

**“Sex, Scandal, Violence, and other Middle-Class Pastimes in *The History of the Celebrated Mrs. Ann Carson*”**

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In July, 1816 a respectable, middle-class woman named Ann Baker Carson attempted to kidnap the Governor of Pennsylvania. Why this educated businesswoman performed such a daring deed is a tale of the nineteenth-century world turned up-side down and inside out. Carson related her version of the crime in the *History of the Celebrated Mrs. Ann Carson* (1823). The events described in the *History*, though unusual, are accurate. Newspaper accounts, trial transcripts, and letters corroborate Carson’s tale. Yet it is Carson’s interpretation of those facts, an interpretation which cannot be verified, that offers us a rich source of information about emerging class identity in the nineteenth century. Whether any of Carson’s assertions concerning her motives, ideas, and behavior are true is beside the point: Carson’s consciousness of her audience, her intentions, and her assumptions about society, all provide an uncommon perspective on America’s developing middle class and women’s place within it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson wrote her memoir with the help of Mary Clarke Carr. There is a distinct possibility that Carr actually wrote most of the *History*. Carr told her side of the story in her continuation of Carson’s life, *The Memoirs of the Celebrated and Beautiful Mrs. Ann Carson, Daughter of an Officer of the U.S. Navy and Wife of Another, Whose Life Terminated in the Philadelphia Prison*. (Philadelphia and New York, 1838). All quotations from the *History* are taken from what is essentially the second edition of that work in the form of the *Memoirs*.

Her social and economic background placed her squarely within that class of American society which promoted a new sense of refinement and adherence to the gendered behavior dictated by separate spheres ideology. Carson's father, Thomas Baker, was a ship's captain employed by various Philadelphia shipping firms, who kept his family in genteel comfort. He sent his daughters, including Ann, born in 1785, to some of the first female academies in Philadelphia. But a reversal of fortune in the late 1790s compelled the Bakers to marry off their fifteen-year old daughter to one of her father's fellow officers, twenty-four year old Captain John Carson. Carson was the son of the well-known Philadelphia physician, John Carson. The Captain's income and social status should have kept Ann in the comfortable middle-class world she knew.<sup>2</sup>

But the Captain was an alcoholic who could not consistently fulfill his financial obligations. At Ann Carson's insistence, in 1812 he sailed off to the East Indies. In October 1815, believing the Captain was dead (she had not heard from him in three years) Ann Carson married Richard Smith, a handsome, but penniless young Irishman several years younger than she. But the Captain was alive and well. He returned to Philadelphia a few months after Carson's marriage to Smith. Upon discovering his wife bigamously married, Captain Carson threatened to divorce her. Before legal action was taken by any of the parties concerned, Richard

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<sup>2</sup> Both the Baker family and the Carson family income and housing ranked them slightly above the average for Philadelphia households. Susan E. Klepp and Susan Branson, "A Working Woman: The Autobiography of Ann Baker Carson," in Billy G. Smith, ed., *Life in Revolutionary Philadelphia: A Documentary History*, edited by Billy G. Smith, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), footnote 1, 156.

Smith shot and killed Captain Carson. Smith was convicted of murder and sentenced to die. Ann Carson was tried as an accessory to murder, but no clear evidence surfaced to substantiate the indictment. Carson was acquitted. Though there were mitigating circumstances in Smith's situation, including Captain Carson's threats to kill Smith, the Governor of Pennsylvania refused to grant a pardon. Carson, as she explained in her memoir, then chose the only means she believed left to her: she acquainted herself with "the fraternity of desperadoes, who keep civilized society in bodily fear for either life or property."<sup>3</sup> Having planned to kidnap the governor and force him to release her condemned lover, Carson accompanied two armed men to the vicinity of Selinsgrove, Governor Snyder's estate near Lancaster. But once her plan was discovered, Snyder's friend John Binns wrote to the Governor, warning him of Carson's plot:

The infernal Fiend who has caused the murder of her husband and the violent death of him she called her husband is raging with madness and has put all upon the cast of the die.... Do this or do anything else your judgment may direct to guard you against this enraged Tygress [sic] for a time.... I beseech you to guard against all the machinations of this Fiend of Hell for a little while and all will be over.<sup>4</sup>

Carson and her men were apprehended as they neared the vicinity of the Governor's residence.

Richard Smith's execution proceeded as scheduled, and Carson stood trial for attempted

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<sup>3</sup>. I, 191.

<sup>4</sup> John Binns letter to Simon Snyder Philadelphia 9 pm Wed July 10 1816. Correspondence of Simon Snyder, Case 76 vol. 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Carson planned to kidnap the governor and force him to release her condemned lover. Should this plan not succeed, she was prepared to kidnap Snyder's son or John Binns, editor of the *Democratic Press*, or Binn's young son. Prisoners for Trial Docket (January 1816 - January 1818), Philadelphia City Archives.

kidnapping. She was acquitted of all charges. But the two trials and her attempts to free Richard Smith left her heavily in debt. She lacked financial resources to begin a new business and she had lost the credibility to elicit assistance from former friends and acquaintances. Even her family turned against her. According to Carson, her brothers-in-law were chiefly to blame for bringing her to trial, and had prejudiced her sisters and many of her friends against her. Since, she explained, "I was hunted, like a hare pursued by the hounds, from respectable society," Carson chose, "to initiate myself among that class of people who set *law, justice*, and forms, at defiance."<sup>5</sup> The life of a respectable, but impoverished woman held no appeal. Among criminals, on the other hand, she believed she could preserve the material comforts she was accustomed to. This life was not without its risks, however. She was arrested in Maryland on a robbery charge, and identified by the Maryland Attorney General as the "celebrated Mrs. Carson of Philadelphia, a lady whose talents when united with outlaws, such as she is at present connected with, renders her a dangerous inhabitant to any state." Carson was nevertheless declared innocent of the charges, but ordered to leave Baltimore. Soon after this she was convicted for receiving stolen goods in February 1821 and served eleven months in the Philadelphia penitentiary. After her release in January 1822, Carson determined to write and publish her story. The *History of the Celebrated Mrs. Ann Carson* is more than just a tell-all, name-all apology for an outrageous crime. It offers readers a window on the values and self-

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<sup>5</sup>. Carson's emphasis. II: 10. For details of the kidnapping and trial, see Susan Branson, "'He Swore His Life was in Danger From Me': The Attempted Kidnapping of Governor Simon Snyder," *Pennsylvania History*, 67, no. 3 (Summer 2000).

identity of the developing middle class in early nineteenth-century America. Carson's *History* helps us see who they are by drawing a boundary around their likes and dislikes, fears and aspirations – some of which were shared with members of other social and economic groups.

Identification and description of this segment of society that in the early nineteenth century was becoming culturally, economically and socially dominant has challenged historians for some time. What exactly *was* the middle class? The values associated with the middle class were not confined to the group of people who can be defined as such merely through either their wealth or their relationship to a means of production. Nor was a belief in separate spheres and the gendered familial, social and economic practices this ideology entailed confined to the middle class. This class shared certain values with those beneath and above, and they appropriated certain behavior and prejudices from those above them on the economic and social scale. But the middle class consciously sought to exclude those below from association or identification with themselves, as well to condemn some of the practices of those further up the social and economic scale.<sup>6</sup> It was this exclusion and criticism of social and economic inferiors

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<sup>6</sup> The term “middling interest” was in use (and in print) both as a political identification and as a social one by the 1820s. Lydia Maria Child believed the audience for her books was the “middling class.” Preface to *The Mother's Book* (1831). Burton Bledstein discusses the first usages of this term in his introduction to *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2001): 9.

Historians argue about the timing of middle class formation as well the definition of this class. I am not concerned so much with its origins as with identifying it in a time and place in which people began to consciously use the term middling sorts middling interests, and to identify them as such.

that Carson used to identify individuals and groups who were not of her class. The comments she makes about behavior, dress, education, and speech – all markers that distinguished class - show us what was important to Carson and her readers.

The middle class developed their sensibility against a background of dramatic economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The proletarianization of workers, hand in hand with what Burton Bledstein calls a culture of professionalism, pushed (or kept) some individuals economically downward. These same forces provided others individuals with new relationships to the marketplace and allowed them to attain a measure of affluence that had not been possible earlier. The political economy of the early nineteenth century, in combination with technological developments and market forces, conspired to expand a class of individuals who had a new relationship to production but also possessed distinct familial, social and cultural ideals.<sup>7</sup> Racism and nativism were shared by white, native-born Americans of all classes. But an antipathy to petty producers, the valuing of education and refinement, and an emphasis placed on individual responsibility and achievement, sentimentality, and maternalism, were the ideals perhaps most directly associated with, and to a certain extent formulated by, the middle class itself.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>. “One could enter the middle class piecemeal, through discriminating practices: in family activities, child-rearing procedures, gender relations, techniques of worship, work habits, labor relations, education and health methods, recreation routines, and personal as well as domestic consumption patterns.” Bledstein, *The Middling Sorts*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Consumption is also a hallmark of middle-class identity, especially of gendered identity. Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department*

The process of middle class formation was already underway by the late eighteenth century, when economic forces facilitated transformations from artisan to merchant, from artisan *Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). C. Dallett Hemphill discusses the ways in which the middle class sought to define itself through manners, speech and behavior – all precisely explained in, and encouraged by, conduct books. See especially chapter 7 in *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The literature on the subject of the formation of middle-class identity and respectability includes, but is by no means limited to, the following: Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 593-619. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge, 1989): 66-137. Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1990). Patricia Cline Cohen, "Unregulated Youth: Masculinity and Murder in the 1830s City," *Radical History Review* 52 (1992): 33-52, and "The Helen Jewett Murder: Violence, Gender, and Sexual Licentiousness in Antebellum America," *NWSA Journal* 2 (1990): 374-389. Steven Ruggles, "Fallen Women: The Inmates of the Magdalen Society Asylum of Philadelphia, 1836-1908," *Journal of Social History* 16 (1982/3): 65-82. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: Illinois, 1987). Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, (New York, Oxford, 1985).

to banker, from artisan to professional. In many families, such as the Baker's and the Carson's, this happened in one generation. Ann Baker Carson's grandfather was a house carpenter in Britain. Ann's father, after coming to America, served as an officer under Stephen Decatur's command during Revolution. By the time of Ann's birth in 1785, he captained ships for a Philadelphia merchant and was able to keep his family "in a style suitable to his rank and fortune."<sup>9</sup> John Carson's grandfather was a barber who educated his sons to be professionals. Carson's father became a wealthy Philadelphia doctor who in turn provided his son with the means to become, as Ann's father was, a well-to-do ship's captain in the West India trade.<sup>10</sup>

Such rapid economic shifts were accompanied by important domestic transformations. As the household economy gave way to work and production outside the home, women occupied themselves with running a household rather than contributing to the family income.<sup>11</sup> For

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<sup>9</sup> I, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Vol. I, 89-90. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984); Gary J. Kornblith, "From Artisans to Businessmen: Master Mechanics in New England, 1789-1850," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1983; Lisa Lubow, "Artisans in Transition: Early Capitalist Development and the Carpenters of Boston, 1787-1837," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Boydston has written extensively on this topic. See "The Woman Who Wasn't There: Women's Market Labor and the Transition to Capitalism in the United States." *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 183-206 and *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

families like the Bakers and the Carsons, this meant wives and daughters devoted their time to purely domestic matters. Rather than keeping business accounts, supervising apprentices, and caring for boarders, wives devoted themselves to child-rearing. The daughters of these newly affluent families attended female Academies and socialized with other young men and women from middling and elite families.

Women of this class articulated their new roles. Gertrude Meredith, for example, defined her domestic role as that of “an *attentive* wife, and a *good* mother – herein consists my ambition – I feel no other – it is the only pursuit I delight to labor in.”<sup>12</sup> Meredith was also very conscious of her class status. After meeting a young woman who had married above her class, Meredith was thankful to have been “born a lady... I could scarcely keep from assuring her that I was fully sensible of her elevation and considered her now quite my equal.” And she dissuaded her husband from sending their son to a particular school on the grounds that many of the students were “little rag tags and bob tails,” rather than boys of the Meredith’s social station.<sup>13</sup> Thus

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<sup>12</sup>. Gertrude Meredith to William Meredith, Sept. 2, 1800. Meredith Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Gertrude Meredith was the daughter of Samuel Ogden and niece of Gouverneur Morris. Concern with child-rearing and an emphasis on emotion and attachment to children was not confined to mothers. See Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> February 7, 1805; May 3, 1804. Gertrude seemed overly concerned with the appearance of refinement. She disparaged her uncle Morris’s library because the books appeared “more like the purchases of a great economist than a man of fortune. The editions are few of them elegant and

through behavior, manners, and opinions, this class of men and women have left the modern observer with sufficient information to assess what was important to them, who they judged as belonging to their own class, and who they judged as *not* belonging. Their schooling, memberships in civic organizations and reform societies, and their literary interests illustrate their values. Ann Carson used her *History* to confirm the social and cultural attitudes and ambitions of the American middle class. Though Carson did not share Meredith's prosperity, she did share her beliefs, and prejudices. Gertrude Meredith was Carson's ideal reader.

Carson designed the form as well as the content of her narrative to appeal to a middle class audience. As a literary text, the *History* would have been both familiar and enticing to an early nineteenth-century reader. An exposé of a scandalous series of events, Carson's book was a precursor to the fiction (in the form of dime novels) and non-fiction (penny papers such as the New York *Sun* and *Herald*) that attracted scores of antebellum readers.<sup>14</sup> The *History*, written

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the greater proportion of them very common indeed, and some in boards." September. 6, 1802.

<sup>14</sup>. The *Sun* and the *Herald*'s coverage of the Helen Jewett and Mary Rogers murder cases, for example, exemplified this type of journalism. Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: the life and death of a prostitute in nineteenth-century New York* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1998) and Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For earlier criminal accounts see Daniel E. Williams, "Rogues, Rascals, and Scoundrels: The Underworld Literature of Early America," *American Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1983):5-19.

soon after Carson's release from prison in 1822 on a house robbery charge, is a deliberately crafted document intended to entertain, shock, instruct, and gratify. In this regard, it belongs to the tradition of the "true-crime" story: narratives related by criminals themselves. There is a long history of gallows-side confessions and accounts in early America, all of which were readily available at the numerous booksellers and circulating libraries in Philadelphia and other eastern seaboard cities.<sup>15</sup> An immediate precursor to Carson's memoir was the *Sketch of the Life of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs* (Philadelphia, 1812). Burroughs argued to his readers that his character put him at odds with social conventions and legal authority, insisting that his behavior was justified by circumstances. Carson explained her activities in a similar manner. Carson also followed Burroughs' lead by turning the tables on the legal system and its representatives: Burroughs apparently "regularly challenged the motives of his persecutors and the fairness of the legal proceedings undertaken against him." Carson did likewise. Thus Carson had a rich body of crime narratives to draw on as she constructed the *History*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One of the earliest of these American confessions is *The Vain Prodigal Life, and Tragical Penitent Death of Thomas Hellier* (London, 1680). Hellier, a Virginia indentured servant murdered his master and mistress.

<sup>16</sup> The *Sketch* was reprinted in Philadelphia by Leavy & Getz 1853. This was an abridged version of the original narrative, the *Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1798, Boston 1804). Burroughs' case is discussed in Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 158-159.

The success of Carson's book was helped by John Binn's scathing review of it in his

The *History*'s plot weaves together themes of duty, love, and betrayal -- typical elements in popular eighteenth and nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. In structure, style, and content, it closely follows the prescriptions of this literary genre, giving a twist to the tradition of crime narrative. This explains part of the appeal of her story to middle-class readers, who reveled in sentimental fiction such as *The Power of Sympathy*, *Charlotte Temple*, and *The Coquette*, three of the most popular novels of the early republic, and all based on real-life scandals. Carson's autobiography was one step closer to reality than such stories, but clearly shared many characteristics with these fictional depictions of actual events.<sup>17</sup>

Carson's *History* contains fainting spells, lovers' vows, duels and drama. But it is also chock-full of attitudes and opinions that identify Carson's class. She wrote with pride of herself as a working woman, taking satisfaction in the fact that she was "a useful and active member of society."<sup>18</sup> She recounted one occasion when her "spirit was aroused" by hearing a rather *Democratic Press*. He told his readers: "It is a reproach to our police that such a book is publicly advertised and sold in our city. Its details of crime, however glossed over, are calculated injuriously to effect [sic] the morals of young people." *Democratic Press*, Saturday, January 25, 1823.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen has noted that early American sentimental fiction is much like modern "docudrama": *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 168. For a discussion of early American sentimental fiction, readership, and class, see Cathy N Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> I, 77. Carson's sentiments are suspiciously similar to those expressed by Constantia Dudley in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* (1799), who Brown says was, "mistress of the product of

arrogant colonel from Virginia disparage a store-keeper. Carson haughtily replied to him, "Hold, sir, I am but a *store-keeper*."<sup>19</sup> But this pride came at a price: because Captain Carson had failed to provide the home and financial support she expected, Carson became the family's chief breadwinner. With china her husband procured on an earlier Asian trip, Carson opened a shop. She described herself at this period in her life as valuing the financial independence her work brought her. Through her own efforts she "daily increased my little capital, and added to my stock in trade." Later she made trips to Boston and New York to obtain supplies.<sup>20</sup> When the Embargo, and then the War of 1812, curtailed the import trade, Carson resourcefully turned to supplying clothes for the military. She and her mother employed several women to do this.

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her own labor." Dudley, like Carson, articulates ideals of independence, intelligence, and self-reliance for women. Ernest Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction, 1775-1914*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974): 32-33; Steven Watts, *The Romance of Real Life: Charles Brockden Brown and the Origins of American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994): 89-100.

<sup>19</sup> I, 131. Carson confessed to her readers that on at least one occasion she was embarrassed to own she was a storekeeper when she sought to conceal from a potential beau her "humble employment." I, 85.

<sup>20</sup>. I, 76. Carson opened her shop just prior to the crisis with Britain which led to the war of 1812. Few American merchants had new stock of china ware, and Carson's supply was in high demand.

Though forced out of her expected domestic role, Carson's depiction of herself as a hard worker, and her self-praise for her ability to provide for her family, reflected the values of readers who themselves had made the jump from wage earner to independent producer.<sup>21</sup>

But Carson was careful to distinguish herself from mechanics and shopkeepers “whose ideas soared not beyond the art of making money.”<sup>22</sup> She placed a different value on work than did these crass dwellers in the marketplace. The people she criticized valued the making of money for its own sake - as an end rather than a means to an end. Carson, on the other hand, was a genteel provider who worked out of necessity; she claimed that she “valued [money] for its utility alone, and was anxious only for sufficient to answer my purposes; this my store produced.”<sup>23</sup> This was largely a distinction without a difference. Carson sought to retain for herself (and in the eyes of her readers) her status as a genteel middle-class woman. Her decent down the economic ladder robbed her of many of the outward markers of her class. Her words and her demeanor were the only means left with which she could prove her status.

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Carson would have drawn the sympathy of her readers in her record of the downward spiral of her family's fortune as her husband became increasingly handicapped by his alcoholism, and Ann took over as head of the household. “He pursued this ill line of conduct for some time, till my patience was nearly exhausted; and, irritated by his imposition, in not only forbearing to make any provision for his family, but depending totally on me, I therefore gravely inquired one day, what he intended to do in future for his living? Adding, I could not afford to support him in idleness and daily intoxication.” Vol. I, 95.

<sup>22</sup> II, 33.

<sup>23</sup> I, 87.

Carson defined her class identity in part by her distinction between manual and non-manual occupations. She disparagingly referred to an ignorant farmer as “Mr. Ploughshare,” and deliberately contrasted the uncouth behavior of a plasterer whom she called a “man of mortar” and “Mr. Lath and Plaster,” to the “civility” of a merchant “gentleman.”<sup>24</sup> According to Carson, the judge who presided over her trial in February 1821 was unqualified for his station because of his profession. He was “a man of weak and superficial understanding.” He lacked sufficient education to fill such an important civic role because he had spent his life “toiling for bread” as a hatter.<sup>25</sup> Carson was even less satisfied with the jurors, “men from the lowest grades of society, apparently ignorant and uninformed, consequently the slaves of prejudice.”<sup>26</sup> Carson was not alone in this opinion. For example, in a short story published in the *Weekly Magazine of Original Essays*, “The Plague of the Learned Wife,” a tradesman complains that his wife reads too much, and bothers him with reading aloud passages containing “hard words.” Her “bookish” interests also mean that she is of no help to him in his business. From the husband's point of view, there seems little to be gained from studying books: “According to my notion now, neither tradesmen, nor tradesmen's wives, nor any body belonging to them, have any business to talk like

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<sup>24</sup> I, 185 II, 34.

<sup>25</sup> II, 60.

<sup>26</sup> I, 180. Her dislike of these working class men was intimately bound up with her trials. She not only found mechanics and tradesmen to be “ignorant, mean, and selfish,” but also dangerous: “when invested with power, [they are] arbitrary, cruel, and vindictive.” Vol.1 30.

*skolars.*"<sup>27</sup> This humorous mocking of the willful ignorance of tradesmen suggests a tacit understanding among the *Weekly Magazine*'s readership that education was one of the attributes that separated them from their economic and social inferiors.

Carson did not spare women in her class distinctions. She condemned those who failed to meet her standards of "politeness and feminine delicacy," such as two "witless" women she encountered on a boat ride from New York to Philadelphia: "One of these curious ladies was the wife of a grocer in Kensington, of the genuine Camptown breed and manners; ignorant as the tawdry finery with which she was profusely loaded; yet purse-proud, and wrapped in self-consequence."<sup>28</sup> The woman's manners and clothes indicated she was of a lower class. Her husband's occupation, though superficially similar to Carson's, was not by itself a marker of their class. Acquisition of wealth was not a sufficient condition for middle class status – much depended upon what one did with it. Carson, though a store-keeper, had education and manners that distinguished her from the grocer's wife.

Indeed, Carson's notion of class, not surprisingly, had little to do with economics. She defended her middle class status despite her fall from prosperity. Although one needed to be raised in a family in which affluence could provide the means to acquire education and proper training, even without an income to support a genteel lifestyle, individuals such as Carson could indicate their class origins. According to Carson, many of her partners in crime came from "families of the first distinction, who, having squandered their patrimony, resort to illegal means

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<sup>27</sup>. *Weekly Magazine of Original Essays*, (Philadelphia, May, 1798).

<sup>28</sup> I, 215; II, 33.

to replenish their empty pockets, to procure those indulgences they have been accustomed to."<sup>29</sup> These men and women dressed, spoke, and behaved like middle-class Americans. They did not forego the clothes, style or living conditions they were used to. This situation highlighted one of the increasing dangers of urban life: the business, social class, and legitimacy of a stranger could not be known from her outward appearance. Carson and others used this anonymity to their advantage. With the proper clothes, manner, and sufficient amount of money, criminals could "pass" in respectable society; they preyed on others by exploiting social conventions and expectations.<sup>30</sup> As C. Dallett Hemphill has noted, manners were "gate-keeping devices to serve

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<sup>29</sup>. II, 11. The class origin of Carson's compatriots is not as unlikely as it might seem. They would have needed a certain level of education as well as skill to carry out counterfeiting and other illegal activities. Daniel A. Cohen has noted that members of flash gangs in Massachusetts also came from comfortable backgrounds. Cohen, "A Fellowship of Thieves: Property Criminals in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of Social History* 22 (1988): 70.

<sup>30</sup>. "In the cities of early industrial America, the personal appearance of a stranger did not offer reliable clues to his identity." This was due in part to the Industrial Revolution, which had enabled "rising classes to imitate the dress and conduct of the older elites." Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men & Painted Women A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982): 37; Claudia B. Kidwell and Margaret C. Christman, *Suiting Everyone: The Democratization of Clothing in America* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1974). See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf 1993) for a discussion of the sharp line the middle class drew to separate themselves from the lower classes. The diffusion of gentility confused the issue of class

the cause of social exclusivity” for the middle and upper classes. There is no better example of this in Carson’s narrative than her social call on Dolly Madison. Carson looked, talked, and behaved like a middle-class woman, and therefore gained access to the President’s wife.<sup>31</sup>

The importance of clothing to maintaining a middle-class identity was also highlighted by Carson’s reaction to being forced to wear prison clothes, an act that removed the outward vestiges of her social standing. The prison authorities allowed her to wear some of her own things, and put her in charge of selecting and repairing the female prisoners’ wardrobe. Among the many criticisms Carson had of her fellow inmates was their inability to repair their clothes. She put this down to their being “generally the lowest grades of society, scarce one removed from Hottentots.” Carson said “I undertook to civilize and bring into some kind of order.” To her surprise (but not to ours) she recalled that “many of them hated me for the care I manifested for \_\_\_\_\_ because more people could afford the outward semblance of it.

<sup>31</sup>. *Bowing to Necessity*, 130-131. This behavior accompanied dress, and consumption (both material and cultural). Concern with social and class distinctions burgeoned in the 1820s. Hemphill notes the growth in the number of conduct books offered for sale in the United States. 90% of these new works were directed at (and written by) middle class Americans. *Bowing to Necessity*, 131.

Carson compared Madison rather unfavorably to herself: "I discovered that fame had, as usual, been very far from the truth, as Mrs. Madison is not so tall, much thicker, and inclining to *em bon point*." II, 26.

them, toiling all day to keep them decent and comfortable. “<sup>32</sup>

Another reason for Carson’s low opinion of her fellow inmates was the fact that a large number of them were black.<sup>33</sup> Carson’s racism was shared by most white nineteenth-century Americans. And, though Carson employed a black woman and talked fondly the “faithful servant” whom Richard Smith had “emancipated from the horrors of slavery,” her contact with black prisoners in the Walnut Street jail evoked virulent comments and behavior.<sup>34</sup> She was particularly disgusted by the dining arrangements. Women were seated “promiscuously, without any distinction of age or color.” She watched as her fellow inmates caught their meat “in their fingers, and gnaw[ed] it like dogs, no knives or forks being then allowed them.”<sup>35</sup> Carson refused to sit at a table with black women, and asked to have them removed. Though she did not get her wish, Carson was able to persuade her jailers to force the women to sit at the lower end of the table. She was also repulsed by the religious hypocrisy of the black prisoners whom she perceived as merely attempting to ingratiate themselves with visitors by “affect[ing] to feel the powers of religion to so violent a degree, that persons in their immediate vicinity were endangered by the surprising feats of agility they performed.” Carson also complained that these women gave off “a noisome effluvia.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> II, 65; II, 66.

<sup>33</sup> Black women, according to Carson, made up “a large majority in our female republic.” II 68.

<sup>34</sup> I, 177.

<sup>35</sup> II, 67. Carson was also given a knife and fork.

<sup>36</sup> II, 68. She mentions this again a few pages later: “The cell was then filled with negroes,



Irish gentleman of some eminence at the bar," whom she claimed was drunk in the courtroom and who "had his eye on a good fat office." But Carson reserved the lion's share of her condemnation for Governor Snyder, of whom she noted, "Some of Simon Snyder's friends have said that he would have suffered death rather than commit an act derogatory to his dignity as governor; but those persons should have remembered that he was of mean spirit, and low [and immigrant] origin." Nor did she spare Snyder's wife. This "would-be fine lad[y]," whose conduct Carson complained was no better than that of servant girls, "ought to have been better educated, have more spirit, dignity, and respect for the office of her husband."<sup>39</sup> Carson was explicit about the motivations for the History's publication: to exonerate herself from the malicious rumors about her character, and to make money.<sup>40</sup> Inflammatory comments like those

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<sup>39</sup> I, 205.

<sup>40</sup> . It is unclear if she succeeded in either of these ambitions. Mary Clarke Carr recounted that "fifty copies were disposed of in a day for several days in succession" after it went on sale. She also claimed that "it was written for by the President, vice President, Gov. of Pennsylvania, and a great number of members of Congress, of both houses." (*Memoirs* II, 103). However, under the terms of their contract with the printer, Desilver, Carson and Clarke had to wait until his portion of the books was sold before they could make any profit. (*Memoirs* II, 104). Carson chose to trade her share of the books for counterfeit notes on Stephen Girard's bank. This adventure got her arrested again. While serving a seven-year sentence on the counterfeiting charge Carson died in the Philadelphia penitentiary of typhoid fever in April, 1824. She was thirty-eight years old.

about Snyder and his wife may well have been included for their shock (and money-making) value. But they may also have helped readers distinguish Carson's status from those beneath her.

The *History* works hard to justify Carson's class status despite the fact that she violated its norms. What she told readers she did have were refinement, delicacy, education, sensibility, morality (of sorts), and maternal feelings – all characteristics cultivated and valued by the middle class. Her robust racial and ethnic prejudices, and disparaging remarks about artisans and the pretensions of their wives, would all have struck a chord with her readers. The *History* is also framed by assumptions about the private and public duties and obligations of men and women: Carson weighed her expectations of marriage and family life against the ideology of separate spheres. Though a series of circumstances denied her economic stability and a secure, affective family life, she nonetheless championed the values embraced by many of her readers. If anything, Carson proved how much she believed in these ideals when she exposed the deficiencies in her own family and the failure of first her father and then her husband to be family providers.

Carson may have articulated a middle-class point of view, but whether such an audience enjoyed her work is unknown. In some ways Carson was an equal opportunity offender. The *History* would certainly have titillated, but also affronted, a good many readers. Carson's portrayal of herself as a victim was intended to justify her descent into the criminal world, but her abandonment of middle-class virtues – such as marriage and a legal means of earning a

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living – would have been condemned by the very people with whom Carson sought to identify herself. Comfortably situated men and women may have found unsettling Carson’s account of the precarious circumstances that propelled her into financial distress and ultimately crime. Could they, too, lose their possessions and position in the blink of an eye? Or would her readers have felt self-congratulatory, assured that their lawful behavior, prudence, and self-control would save them from a similar fate?