

The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City. By Sharon E. Wood. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xiii + 321 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photographs. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$22.50. ISBN: cloth, 0-807-82939-0; paper, 0-807-85601-0.

Reviewed by Margaret Garb

In the decades after the Civil War, young women from farming villages and small towns throughout New England and the Midwest moved to urban centers like Chicago and New York, and just as often to smaller cities like Davenport, Iowa. They traveled, sometimes with family, sometimes alone, in search of waged employment in shops, offices, department stores, factories or, the last resort, as servants in family homes. Struggling to support themselves on always inadequate incomes, living in boarding houses and walking through city streets from job to home to evening entertainments, single wage-earning women, by their very presence in public spaces, became the symbols of the dangers of urban life in the industrializing nation and, at the same time, the forces behind a dramatic transformation in the ways urban streets, civic institutions, and even politics would function in the twentieth century. Sharon E. Wood's *The Freedom of the Streets* is a vivid account of the lives of Davenport's wage-earning women. In a meticulous and imaginative use of sources—police records, the manuscript census, city directories, tax records, as well as newspapers, women's club records, and letters—Wood effectively links the material experiences of working women to the constant public debates over what it meant for a woman to work outside the family home. With the city as backdrop—sometimes even as a central character—Wood tracks a generation of wage-earning women—a doctor, nurses, servants, factory girls, and, most commonly, prostitutes—as they moved through the streets, homes, and work places of Davenport.

Waged work, a necessity for many, put late-nineteenth-century women in a complex and difficult position. Some women's-rights advocates, like those in the Association for the Advancement of Women (AAW), contended that women needed economic independence before they could claim the full rights of citizenship, in particular suffrage. Members of the association, seeing "self-support" as the primary

problem facing American women, sought to “identify employments they could possibly claim as respectable for women,” including architecture, journalism, dentistry, business, and even “Bee Culture” (p. 41). Yet, as the AAW members recognized, “Idleness is respectable” (p. 41). A woman who worked for money lowered her chances for marriage and risked the perception of having lost her virtue. Even if they did manage to avoid the “moral danger,” working women’s very presence in workplaces and their visibility on urban streets suggested the precariousness of their respectability. In a particularly sharp analysis of the geography of housing and work in Davenport, Wood shows that wage-earning women, including the widely celebrated and respectable Dr. Jennie McCowen, tended to live and work within walking distance of—often on the same blocks as—the city’s brothels. It proved difficult for a single working woman to distinguish herself from her less virtuous neighbors.

Wood provides a remarkably rich and nuanced portrait of Davenport’s prostitutes, from the impoverished young women who turned to prostitution out of desperation to those, like Josie Mitchell and Emma Webb, who built successful businesses and large fortunes running brothels. Prostitution was, for some respectable laboring women, a temporary measure, while for others it served as long-term, steady employment. For most, it was a job: “money was at the heart of the matter” (p. 100). Reformers and politicians, seeking solutions to such criminal activity, engaged in long-running debates over whether prostitution was caused by an impoverished environment, innate evils, or “hereditary degradation.” (Davenport for a short time established an informal system of licensing brothel owners and inspecting prostitutes, a move that infuriated reformers and middle-class employed women.) Wood, however, uncovered more mundane causes. In a series of vibrant narratives of individual women’s lives, Wood shows that the death or desertion of a husband left women with few other options for supporting their children. Here, as Wood astutely notes, motherhood, the great virtue for nineteenth-century women, might prompt a turn to prostitution. “Urban geography” too shaped women’s employment choices. Living on streets where neighbors supplemented their income with prostitution, some of these women may have seen sex commerce as a viable opportunity.

In the section perhaps most disturbing to contemporary readers, Wood demonstrates that deeply held assumptions about the nature of womanhood, class

differences, and the character of urban neighborhoods could leave even young girls tainted by immoral behavior or, worse, at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. In September 1891, ten-year-old Ada Ammerman and her friends, eleven-year-old Dolly Hamerly and fourteen-year-old Della Wood ran away from home and apparently spent a weekend with three “sporting men,” a group who gambled on local horses. Ada’s mother, after searching frantically, dragged her daughter home and sent her husband to swear out a warrant for the men’s arrest. In the trials that followed, the girls were portrayed as wild, allowed to play in streets and alleys, and ultimately as prostitutes, willingly and intentionally trading sexual favors for cash and trinkets. The men, seen by the jury as simply following the sexual instincts of healthy young men, were acquitted. After detailing the trial testimony, Wood follows the girls into adulthood and looks at the ways this very public accusation of the exchange of sexual favors might have shaped the rest of their lives.

The Freedom of the Streets is packed with compelling and richly detailed vignettes. It contends that women’s waged work in the Gilded Age was tenuous, linked by bourgeois culture to sexual impropriety, and that employed single women recognized that they needed to provide each other with support through local clubs and political organizations. Other scholars of women’s history have made similar arguments about wage-earning women in other cities and in other periods in the nineteenth century. What is truly remarkable and innovative about this study is that it evokes with tactile precision the ways women moved through the city and gradually opened urban public spaces to respectable women. In the scattered scraps of evidence often overlooked and rarely pieced together by scholars, Wood has reconstructed a city of struggling and courageous women.

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