

The Politics of Respectability

"The Double Standard Revisited: Plebeian Women and Male Sexual Reputation in Early Modern England" by Bernard Capp, in *Past & Present* (Feb. 1999).

The notorious double standard for sexual morality was alive and well in 16th- and 17th-century England. But the difference between male and female standards of honor has been exaggerated, argues Capp, a historian at the University of Warwick, England. Among the respectable middling classes and the "honest poor," a man's moral reputation was important—and the proof lies in the moral and legal leverage women exercised in various situations.

By the end of the 16th century, the view "that adultery was a weighty sin in either sex" seems to have been widely accepted, Capp says. "The good husband . . . was betraying his moral responsibilities twice over if he fathered a child on one of his own servants, and could expect considerable opprobrium from neighbors."

Capp, drawing on evidence from British court and workhouse records, says that the consequences of bad behavior went beyond mere finger wagging.

Courtship and marriage was one principal arena where the drama was played out, Capp notes. Among courting couples, honorable men were usually expected to marry a woman who found herself with child. "The London Bridewell [workhouse] records," says Capp, "contain many cases where a single mother claimed she had been seduced by a firm promise of marriage, whereupon the alleged father would be summoned and examined and, if he confirmed her account, the couple would be ordered to marry with speed." A man who

admitted paternity but denied making any promise of marriage would often be ordered to make support payments.

Sometimes, knowing the real father could not marry or provide support, a woman would seek "to trap some other man into marriage," Capp points out. For example, when Elizabeth Lawrence, a Portsmouth servant, found herself pregnant in 1653, she promptly slept with two other men, then claimed that each one was the father and had promised to marry her.

When a maidservant became pregnant by her employer, she often was too frightened to realize the bargaining power she possessed, so the employer would simply indicate what he was prepared to offer. But in some cases, the woman did recognize the leverage she had, Capp says. "When Agnes Strange, a carpenter's maidservant, became pregnant in 1599, her employer gave her 15s. to go away to her friends in Salisbury. Instead, she remained in London and, when he summoned her again to ask why, she took her brother along to help press her case; together they secured a large sum and a pledge that she would be well cared for."

Though males and females "were never equally matched in the politics of sexual relations and reputations," Capp concludes, women were more than "passive and helpless victims. They were also agents: sometimes heroic, sometimes highly resourceful, at times cynical and shameless."

PRESS & MEDIA

The Mysterious Readers

"What Do Readers Really Want?" by Charles Layton, in *American Journalism Review* (Mar. 1999), Univ. of Maryland, 1117 Journalism Bldg., College Park, Md. 20742-7111.

"First, go out and ask your readers what they want in their daily newspaper. Then give it to them," declared the executive editor of a paper in the Gannett Company chain a few years ago. "It's that simple." But it isn't, says Layton, a former *Philadelphia Inquirer* editor. Newspaper people are supposed to be hard-nosed skeptics, but he contends that

many haven't been skeptical enough about market research purporting to reveal what readers want.

Consider some 1990 research into preferences among readers of California's *Orange County Register*. In the survey, 63 percent said they would read the paper more often if fewer stories "jumped" inside from page one