and the privatized feminine domain of the family—a haven from the heartless world of the labor market. Because reformers had few means by which to understand the moral implications of "respectable," middle-class women "working out," they tended to evaluate and define women's experiences in all work environments through the prism of prostitution, assuming that any wage-paying work for young women entailed their sexual commodification and subsequent "dehumanization." Social reformer Anne Brown, for instance, characterized the "evil" of both prostitution and women's work as one of "impersonality—the regarding of persons as things."²⁹

In the act of utilizing their labor power for discrete, mechanical tasks, women relinquished what to the Victorian sensibility had always made them human—their identities as mothers and wives rather than laborers. As Margaret Drier charged in 1914, the working girl, modelling herself after the prostitute, "found it easy to do as the unmoral kind had always done—she entered into the barter and sale of [herself] for an income."³⁰

Because they viewed prostitution as the metaphor for women's work in the public sphere, members of Maryland's vice commission devoted two volumes of their report solely to the "industrial conditions" in Baltimore that purportedly encouraged vice and nebulous "moral lapses" among women workers. Without question, below-subsistence wages in department stores and tobacco factories prompted many young women living away from home to at least occasionally accept money or gifts from "fellows" in order to make ends meet or simply to enjoy an evening of "city pleasures" that would break monotonous work routines. Baltimore's investigators explicitly rejected primarily attributing young women's moral failings to dangerously unfair wages, however. Instead the commission

"exposed" subtler causes of vice they viewed as intrinsic to the types of work and work environments created by factory production and consolidated industry.³¹

The commission conducted an exhaustive investigation of places employing women to illustrate what they saw as the conflation of overt prostitution and "respectable" work. Office work especially outraged Baltimore's reformers as an insidiously-disguised prostitution. "We found nothing more reprehensible than some of the immoral practices of a number of Baltimore's esteemed and prominent business men," the commission reported. "The practices of the red-light district are pale and mild compared to the acts of these Christian gentlemen." An "attorney of some prominence," for example, had told an investigator that he would not hire a girl unless he could "have relations" with her, and female office workers interviewed often reported having affairs with executives. "S.O.N.," a private secretary earning seven dollars a week, "had additional income from a businessman in her building," who gave her money and sent her roses. "They have been together to dinner at the Madison," an investigator recounted, and the "girl knows all about the private places in Baltimore."³² An employer's "seductive" behavior toward a secretary might today constitute sexual harassment because the meanings of women's jobs are more carefully drawn and distinguished from the explicitly sexual labor of prostitution. Baltimore's reformers in the early twentieth century, however, made few meaningful distinctions between women's work and sexual barter. Investigators characterized the office affair as indigenous to the work environment itself—a "commercial bargain [in which] one buys what the other has to sell...until the commodity diminishes in value." By the same logic, waitressing appeared a dangerously imprecise profession to investigators, who speculated that the ambiguous meanings of "tips" and "gifts" from customers presented "an open door to immorality." Waitress "R.B.N." had been taken out twice for "immoral purposes" by men who frequented her restaurant, and she knew about contraception.³³

Waitressing and office work, however, absorbed a comparatively select subgroup of Baltimore's female working population. By 1915 Baltimore boasted several mammoth department stores that satisfied an extravagant array of needs and whims. The commission examined three stores, each employing from six hundred to seven hundred young women, who would parade out of work at 10 P.M. on Saturday nights "all dolled up to meet men at the front door to accompany them to dance halls." Department stores "seduced and endangered" Baltimore's young women, the commission theorized, because they chaotically confused social boundaries. The salesgirl each day fondled beguiling, luxurious merchandise she could ill afford, women worked closely with male store managers, "the colored help ate in the same room with white people," women's dressing rooms were congested, and "on bargain days there is a rush of all kinds of people" who exposed young women to relentless sexual temptation. "The men are seen, more or less openly, to handle the girls in the most disgusting and vulgar fashion and are never called down," the commission decried. Telephone exchanges in public places, similarly,

threw "the operator into contact with a number of men," such that the women "are known to be more or less immoral."³⁴

Even sex-segregated, enclosed work environments ignited investigators' suspicions. Baltimore's tobacco factories, employing over three thousand women, permitted "hardened" older women to mingle with—and finally corrupt—the young. "A woman employed in the factory says that she has worked with common prostitutes but has never heard them talk as do these young girls," the commission reported. Nearly all the girls adorned themselves with jewelry that they wore very conspicuously and tirelessly recounted "which pieces were given them by individual men in much the same fashion as an Indian displays the scalps in his belt." By conflating the tobacco operative's "leisure" activities—her mercenary "scalping" of men—with her factory labors, the commission underscored that even work as regimented and ostensibly unambiguous as tobacco processing existed along a spectrum of urban sexual commerce, and that the blending of classes and moral "types" in the workplace encouraged eventual overt prostitution.³⁵

It bears emphasis that Baltimore's reformers did not enthusiastically endorse the popular and statistically evident conclusion that low wages encouraged women's "bartering" with men for dinners, gifts and, sometimes, explicit monetary reward. Instead, investigators condemned the very phenomenon of women's wage work—however generously remunerated—produced by consolidated capital and large-scale industry. Office workers, waitresses, salesgirls and telephone operators often fulfilled such diffuse and ill-specified tasks for employers that the commission probably correctly identified a nebulous grey area between wage work and sexual work characteristic of Baltimore's emerging "service" industries in the early 1900s. Significantly, however, investigators defined "pay" in such all-inclusive terms (e.g., from explicit wages to "gifts" such as dinners and roses) that they effectively erased differences between "legitimate" wages and the "wages of sin." Along these lines, they also described all premarital sexual relationships as entailing some form of economic exchange in which the woman accrued a wage, however intangible, for her "services." Office worker "Miss N," for example, who worked for a prominent businessman downtown, reported that her boss had given her a diamond ring and taken her out several times to dinner.³⁶ Because Baltimore's elite reformers had difficulty envisioning a sexual practice—today recognized as "dating"—between the extremities of prostitution and the wifhood-motherhood tandem, they could only view "Miss N's" affair as a commercialized sexual exchange. The practice of dating may have begun with the urban working class in the early 1900s, but it would not emerge as a sanctioned cultural institution until the late 1920s.

Although reformers generally did not recognize distinctions between prostitution and dating, or leisure activities and the "workaday world," Baltimore's young working women upheld their own criterion of vice and virtue, one that distinguished between prostitution and having a "fellow" on precisely the grounds that if a woman labored, her wage derived only from her job, and her activities in amusement parks, dance halls, and saloons constituted a realm of pleasures distinct from "work" altogether.

One investigator, stationed at an amusement park on the Back River, recorded the nuances of an exchange with a "charity girl," the commission's label for women who consented to sexual relations for little or no reward aside from perhaps an "ice cream or a glass of beer." The woman invited the investigator to go out with her one afternoon, and when he "asked her price," she seemed quite upset, and said, "I'm no common whore. I'm not looking for money," and hinted that she might accept a dress. For this young woman, "gifts" and presents constituted morally legitimate tokens of affection from men, stridently demarcated from monetary payments gained through the woman's "real" work in a department store. In distinguishing between salaries and gifts or "treats," women construed their sexual relations in terms subtler than the Progressive's dichotomy. For them, Baltimore's dance halls and parks created a third, sexually exciting realm separate from both the (private) family and the (public) workplace. Mazie, a twenty-one-year-old cigar maker, assured an investigator that although her "fellow" might buy her a drink or treat her, "she had never taken a cent in [her] life" and merely had a "regular Saturday night friend to dance with." "O.R.Y," employed as a hatter, went with boys two or three times a week, and saw that she'd never get a dance partner if she "went around prim." She underscored, however, that she "could not pick up the nerve to ask for money," because then—and presumably only then—"the fellows put you down as a 'whore.'"³⁷



In their analysis of the sexual economy, Baltimore's reformers assigned moral meanings to various forms of female labor and leisure in an economically transformed city. Their tales of moral peril and demise implicitly reaffirmed marriage and motherhood as appropriate, "safe" arenas for women's labors. Meanwhile, their conflation of various forms of female wage labor, from prostitution to retail sales, redefined "prostitution" as a phenomenon endemic to any contractual relations between men and women outside of the marital contract. Significantly, the Progressives depicted the difference between legitimate and illicit female employment as one of degree rather than kind. Although the prostitute was more dramatically marginalized from proper society, the working woman also suffered the demoralizing effects of "industrial" prostitution. The anti-vice investigation of Baltimore's most marginalized women, then, ironically led reformers back to the heart of the city's socioeconomic transformation—it expressed larger anxieties concerning the implications of women's wage work in the transitional period from a Victorian middle-class morality based on the "cult of domesticity" to a sexual morality more characteristic of life in the "modern manner." As the Maryland vice crusade illustrates, a city's response to economic change and class reconfigurations always involves an attempt to reconcile pre-existing notions of social order—principally, ideas of appropriate gender roles and gendered notions of "work"—with material exigencies that often render these ideals unrealistic and contestable.

NOTES

1. The Maryland anti-vice campaign was part of the larger "progressive" political agenda. Progressives, both in Baltimore and nationwide, were a comparatively elite group of businessmen and members of the emerging professional classes concerned with the erosion of traditional sources of economic and moral authority in the cities. Although profoundly ambiguous, Progressives tended toward anticorporatism and proclaimed themselves champions of the struggling entrepreneurial classes. Their social causes included fair wages, black rights, labor reform, public utilities laws and pure food acts. Although the Baltimore Social Register listed only 1.2 percent of the city's total population, it provided 59 percent of the Progressive reform leaders, 77 percent of whom were "old stock" (at least third-generation) Americans. All white and 73 percent Protestant, Progressive leaders in Maryland were mostly native Baltimoreans. Seventy percent had college degrees and 68 percent advanced degrees—often in law and medicine—in an era when only 4 percent of American people attended any college at all. Of the twenty-eight women predominant in the movement, 61 percent were listed on the social register and had careers as doctors, nurses, teachers or social workers. See James B. Crooks, *Politics and Progress: The Rise of Urban Progressivism in Baltimore, 1895 to 1911* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), and Nicholas Burckel, "Governor Austin Crothers and Progressive Reform in Maryland, 1900-1912," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 74 (1979): 184-201.

2. The Maryland Vice Commission Report, 1915, 5 vols., Enoch Pratt Free Library Archives, 1:375. Hereafter referred to as *MVCR*.

3. *MVCR*, 2:4; 4:68; 3:102.

4. Quoted in Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), p. 140.

5. A few scholars have perceptively examined prostitution in the nineteenth century, including Timothy Gilfoyle, "Strumpets and Misogynists: Brothel 'Riots' and the Transformation of Prostitution in Antebellum New York City," *New York History*, 68 (1987): 43-67; Christine Stansell, "Men, Women and the Uses of the Streets," *Feminist Studies*, 8 (1982): 311-33; Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1780-1860* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986); Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*; and Anne Butler's study of prostitution on the western frontier, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Sorrow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Stansell emphasizes prostitution as one of many improvisational means of securing a subsistence practiced by poor women in antebellum New York City. Gilfoyle provides an analysis of prostitution as the locus of middle-class fears concerning women's public persona in mid-nineteenth century New York.

6. On middle-class definitions of femininity and the Victorian "cult of true womanhood," see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York 1790-1860* (New York:

Cambridge University Press, 1981); Ryan, *Women in Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), and Carroll-Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Although domesticity, as described in these studies, was idealized by the middle class as the proper feminine realm and indeed the defining characteristic of respectable femininity, women converted this ideology as well to legitimize political and social reform work, an aspect of Victorian gender definitions that this paper will not explore.

7. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), discusses the geographic and sexual transformation of working-class urban culture in New York City at the turn of the century. My own analysis of working-class leisure in Baltimore draws on some of her observations but will attempt to explain, more precisely, what class-specific ideas of wage work enabled reformers and young working women to develop sometimes radically divergent ideas about sexual virtue and vice. See also William Trufant, *The Social Emergency* (New York: Doubleday Page and Co., 1914), p. 83.

8. Suzanne Ellery Greene, *Baltimore: An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, Calif.: Windsor Publications, 1980), p. 82.

9. Charles Hirschfeld, *Baltimore, 1870-1900: Studies in Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1941), p. 41.

10. Hirschfeld, *Baltimore*, pp. 77, 82. Gary L. Browne, *Baltimore in the Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), argues that the move to upland districts occurred in the early nineteenth century, although observers in 1915 ascribed much of this demographic shift to the sprawl of consolidated industries (*Baltimore Evening Sun*, 2 July 1897).

11. Changes in the corporate-industrial structure spawned population and class reconfigurations as well. From 1870 to 1900, Baltimore's population increased by 100 percent to 450,000. Less than 10 percent of the population had been born abroad, a characteristic unique to Baltimore. Of the immigrant population, Germans predominated until the 1910s, when the "new" immigration from southern and Eastern Europe became evident. The state Bureau of Industrial Statistics in 1912 reported that of 28,357 immigrants to arrive at the Port of Baltimore, 15,105, or 53 percent, were Russian. Significantly, comparatively few immigrants actually settled in Baltimore—most sought greater economic opportunities in the larger northern cities or the West. Only 2,552 immigrants arriving in 1912 gave Baltimore as their final destination, 666 of whom were categorized as "Hebrew" and 323 "Russian."

12. Hirschfeld, *Baltimore*, p. 47, Linda Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 13; State of Maryland, Bureau of Industrial Statistics, *Report*, 1912, p. 74. For more information on women's labors in Baltimore, see Roderick Ryon, "'Human Creatures' Lives": Baltimore Women and Work in Factories, 1880-1917," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 83 (1988): 346-65.

13. Hirschfeld, *Baltimore*, p. 59; Bureau of Industrial Statistics, *Report*, 1912, p. 64; see also State of Maryland, *Industrial Survey of Baltimore*, 1915.

14. Theodore W. Durr, *Baltimore People, Baltimore Places* (Baltimore: University of Baltimore, 1980), p. 60.

15. MVCR, 2:11, 15, 17. On working women in the early 1900s more generally, see especially Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Sarah Eisenstein, *Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses* (London: RKP, 1983).

16. "The Women's Civic League, 1911" scrapbook, box 17, Warfield Papers, Johns Hopkins University Archives, Baltimore. Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), and Mark Conolly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), are the two most comprehensive studies of Progressivism and anti-vice. Neither discusses Baltimore specifically. See also Vern Bullough, *Prostitution: A Social History* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1978), p. 200, and "Man's Commerce in Souls," *McClure's*, 41 (August 1913): 137.

18. MVCR, 1:9, 1.

19. E. Cookman Baker, "The Victim" (Baltimore: privately published, 1916).

20. MVCR, 1:10.

21. MVCR., 10, 12, 13, 9.

22. Clifford Roe, *The Girl Who Disappeared* (Chicago: American Bureau of Moral Education, 1914), p. 72; "The Ways, Wages and Wherefores of the Scarlet Woman," *Hearst's*, 24 (1913): 173; MVCR, 1:98, 13.

23. MVCR, 1:10, 11, 16, 18.

24. MVCR, 2:48; 1:18.

25. MVCR 2:14, 3, 27, 37.

26. MVCR 2:30, 37.

27. MVCR 2:46, 44, 57, 56.

28. Reginald Kauffman, *The House of Bondage* (New Jersey: Gregg Press, 1910), pp. 69, 372.

29. Elizabeth Butler, *Women in the Trades* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1909), p. 61; Anne Brown, "Sex Education at the Y.W.C.A.," *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 1 (1914): 582; Helen Campbell, *Prisoners of Poverty* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890), p. 354.

30. Margaret Drier, "One Aspect of the Menace of Low Wages," *Journal of Social Hygiene*, 1 (1914): 596.

31. See Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures," in *The Powers of Desire*, ed. by Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp.74-87.

32. MVCR, 2:95, 97, 99.

33. MVCR 2:128, 115.

34. MVCR 2:39, 32, 76.

35. MVCR 2:56.

36. MVCR 2:104. There are numerous other references to "office romance" in volume two.

37. MVCR 1:331, 198; 2: 74.