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Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz. *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 278 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-11233-6; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-11234-3.

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Sex, Politics, and the Flash Press of the 1840s

The *Flash*, the *Whip*, the *Rake*, and the *Libertine*: such titles might evoke images of pamphlets handed out on the Las Vegas strip or of contemporary "lad" magazines, but they were actually four short-lived weekly newspapers produced in New York City in the early 1840s. For the last two decades, historians Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz have mined these papers for evidence of public discourse on sexuality and crime in nineteenth-century New York City.[1] Now they have collaborated on *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, a book that offers both analysis of and extensive excerpts from these largely forgotten publications.

Part I of the book recounts the brief history of the papers and stakes a convincing claim for their historical significance. According to the authors, "flash press" was one of many descriptors given to these papers at the time (others included "racy," "sporting," "obscene," "libidinous," and "loathsome"); the publishers chose the title because "flash" was a contemporary slang term meaning a language of "smartness and deceit … used by thieves to communicate among themselves and mystify outsiders" (p. 2). This connotation dovetails with the authors' claim that these papers provide evidence of "an underworld that … offered a challenge to what has often been seen as a monolithic Victorian sexual regime emphasizing suppression if not outright denial of sexual urges" (p. 11). The authors also contend that prosecutions of the flash press's editors for obscene libel constitute an important moment in American legal history because the decisions provided a common-law precedent that "profoundly influenced" the more widely examined obscenity prosecutions by Anthony Comstock in the 1870s (p. 81). *The Flash Press* synthesizes several arguments presented in the authors' previous work and introduces a few new claims that have emerged from the collaboration, making it a valuable introduction to a little-known antebellum culture of sexual and political rebellion.

The flash press emerged out of a scandal that incorporated the major elements of the papers' stock-in-trade: sex, theater, and the transgression of emerging sexual boundaries. In 1838, Louisa Missouri Miller, an eighteen-year-old actress who was the daughter of a successful New York City madam and an attendee of the prestigious girls' school Emma Willard's Troy Academy, sought theatrical training under the tutelage of Thomas N. Hamblin, an actor and director with a reputation for turning ingénues into stars (and then taking them into his bed). When Miller's mother objected to this arrangement, a writer and editor named George Snelling started a newspaper called the *Polyanthos* largely to criticize Hamblin and alert the public to the dangers facing the young girl. Two weeks after the *Polyanthos* began publication, the young actress took sick and died at Hamblin's house (the second of three women to do so within a short period of time). The mainstream press actually blamed the *Polyanthos* for the death, claiming the shock of reading its charges spurred her illness, but Miller's mother held Hamblin responsible. Following the death of the third young woman in his home, Hamblin fled the city; when he returned in 1841, the Miller family funded a new paper for Snelling designed to ruin Hamblin's finances by regularly blasting him and his theater company. This paper was the *Sunday Flash*, which became the first publication of the flash press genre when it debuted in August 1841.

The Hamblin/Miller case placed the *Sunday Flash* in the position of defending the purity of young women and condemning aggressive male sexual behavior, but that stance seems to reveal more about the personal alliances and animosities within this small community than it does about the ideology of the flash press editors. In fact, the authors persuasively argue that "the distinctive character

of flash came principally [from] ... in defense of active, male heterosexuality ... [and] favorable coverage of prostitution and other illicit sexual behaviors" (p. 10). They claim that the flash press built a "shared community" around these ideas; that is, "by publicizing the locales and participants engaged in non-marital sex, the papers familiarized those activities and thereby emboldened men to feel comfortable asserting male sexual prerogatives in opposition to the emerging canons of respectability" (p. 10). The flash press's celebration of male heterosexuality also furthered a political agenda that the authors have labeled "libertine republicanism." This ideology included a "radical, democratic critique of privilege and hierarchy" and a "skeptical rationalism and a vehement, anticlerical hostility to organized religion and social groups defined by their religious beliefs" (pp. 55-56).

The authors do not explore the relationship between the flash press and the artisanal or workingmen's movements of the era (all of which might be seen as part of the revolt against the economic and social elites. But the flash writers' antagonism toward both economic elites and immigrants as well as their opposition to the imposition of values of self-control espoused by evangelicals and other moral reformers of the era suggests an ideological kinship. The flash writers emphasized the hypocrisy of reformers; the *Sunday Flash* (the very name of which may have constituted a repudiation of sabbatarianism) cited examples of reformers walking through the Five Points, ignoring the poverty and prostitution in order to quarrel with newsboys who sold papers on Sundays (p. 70). The flash press's inconsistent judgments upon prostitution may have stemmed from personal antagonisms toward individual women, but their methods of disparaging individual prostitutes as anti-republicanism reveal the editors' democratic biases. Homosexuality and interracial sex were consistently condemned, and generally attributed to those with aristocratic aspirations or to immigrants. The papers presented "a strange mixture of Tom Paine's revolutionary politics with aspects of the sexual ideology of the Marquis de Sade.... [S]ex in the flash press not only represented liberty; it made one a better republican" (pp. 57, 76).

The authors leave open the question of whether this mixture of politics and sexuality constituted pornography, but state officials clearly viewed the content of these papers as obscene. In July 1842, after filing a series of standard libel charges against the flash press editors, the district attorney delivered a wholesale set of indictments against the flash press editors for obscene libel, inciting what the authors view as an early example of the "national struggle between censorship and the right of free expression" (p. 81). *The Flash Press* takes readers through the history of criminal and obscene libel in England and the United States and then argues that the prosecution of these publications was driven by a conservative corps of New York City's legal community who sought to censor not only these publications' erotic content but also their challenges to the power of the city's political and social elite through ridicule and exposure of hypocrisy (p. 91). The conviction of the flash press editors succeeded in killing this genre of publication; subsequent publications retreated from the direct connections between political democracy and erotic freedoms that characterized the libertine republicanism of these young men. Perhaps more significantly, the authors view these cases as significant to the nation's legal history because the judges, and particularly chief judge Frederick Tallmadge, sought to not only suppress materials after publication (a stance which was in line with English jurist William Blackstone's theories on libel) but also to censor material before it reached the public. The flash press cases thus served as a crucial precedent during the 1870s when the New York state legislature codified this stance into the Comstock Act of 1873.

Part II of the book presents an annotated treasure trove of hard-to-find articles, advertisements, and illustrations from the flash press. In fact, the entire collection may be overwhelming for undergraduates, so instructors will probably need to be selective; more judicious selection or more extensive annotations might have aided that audience, but scholars will be thrilled by the wealth of resources here. The combination of these primary sources and the authors' compelling reinterpretation of antebellum New York culture make the book an economical and pedagogically valuable option for classes in cultural, urban, media, or legal history. They also make *The Flash Press* a thought-provoking and entertaining read for both a scholarly and a general audience, particularly those unfamiliar with the authors' previous work.

Note

[1]. For examples of these authors' previous use of these documents, see Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920 (* New York: Norton, 1994); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz. *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America (*New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

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