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Jennifer Greenwald '96  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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**"The Great Woman Heart:" The Women's Congresses  
at the World's Columbian Exposition, 1893**

**Jennifer Greenwald  
Research Honors Project 4/18/96**

The World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, served as a display of the progress of industrialism and technology during the late nineteenth century. These developments were celebrated and glorified; one contemporary wrote that the Exposition was an "incomparable aggregation [of] all the surprises of modern accomplishment" and a "manifestation of beneficence" that would lead "surely towards a happier, higher and more righteous condition."<sup>1</sup> The "White City," with its neoclassic architectural buildings, provided space for these displays of industrial invention; more importantly, the White City represented a vision of unity where ideas of past and present, tradition and change coincided to create a utopian city.<sup>2</sup> According to historian Robert Rydell, the middle class "looked upon the White City as a manifestation of what was good in American life and as an ennobling vision Americans should strive to effectuate."<sup>3</sup> In reality, however, outside the boundaries of the White City, these "accomplishments"--resulting in industrialization, mass immigration, social fragmentation and urbanization--were rapidly transforming the landscape of nineteenth century America and were much cause for middle-class alarm. The creators of the World's Fair, with their vision of the utopian White City, sought to calm the anxieties caused by these profound changes; they provided Americans with a traditional context in which these revolutionary inventions could be both viewed and understood. In doing so, they offered a view of cultural harmony to a middle class uncertain of its identity. During this period of immense transformation and severe economic depression, the Columbian Exposition certainly was "a reaffirmation of the nation's unity, self-confidence, and triumphant progress."<sup>4</sup>

Ideas about gender were integral to the anxieties experienced by nineteenth century America. In response to the changing times, women were becoming more publicly outspoken, a realm of action traditionally occupied by men. Perhaps the organizers of the fair, in an attempt to alleviate fears about gender, created a Woman's Building to display women's accomplishments *separately* from the more important inventions of men. The Woman's Building, designed by a female architect, was described by contemporaries as being "gracefully timid, genteel, womanly, peaceable and chaste."<sup>5</sup> These descriptions were meant to undermine the revolutionary potential of the building and the activities it housed; however, inside the Woman's Building, women used their separate space to address real issues.

Women gathered in the Woman's Building and held Congresses on a variety of topics, including their own position in modern society. This congregation of women--following a general trend towards the formation of woman's clubs in the late nineteenth century--illuminated the way in which women stepped out of their traditionally defined space in order to make sense of the changes occurring in society. Like the creators of the fair, the middle-class women at the Exposition, through their congresses held in the Woman's Building, illustrated another attempt to soothe over anxieties--which, ironically, their public activism inevitably caused--through the use of traditional notions in the face of change and a middle-class identity crisis. By using conventional ideas about womanhood and domesticity, women's participation within the public realm seemed justified and appeared to be a natural extension of a woman's traditional role of mother. As one speaker demonstrated,

“All reforms for the elevation of humanity have the great woman heart in them.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, through the use of traditional ideas, women's greater involvement in public affairs could be more easily accepted. Ultimately, by using ideas of domesticity, the middle-class women at the Fair sought to gain leverage for themselves in society at large.

After examining the ways in which these women sought to expand their own sphere of action, I hope to illuminate the Congresses' attempt to also shape roles for working-class women by considering their conceptions of work and reform in the larger context of middle-class identity. In doing so, I hope to reveal how many of these women sought to calm fears--like the creators of the Exposition--by offering an increasingly fragmented society a model of unity and cooperation. However, while some of the women at the Fair attempted to honestly address the problems troubling the minds of many Americans, including the working classes, others painted a portrait of harmony which was meant to evoke middle-class solidarity rather than true social cohesion.

In 1890, the national government passed a bill creating the Chicago World's Fair and a National Commission (comprised of only men) to see to its development.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Susan B. Anthony, who worked behind the scenes in Washington to gain support from the wives and daughters of influential politicians, the National Commission was authorized to appoint a “Board of Lady Managers” to organize women's activities at the Fair. However, Anthony's proposal for a sexually integrated committee was turned down in favor of a separate board for women. The members--115 representatives from

the various states-- met on November 19, 1890 in Chicago and chose Bertha Potter Palmer as their president.<sup>8</sup> Susan B. Anthony, whose ideas about women's suffrage were considered too radical, was not delegated a position on the Board. Interestingly, Palmer did gain the most important position; one historian describes Palmer as a woman who men in power would choose "for her presumed pliability only to find out their mistake when it was too late. . . . With the combined weight of many women's organizations at her back Palmer proceeded to wrest from the United States Congress more than it ever intended to give and from the exposition commissioners concessions they had not dreamed of."<sup>9</sup>

One example of Palmer's achievements was her organization of the women's congresses. Palmer, with the help of the Lady Managers, created a Congress of Representative Women, a week-long gathering of notable international and national women who convened to express "their ideas regarding the social, business, and political affairs of humankind and all that pertains to make a greater future for the human race."<sup>10</sup> Also, throughout the course of the Exposition, a variety of conventions were held in the Woman's Building, in which women gave speeches on topics ranging from education, reform, politics, and economics to literature, history, personal health and self-culture. These congresses, through the work of Palmer and the Lady Managers, became a representation of women unprecedented in the history of world's fairs.

In the opening speech, Palmer confronted the general concerns of the Congresses. Palmer addressed the most problematic issue of the times when she said, "The few forward steps which have been

taken during our boasted nineteenth century--the so-called age of invention--have promoted the general use of machinery and economic motive powers . . . but have not afforded relief to the masses, which was expected."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Mary K. Eagle, in an introduction to a published compilation of speeches from the congresses, labeled the problems of industrialism as paramount when she said "among the greatest problems of the times is aggressively prominent that of the relations of men and women in the work of the world."<sup>12</sup> Another speaker stated that the congresses were being "devoted to the temperate study of the condition of the women workers of the world."<sup>13</sup> Industrialization, then, was perceived by the women at the Fair to be one of the most pressing problems for American society. To better understand the importance of industrialism to these women, the profound effects of industrialization on nineteenth century America must be examined.

Before industrialization, agriculture was the foundation of the American economy. The typical farm was small, family-owned and operated, and produced goods which were used for the family, or sold in local markets.<sup>14</sup> By 1900, as industrialism developed, many of those farms were replaced by "large, corporately owned, bureaucratically managed, multifunctional, [and] capital intensive" businesses.<sup>15</sup> By the turn of the century, over half of the American population worked in industrial occupations. By the early twentieth century, industrialization had drastically altered the face of the American economy.

As the economy became increasingly corporatized, the nature of work, especially for single women, changed drastically. Women's

employment was on the rise, escalating from fifteen to twenty-five percent between 1880 and 1900.<sup>16</sup> A variety of service jobs, created through increased commercialization and industrialization, were being filled by single immigrant women, seeking escape from the drudgery of domestic and factory work. They were employed in offices, restaurants, department stores, hotels and beauty parlors, where employers could exploit their labor (often averaging sixty hours per week) for about four to five dollars a week.<sup>17</sup>

Along with shifts in the economy, industrialization had an immense impact on American culture. Industrialization brought with it a wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe; thus, the character of America's cities drastically changed. Social fragmentation and disharmony, especially in the context of the economic depression of 1893, characterized the late nineteenth-century city in America, which more closely resembled a "patchwork quilt" rather than a "tightly woven fabric."<sup>18</sup> Urban industrialism manifested itself in the existence of a distinct working class, living in the poorest of social conditions in the nation's largest cities. One woman at the Exposition painted a vivid picture as she urged her audience to imagine "our ragged children, our despairing mothers, our hollow-eyed . . . fathers sitting disconsolate by the silent mill, the mine, the manufactory," living in over-crowded, unsanitary tenements.<sup>19</sup> Another speaker called Chicago a "sin-sick city."<sup>20</sup> Historian David Danborn contends that "the city of the late nineteenth century seemed to represent everything that Victorian Protestants stood against," including social division, disharmony and self-indulgence.<sup>21</sup> "Material progress and technological advancement," he



writes, "existed side-by-side with social regression."<sup>22</sup> Clearly, America's cities were undergoing change "on a scale that was not easy to assimilate."<sup>23</sup>

Industrialism also prompted change in the most basic patterns of everyday life, and caused a division in the public and private areas of life. No longer was the family a primary unit of production as it had been under an agricultural economy. As one historian writes, "Wage labor began to replace family and servile labor, and the factory took the place of the household as the commodity production unit."<sup>24</sup> So, industry required production outside of the home. Thus, industrialization--and its consequent impact on the division of labor--generated a new ideology. The "natural" characteristics of women and men relegated them to their positions in society--man's fierce, ambitious personality made him at home in the competitive public sphere, while woman's submissiveness, moral superiority, and purity made her at ease in the privacy of her home. Here, a woman could cultivate her domestic capabilities and provide an oasis for her hard-working husband. This ideology, known as the cult of domesticity, was aimed at middle-class women, for their husband's affluence afforded them the leisure time to uphold the virtues of "true womanhood."<sup>25</sup>

This ideology also had profound implications for working-class women. Wage-earning women, who worked for the economic survival of the family, often knew no distinction of the public and private areas of life. Palmer understood that not all women had the "luxury" to stay at home; she said, "there is, unfortunately, not a home for each woman to preside over; most men are unable to

maintain one.”<sup>26</sup> This middle-class ideal, then, was accurately perceived to be quite restrictive for the working-class woman. Again, Palmer articulately stated that “the theory which exists . . . that the sphere of woman is her home . . . tells heavily against her, for manufacturers . . . take advantage of it to . . . obtain her services for nominal price, thus profiting . . . by the necessities and helplessness of their victim.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, J.N.O. Hanna believed that the customs which relegated “well-to-do” women to the home had “a wider bearing . . . [which] extends to the classes of people engaged in such labor, and builds . . . the barrier which exists between labor and capital, the rich and the poor.”<sup>28</sup>

This “barrier” was immense; in fact, by 1900, only one percent of the population owned more of the wealth than the other ninety-nine percent.<sup>29</sup> This statistic suggests that the cult of domesticity was merely an ideal that could only be embraced by a privileged few; the existence of such a highly stratified society reveals the small percentage of middle and upper-class women and men in nineteenth century America. However, the cult of domesticity, while only an ideal, affected many working-class women; their value in the workplace and society at large was extremely low, for woman's “proper” place was considered the home, not the factory. Industrialization, then, had an economic as well as cultural impact on gender roles for both the middle and working-classes.

The women of the congresses found the problems of industry to be imperative, for industrialism was a pervasive theme in many of the speeches. Clearly, then, the effects of industrialism were felt not only by those living in the miserable conditions of the city; the upper

classes, as well, felt the strains. A quote from historian Daniel T. Rodgers further illuminates the tensions that industry created for the middle class:

Few places had seemed more immune to the dislocations of an industrializing society than the solid, roomy houses that lined the tree-arched streets and fronted the boulevards of every Northern town and city, self-consciously cut off from the toil and turbulence around them. But behind facades as solid and confident as those of the factories, middle-class households harbored their own festering germs of discontent.<sup>30</sup>

During the Victorian era, middle-class Americans hailed the notions of individualism and self-determination. As industrialism developed, along with a culture of consumerism and an emphasis on material possession, their “familiar ideas of character and will were shaken by the triumph of organized capitalism.”<sup>31</sup> As material progress rather than personal achievement began to demarcate success and social standing, the middle class experienced their own anxieties over their changing position--as consumers rather than producers.

The obvious discontent among the working classes was another source of middle-class fears. The Haymarket Square riots in Chicago in 1886, the rise of populism, trade unionism and socialism are just some of the manifestations of working-class discontent in the context of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Such movements “presented frightening spectacles to the middle and upper classes” who were “preoccupied by their own physical and moral decay” in industrial society.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the large number of people immigrating to America were believed to pose a threat to middle-class stability. As the birthrate among native-born Americans decreased, the middle-class feared that their power would be weakened by the rapidly

increasing immigrant population.<sup>33</sup> Historian James Green concedes that "Socially and culturally, the immigrants seemed to live in a world of their own, but they could not be ignored . . . . [W]hen they became naturalized and registered to vote, they could become a threat."<sup>34</sup> As a result of those fears, the middle class often sought to control the immigrant vote.

Kate Field, in her speech entitled simply, "A Talk," best illustrates the fears experienced by the middle class in regard to the immigrant working classes. Although her speech is not representative of the beliefs of most of the women at the Exposition, it offers the most clear reflection of the biases and prejudice internalized by many members of the middle class. It is also important to remember that they were, in essence, products of their own culture. Field was not an advocate of universal suffrage. Rather, she spoke for a "restricted suffrage founded on education and character regardless of sex."<sup>35</sup> Due to a lack of child labor laws and economic necessity, many working-class people were deprived an education. This is a reflection of Field's hidden biases concerning suffrage--perhaps only the wealthy, for whom education was widely available, should vote. However, her biases became more overt as the speech progresses. In regard to immigration, she said, "I failed to see the virtue of opening our arms to the scum of Europe and of closing them to the Chinese, who never get drunk, who do their work and don't vote, and ask nothing in return except to live."<sup>36</sup> Many women, she claimed, felt as she did, for "they knew that without the Chinese servants they will have to do their own work."<sup>37</sup> Her speech clearly

reflects the class-bias and nativism prevalent in the middle class during the late nineteenth century.

Interestingly, because of the rapid emergence of immigrants in America, Field felt that women (although probably only middle-class women) should be granted the right to vote. "I should advocate woman's suffrage," she said, "because I was tired of being classified with criminals, idiots, and children, and I did not want politicians to make the laws for me."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, as the corrupt public space began to challenge her own identity, her participation within the public realm was necessary, for there she could help to make laws that would further distinguish her from various forms of "scum." Reid Badger, a historian of the Chicago World's Fair, argues that the Exposition provided "an objective focus for cultural self-examination," a way for the middle class to reaffirm and strengthen their cultural identity during "a period of rapid industrial and technological change."<sup>39</sup> Public activism, then, was a possible means for middle-class women to distance themselves from the working-class and reassert their cultural identity. Although this was one of the most exaggerated examples of middle-class consciousness, it does offer insight into some of the motives for women to become active outside of the home.

The changing roles of both working and middle-class women served to further heighten the middle-class crisis of identity. Historian Kathy Peiss explains that service-oriented jobs spawned by corporatism provided the young working-class woman with a new independence and freedom for leisure time. Freed from the constant drudgery of household labor (whether working in her family's home

or the home of her mistress), women in service occupations gained the opportunity to shape their own lives.<sup>40</sup> Working-class women's leisure time--spent *publicly* in the streets, dance halls, movie theaters and amusement parks--differed considerably from the more "respectable" forms of middle-class entertainment, such as reading, sewing and music which were usually performed in the privacy of the home.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the changes in the lives of working women, prompted by developments in industry and the resulting division of work and leisure, were yet another source of middle-class anxiety.

The "True Woman" herself was not exempt from the massive changes that were transforming American culture. The ideal Victorian woman, according to one historian, "was one of the nineteenth century's most memorable myths . . . because rapid social changes made her existence untenable."<sup>42</sup> In the late nineteenth century, due in part to an imbalance in the sex ration, many women were unable to fulfill their traditional role as mother and child-rearer through marriage. As historian Patricia Marks writes,

Many middle-class women, then, had to face the probability that despite their upbringing, despite their belief in physiological destiny, they would *not* marry; . . . [instead] they would have to be factored into the economic system.<sup>43</sup>

No longer able to depend on marriage for financial stability, the model of the "New Woman" emerged, who sought education as a means to personal independence and employment. Electa Bullock, in her speech entitled "Industrial Women," confidently claimed that to confine a woman to the "narrow sphere of house-wife" would cause the "wheels of progress to turn backward."<sup>44</sup> Thus, according to

Bullock, the existence of the New Woman was essential to the nation's progress. The New Woman was clearly a less pliant, more publicly outspoken, and educated version of her Victorian sister.<sup>45</sup>

Voluntary associations, not unlike the congregation of women at the Exposition, provided the New Woman a public vehicle to voice concerns regarding the deteriorating social situation of the late nineteenth century. However, women did not organize their groups without criticism. Patricia Marks, in her book about the image of the New Woman in the popular press, shows how satirists reflected the middle-class fears concerning the changing, more public role of women. One Chicago magazine in 1891 deemed Palmer and her female associates "The Board of Lady Damagers."<sup>46</sup> The real fear, then, was not the mere existence of the clubs, but rather the extent to which the clubs gave women the opportunity to redefine the pattern of their lives.<sup>47</sup> One speaker at the Fair, in the spirit of the New Woman, said, "I claim, in short, an equal right to all that man claims for himself."<sup>48</sup> In terms of public matters, physical exercise, dress, education and work, the New Woman aimed to broaden her sphere of action and exert control over the direction of her life. Indeed, this is exactly what the women at the World's Fair sought to do.

By stepping out into the traditionally male-dominated public arena, the women at the Exposition--during the era of the New Woman--aimed to redefine their positions in American society. This extension of woman's activities out of the home was justified by the impact of industrialization on domestic life. Jackson Lears argues in his work about American culture that it "was impossible for the

home to remain altogether isolated from the market society. Inevitably the haven embodied many values of the heartless world outside.”<sup>49</sup> In the home, he concedes, men were socialized to compete in their inherited and aggressive public arena. Furthermore, in the home “women could exert cultural and psychological influence over men.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, another historian writes, “in the new industrial order, the well-being of [women’s] households . . . seemed increasingly out of individual . . . control.”<sup>51</sup> Voluntary associations and clubs, then, provided a means for female solidarity and the protection of domestic life.

Julie Matthael, in her work on the economic history of women, labels the move of nineteenth century middle-class women from the home to the public as the “social homemaking” movement. This move towards public activism was deemed imperative to these middle-class women, “since capitalism was not filling the needs of many men, women and children and was preventing them from attaining the standard of home life that . . . [they] saw as essential.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, by becoming publicly active, some middle-class women sought to protect the sanctity of the home. Ellen Foster demonstrated this goal when she said, “Every contest for better conditions of living bears directly upon the home and the woman in it.”<sup>53</sup> Likewise, another speaker proclaimed, “All honor to that consecration that will force woman from the home in order to better protect the home.”<sup>54</sup> So, “socialized to believe in their own compassionate instincts,” it appeared to be women’s duty to ensure the safety of homes everywhere.<sup>55</sup> This exemplifies women’s use of



traditional ideas of womanhood and domesticity to substantiate their claims for activism.

Domestic ideology, then, which found its roots in the cult of domesticity, was meant to encourage women's participation in the public sphere. Perhaps the most widely accepted tenet of the cult of domesticity was the notion of female moral superiority, which was used as a further justification for public activism. Helen Bullock, in her speech "Power and Purposes of Women," clearly illustrated this prevalent notion:

Whatever difference of opinion may exist concerning the range of woman's intellect, there can be no question as to her superior moral and religious status . . . . therefore it is for the best interests of humanity everywhere to utilize woman's power and influence.<sup>56</sup>

The cult of domesticity had allotted women the important position of moral guardian of the home. When external forces began to threaten the safety and morality of the home (a husband or son may be tempted by the prostitute, a daughter could become one, for example), women, according to Bullock, needed to become the moral guardians of American society. "The great moral factor of the world," she said, "is its womanhood."<sup>57</sup>

Other women expressed their belief in moral superiority. Rev. Anna Eastman hoped that the ideals of man were "to be made high like those of womanhood" for men had become "money-making prayerless machines."<sup>58</sup> Implicit in the cult of domesticity and the notion of female moral superiority was the belief that women's moral nature was founded on religious grounds. O.R. Lake urged the Congress to "develop that gentle, charitable womanliness that is ours

by Divine inheritance."<sup>59</sup> Also, Anna Green thought that 1893 was the woman's "era of progress . . . a reflection of . . . that period when the . . . heavenly father [chose] her as the mother of his son."<sup>60</sup> These speakers, then, used what had once been a restrictive notion of womanhood--moral superiority--to make progress in the public sphere; in fact, a woman's activism would make her a better homemaker. The "enlargement of woman's activities," Foster claimed, would not have a corruptive effect on the high ideals of womanhood; instead, they would "make her stronger and purer in the home."<sup>61</sup>

Even Palmer, one of the more liberal thinkers of the Congress, seemed to believe those traditional (and quite limiting) assumptions about womanhood. She stated that "every woman, who is presiding over a happy home, is fulfilling her highest and truest function."<sup>62</sup> In her closing address, she claimed that "the home and the privacy of domestic life is the chosen sphere of every woman."<sup>63</sup> Danborn, a historian of the progressive era, writes about the progressive's tendency to inculcate values into public life in order to "hold a reluctant society to its basic values."<sup>64</sup> Considering the scope of the changes occurring within their society, the use of traditional ideas probably seemed to be a logical way to make those changes more palatable. However, the prevalence of the notions of motherhood and homemaking as women's most significant role--a common theme in many of the speeches--may point to something else. Ironically, these women used restrictive conventional notions about themselves to *elevate* their status within American culture. Anne Firor Scott, in her book about women's organizations at the turn of the century,

addresses nineteenth-century women's use of traditional arguments as a justification for public activism. She writes:

It is impossible to distinguish clearly between those . . . for whom Victorian rhetoric and ladylike behavior were convenient masks for innovation, or possibly even for subversive ideas, and those who had so internalized the ideology of domesticity that they took for granted and operated within its framework.<sup>65</sup>

Further examination of this issue is necessary, for it reveals the ways in which these women capitalized on the anxieties caused by industrialism. Changes occurring within society, caused by developments in industry, required that women step out of their defined sphere of the home to protect their homes and the homes of others. By using domestic discourse in the face of change--whether they believed those ideas or not--these women sought to gain leverage within the public realm.

Charlotte C. Holt, in her speech "The Woman Who Has Come," provides one of the clearest reflections of this issue as defined by Scott. Some of her beliefs on work and the equality of the sexes were the most radical in the context of the women's congresses. She claimed that "the great secret of absolute equality between the sexes" was for women to make work as central to their lives as it was for men.<sup>66</sup> She thought it "useless to talk of equal work and equal wages until women . . . [gave] equal work."<sup>67</sup> She criticized the predominant, and quite narrow notion of female moral superiority over men, and thought that the ideal woman should recognize that "she is first of all a human being, with all the desires and limitations, with all the faults and aspirations . . . that are common to the human family."<sup>68</sup> Clearly, her work is quite revolutionary in the context of the Exposition.

Interestingly, though, towards the end of her speech, Holt assured the audience that the ideal woman was "essentially a domestic woman" since it was "impossible . . . to conceive of a woman . . . without a home."<sup>69</sup> The knowledge that this ideal woman would acquire outside the home, according to Holt, would make her a better housekeeper, for she would know how to "keep the wheels of the domestic machinery oiled."<sup>70</sup> Her convictions on the importance of work outside the home and the equality between the sexes are much too strong to readily accept her arguments concerning homemaking and motherhood. However, her use of domestic discourse could be better understood if we see it as a "convenient mask for innovation." To make her progressive ideas more acceptable to society--a society undergoing rapid transformations in almost every facet of life--she offered an idea of domesticity that did not fully threaten the traditional and familiar. A closer analysis of this speech, then, shows how this individual used domestic ideology as a means of hiding more radical motives; in this respect, she soothed some of the fears that her ideas may have created. More broadly, she provided society with familiar ideas that could be accepted in the face of profound change, while hoping to expand the sphere of action for middle-class women.

Domestic ideology, then, served to blur the boundary lines of public and private space; that the social conditions caused by industrialism threatened the privacy of the household became an effective argument for women's public activism. To protect their families, "women envisioned a new, humane state, identified with the values of the home rather than the marketplace."<sup>71</sup> Minnie Louis

exemplified the tendency for middle-class women to associate the values of the home with those of the public; she said, "It is first in the home that the reformatory processes begin, and from thence are carried into life's wide arena."<sup>72</sup> Caroline Sherman, in her speech entitled "Characteristics of the Modern Woman", thought that the greatest opportunity of the nineteenth century was "the unity of aim, the common purpose" for women in "public matters, especially in matters which bear directly on the home."<sup>73</sup> Reforming public space, then, was clearly a major concern for the progressive Fair women, for the public posed a threat to their middle-class homes. And naturally, due to woman's "motherly" nature, reform seemed not only an option, but a duty for these middle-class women.

Therefore, women used restrictive ideals of womanhood delineated by the cult of domesticity to their advantage; in doing so, the women at the Columbian Exposition tried to make real gains in the public sphere through reform activism. As these women publicly spoke on matters that were traditionally discussed by men, they used conventional notions about femininity to provide society with a soothing view of their actions. How, one may ask, did they get away with this? By making their movement into the public seem like a "natural" extension of femininity (they had to "clean-up" society just as they would clean their homes), men, relegated to their separate, "manly" sphere of action, "were naturally unable to judge women's performance."<sup>74</sup> Also, by trying to soothe over anxieties experienced by nineteenth century America, these women had to touch upon--either advertently or inadvertently--the fears of *middle-class* culture and identity. So, reform often provided the women at the

Fair an opportunity not only to elevate the status of women within society, but also an opportunity to reaffirm middle-class identity with regard to an "Other"--in this case, the working class. However, some of the women confronted the problems that were developing due to the stratifications of social class and tried to offer a true vision of unity for nineteenth-century Americans.

In order to fully understand the dimensions of women's public reform, we must first examine the typical woman who participated in the Exposition. Eagle claimed that the Congresses were meant to be "the first official utterance of women on behalf of women."<sup>75</sup> Although these women claimed to be speaking on behalf of all women, the common backgrounds of the speakers are revealing-- they were mostly white (with the exception of international women), educated, economically privileged, well-travelled and native to America. The absence of working-class representatives at the Congresses is quite telling-- middle-class women sought to reform and define the lives of these working women, but they were not given a voice of their own in the Woman's Building.

Historians have debated over the uses of reform for middle-class women. Matthael argues that the social homemaking movement was not revolutionary, for it was an integral part of industrialism. "The social homemakers," she says, "'mothered' the losers; they did not try to change the game."<sup>76</sup> In this sense, middle-class women distanced themselves from their working-class "sisters;" being a mother suggests a parent-child relationship. Wage-earning women, then, were often regarded as childish, helpless, even degenerate victims. By "mothering" these poor women, the middle

class may have obtained a sense of power, and consequently, a reaffirmation of their superior middle-class identity.

Similarly, historian Robert Teaford claims that Progressive reformers, while aiming to instill a "a new civic spirit . . . that would emphasize the communal welfare over private desires or special group interests," still obtained *middle-class* goals and standards which reflected their social origins.<sup>77</sup> Another scholar notes the reformers' frequent inability to "overcome the barriers of race and class in their attempts to restructure the relationship between the home and the community at large."<sup>78</sup> Therefore, reformers, like some of the women at the Exposition, sought to retain and reaffirm their cultural authority in a rapidly changing society by attempting to elevate the lower classes to their middle-class conception of respectability.

However, Scott, while acknowledging the tendency for middle-class women to reassert cultural authority, also says that some leaders "could entertain analyses of social problems that called for radical restructuring of the society," and that "[t]hese women helped to change the climate of opinion with respect to the 'poor.'"<sup>79</sup> By looking at the real problems in society, some middle-class women hoped to diminish the widening disparity among social classes; rather than playing mother to their "children," these women sought to work equally with wage-earning women. United by their common bond--womanhood--they hoped to reform society in a way that would be beneficial for all. A further discussion of this debate, through the use of the Congress speeches, will help to illuminate the motives of these

middle-class women in regard to reform, and its implications for the working classes.

Along the lines of Matthaël's argument, some women did seek to further distance themselves from the working class through reform. The speech, "The Tempted Women," by Isabel Lake is a case in point. In terms of the "tempted women" in Chicago, Lake stated that they were "great in point of numbers, great in density of sin, great in need of this suffering class."<sup>80</sup> She urged her fellow middle-class sisters to help these women break out of the chain of circumstances, for without that help, they would "sink lower each day."<sup>81</sup> Lake, however, had found a solution to the problems of the tempted woman; in order to "rescue [them] from a life a shame," she claimed, they needed the "love" of the middle-class woman.<sup>82</sup> Her solution is a simple one, but not very realistic. What the "tempted woman" really needed most was an education, a society that placed value on her work (not necessarily prostitution), better housing, financial assistance. Lake neglected the larger institutions which had relegated the "tempted woman" to her role within society. Motherly love was Lake's simple solution to a complex problem. This is just one example of the perceived mother/child relationship between classes which served to strengthen middle-class identity. It's also noteworthy that Lake uses a traditional idea about domesticity--motherly devotion--to address the very public issue of prostitution. As a woman and mother, it appeared to be Lake's duty to help her "wretched sisters."

Lucy Wheelock's speech, "The Children of the Other Half," also exemplifies how some of the women at the Fair ignored the real



causes of poverty and social disharmony, thus distancing themselves from the working-class. Wheelock advocated kindergartens for children of all classes. "The child of the slums," she believed, "becomes vicious and wicked because affected by the false maxims of his environment."<sup>83</sup> Yet, to put that same child "for half a day into an atmosphere of peace and good-will and joy . . . is to make the dinginess and misery of the tenement house impossible."<sup>84</sup>

Although her cause may be noble, nowhere in the speech does she confront the reasons for the "misery" of the tenements, nor does she propose a solution for the larger issues at hand. Rather, she offers yet another simple solution to a very complex problem. Again, this example reflects the "mothering" tendency of these middle-class women--after all, aren't the feminine virtues of patience and nurturing manifested most clearly in a kindergarten? These are just a few cases in which some middle-class women at the Exposition, through their reform efforts, further distinguished themselves from the working classes and attempted to reassert their cultural identity in a rapidly changing society.

However, many women did address the *real* problems occurring in society. Consequently they sought to create a bridge for rich and poor, rather than a divide. Palmer addressed and condemned the social conventions that caused women to "contend against a public sentiment which discountenance[d] their seeking industrial employment as a means of livelihood."<sup>85</sup> Here, Palmer explored the roots of women's inferior position--society's perceptions about gender roles and female employment--to offer a more realistic description of the barriers to working-women's progress. Bullock

offered advice to her contemporaries in regard to the restrictive notions of women's proper place when she said, "support her in her proud position of wife and mother, [and] sustain her in every advance movement and the women of America will lead society onward and upward."<sup>86</sup>

Knowledge of the public realm, according to some of the women, could also help to diminish barriers between classes, for that knowledge would be used to solve society's problems. Foster encouraged women to become more educated about politics and "more persistent on behalf of her convictions," for then she may "remedy many existing defects in the conduct of public affairs."<sup>87</sup> Caroline Sherman believed that working-class women should also become more knowledgeable about public matters, for, according to her, they knew by "painful experience how closely the decision of these questions may effect them."<sup>88</sup> Rev. Augusta Bristol, a "woman of big brain, well stored with valuable information," took the desire for public knowledge a few steps further; her statement is an excellent example of the middle-class desire for social cohesion. She called for a new "system of society and government" which would "stand for all and all for each."<sup>89</sup> Sherman, too, felt that women of all classes should be united by a "common purpose in public matters" in order to "do away with the artificial system of caste among women."<sup>90</sup>

Other women confronted the divisions of the upper and lower classes through reform more overtly. Rev. Anna Spencer bravely offered her audience a critique of women's clubs and associations in her speech entitled "The Advantages and Dangers of Organization."

She advocated reform that would be aimed at giving "the less favored feminine life of great cities . . . the dignity, the power, [and] uplifting self-respect which the best and strongest womanhood displays."<sup>91</sup> The only way women could achieve their goals, she believed, was when *all* women were "united in a common impulse toward freedom."<sup>92</sup> The danger of women's clubs, according to Spencer, was that many of the members considered social clubs as "a ladder to social distinction."<sup>93</sup> The ultimate danger, then, was for middle-class women to distance themselves from their working-class sisters through their membership in associations. Rather than "leading in the march of progress," she warned, many women were "only tagging on because the crowd attract[ed]" them.<sup>94</sup> Spencer clearly reveals a middle-class attempt to eliminate the social fragmentation of American society in the late nineteenth century.

So, by justifying public activism through their perceived "feminine" characteristics such as nurturing and altruism, the women at the Exposition provided society with familiar notions of femininity in order to make gains for themselves within a rapidly changing society. Indeed, while some individuals sought to formulate middle-class cultural identity through social reform, others tried to bring women of all classes together for the benefit of society at large. However, it is crucial to note here that despite the reform efforts of these middle-class women, working-class people made their own impact on the dominant culture in America. As Peiss has pointed out in her book Cheap Amusements, the middle class adopted and refined the "new 'manners and morals' [of the working classes] in emergent bourgeois social spaces."<sup>95</sup> For example, the dominant class

embraced and reshaped an important working-class cultural form-- dancing--in order to "meet middle-class standards of respectability"<sup>96</sup> Moreover, movie theaters, once a haven for working-class entertainment, began to cater to a more "respectable" crowd as censorship limited the explicit nature of the movies. In sum, Peiss argues that culture was not imposed on the lower strata of society as historians have traditionally argued; instead, she concludes, a cultural transmittance occurred between the classes.

Like reform, ideas about work in the speeches also reveal the tendency of these women to distance or unite women of the lower and upper-classes. These beliefs were often based on ideas of domesticity, thus calming some of the fears that women's employment had created within their industrializing society. Rodgers argues that late nineteenth century middle-class women felt constricted within their traditional sphere of womanhood.<sup>97</sup> Voluntary organizations served as one outlet for women to voice their concerns. However, "for many women," he claims, "the clearest alternative to the constrictions of domesticity was a paying job."<sup>98</sup> He also writes:

Certainly it was logical to expect that middle class feminists who wrote of woman's need for work should have admired these working women . . . . But those middle-class career women who looked most closely at women industrial workers often came away from the encounter with a disturbed, half-betrayed sense of recoil.<sup>99</sup>

In this sense, middle-class women did delineate the boundaries of class, which was evident in some of the speeches. However, some of the speeches provide important exceptions, and illustrate the middle-class attempt to dissolve divisions created by class.

Ideas about industrial work, as expressed by some of the speakers at the Fair, exhibit the low value they placed on that type of work; it becomes evident that middle-class women often ignored the economic necessity which forced thousands of working-class women into menial, dead-end industrial occupations. One historian writes, "The work that middle-class reformers saw as a demoralizing element of domestic life was embraced by immigrant women and their families as a strategy of survival."<sup>100</sup> L.C. McGee, in her speech "The Home of the Future," manifested the ways in which some middle-class women failed to recognize the real motives for working women to engage in industrial employment. McGee felt that work outside the home--work she narrowly defined as professional--posed a threat to a woman's primary role of homemaker. She said that a woman's participation in activities outside the realm of the home was an "eternal disadvantage to the home as a social institution."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, while Anna Green believed that women's ambitions were leading them to the "highest plane of eminence and progress," she stated, "God forbid that it should become necessary for her to abandon the province of the home, the great centrifugal center."<sup>102</sup> Clearly, these particular individuals failed to account for the fact that many women worked due to economic necessity or rather, from sheer inclination to avoid a life defined by domestic duties. By doing this, some women at the Exposition neglected the real problems of wage-earning women. As Lear further explains, in late nineteenth century America, the "common pattern of culture involved a denial of the conflicts in modern capitalist society, an affirmation of

continuing harmony and progress" which was aimed at asserting middle-class authority.<sup>103</sup>

By contrast, other women did understand the differences for wage-earning women in terms of work. Palmer asked those "idealists" who thought that the proper sphere of woman was her home, to see how the "'gentler sex'" worked under such miserable conditions. A working woman, she argued, did not have "a home of which she is the queen, with a manly and loving arm to shield her from rough contact with life."<sup>104</sup> Palmer understood the urgency of the working-class situation; she said, "They must work or they must starve."<sup>105</sup> Holt too was aware of the economic need of the working classes. These women, she said, did "not work from choice, nor from the realization of broader opportunities for women, but through stern and bitter necessity."<sup>106</sup> In fact, one speaker condemned the social divisions that work created among women. She urged women to be "more considerate of their sisters who are struggling under the burdens of life . . . [for] the Creator did not intend such wide-spread separation . . . for women."<sup>107</sup> In their perceptions of work, these women were aware of the real problems that wage-earning women faced, and thus sought to dispel the disunity among classes.

Likewise, other speakers realistically addressed the benefits of wage-work. Some of the women thought that the economic independence that could be gained through wage-work was beneficial to all women. Lydia Prescott claimed that a woman could be "emancipated from her bonds of economic dependence" by "mechanical invention," for this work would give her a "wider knowledge of her possibilities."<sup>108</sup> Kirstine Frediricsen said that to

take "work out of the hands of woman" was to take "influence away from her."<sup>109</sup> She considered an ideal woman to be one who made her influence felt in public life, "as the society lady does," while also making herself "real useful, as the factory girl does."<sup>110</sup> Economic independence, according to some of the women at the Fair, was considered liberating for *all* women. In this sense, these middle-class women sought to bridge the gap between rich and poor.

By using ideas about domesticity--and more particularly marriage--some of the women attempted to soothe the fears that their beliefs undoubtedly created. Hanna claimed that a woman's "power to acquire . . . money would rather sweeten the path of matrimony" since she would be entering the marriage out of "the compelling persuasiveness of a genuine love" rather than as a "loop-hole of escape from an irksome bondage."<sup>111</sup> Likewise, Caroline Sherman argued that a woman's financial independence would create a happier marriage, since often a woman married "simply because there is for her no other alternative."<sup>112</sup> The notion of economic independence--a central tenet of the image the New Woman--was discussed in some of the speeches in terms of its advantages for marriage, rather than an end in itself. In this sense, these speakers aimed to alleviate some of the anxieties created by the New Woman. Later in Sherman's speech, she stated that the "privilege of gaining an independent livelihood" was a means for a woman to decide "for herself the direction of her life."<sup>113</sup> Domestic discourse--and more particularly, marriage--thus neutralized the radicalism of this idea; in this sense, middle-class women tried to make real gains in the public realm, for themselves and in some

cases for working-class women, through the use of conventional ideas.

The speech "We, the Women" by Cara Reese is the best example of a middle-class woman's attempt to destroy class barriers. Reese was quite aware of the divisions of class. Her speech was aimed at elevating the value of work for both the homemaker *and* wage-earning woman. A threat to the success of future women, she pointed out, was "the sharply divided line of caste" that separated these two groups.<sup>114</sup> She said:

The unappreciated home-makers of today . . . watch the career of the wage-earning women with hungry eyes. The wage-earning woman sighs for the comforts of the home, but views home-life with distrust. Both are discontented . . . . This discontent . . . threatens the success of the women of the future.<sup>115</sup>

She proposed a solution for all women. She urged wage-earning women to offer homemakers a "broadening glimpse into life," while encouraging the homemaker to give her "sympathy and counseling" to the wage-earner.<sup>116</sup> The fate of women, then, according to this individual, was the extent to which women--both working and middle-class--could understand and help one another. Reese provided her audience with a model of cooperation and unity. This speech is one example of the ways in which middle-class women sought to erase class boundary lines.

Industrialization had initially caused a division of the private and public arenas of life in nineteenth century America. However, towards the end of the century, women--particularly the women at the World's Columbian Exposition--realized that such a distinction



was problematic. Both spheres of action were inextricably linked, rather than separate, uninvolved entities. Both public and private spaces were undergoing profound transformations; urbanization, immigration, social fragmentation and an expanded sphere of female action caused the middle class to ponder their cultural identity in the face of such alarming changes. The home, which had been regarded as an oasis from the competitive public sphere, appeared to be no longer immune to the corruption and vice of the public. Women were at an advantage to "understand . . . the negative consequences of what were generally seen as the great . . . accomplishments of the urban-industrial revolution," for they were traditionally not a part of that sphere and could provide an objective criticism of it.<sup>117</sup>

Also, and somewhat ironically, the women at the Fair, by using traditional ideas about womanhood and domesticity, justified their participation within the public sphere. As homemakers and housekeepers, they claimed, it was their duty to clean up the mess that men had made. However, some women merely *used* domestic ideology, rather than wholeheartedly believed it, for the sake of women's progress; by offering an anxious society familiar, comfortable ideas, women made their sometimes radical notions more acceptable. In providing society with these seemingly nonthreatening ideas, women were often able to make statements that called for women's equality, a truly revolutionary concept in the context of the Exposition.

By stepping out of their traditionally defined private space to address and calm the fears of a rapidly changing America, these women often had to confront the anxieties of middle-class culture in

particular. Through ideas about reform and work, some women provided a view of the working class that heightened a sense of middle-class unity and superiority. This reaffirmation of class was a necessary component of the Fair itself. The creators of the Exposition displayed the White City as a culturally united utopia in the midst of the chaotic, industrial city of Chicago. Similarly, some of the women also attempted to alleviate the tensions of middle-class culture by defining roles for both themselves and wage-earning women in terms of reform and work. On the other hand, some women addressed the real problems of nineteenth century society in an attempt to diminish distinctions created by class; their goal was a real utopia, a society which would truly "stand for all and all for each."<sup>118</sup>

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