

Chapter 5

Domesticity, Discipline, and Prisoners' Response: Retraining Women in Prison

On 8 October 1873 Mrs. Sallie Hubbard—the “Wabash Murderess”—became the first inmate of an exclusively female prison in the United States. Along with her husband, she had murdered a pioneer family of seven which had sought refuge in their home. Mr. Hubbard was executed while his wife received a life sentence. The sheriff and two deputies who transported Sallie Hubbard to the new women's prison applied heavy manacles to contain her. But when superintendent Sarah Smith received the woman, she dramatically heralded the contrasts of men's and women's prison reform. Directing the men to “Take off her shackles; she is my prisoner, not yours,” Smith embraced her fallen sister, prayed for her, and showed her to a room decorated with bedspread, clothed table, curtains, a pot of flowers, a Bible, and a hymn book. In time, Hubbard became a model prisoner.¹

The Massachusetts women's prison opened with comparable ceremony. When inmates formerly confined in state houses of correction arrived at Framingham on 7 November 1877, they immediately received bright, blue plaid dresses. The superintendent explained that the institution “was not designed for imprisonment alone, but for reformation.” It would be “a starting point in their existence for all eternity, a pause in this earthly life, a time for reflection, an opportunity for new principles to be formed, holy resolutions to be made, in the strength that God alone can give.”² Similarly, managers explained that the New York House of Refuge at Hudson “is not a prison . . . but an educational institution.” The Western House of Refuge promised to “give such moral and religious training as will induce [inmates] to form a good character and such training in domestic work as will eventually enable them to find employment, secure good homes and be self-supporting.”³

Each women's institution thus rejected traditional penal goals of punishment and deterrence. The new prisons opened as alternatives to the penitentiary, with its silence and hard labor, and to

the men's reformatory, with its military and industrial atmosphere. In contrast to both, women's prisons were intended to retrain women through sympathetic female staff, prayer, education, and domesticity.

Despite the founders' self-conscious differentiation of women's prisons from other nineteenth-century institutions, the feminine experiments eventually resembled traditional prisons in many respects. Like other efforts to humanize institutional care, such as the "soft-line" in juvenile reformatories or "moral therapy" in insane asylums,⁴ women's prisons increasingly relied on traditional methods of discipline. In each of these experiments the underlying function of prisons and asylums—the control of inmates—repeatedly asserted itself. The women's institutions did remain unique in the domestic content of their retraining programs, but they too ultimately shared the disciplinary values of the prison system. In both skill training and character building the tension between domesticity and discipline pervaded the internal life of the women's prisons.

Retraining Skills

Women prison reformers insisted on the importance of teaching inmates some remunerative skills so that they would not be tempted to commit crimes after their release. They had suggested several types of training, including academic classes, industrial trades, and domestic skills. For several reasons, domesticity eventually prevailed at each institution. First, academic classes proved frustrating to teachers and inmates because of insufficient staff and resources and the difficulty of teaching so diverse a group. Only the New York houses of refuge, with their younger populations, maintained a commitment to remedial education.⁵ Industrial training, favored at first by some administrators, faced the opposition to prison-made goods raised by the labor movement during the 1880s. Furthermore, the realities of women's employment opportunities discouraged industrial training, for only a small number of women could get jobs in skilled trades.⁶ Because most women who worked for pay were domestics, and because domesticity was central to the reformatory scheme, administrators focused on training in domestic skills.

Some of the founders of the new prisons had hoped to expand training and job placement beyond the domestic work offered in the homes for discharged women prisoners. In advocating women's

reformatories in 1870, Elizabeth Chace had questioned training for domestic service, noting that "men are more generally taught trades, both useful and profitable, . . . in shops, factories and on farms."⁷ Rhoda Coffin suggested in 1876 that an inmate learn both the "duties of housewifery, and if possible, . . . some kind of trade—a trade which could be carried on without machinery."⁸

The Indiana Woman's Prison did try to identify some training that was "fit for women to do," offered possibilities for self-supporting employment after release, and did not undercut the incomes of the working women in the area. The managers, possibly seeking a profit-making industry, experimented with chair caning, paper-box making, and glove stitching, all of which proved financially disappointing. Finally, they settled on a prison laundry and brought experts from the Troy, New York, laundry workers to initiate Indiana inmates into "the secret of *starch*, ironing," and other skills.⁹

The Indiana industrial laundry employed about half the prisoners, but it was tiring, routine work and the superintendents disapproved of it.¹⁰ Thus, by the 1890s Indiana's annual reports stressed domestic training: "A love for women's work should be carefully instilled into the minds of the girls." Cooking and cleaning, sewing and quilting occupied inmates. Superintendent Sarah Keely proudly told the 1898 prison congress that her institution had no steam laundry and no power sewing: "All work is done as it would be in a private family, thus fitting the women for work as they will find it in the outside world."¹¹

As an "incentive to good behavior," indoor domestic work was later supplemented by outdoor activities. In addition to working in the chicken farm and in vegetable and flower gardens, Indiana inmates made institutional repairs. They painted most of the rooms, renovated the chapel, repaired walks, built steps, and cemented floors. They were not encouraged, however, to seek work using these skills.¹²

During its opening decade, the Massachusetts reformatory had contracts from private industries for machine knitting, chair caning, straw work, and the manufacture of corsets, brushes, and hammocks. When contract labor came under attack, a state-use system limited the amount of goods the prison could market. During her term, Ellen Cheney Johnson established outdoor labor, for, she believed, "To rouse an interest in country life and pursuits is likely to make the woman more contented when she is placed in a quiet home away from the city." Thus, those inmates not working

in the prison laundry might be found whitewashing walls and ceilings, painting buildings, and taking care of prison grounds. Johnson also set up an experiment in silk culture that was briefly successful. As in Indiana, these outdoor activities were less a form of training than of moral treatment. As superintendent Frances Morton wrote, "while it is health-giving, it also suggests new thoughts which must be uplifting to many minds, if not at the time, we hope for the future."¹³

Massachusetts prison managers claimed that it was difficult to find "mechanical work" for inmates after release and, as in Indiana, the managers' ideals of the country home required training for domestic tasks rather than for trades and industry. Thus, in spite of an initial interest in training for less-traditional skills, the major emphasis at Framingham was domesticity; Framingham's unique contribution to prison reform was the indenture program, or conditional early release, when prisoners served as domestic servants in neighboring homes.

The indenture system provided an incentive for inmates to acquire domestic skills. Only those who displayed "fitness for service" while in prison qualified for placement. As Ellen Johnson explained, the program fulfilled several of the goals of training. It was intended to bring the inmate "under the influence of family life and to keep her from old temptations; at the same time she is trained to domestic duties, and her earnings are entirely under her own control."¹⁴

The indenture law passed the Massachusetts legislature in 1879, a year after the women's reformatory opened. In the twenty-five years during which the Massachusetts institution found placements for inmates, approximately 1,500 women went "to service," about one-fourth of all those sentenced there. Fewer than 9 percent of the servants returned to the prison from their positions, and the state considered the program highly successful.¹⁵

To be eligible for indenture, an inmate had to be in the highest grade in the prison, which usually meant that she had served about three-fourths of her sentence. The superintendent had the authority to recommend prospective servants. (Ellen Johnson once stated that a woman was never recommended "until we feel she can make bread," a comment which won a round of applause at the National Prison Congress.) A housewife usually asked the Massachusetts prison commissioners to assign a domestic to her, and when an inmate had been approved, the prisoner had the choice of consenting to the contract or remaining in prison. The

employer could reject the candidate, too. In one case a Jamaica Plain housewife declined an inmate who was known for her drunkenness, claiming, "We are too near the city, and the neighborhood abounds in temptations." In another instance, one inmate refused a position which was then accepted by another.¹⁶

"As a rule," the superintendent explained, "the homes selected have been in the country, away from evil influences." Most of them were in the semirural towns surrounding Boston, especially in South Framingham, near the prison, and Weston, West Newton, Ipswich, or, for a few, western Massachusetts. The wages ranged from \$1.25 a week during the first months of service to \$2.50 a week in the more generous households; these wages were slightly lower than most domestics earned. The money earned belonged entirely to the inmate, who sometimes received a bonus when her term expired and she left her place of indenture.¹⁷

The housewives who accepted servants took their responsibilities as seriously as did the prison officers. They claimed to welcome inmates "right into the family," and treated them like daughters, with the hope that the former criminals would marry and establish their own domiciles. Not only the domestic duties, but also the personal lives of servants came under their employers' surveillance. As one woman wrote to the prison when accepting a released inmate: "What are the woman's weak points of history and character? I will protect and guide her to the best of my ability." To ensure proper conduct, employers supervised private hours, required permission for visitors or for trips away from the house, and set standards of acceptable behavior.¹⁸

Most servants completed their contracts of indenture without incident. Their incentive was to remain outside of the prison; to run away from service became a criminal offense in 1880. The employers profited by acquiring a sometimes grateful servant and the possibility of future indentures if the current one was successful. Occasionally, however, household conflicts became too serious and the indenture was terminated. In one case an inmate indentured to a couple on a small farm left after four days, explaining that "the man was not a good man to his wife and he didn't act proper to me; he was always flirting and it made me feel sorry for his wife." When employers sent servants back to the prison they often did so with apologies for failing to uplift their charges. One woman claimed that she had borne the drinking, temper, and late hours of her worker, but regretted that her husband couldn't overlook the language used toward him. Another employer, who paid

her servant's fine when arrested, wrote: "I thought I could reform her but have come to the conclusion there is no such thing . . . If it had not been for her appetite for drink she would have remained here." In another case, police followed a servant home and nearly arrested her for soliciting. The housewife lamented that "I could not keep her with my family of boys . . . I lost in other ways one of the best workers I ever had."¹⁹

But for each unsuccessful indenture there were nine in which women served their terms completely, often winning the praise of employers. One servant who had been unsatisfactory at first "turned over a new leaf," her employer wrote to the superintendent. Other participating housewives sent back periodic reports on former servants who were happily married or successfully employed, such as the "colored girl released three years before who is now a housekeeper in Connecticut making \$3.23 a week, very respected, responsible." Inmates, too, wrote to the prison from their placements. One claimed to be "very happy in my new home," while another asked the superintendent to "tell all the girls for me to get a place . . . on a farm."²⁰

The Massachusetts indenture plan succeeded because it fulfilled several functions for the prison. First, it provided suitable feminine training that did not compete with men's labor (although it did undercut the wages of other women servants). Second, sending inmates out to neighboring housewives gave added incentive for good behavior in prison and opened spaces for new commitments when necessary. Finally, indenture served as a form of parole, with individual homes serving as halfway points to release. Although it did reflect the narrowing of training in the prison, the indenture plan was one of the most progressive plans of its time. It offered better training than women received in the houses of corrections and may have been more welcome to prisoners than the industrial work done by inmates in penitentiaries.

The reliance on domestic training made more sense, however, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, when most women viewed household management as their primary occupation. By 1900, when the women's prisons had reverted to domesticity, more American women were leaving the home for public activities ranging from higher education, the professions, and social reform for middle- and upper-class women, to factory work for immigrant and working-class women.²¹ Some women did continue Catharine Beecher's tradition of trying to elevate housework to a profession, particularly through the domestic science movement. But the

women's prisons did not view indenture as professional or scientific training. The domesticity they cultivated looked backward, rather than forward, suggesting how firmly the prisons were rooted in the traditional female sphere.

The indenture program also suggested an attitude on the part of reformers that might be called, for lack of a neutral term, maternalistic. Although the keepers themselves had entered the public sphere as paid workers and social reformers, they discouraged prisoners from leaving the home. Women who had committed crimes, they implied, could not be trusted on their own, especially in the cities. Therefore, to protect them from either their own "bad inclinations" or from men, the reformers sent prisoners to small towns and rural families. Unable to teach inmates how to support themselves in an urban industrial economy, they chose to return them to an older, increasingly anachronistic, women's world.

Character Retraining

A dual ideal of womanhood guided the staff who worked in the new reformatory prisons. It drew upon the values of the female sphere, especially piety, domesticity, and purity. At the same time, though, it called for self-sufficiency, echoing reformers' concerns that sexual or economic dependence led to women's crimes. Prison officers believed that women were more emotional than men and thus cultivated their sentiments; they also argued that women needed self-control and attempted to encourage it.

Staff members themselves provided a model of this dual ideal. They assumed the roles of loving but demanding mothers who forgave past errors but insisted on obedience. For Indiana superintendent Sarah Smith, the first principle of corrections was love; the second, the strength to resist temptation and care for oneself. Her methods, she explained, consisted on the one hand of constant personal oversight, special care in sickness, little acts of kindness, and, on the other hand, prompt punishment and firm training. Like Ellen Johnson in Massachusetts, Smith and her chief matron, Elmina Johnson, won praise for uniting "womanly kindness and sympathy with great firmness and skill in governing."²²

The superintendents and chaplains appealed to traditional feminine ideals of piety and domesticity to aid inmates' retraining. The chaplains mainly provided spiritual and nurturing services. They visited new prisoners in solitary, made sick calls at the hospitals, and wrote letters for the illiterate. Daily religious services,

Sunday schools, and prayer meetings, as well as sermons by visiting ministers, exposed all inmates to Protestant teaching, with an emphasis on "a full and free salvation." Ellen Cheney Johnson donated a painting of "Christ and the Erring Woman" to remind prisoners they were "a downcast, but not forsaken sisterhood."²³

Officers also used nature to cultivate piety. One night Johnson awakened prisoners and sent them outside to view a night-blooming flower. During the day Massachusetts inmates sometimes sat in the mulberry grove to hear visiting speakers. The superintendent of the Western House of Refuge led inmates on a hike one day. The managers exclaimed that it was "one of the great events of the season. Although the girls were tired from the walk, . . . still they were delighted to get outside the fence. After the walk, dancing was indulged in until supper time."²⁴

Prisoners' maternal feelings could be aroused by the children of inmates who resided, up to the age of two, in most institutions. By allowing prisoners to visit and care for the infants, the staff both feminized the prison routine and provided an outlet for otherwise-disruptive inmates, as the story of Margaret B. illustrates. A "poor old creature," for years "drunk and knocked about," Margaret complained, "I've been in every institution in the country and I'm tired of institutions. Won't you let me go home?" Prison physician Lucy Hall recalled her response: "'I can't let you go home,' I said, 'but how would you like to help take care of the babies?' I took her to the nursery, and in twenty-four hours that insane look of misery had left her face . . . I fully believe I saved her from insanity."²⁵

The emphasis on piety, nature, and maternity may indeed have comforted many inmates. In contrast to mixed institutions where women prisoners were objectified as sexually fallen outcasts, the new feminine methods stressed the other parts of inmates' female identities: their nonsexual, maternal, sentimental sides. The women's world in the prison offered a potentially supportive atmosphere for those inmates who wanted to affirm these values in themselves. The Massachusetts reformatory was said to have provided such an environment at first, at least according to one observer. In 1879 Louisa May Alcott spent a "very remarkable day and night" at the prison, where she read to the 400 inmates and listened to their stories. She judged the institution "a much better place than Concord Prison, with its armed wardens, and 'knock down and drag out' methods. Only women here, and they work wonders by patience, love, common-sense, and the belief in salvation for all."²⁶

Although these efforts to strengthen the feminine elements of the prison environments continued, they coexisted from the outset with more authoritarian means of enforcing feminine behavior. In Indiana superintendent Smith prohibited "the unwomanly vice of tobacco-smoking" at the institution's opening, even though the practice had been permitted for women in the state prison. Furthermore, she immediately banned the popular *Police Gazette* and allowed only religious newspapers. The board of visitors welcomed these dictates as "the forerunner[s] of other voluntary [*sic*] reforms that will . . . lead to a restoration of an effaced or lost womanhood." When inmates protested these deprivations, prison officers relied on their maternal skills. Even prisoners who were wild and unmanageable, they explained, could be "hushed for a while, at least, into quiet submission by the power of song and prayer."²⁷

The Massachusetts superintendents who followed Mosher and Barton epitomized the harder line of women's prison reform. Ellen Cheney Johnson disapproved of unsupervised conversation among inmates. When she took charge in 1884, she suspended recreation periods and scheduled special events instead. The Silver T Club (Temperance, Truth, and Trust) occupied the evening hours which had originally been a time for informal meetings. Johnson claimed that she encouraged self-sufficiency among inmates by allowing prisoners to manage the clubs themselves. Similarly, the badges worn by those privileged to belong were supposed to instill self-respect. But, as Johnson herself revealed, her methods manipulated inmates and imposed her will on them: "Of course the prisoners themselves are not aware of our wish to interfere with their recreation time. They are very jealous for what they consider their rights, and whatever we do must be managed with tact, not to antagonize them and so destroy the good effect of our efforts."²⁸

Johnson's successor in 1900, Frances Morton, openly rejected kindness for authority. She cut out recreational hours entirely because they were "great sources of evil and detrimental to discipline." Morton told the women they would do better to use the time learning to sew. The message she repeated to her professional colleagues was "Obedience is the first lesson taught each woman."²⁹ Morton may have been idiosyncratic in her authoritarianism, or her approach may have marked a break with the past tradition of hiring sympathetic reformers as administrators. In either case, she spoke more freely about control, relying less on the principles of sisterhood than had her predecessors.

These personal methods employed by prison officials were combined from the outset with formal structures for overseeing the daily behavior of inmates. The merit grading-system—an integral part of British and American reformatory penology—placed upon the prisoner herself the burden of maintaining order. The elaborate rules governing daily life illustrate both what prison routine was like and how the emphasis on self-control resembled the traditional goals of prison discipline.

Ellen Cheney Johnson's merit system, instituted to encourage "self-conquest," consisted of four stages, each of which granted wider privileges of dress, mail, and recreation. A woman could advance from the blue denims of Division I to the gingham dress of Division III. Then, if she had a perfect record, she earned a red ribbon with the silver letter T (for the Temperance Club), to be worn over her left breast. These trusted women had the best rooms and took responsibility for prison chores. In Indiana a three-tiered system operated after 1896, regulating inmates' food, dress, and letter-writing privileges. The "honor system" at the Hudson House of Refuge asked inmates to report their own misbehavior (which one critic found "absurd"). The superintendent of the Albion House of Refuge prided herself on the absence of such a system, since she found it inimical to "well regulated family methods." However, the institution did eventually accept a plan by which inmates received 10,000 marks on entry that had to be worked off through good behavior in order to earn parole.³⁰

With the introduction of the indeterminate sentence at the end of the century, the merit systems assumed new significance. These sentences, long advocated by prison reformers as incentives to good behavior, gave a minimum-to-maximum range (e.g., two to five years), with the inmate's record determining her date of release. In 1903 the Framingham officials reorganized the merit system with a complicated plan of credits and demerits which required "perfect conduct and industry" for months at a time to reach the highest grade, from which parole was possible. Backsliding meant serving extra time. The system confused many prisoners about the length of their stay and no doubt created enormous tensions.³¹

The self-discipline imposed by such positive incentives did not suffice to produce model prisoners, as the use of punishments indicated. According to the early statements of prison reformers, women would be hindered rather than reformed if punished by confinement in the typical nineteenth-century dark cell. Yet soli-

tary confinement and a diet of bread and water awaited a woman who was disrespectful, talked at meals, or attempted to escape. As Clara Barton pointed out when requesting several punishment rooms at Framingham, solitary provided a more humane method of dealing with noisy and unruly women than did handcuffs, strait jackets, or lashes, which were still in use in state prisons. Perhaps with this thought in mind, but also because the reformatories admitted some inmates whom the staff found "perverse, obstinate, and wicked," each one soon provided punishment rooms, and some resorted to corporal punishment.³²

The use of disciplinary measures varied by state, by superintendent, and by institution. Ellen Johnson punished misbehavior at the dinner table by solitary meals; "further insolence" resulted in confinement in a solitary work room (ten by twelve feet) for up to three weeks, plus the loss of ten credits and one day of commuted time. Extreme insubordination earned confinement on bread and water, with no company or books allowed, until the offender declared her penitence. The "dungeon" (basement cells and a diet of bread and water) was reserved for those who attacked officers, destroyed property, or threatened the safety of other inmates. Johnson claimed that she seldom used this last resort.³³

In Indiana, where more felons were incarcerated at the women's prison, administrators seemed less averse to discipline. Superintendents' official reports often described punishments of solitary confinement, a bread and water diet, the loss of good time, and corporal punishment. In addition, periodic charges of extensive physical discipline reveal that handcuffs and beatings were also used.³⁴

Severe treatment characterized New York's Hudson House of Refuge, even though its inmates were young, minor offenders. For "pouting, loud talking, and failure to comply with the spirit of the rules and unwritten laws of the institution," inmates lost points in the merit system. For more serious problems, solitary in a dark cell with disciplinary diet and handcuffs was reportedly "in vogue" at first, while long confinement in uncomfortable positions and corporal punishment frequently occurred in later years. Excessive physical punishment provoked a riot in 1899, one of the rare incidents of active resistance that officials recorded. An investigation disclosed not only harsh punishment but also complete mismanagement. A new administration closed the dungeon and revised the merit plan, but within a year their reports mention punishment cells again.³⁵

Reformers had argued that women's institutions must be places of reformation and not of punishment, yet some punishments did appear throughout the records. Compared to mixed penal institutions the level of physical discomfort in the women's reformatories was mild. Women who remained at Sing Sing, for instance, endured gags, strait jackets, short rations, hair croppings, as well as solitary in the dark cell.³⁶ The women's reformatories relied more heavily on systems of merits and demerits, imposing less corporal punishment and employing alternate means of discipline. Combined with emotional and spiritual appeals, their methods of inculcating "self-control" seemed to succeed in creating orderly, well-disciplined penal environments.

The Effect on Prisoners

The most difficult problem in prison history is reconstructing the inmate experience. Although quantitative data tell something about who went to prison and why, they do not record feelings. Most statements about inmates come from reformers and officials, and thus must be read with care. No doubt the women who were retrained in the reformatories reacted as have other subjects of "total institutions": rebellion by some and submission by others. Unfortunately for historians, the institutional records mainly report grateful responses from former inmates and glowing accounts from visitors. Only two outbreaks appear in the sources. Of the one at Framingham in 1888, a legislative investigation insisted it was merely "born of a spirit of bravado and of a desire to have some fun." New York officials took the riot of 1899 at Hudson more seriously; they blamed management for the mistreatment of inmates and instituted some reforms. And, of course, the use of disciplinary measures which had not been anticipated by reformers suggests that on an individual level, prisoners resisted the retraining process.³⁷

The bulk of the evidence indicates, however, that most inmates complied with the official routines. Whether inspired by the examples of the staff, encouraged by the incentive systems, or discouraged by punishments, they seem to have become the dutiful daughters required by the institutional regimens. Like the group of life-term prisoners observed in Indiana, many inmates of women's prisons seemed "docile, industrious, even pleasant, and . . . apparently resigned to their fate."³⁸ An observation by national

prison reformer Frederick H. Wines shows the extent to which order prevailed, in this case under Ellen Johnson:

I applied to the discipline at Sherborn every known test. I saw no conversation in the shops, certainly less than in a well-governed school. . . . I stood in the halls at night and listened for a sound, but could hear none. I noted the generally respectful manner of the prisoners to their officers. I sat upon the platform in the chapel, and again in the rear, without detecting a symptom of disorder.³⁹

A similar scene at the Indiana Woman's Prison impressed reformer Isabel Barrows:

The bell signals for dinner. The inmates file in but there is always a pause of perhaps five minutes before the last one is in her seat and they are ready to sing grace. Out from every pocket, as soon as she sits down, comes the bit of fancy work and they may sew till the signal for grace before meat [*sic*]. . . . after certain meals they are allowed to turn and face the officer, who sits on a platform at the side, and while the tables are noiselessly cleared by those on duty for that work, the rest may sit for fifteen minutes or half an hour at their needlework while the officer reads aloud to them some interesting book.⁴⁰

The authors of these observations, sympathetic to the women's prisons, wanted to emphasize that female staff could maintain order. They revealed that the women's reformatories did not differ greatly from men's prisons. Each required a degree of regimentation which could not have been achieved without "constant pressure and vigilance," according to Wines.

Officials succeeded in maintaining this level of control by carefully inculcating prisoners with the values of reformatory treatment. The prisons, like other "total institutions," facilitated this process.⁴¹ Isolation stripped inmates of their normal identities, while keepers had absolute power to impose their ideals on them.

The type of inmate, discipline, and design in the women's prisons may have made this task easier. First, many women were already humiliated when they arrived at the institutions. Some had not realized they had risked imprisonment when they drank, left home, or had sexual relations. Others had actually been the victims of sexual mistreatment. As one woman who had been seduced and abandoned wrote: "Ever since I came here it has seemed as if I should die of ashame [*sic*]."⁴² Next, solitary confinement during the first stage of classification isolated inmates. Later, complicated merit systems regulated the minute details of prisoners' behaviors,

including their food, clothing, rooms, and correspondence. The threat of punishment may have been responsible for the absence of rebellion, but equally important was the reformatory design itself. The semblance of domesticity masked the fact that women were indeed prisoners; without consciousness of their position, prisoners were less likely to strike out at their keepers. The rhetoric of sisterhood, moreover, may have convinced some inmates that institutional controls were indeed for their own good.

The reminiscence of one prisoner at the Massachusetts reformatory suggests how individual resistance gave way gradually to identification with reformatory values. A woman "of culture and education," the prisoner resented the deprivation imposed on her during her solitary probation period—"so little water, so few towels . . . tin plate." Then, "As the days went on through probation," she wrote, "a feeling that being shut up indoors was far worse than having to eat from a tin plate; that I would give anything in all the world for some of my own books." When she entered Division II and met the other inmates, her first reaction was that the women were "hardly human," but she then became interested in their reformation. "It began to be a pleasure to feel that I could keep one group of women from more harmful talk by telling them stories or picking out library books." This behavior earned her reclassification. She recalled leaving Division II "with a feeling that I could trust the matrons," and, granted the privileges of dress and movement of Division III, she reached the point of complete identification with the staff and the values of order and discipline. She wrote:

In Division III the world began to change. I began to know the place better. I began to find more of bad and more of good in women. Many, many—indeed most of them—were hopeless. They are coarse, vulgar, but not all bad. They are generous among one another; many of them are truly fond of their matrons; they do appreciate kindness. They value the flowers in chapel on Sunday. One not very well behaved woman said, and she meant it: "I'd like to be good just to let Mrs. Johnson know it." To sum it all up, the place is to me a reformatory, not a prison; clean, orderly, systematic, managed and governed with a judgment that is beyond criticism.⁴³

In this case and others, isolation and the grading system helped convert new inmates. As an educated woman who considered herself better than the others, the above case was atypical; the inmate

became an active partner in the reformatory process. Other women gradually stopped resisting and accepted the fate assigned them by the staff because they had no explanations for their predicament. For example, a woman who had been at the Massachusetts prison for only one month, on a vagrancy charge, revealed both discontent and resignation when she testified during a legislative hearing:⁴⁴

Q. This is the first time you have been sent to Sherborn?

A. Yes. . . .

Q. How do you like it here?

A. Don't like it at all.

Q. Like that uniform you have to wear?

A. No, I don't.

Q. How long you got to stay?

A. I don't know . . .

In another case, a woman who claimed to have miscarried and disposed of the fetus was convicted of murdering her illegitimate child. She had served only two months when interrogated and was already learning to accept a penitent role.

Q. How long have you got to stay here?

A. I don't know. . . .

Q. Did the court say anything as to how long you were to stay?

A. I don't know; I was so hysterical all I could hear was Sherborn. . . .

Q. Got any curiosity [about length of sentence]?

A. It would not shorten my stay if I had.

Q. Are you pretty well satisfied here?

A. In a way I am. I have no reason for being dissatisfied, except that I am away from the few relatives that I have.

Q. There is nothing in the institution that you can complain about, is there?

A. No, sir.

Q. You have to be up day and night? [She worked in the infirmary.]

A. Up and down.

Q. That is voluntary on your part.

A. I was put in there and it is my duty to do whatever is expected of me.

This woman, because of the shock of finding herself sentenced to prison, had no idea how long she would have to remain. She resigned herself to doing whatever was necessary to avoid further trouble.

An older Irish woman who had served five years, apparently for

adultery, was about to be released. Her attitude is precisely that which legislators hoped the prison would mold:

- Q. You won't have that fellow around the house again?
- A. No; nor any other fellow.
- Q. Have you made a good many acquaintances among the women?
- A. I saw a couple of women I know from Charlestown.
- Q. When you go out are you going to keep up any of the acquaintances you have made here?
- A. I am going to keep my business to myself.
- Q. There is no one here you care to continue acquaintance with?
- A. I am going to keep to myself.

For inmates like her, prison had become a way of life. When one woman's sentence expired, for example, she asked to remain at the Massachusetts reformatory until she could arrange a place to live rather than return to her husband. "I never want to see the face of that man again," she wrote, echoing officials' views: "as to live with him I never shall for he is not my Equals he is a drunkard and I am better without him."⁴⁵ No doubt she was. Yet while the prison had fostered this insight, the woman still did not have the skills to become self-supporting and so be able to act on it.

Those inmates who accepted the values of temperance and obedience became success stories for the official record. Annual reports to state legislatures recounted grateful tales of former criminals who thanked the reformatory for their new lives as wives, mothers, or domestic servants. "I have got a good man, don't drink or no bad habits," one wrote. "Your place was a making of a good woman of me. I go to meeting every Sunday and do just as my husband want to do and we live happy together." An employer complimented the reformatory for a released inmate who was "the best girl with children that we ever had. She has behaved herself in every particular and has not given us the least bit of trouble." Another case, representative of several, reported on a released inmate: "You will be glad to know that she is thoroughly reformed, is married, and living in X [another city]." Such was the power of this system that one dismayed husband wrote to the prison that his reformed wife might "go bad" unless he received word from them which would "tone her down." And according to the superintendents, former inmates sometimes returned to the reformatory for their own reencouragement and to provide models for other prisoners.⁴⁶

The programs to retrain women in the Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York reformatory prisons between 1870 and 1910 had a mixed record of success and failure. On one level, prison reformers won legitimacy by proving that women could manage institutions and adequately control female prisoners. As Frances Morton wrote in 1902: "Twenty-five years ago the eyes of the world were looking with incredulity on the experiment of a women's prison, governed by women; to-day the experiment stands pre-eminently a grand success,—a monument of woman's work whose foundations are very strong, for in the very beginning they builded stronger than they knew."⁴⁷ Reformers from the nation and the world visited the women's institutions and found them "far more enlightened" than most penal facilities and an inspiration for future reformatories.⁴⁸ Compared to most prisons' treatment of women, the female institutions were exemplary. They enabled thousands of women who would otherwise have served in men's institutions to avoid the neglect and abuse that continued here.

However, only half the goals of retraining were met. While inmates were taught to value traditional feminine ideals of purity and submissiveness, this training often defeated the concurrent goal of teaching women to be self-sufficient. Although reformers recognized that women's dependencies were a source of their crimes, they cultivated new dependencies on the prison and taught domestic skills which ill-equipped inmates for economic self-support.

The ideas reformers had used to justify the establishment of separate women's prisons rested on important assumptions about sex, class, and power. Because they perceived women as a sexual class, separate from men, nineteenth-century reformers crossed the boundary between themselves and fallen women. Once they took charge of prisons, however, sex was no longer the determinant of power. A new hierarchy placed the keepers above the inmates, in part because of the privileges they had enjoyed as middle-class women, but also because of the nature of institutional relationships.

Reformers had tried to bridge the divisions based on purity and class in order to reach out "the helping hand" to fallen women. As keepers, however, they fully exercised their authority in the unique, single-sex, power hierarchy of the institution. Power triumphed over sisterhood not because these were single-sex institutions, but because they were prisons; female-directed colleges,

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settlement houses, and political organizations did not necessarily recreate this pattern.⁴⁹ The women's reformatories recapitulated the histories of other nineteenth-century institutions for deviants and dependents; the contradictory notion of "feminine prisons" remained unresolved.