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The Helen Jewett Murder: Violence, Gender, and Sexual Licentiousness in Antebellum America

Patricia Cline Cohen

One Sunday morning early in April of 1836, a prostitute who called herself Helen Jewett was found murdered in her bed by the landlady, who kept the elegant brothel on Thomas Street in New York City where Helen had lived and worked.[1] The victim had a three-inch gash in her forehead, and her bed, which had been set on fire, smoldered and smoked up her room. The police were called, and within hours they had narrowed their suspicion to a nineteen-year-old clerk named Richard P. Robinson, who had frequently visited Helen and had been keeping company with her for over a year. He was her last known visitor on the night of the murder; a witness swore she had actually seen him in Helen's room at 11:00 P.M. Robinson was roused from sleep at 7:00 A.M. at his own boarding house, about a mile away, and was taken to the murder scene where he maintained an oddly impassive demeanor. Just once he denied guilt, with a protest that a such a crime would destroy his brilliant prospects. A coroner's jury was assembled at 9:00 A.M. to view the near-naked, charred body and to hear statements from the other women in the house. A cloak and a hatchet found in the backyard of the house were linked to Robinson by witnesses. From this suggestive, yet still circumstantial evidence, the coroner's jury concluded that Helen Jewett had died from a blow to the head with a hatchet held by the hands of Richard P. Robinson. Robinson was bound over for trial and sent to Bellevue jail.[2]

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[2] Basic facts of the crime were established at the coroner's jury and at the trial; official manuscript notes on the former are in the District Attorney's Indictment Files at the Municipal Archives in New York City; the trial proceedings taken down verbatim were

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These are the bare outlines of a murder case that within days was reported in newspapers all over the eastern states. A survey taken that spring of one block in Manhattan containing twenty-two brothels showed twenty deaths, some of them violent, of young women during the preceding three months.[3] Clearly the demise of a prostitute by itself was not earth-shaking news. But the Jewett murder instantly generated mass excitement and widespread publicity that focused on the unusual personalities of the two principle players. Jewett was represented in print to be a classy, attractive, literary young woman with no apparent regrets about her chosen life. Once dead, she became a celebrity—but a rather problematic celebrity for the moral instruction of the young. And Robinson seemed an unlikely murderer; he was no rowdy gang member but instead the son of a respectable and politically prominent Connecticut family. Early news accounts claimed that his character was "irreproachable."

By the time young Robinson came to trial, two months later in early June, twenty out-of-town newspapers had sent reporters to cover the courtroom melodrama. Newspapers from Maine to Mississippi were reporting and discussing the case. Information the more respectable newspapers declined to print was reported with enthusiasm in the penny press and in a barrage of chapbooks—cheap pamphlets—each purporting to tell the true story of the beautiful, sinning Helen or the handsome, yet perhaps dreadfully wicked, Robinson. Graphic artists in New York City rushed to print likenesses of both young people. The ones of Robinson exaggerated his youth, while the ones of Helen emphasized her sexuality; one engraving featured her corpse in demure repose in a smoldering bed, with naked breasts dominating the center of the picture.

The journalistic competition to get the scoop on this unfortunate pair generated an extraordinary amount of documentation, some true and some fictional. As a result, the murder case provides historians with unusually rich evidence about an antebellum subculture of glamorous

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widely reported in newspapers and published in pamphlet form, *The Trial of Richard P. Robinson for the Murder of Helen Jewett* (New York, 1836). News reports in 1836 called the victim variously Helen or Ellen; most modern accounts have opted for Ellen. Complaint documents, however, bearing Jewett's signature in Police Office files in the Municipal Archives, New York, clearly show that she considered her first name to be Helen.

[3] "More Must Be Done! A Collection of Facts," *The Journal of Public Morals* 1 (1 May 1836):1. This journal was a short-lived publication issued by the male moral reform group, the Seventh Commandment Society, loosely associated with the New York Female Moral Reform Society. The Seventh Commandment Society had a male membership consisting mainly of ministers from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York. For the general patterns of rising violence against prostitutes in New York City in the 1830s, see Timothy Gilfoyle, "Strumpets and Misogynists: Brothel 'Riots' and the Transformation of Prostitution in Antebellum New York City," *New York History* 68 (January 1987): 45–65.

vice. For example, the reading tastes of the victim were ascertained by one enterprising editor; James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald,* who toured the death scene and examined the titles of the books on her bedside table. Helen subscribed to the *Knickerbocker,* a fashionable literary periodical and owned books by Sir Walter Scott, Lytton Bulwer, and Lord Byron (whose picture was hung on her wall). Another paper reported that she kept a diary, wrote poetry, and played the guitar. While there is no clear proof that a diary in fact ever existed, there are nearly ninety letters to and from the victim, which were found in her room by the police on the day of the murder. Robinson kept a diary, a self-indulgent and opinionated record of his daily activities, and part of it was published in the weeks before the trial.[4]

New Yorkers exhibited much interest in the case. Between April and June, packs of young men, probably clerks, roamed the streets of New York City with Robinson cloaks and Robinson caps, proclaiming their sympathy for the accused clerk. But at least one working-class gang adopted a different hat called the "Helen Jewett mourner," a white fur hat with black crepe ribbons.[5] Female street activity surfaced in only one report: a throng of young women descended on the victim's half-burned bedstead when it was junked at curbside and carried away shards of wood in a kind of eucharistic memorial to the slain woman.[6] It is quite likely that they were other young prostitutes of the Thomas Street neighborhood.[7] Large crowds gathered at the jail, the police office, and the courthouse, hoping for a glimpse of Robinson. On one night a skittery crowd numbering several hundred assembled at the brothel on

[4] *A Sketch of the Life of Francis P. Robinson, the alleged Murderer of Helen Jewett, containing Copious Extracts from his Journal* (New York, 1836); later editions corrected the title name to Richard.

[5] The New York *Herald* reported that the Chichester gang was sporting this hat; 15 July 1836. A decade later the "Helen Jewett mourner" hat was worn by some Democratic party partisans in New York, one of whom claimed years later that cartoons of Andrew Jackson sometimes depicted him in the same white fur hat. ⇒ Alexander Saxton, "George Wilkes: The Transformation of a Radical Ideology," *American Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1981): 441.

[6] "Ellen Jewett," *The Illuminator,* 18 May 1836, 112.

[7] Three brothels were clustered together on Thomas Street between Chapel and Hudson. The rest of the block was largely occupied by black families. Helen Jewett had lived in a series of fancy houses on Duane, Leonard, and Chapel streets, all within a few blocks of the Thomas Street house. See *Longworth's Directory of New York City,* 1835–36 and 1836–37; and Federal Manuscript Census, 1830, 5th Ward, New York City. In the 1830s, this region west of Broadway and to the north of City Hall was the location of the most elegant prostitution establishments. For a geography of the trade, see Timothy Gilfoyle, "The Urban Geography of Commercial Sex: Prostitution in New York City, 1790–1860," *Journal of Urban History* 13 (August 1987): 371–93. For a more contemporary description of several establishments, including one Jewett once lived in, see [Harrison Gray Buchanan], *Asmodeus; or Legends of New York* (New York, 1848).

Thomas Street, after reports that Jewett's ghost had been spotted in a window.[8]

By the time of the trial, partisans of both the victim and the accused held fast to their versions of the case. The five-day trial was reported verbatim in many papers. Rumors had it that the jury was packed, that key witnesses lied, and that privilege—both class and gender—triumphed unfairly over justice. The jury was out only fifteen minutes, and when the verdict of acquittal was announced, a courtroom full of young men broke into cheers.

For years after 1836, the Jewett murder legend continued to grow. In Boston a wax works exhibit of world-class criminals featured expensively clad models of Jewett and Robinson; an observer noted how "decent-looking" women clustered around and stared at the figure of Helen.[9] Chapbooks claiming to have new evidence appeared periodically, and in 1845 the story was turned into a dime novel with an elaborate plot showing how someone other than Robinson could have been the murderer.[10] In 1848 the *National Police Gazette* ran a multipart serialization on the murder, a historical fiction with invented conversations and events seamlessly woven together with the known facts in the case. The *Police Gazette* serial then became a book in 1849, which was reissued several times during the next few decades.[11] In the twentieth century, the case has been rendered into historical fiction three times.[12] A few historians have examined the case for what it reveals about the history of crime literature or the history of journalism, but no one has studied the extensive documentation to discover what it reveals about class and gender in antebellum America.[13]

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[8] New York *Herald*, 14 May 1836.

[9] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1972), 176–78.

[10] J.H. Ingraham, *Frank Rivers, or, The Dangers of the Town* (New York, 1845).

[11] George Wilkes, *The Lives of Helen Jewett and Richard P. Robinson* (New York, 1849).

[12] Manuel Komroff, *A New York Tempest* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1932); Raymond Paul, *The Thomas Street Horror* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); and Gore Vidal, *Burr* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), who used the crime as a subplot.

[13] David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860: A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957), 161–70; Oliver Carlson, *The Man Who Made News: James Gordon Bennett* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), 143–67; James L. Crouthamel, "James Gordon Bennett, the New York *Herald*, and the Development of Newspaper Sensationalism," *New York History* 54 (July 1973), 294–316; Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 57–65; David Ray Papke, *Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830–1900* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1987), 41–43; and Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 183–84. Christine Stansell does not discuss the case in her book, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986), but her chapter on "Women on the Town" provides an excellent background

Why did this murder become so fascinating to the public of 1836? The answer to that question may at first appear simple, for today horrible murders and especially ones with a sex-crime angle have a guaranteed audience, both as news stories and as nightly television entertainment. Most modern historians of journalism have been content to attribute the murder's notoriety to the new breed of newspaper editors of the penny dailies who were competing for and building up their readership by printing sensationalist articles.[14] But sensationalism alone is an inadequate as well as ahistorical explanation, for it takes as a given what should be regarded as problematic, the popularity of erotic violence.

Recent feminist interpretations by Jane Caputi, Judith Walkowitz, Deborah Cameron, and Elizabeth Frazer of sexual murders have theorized that such crimes are fundamentally about male domination and patriarchal control of women. These scholars argue that the most extreme form, the serial killer who sexually assaults or mutilates his victims, is basically a modern phenomenon, originating with Jack the Ripper in 1888 and imitated by multitudes of rippers and stalkers thoughout the last hundred years, the century of Western women's emancipation. The high news value of such crimes permits a widespread male readership, some small segment of which identifies with the killer, even to the point of sending anonymous letters to the police falsely claiming credit for the crimes; copycat murders sometimes result. The publicity also serves to amplify terror for women, encouraging them to notice that their normal protective precautions against violence might be woefully inadequate.[15]

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for the story, especially her discussion of the two antebellum images of prostitutes, innocent victim versus sexual jade.

[14] Carlson, *The Man Who Made News;* Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1989); and John D. Stevens, *Wretched Excess: Sensationalism in the New York Newspapers* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming). The penny press in New York City and elsewhere was just taking shape in 1836, competing for readers with the more staid mercantile and political party newspapers that charged six cents per copy. The New York *Sun,* for example, had just started publishing in 1833; the *Transcript* had begun in mid 1834, and the *Herald* in May 1835. In Boston, the *Daily Times* began in February 1836 and by summer had a circulation of twelve thousand, larger than any other Boston paper. The Philadelphia *Public Ledger* started publishing in March 1836 and rode the Jewett wave to high circulation. In New York, because of the Jewett coverage, the *Herald*'s daily circulation went from five thousand to between ten thousand to fifteen thousand. Figures are from Willard Grosvenor Bleyer, *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton-Mifflin, 1927), 154–84.

[15] Jane Caputi, *The Age of Sex Crime* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 198→ Caputi, "The Sexual Politics of Murder," *Gender & Society* 3 (December 1989): 437–→ Judith Walkowitz, "Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Fall 1982):543–74; Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer,

The Jewett murder predates the Ripper tradition by fifty years and in several respects appears to have been a typical crime of passion or anger, where the victim and her probable murderer knew each other intimately, and the moment of murder was not accompanied by sexual assault.[16] Thus it seems to have little in common with Ripper-style misogynist murders, instead belonging to a much longer tradition of domestic violence pushed to the extreme, wherein crazed husbands dispatched wives in moments of fury.[17] Yet key features of the case prefigure the web of associations—sexualized victim, fiendishly clever criminal—that later became the hallmarks of gender-motivated hate crimes. As one of the first highly publicized sexual murders, the Jewett-Robinson case helped define the categories that would structure the experience of eroticized murder.[18]

In 1836 the categories were not fixed; it was possible to generate disagreement about male and female complicity in sexual sin. The issues raised by the murder were ones ripe for discussion in the 1830s, which helps to explain the enormous interest in the case; it was more than just a chance for a lurid peep at brothel life.

One issue was the problem of unsupervised young people, a phenomenon of greater dimension then than at any previous time in American history. Teenage boys were migrating in large numbers to cities to take up training in commercial establishments; Robinson was fifteen when he arrived in New York and started living in a boarding house on his own.[19] Girls too were more mobile than ever before, but their job opportunities, chiefly factory work or domestic service, usually entailed supervision of their private life as a condition of employment. Girls like Helen Jewett, however, who made up the "frail sisterhood," enjoyed complete freedom from supervision of any kind. Many such girls lived not only in the big cities but also in large towns like Portland, Maine and Buffalo, New York. In January 1836 a chaplain in upstate New

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The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder (New York: New York University Press, 1987).

[16] The autopsy concluded that she was murdered while asleep, and there was no sign of struggle or other disturbance of the body. District Attorney's Indictment Files, "Case of Richard P. Robinson," Municipal Archives, New York City.

[17] Karen Halttunen, "Early American Murder Narratives: The Birth of Horror," (Paper delivered at the meeting of the Organization of American Historians, St. Louis, Mo. April 1989).

[18] Only one sex murder prior to the Jewett case garnered as extensive and lasting publicity: the Avery case of Fall River, Massachusetts, where a minister was charged with the murder of young and pregnant Sarah Cornell; see David R. Kasserman, *Fall River Outrage: Life, Murder, and Justice in Early Industrial New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

[19] Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1975).

York estimated that seven hundred to one thousand such girls regularly traveled on the Erie canal, meeting customers and spreading "ruinous pollution."[20] The Jewett-Robinson story was a story of too much freedom, of lack of familial control.

A second and related controversial issue was the problem of illicit sex. Was it on the rise? Was aggressive, active sexuality to be expected from young men, or did licentiousness make Robinson into some kind of monster? There were at least two large, national groups of reformers arguing for total chastity for single men, the Female Moral Reform Society based in New York City and the Seventh Commandment Society based mainly in Providence, Rhode Island; they both published newspapers that followed the Jewett case closely.[21]

Female sexuality was equally questioned. Was Helen an innocent victim or a willing participant in a sexually permissive subculture? Here was a woman who appeared to be accomplished, intelligent, well-educated, attractive, confident—and highly sexual at the same time. How had she come to be a prostitute? Was it really possible for a talented young woman to opt out of the cult of domesticity and fashion for herself a life of sexual experimentation? Was her murder perhaps a punishment for her sinful ways?

The public discourse about the Jewett case resonated with and in turn gave shape to emergent cultural constructions of male and female sexuality. A close look at the half-dozen different representations of Helen Jewett's life illuminates the terms of the public debate about female sexuality; the real background of Jewett shows us something about the constraints, opportunities, and choices open to a clever young woman in 1836. In the first two weeks after the murder, several New York newspapers presented background stories about Helen Jewett. At least six different versions of her life-story materialized, and four of these got extensive treatment in chapbooks, inexpensive pamphlets ranging in length from sixteen to fifty pages and anonymously authored. In the 1840s two more versions appeared.

One account, titled *The Life of Ellen Jewett,* claimed her true name was Maria Benson, a virtuous Boston orphan sent to boarding school

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[20] "Address on Moral Reform," *Journal of Public Morals* 1 (1 October 1836):1.

[21] The women published *The Advocate of Moral Reform* starting in 1833; the men published *The Journal of Public Morals.* On the history of the moral reformers, see Larry H. Whiteaker, "Moral Reform and Prostitution in New York City, 1830–1860" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1977), and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23 (October 1971): 562–84.

by her kindly guardian.[22] At the school she was courted by the evil son of a Boston merchant, who soon seduced her and persuaded her to run away with him. Her guardian took her back, even after her ruin, and initiated suit against the seducer. But the irrevocably stained Maria felt so uncomfortable amid respectable society that she left home on her own, to spare her guardian the shame of harboring a fallen woman. She struck out for New York, intending to look for honest work. On her first night there she was befriended by a man in the street who promised her protection but instead took her to a house of assignation. By the end of the story, this man turns out to be the illegitimate son of her kindly guardian. At this point the modern reader is now disinclined to believe the pamphlet, with its formula-novel plot and conventional seduction scenario.[23]

But in fact there are kernels of truth sprinkled throughout the story; the author probably believed the story. Helen Jewett did go by the name of Maria Benson, but neither alias was her birth name. The story of the Boston boarding school and the seduction Helen made up herself in 1834; the author uncritically accepted it. It fit well with the stories of sympathetic heroines in novels, which is probably why this version of Helen Jewett got such wide publicity. But it was largely fictional, a creative lie made up by Helen when she appeared in police court to press charges of assault against a young man who kicked her in the Park Theater one night. A reporter at court was captivated by her beauty and poise. He questioned her about her background and printed the Boston boarding school story in the "Police Office" columns of his paper, presumably as a moral lesson of how an innocent girl could unwittingly become a prostitute.[24] Our murder victim was evidently a resourceful young woman, both in demanding judicial redress for the ungentlemanly kick in the theater and in spinning out a classic seduction story to the reporter.[25]

Another account of Helen's background, titled *An Authentic Biography of the Late Helen Jewett, A Girl of the Town,* claimed her true name was Maria Benson, presented her as an innocent victim, and portrayed her

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[22] *The Life of Ellen Jewett; Illustrative of Her Adventures with Very Important Incidents, from her Seduction to the Period of her Murder, Together with Various Extracts from Her Journal, Correspondence, and Poetical Effusions* (New York, 1836).

[23] Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), discusses in detail the literary conventions of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century seduction novel.

[24] New York *Transcript,* 30 June 1834.

[25] Jewett swore out complaints against assailants at least two other times in the police court; Police Office files, Municipal Archives. Gilfoyle argues that prostitutes in the 1830s made extensive use of the police court system to protect themselves, Gilfoyle, "Strumpets and Misogynists."

as an orphan from Maine raised in the family of Judge Western, sent to a boarding school in Portland and there seduced by a law student named Lemuel Lawton.[26] In this version of the story, the evil Lawton pursued the fifteen-year-old Maria for a year. He finally succeeded in his objective by plying her with *Don Juan* and other Byronic works and then pushing her over the brink with an unnamed "medical preparation." The ruined girl fled to Boston where her guardian, Judge Western, pursued her. She declined to return home with him, on the grounds that "she did not consider herself worthy of the favor of any of her friends, and all she wished was for them to forget her." In this version of the story, however, instead of accepting her fate, Maria threw herself into her new life with enthusiasm and became a courtesan of "ardent temperament." She moved from Boston to New York in 1829 and lived with a series of rich men as a mistress. On the side she did a profitable business in sex commerce and pursued her whims with particular men. She pursued a doctor whose clientele included prostitutes. The author of *An Authentic Biography* printed two letters Maria wrote to the doctor, imploring him to visit her any evening since he was the only man who appreciated that she was not "wholly depraved" and actually had a mind. The author reports that the doctor was smitten, "struck with her evidences of intellect and education"; indeed it seems likely that the author of the pamphlet was none other than the doctor. The story of Lawton the law student and the Portland boarding school sounds like a story Helen was capable of creating, yet with some accurate details. Clearly the author knew Helen well. The author, sympathetic to Helen, called her "a most extraordinary individual . . . a brilliant and fascinating prostitute. How deeply is it to be regretted that a girl of her extraordinary mental powers should not have had the watchful guardianship of a mother, at a time when the passions are bursting forth in their full strength."[27]

Complete strangers with no knowledge of Jewett did not hesitate to join the pamphlet bandwagon. One fabricated version appeared in Boston, allegedly written by her first true and pure lover, who claimed it to be a "Sketch" of Ellen Jewett's life, along with many samples of her poetic achievements.[28] This version portrayed Ellen as a virtuous girl from Augusta, Maine, who lived with doting parents and wrote senti-

[26] *An Authentic Biography of the Late Helen Jewett, A Girl of the Town by a Gentleman Fully Acquainted with her History* (New York, 1836). There was a large Laughton / Lawton family living in Hallowell, Maine, the town in which the real Ellen lived during her teenage years in the 1820s, but none was named Lemuel. There were no Lawtons located in Portland at the time, according to city directories and to the Mormon Genealogical Society's surname index.

[27] *Authentic Biography*, 10–11.

[28] *Sketch of the Life of Miss Ellen Jewett* (Boston, 1836).

mental poetry about clouds, the sky, and love. She was engaged to marry George W., presumably the pamphlet's author, with whom she took long walks along the Kennebec River and chastely pledged undying love. But on the eve of their marriage, George suddenly had to leave town for Florida to take care of legal matters, and his absence stretched to a year. In the meantime a rake, just graduated from Yale and the son of a planter from South Carolina, wormed his way into Ellen's company, forging letters that reported George's death. The rake then kindly offered to accompany her to her cousins in Hartford, Connecticut but instead he abducted and ruined her, leaving her in a brothel. Her virtue destroyed, she cannot go back, and the end of the story is quickly told: she dies in New York City. Before her death, however, she wrote her parents that "I have found out too late that she who deviates one single step from the path of virtue and rectitude is lost forever!"[29] The only element of truth in this version is that the real Helen lived for a time in Augusta, Maine, where she did indeed know a George W. very well.

A more factual variant on Helen's life was reported in the *New York Herald* two days after the murder and then reprinted soon after the trial in a pamphlet titled *The Thomas Street Tragedy.* The *Herald's* editor, James Gordon Bennett, must have gotten the information from a close acquaintance of Helen's, either a girl in the Thomas Street house or a regular customer. So in fact it becomes another self-representation created by Helen and filtered through Bennett's source. She was identified as Dorcas Dorrance, a native of Augusta, Maine. Her parents died in her infancy, the author claimed, and she was raised by Judge Western in Augusta as a playmate of the Judge's own daughters. Her brilliant intellect was honed at a female academy in Augusta, but her moral education was somehow deficient. "In intellectual accomplishments, particularly the art of conversation, interspersed with brilliant wit and repartee, she was unsurpassed. Yet even at this young age, she occasionally gave indications of a wild, imaginative mind—without fixed principles, or a knowledge of the true point of honor in morals. Her passions began to control her life. Her education only gave additional power to her fascinations." At sixteen she went to visit relatives in a town thirty miles away and met an elegant and fine young man, a cashier in a bank. Just as in the other versions, the seducer here is an upwardly-mobile, professional young man. The bank cashier joins the list of over-ardent suitors: the son of the Boston merchant, the Portland law student, and the South Carolina planter's son from Yale. In this account, however, the author does not suggest that Helen was wrongly seduced; rather, in "a moment of passion" she lost everything. She returned to Augusta, where her nonvirginal status became known to the Judge's family so

[29] *Sketch,* 18.

she left for Portland and became a prostitute. The road led to Boston and then New York, where she became a familiar fixture on Broadway and Wall Street. Clad in a green dress and always with a letter in her hand, she boldly occupied public space on the street with her commanding walk and unflinching gaze. According to the *Herald*, "From those who have known her, we have been informed that she was a fascinating woman in conversation, full of intellect and refinement, but at the same time possessed of a very devil, and a species of mortal antipathy to the male race. Her great passion was to seduce young men, and particularly those who most resisted her charms."[30]

The Portland, Maine *Courier* reprinted the *Herald* story and identified the bank cashier as "H****e B****e." In sharp response, its rival Democratic paper, the *Eastern Argus*, accused the *Courier* of deliberately slandering a prominent Augusta citizen whose name corresponded to those initials. The *Argus* revealed that the seducer was a lowly man "of her acquaintance and own standing."[31] Another newspaper in Boston went a step further claiming Helen had been seduced by one of the Judge's own sons. This was harshly countered by the Boston *Advocate*, which claimed that most of everything being printed about Jewett was false and that it had the only true story. Her real name was Dorcas Doyen, the paper reported; her mother had died, but her intemperate father was still alive. She was a servant, not an adopted daughter, in the family of a judge in Augusta. She was neither well-educated nor accomplished, and she was not seduced, her fall from virtue was entirely voluntary.[32] Another Boston paper, the *Post*, assured its readers that the young woman had, from an early age, declared her intention of taking up a vicious life; she was "depraved and reckless," "shrewd and very artful," overweight and not at all beautiful.[33] All the contradictory reports sparked public curiosity to know more. A paper in Natchez, Mississippi printed three accounts of her identity on successive days and then darkly warned its readers that "there is some mysterious juggle [con game] going on. Look to it, look to it. . . ."[34]

The person who perhaps most wanted to set the record straight about Helen Jewett was the Honorable Nathan Weston of Augusta, Maine. Chief Justice Weston of the Maine State Supreme Court was clearly the Judge Western of the newspaper reports. Helen had lived with his family

[30] *The Thomas Street Tragedy: The Murder of Ellen Jewett and Trial of Robinson* (New York, 1836), 7 and 8.

[31] The Portland *Eastern Argus*, 18 April 1836.

[32] From the Boston *Advocate*, reprinted in the Middletown (Connecticut) *Sentinel and Witness*, 27 April 1836.

[33] The Boston *Post*, 15 April 1836, reprinted in the New York *Transcript*, 18 April 1836.

[34] Natchez *Daily Courier*, 12 May, 13 May, 16 May, 19 May 1836.

from 1826 to 1830, and now his parenting abilities had been impugned in the press, his sons slandered. In late April he issued a statement, explaining that the girl the press called Ellen was really Dorcas Doyen, who had entered his home as a lowly servant at age thirteen. He insisted she was not an adopted daughter. Her mother had died, her father was an intemperate mechanic, and Dorcas was put out to service. And a good servant she had been, the Judge said. She attended the local common school and showed remarkable proficiency and "quickness of apprehension"; she also cultivated a taste for reading. This much confirmed the *Herald's* early report that she was unusually bright. But she had somehow succumbed to vicious ways, the Judge said, and he and Mrs. Weston had been forced finally to believe bad reports about her character. Dorcas left them in the fall of 1830 when she was seventeen, abandoning herself to "the profligate life." He claimed to have no idea who her sexual partner in Augusta was; all he seemed to know was that she had first gone to Portland and lived under an assumed name, and that she had later been spotted in the streets of New York by an acquaintance from Augusta. Her subsequent career was deplorable, he said, concluding that "I sincerely hope the catastrophe, cruel as it was, may not be without its moral uses."[35]

All of this was judiciously put, as befits a state supreme court justice; still, Judge Weston's memory was a bit selective as Anne Royall, a popular author, would prove. Royall, a woman in her late fifties who was a notorious lady traveller and busybody, came through Augusta in 1827 and visited the Westons. (Royall was famous for writing and publishing a series of *Black Books*, accounts of her trips and the folks whom she met. A person who declined to subscribe was certain to be described unfavorably in her next edition, hence the blackmail-like title, *The Black Books.*) Royall was a shrewd observer of people, a woman who could see through deception and pretense in a flash, a woman who instinctively distrusted surface phenomena. She was utterly charmed by the young orphan girl who opened the door at the Westons. Such poise, grace, and sweetness, all completely unexpected in a servant who opens doors. She had "the air of the most accomplished lady"; the Weston's daughter, three years older than Dorcas, in contrast appeared to be a silly ninny. Royall remarked on the prepossessing girl to Mrs. Weston, who then claimed all credit for raising this poor orphan child. Perhaps Dorcas was merely a servant—she did open the door—but it is also clear that her capacity for mimicking or even exceeding characteristics

[35] Letter from Judge Nathan Weston, dated 30 April 1836 and first printed in the Portland (Maine) *Eastern Argus*, and reprinted widely, for example, in the (Worcester) *Massachusetts Spy*, 4 May 1836.

usually associated with females of the upper class was already in place when she was fourteen, at the time of this incident.[36]

Judge Weston also failed to mention, in his statement to the press, that sexual sin was a problem for another member of his family in 1830, the year he sent Dorcas from his home. His oldest daughter was then twenty and newly married; in 1833 she obtained a divorce from her young husband on the grounds that he had committed adultery with a party or parties unknown in 1830.[37] There is no way to know whether the banished Dorcas was the third party involved in this adultery, but the coincidence of the two events is suggestive.

Even after Judge Weston went public with his letter identifying Dorcas Doyen as Helen Jewett, the newspapers showed little inclination to do investigative reporting about her actual background. No one contacted Weston further; no one tried to track down Helen's impoverished, intemperate father, who was then a shoemaker living with his second or third wife in a village north of Farmington, Maine. The mythologized versions of Helen as an accomplished and intelligent young woman suited the public fancy much more. Two more versions of her life were published in the 1840s: the dime novel by Joseph H. Ingraham and the loosely-based history by George Wilkes serialized in the *National Police Gazette*.[38] Both presented her as a remarkable, talented, and yet passionate woman, who was tricked into losing her virginity by circumstances not quite under her control but who then made the best of an exciting life. She was pitied in these two versions but was still a sympathetic character.

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[36] Anne Royall, *The Black Book* (1828), 269–70.

[37] Willard L. King, *Melville Weston Fuller: Chief Justice of the United States, 1888–1910* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 1–12. Photocopies of the full divorce petition and decree are in the Fuller Papers at the Chicago Historical Society. Melville Fuller was the toddler son of the divorcing couple in 1833; he was raised by his grandparents, the Westons, and followed his grandfather into law. In 1888 he became one of the less distinguished Chief Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, a job his grandfather Nathan Weston had much coveted in the 1840s.

Adultery, divorce, and the murder of a long-term servant were not the only misfortunes to befall the Weston family of Maine. In the early 1840s, three of them were excommunicated from their Orthodox Congregational church in Augusta, and the youngest son was courtmartialed from his midshipman's training in the navy.

[38] Ingraham's book advances the argument that Robinson in fact did not kill Jewett, that the young man, who first seduced her in Maine, a Bowdoin College student, winds up killing her in New York in a moment of unpremeditated rage. Ingraham was a prodigious author of dime novels, churning out hundreds of them in his lifetime, and *Frank Rivers* at first appears to be just part of his production line. But in an odd twist, it develops that Ingraham grew up in Augusta, Maine and was living there in the 1820s when Dorcas was living with the Westons. Did he know Dorcas, just three years his junior? Did he know that Dorcas was Helen? Did he perhaps have an inside line on the murder? On Ingraham's background, see Robert W. Weathersby II, *J.H. Ingraham* (Boston: Twayne, 1980).

Her death came because one man (of many) whom she chose to love was distraught and perhaps deranged. Both these stories contain superficial bows to the viewpoint of the moral reformers, who protested the unfairness of a system that condemns seduced women and not their seducers. But the subtext of these 1840s stories is that Jewett led an attractive life. The moral reformers' criticism of prostitution, where the wages of sin were sure to be death, is absent; Helen does not suffer venereal disease, abortion, danger from abusive clients, or psychological alienation stemming from selling one's body to strangers. Instead, we read of her fine house and furnishings, her mulatto maid who dresses her, her elegant wardrobe and jewels, and the nice young men who all are genuinely in love with her.

The multiple versions of the life of Helen Jewett and the nationwide publicity the case called forth are evidence of the extreme tension of American society in the 1830s over the fear—or the hope—that women could be unregulated, sexual, independent beings. When told by the moral reformers, the tale of the innocent victim of seduction called forth sympathy but made the clear point that such women could not survive. This was a simple moral lesson. No matter how virtuous a girl was, if she surrendered her virginity she was lost to respectable society; no matter that the loss was not her fault. Portraying Helen as a refined, accomplished young woman ensured that most young women of the reading public would easily identify with her. Portraying her as an orphan was better yet; her lowly background with its overlay of refinement and seduction turned the Jewett story into a Cinderella plot gone bad. The authors implied that her sexual fall made her frail and polluted; death followed disgrace, and the moral tale was completed by her murder. The chapbook that traced her downfall from a Boston boarding school was explicit about this point: "upon the bed she had polluted, [she] atoned for her frailties, by the hatchet of the midnight assassin."[39] Richard Robinson hardly figured in the story at all; he was merely the instrument of her foreordained demise.

That the same tale of hapless seduction could also be told by Helen herself, to the newspaper reporter and to the doctor and probably to many others, demonstrates its allure as a preferred sexual script: this courtesan, adept at pleasing clients, knew that even these men, part of a male subculture of rakish men on the town, wanted to see her as a reluctant virgin initiated into sex through ignorance. The court reporter, after printing his story of the evil merchant's son who caused the ruin of the fair Helen, wrote a private note to the young woman proclaiming his admiration for her beauty, intellect, and lovemaking skills, adding

[39] *The Life of Ellen Jewett*, 45.

"What a prize the villain had who seduced you at the Boarding School! How I should liked to have been in his place!"[40]

Much more complicated lessons were embedded in the several other romantic versions of her life that presented her as an accomplished victim who, once initiated into sexual sin, became an enthusiastic expert. The pamphlet detailing the romance with the doctor and the *Herald* version of the green-dress jezebel succeeded in making her lifestyle glamorous and attractive. Jewett had fine clothes and jewels, leisure to visit the theater nightly, and power over men's sexual desires. She rejected her early exposure to respectable domestic life in the Weston home and a conventional life to embrace risk, adventure, and independence.

This dangerous and subversive message received much attention in the newspapers in 1836 and was perpetuated in the 1840s versions of the case by Ingraham and Wilkes. It encouraged celebrity worship: young women took slivers of her "polluted" bed as souvenirs. It encouraged imitators: within a month, runaway girls as young as fifteen were showing up at New York brothels to enlist in the "fancy life," perhaps in imitation of Helen.[41] And it sold many newspapers.

The most negative characterizations portrayed Jewett as a danger to men. A New York minister preached to an overflow crowd that Jewett was "detestable . . . miserable . . . execrable . . . leprous in soul and body," whereas Robinson was just a poor country boy beguiled by evil city people. Some openly questioned why the murder of a prostitute raised such a fuss, the implication being that Robinson had committed an act of public service. Supporters of Robinson sent anonymous letters to the brothel keeper at 41 Thomas Street, threatening her if she testified at the trial; another anonymous letter taking credit for the crime appeared in the *Herald.* After the trial, the *Transcript* ran a chilling dialogue, meant to be humorous, between two young rakes, discussing the best way to murder girlfriends of whom they had grown tired. And reports of copycat crimes began to crop up in the following months.[42]

The murder of Helen Jewett was not a spectacularly new sort of crime, but it set first the city of New York and then the nation on edge

[40] New York *Herald,* 13 April 1836.

[41] *The Advocate of Moral Reform,* 15 July 1836, 92, tells the story of 15-year-old Sarah Denny from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, turned in to the police by a brothel madam who was loathe to take one so young. The *New York Transcript,* 15 June 1836, noted that Denny had been "enchanted" and inspired by the Jewett stories to run away from a respectable home.

[42] This was the Rev. W. C. Brownlee of North Church, a Dutch Reform congregation on William Street. New York *Transcript,* 14 June 1836. On the anonymous letters and the dialogue, see the *Transcript,* 14 April, 18 April, and 10 June 1836. On copycat crimes, see the Columbus *Ohio State Journal,* 7 May 1836.

because it crystallized in dramatic form the perceived social problem of illicit sex and unsupervised youth. Neither Jewett nor Robinson pretended to be saints; they were unapologetic participants in an urban subculture of easy sex and high living. They both had rejected the behaviors associated with privileged respectable domesticity at a time when the full force of the cult of domesticity was dictating more rigid forms of gender deportment. An erotic, urban subculture posed an alternative, and the social critics, reformers, newspaper writers, and ministers who wrote about the case all had a stake in attacking (or perpetuating) that alternative subculture. The literary efforts that recreated the many lives of Helen Jewett became attempts to construct and reconstruct female sexuality.

The construction of sexuality was an on-going task in the 1830s, and among the middle and upper classes an ethic of female passionlessness gradually gained acceptance as a normative description of human behavior.[43] The Jewett case provided an opportunity for the defenders of the alternative subculture to present an admiring view of a sexually independent woman.

→ Nancy Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs* 4 (Summer 1978): 219–36; John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 39–52.