

Performing Women, Public Womanhood, and the
Transformation of the Nineteenth-Century Cultural Marketplace

by

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Dedicated in loving memory to
Esther Lampert and Eva Schimert

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that between the 1790s and 1870s female performers and their publics transformed the relationship between the commercial stage, constructions of gender, and women's relationship with public life. The advent of new forms of performance, celebrity, and entrepreneurship by women like actress Fanny Kemble, dramatic reader Anna Mowatt, African-American concert singer Elizabeth Greenfield, and manager Elizabeth Bowers expanded forms of public womanhood while drawing in middle-class female audiences. This popularization of new forms of female performance and types of celebrity played out within an intensifying contest over the ownership and class structure of theater in which the status both of female performers and female consumers became increasingly central. I address these issues in a number of ways, examining women's shifting roles as contested symbols of respectability, agents of reform, marginalized but ever-present consumers, and finally, as celebrities whose performances both onstage and off mobilized the fantasies and desires of female spectators.

This project looks across different genres of stage entertainment, considering dramatic theater, concert music, ballet, and dramatic reading. All of these genres of entertainment raised similar questions about women's intellectual capacity and moral and cultural role, the relationships between performance of femininity and female interiority, and the meanings of new forms of female embodiment and physicality. Women's stage

labor also provides a unique perspective on gender, work, and the family economy in this period of market revolution.

Introduction

On an April afternoon in 1865, twenty-two-year-old Brooklyn native Gertrude Kellogg and her friend Lucy Rushton walked over to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where Kellogg “practiced on the Stage” in front of her friend and a motley assortment of janitors and carpenters working in the empty auditorium.¹ For the past year, Kellogg had been studying elocution, which she felt was her “chief talent, perhaps my only one.”² She took lessons from a woman in New York, under whose tutelage she learned to recite the role of Julia from the *Hunchback*, a play written for English actress Fanny Kemble in 1829, as well as texts from a range of literary genres, including poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But the dramatic roles she read excited her the most. Her studies of elocution had given her the confidence to imagine herself in another field of performance. In January 1865 she wrote, “I think I can learn in time to be a good actress. I love to study it.”³ It would be several years before Kellogg obtained employment as an actress. But in December 1867, Kellogg gave her first public dramatic reading for the Christmas festival at Strong Place Baptist Church in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. She wrote enthusiastically about the experience in her diary: “It was I think I may say really my first appearance in public, certainly I never spoke before so many people. It seemed pleasant

¹ Gertrude Kellogg Diaries, 11 April 1865, New York Historical Society.

² Ibid., 18 May 1864,

³ Ibid., 3 January 1865.

but strange and very exciting. Opera glasses leveled at me for the first time at any rate. I was scarcely nervous at all. I am very glad I tried myself.”⁴

Kellogg might have recognized herself in Olive Logan’s comic lecture “Stage Struck,” about the follies and foibles of amateurs aspiring to theatrical celebrity, which Kellogg went to hear with her friend Charles Baker in February 1868. A professional actress from a theatrical family, Logan warned her public against the mistaken impression that the “theatre, being a play-house, is not a place for work.”⁵ Kellogg judged the lecture “very good indeed,” and though she surely laughed at Logan’s comic send-ups of “stage-struck youths” from “every class in society,” Kellogg would ultimately embrace the “laborious” occupation of acting for the next two-and-a-half decades, joining a growing class of women who saw the theater and the platform as a legitimate site of skilled and semi-skilled labor.⁶

From the late-1860s through the 1880s, Kellogg pursued reading engagements and acting positions simultaneously, soliciting reading engagements from literary societies, Young Men’s Associations, and church festivals, and acting engagements with both resident stock and touring companies. She worked with leading New York agents like Colonel T. Allston Brown, who fielded available positions and introduced Kellogg to managers like Augustin Daly, Jane Coombs Brown, Sarah Crocker Conway, and Edwin Forrest. Kellogg’s diaries, which commenced in 1863 when she turned twenty, document the social world and leisure activities of an educated middle-class woman growing up in

⁴ Ibid., 26 December 1867.

⁵ Quotations are from the version of “Stage Struck” published in Olive Logan, *Before the Footlights and Behind the Scenes* (Philadelphia: Parmelee & Co., 1870), 160.

⁶ Gertrude Kellogg Diaries, 27 February 1868; Logan, *Before the Footlights*, 163.

Brooklyn and her transition to a professional stage career.⁷ Kellogg's successes inspired her younger sister Fanny to turn her own musical accomplishments into a professional stage career. Fanny Kellogg became a concert pianist and singer and ran her own concert company in the 1880s. Both sisters parlayed their domestic accomplishments in elocution and music into professional stage careers, while their elder brother Peter followed their father's penchant for entrepreneurial ventures and established a horse and livestock company. For middle-class women of Gertrude and Fanny's generation, the rapidly expanding show trade was a prominent and readily accessible site of skilled white-collar labor for women.⁸

One of the most striking ways to visualize the prominence of female performers within these expanding industries is to examine a catalog of theatrical portraits from the New York studio of Gilbert and Bacon, where Kellogg sat on multiple occasions for promotional portraits. Kellogg's trio of portraits are among over 1700 images in the Gilbert and Bacon album, dated around 1880, of an estimated 300 performers, the vast majority of them women, posing in a range of theatrical and contemporary dress. [Figure 1.] Or consider the composite portraits put out by the competing New York studios of

⁷ Kellogg and her friends and siblings played music and tableaux vivants and experimented with the planchette. They rehearsed and put on private theatricals and attended theater performances in Brooklyn and New York. The Kellogg family was also very involved in spiritualism and women's rights. In 1869, Kellogg attended the mass meeting for female suffrage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where she heard Olive Logan, Lucretia Mott, Frances Parker, and Lucy Stone. She wrote, "I enjoyed it very much indeed. If I had the brain to write a lecture as I have the power to deliver it when written, I would take the field and try to do some good." Gertrude Kellogg Diaries, 14 May 1868.

⁸ Once Kellogg established herself as a professional dramatic reader, she also began giving private elocution lessons, and both sisters gave weekly private music lessons, which provided them with personal disposable income. Gertrude Kellogg seems to have contributed some of her salary and earnings from her acting and reading engagements to the family economy. Significantly, the money Kellogg brought in to the family economy was at the expense of the unpaid domestic labor that she was unable provide her mother because she was attending rehearsals or traveling. On several occasions in the 1870s, when the Kelloggs found themselves financially stretched, Kellogg had to cease performing because her mother could not afford hired help to replace Kellogg's labor.

Napoleon Sarony, Matthew Brady, Charles Fredericks, or E. B. Fay.⁹ A carte-de-visite from the 1870s by E. B. Fay of Nassau St. features fifty stage celebrities who toured or worked as leading stock or managers in New York, including Laura Keene, Sarah Conway, Charlotte Cushman, and Fanny Davenport. [Figure 2.] The “Theatrical Portrait Gallery No. 2” printed by C. D. Fredericks & Co., probably also from the 1860s or 1870s, is a collage of the faces of one hundred actresses, all numbered and indexed on the back. [Figure 3.]

Another way to capture the sheer volume of female performers across the first two-thirds of the century is to examine the histories and genealogies of the stage. *Wemyss’ Chronology of the American Stage from 1752-1852* (1852), Joseph T. Ireland’s *Records of the New York Stage from 1750-1860* (1866-67), dramatic agent T. Allston Brown’s *A History of the New York Stage, From the First Performance in 1732 to 1901* (1903), and finally the fifteen volume *Annals of the New York Stage* (1927-1949) compiled in the early twentieth century by Columbia professor George Odell each contain hundreds upon hundreds of names not only of stock actresses, but also itinerant female performers who traversed regional American and transatlantic circuits in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁰ Women comprise almost half of the performers represented in each of these volumes, which include not only celebrities, but also an expanding body of salaried laborers. These women shaped an emerging culture industry that over the

⁹ Stage performers used these portraits for promotional materials and to solicit positions, but carte-de-visites also became part of the circulating currency of celebrity culture. Fans could purchase carte-de-visites of their favorite celebrities using the catalogs of celebrity portraits made available by these studios and exchange them with friends or compile them in their own celebrity portrait albums.

¹⁰ Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Wemyss’ Chronology of the American Stage, from 1752-1852* (New York: W. Taylor & Co., 1852); Joseph Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage from 1750-1860* (New York: T. H. Morrell, 1866-67); Thomas Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage, From the First Performance in 1732 to 1901* 3 vols. (1903; repr., New York: B. Blom, 1964); George Clinton Densmore Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* 15 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949).

nineteenth century became increasingly oriented around female publics.¹¹



Figure 1. Getrude Kellogg's portraits are the first three in the top row. Gilbert and Bacon Catalog of Theatrical and Public Celebrities, Library Company of Philadelphia.

¹¹ For example, I sampled the actor index to Brown's *History of the New York Stage*, which contains thirty-three columns of approximately sixty-six names each. A random sampling of five columns revealed that the names of women average thirty per column, so we can conclude that women constitute approximately 45 percent of the names in the index.



Figure 2. Collage of Nineteenth-century Actors, E. B. Fay, University of Washington Libraries.



Figure 3. Collage of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Portraits, Charles D. Fredericks & Co., University of Washington Libraries.

Most of these women's lives and careers remain obscure and inaccessible, eclipsed by celebrities like Fanny Kemble, Anna Mowatt, Charlotte Cushman, and Laura Keane—Gertrude Kellogg, because of her persistent diary keeping, is a rare exception. But we can use the careers of prominent celebrities to identify the shifting terms and watersheds of these expanding industries that impacted this large body of stage laborers. This dissertation draws together stories of both celebrated and more obscure figures, like Mrs. W. H. Smith, Matilda Clarendon, and Miss Kimberly, uncovering the central role women played in the formation, expansion, management, and regulation of commercial entertainment industries in the half-century *preceding* Kellogg's first portrait sitting with Napoleon Sarony in 1872. Indeed, the structural and ideological groundwork for Kellogg's career was facilitated by shifts in the content and marketing of public amusements, as growing numbers of female performers hailed middle-class, female publics as a key market for commercial amusements.

Consider the print culture of female stage celebrity a half-century earlier, in the form of a scrapbook of scenic and portrait engravings compiled by Margaret M'Laughlin between 1810 and 1830 in Philadelphia. Surely Margaret had seen some of the stage performers she included, some perhaps in the roles in which they were depicted, like Mrs. Hilson as Margaret Overreach, Mr. Warren as Sir Peter Teazle, Mrs. Darley as Amelia, and Mrs. Francis as Miss Harlow.¹² [Figures 4 and 5.] We know little more about Margaret M'Laughlin than her collecting practices. In contrast, these early stage performers, who labored most of their lives on the boards of the first metropolitan theaters in America, are visible as names in newspaper advertisements and puffs, and

¹² Scrapbook of Margaret M'Laughlin, American Antiquarian Society.

quite literally as the faces of a nascent culture industry that by the second half of the century had become a major site of women's labor and commercial leisure. Yet these figures and histories remain absent from larger narratives about women and gender for much of the nineteenth century. The world of theater and public amusements as it relates to women's history is frequently treated as a subject of the late nineteenth century.

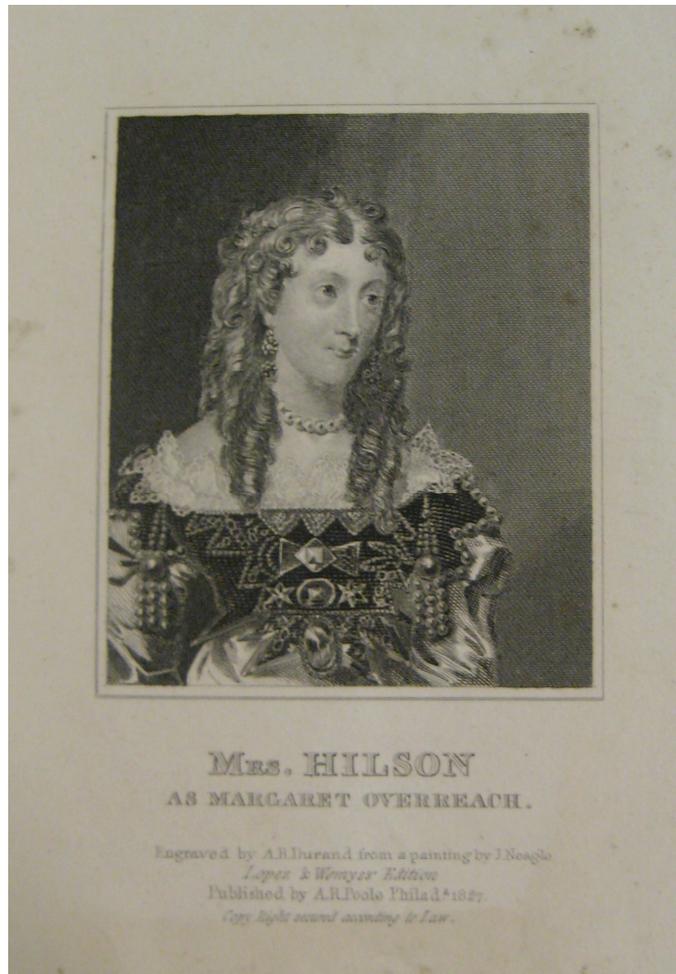


Figure 4. "Mrs. Hilson as Margaret Overreach," Scrapbook of Margaret M'Laughlin, American Antiquarian Society.

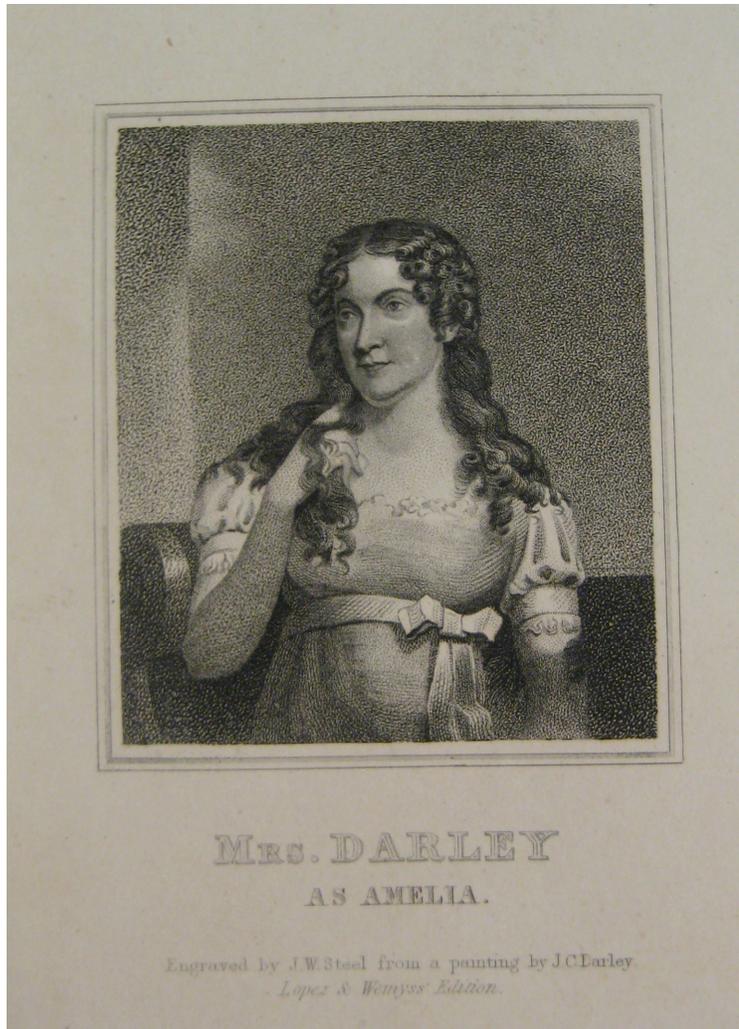


Figure 5. “Mrs. Darley as Amelia,” Scrapbook of Margaret M’Laughlin, American Antiquarian Society.

This dissertation argues that between the 1790s and 1870s female performers and their publics transformed the relationship between the commercial stage, constructions of gender, and women’s relationship with public life. Although women were present in theaters on both sides of the footlights throughout the nineteenth century, their relationship with the world of commercial amusements shifted significantly over this period. In the 1820s, Margaret M’Laughlin would have been among a minority of women in attendance on any given night at the Chestnut Street Theatre, whereas in the

1860s, Gertrude Kellogg was part of a middle-class female public actively hailed by venues like Wallack's Lyceum Theatre, Mrs. John Wood's Olympic Theatre, and Mrs. Conway's Brooklyn Theatre, venues Kellogg attended regularly with her family and friends and where she would later seek employment. During the 1830s and 1840s, an expanding cohort of European and American female stage performers drew acclaim and attention from diverse audiences in which white middle-class women constituted a kind of "counterpublic"—a public that is aware of itself as marginal and even excluded from a dominant public.¹³ These performers developed and popularized new forms and genres of performance, in turn introducing new models of public womanhood and forms of female celebrity that were increasingly successful hailing female audiences, thereby making them visible as a significant market. By the 1850s, another shift occurred such that the interests, values, and priorities of white middle-class women came to occupy the center of the marketplace for commercial amusements. At this point, white middle-class women were increasingly hailed as *the* public of an expanding and diversifying entertainment industry. In all of these respects, the commercial stage became a key site around which middle-class women increasingly oriented their participation in public life. To consider the changing status of women as workers, publics, and markets should not lead us to treat them as passive recipients of change. As the stories in this dissertation reveal, women were agents whose acts of consumption, criticism, publishing,

¹³ My argument uses Michael Warner's category of "publics" to define the relationship between managers and performers and shifting markets for public amusement. Thus I treat attempts to broaden the market for public amusements, which occurred over the course of the period under discussion, as moments of address whereby managers, performers, and critics hailed the middle class, "respectable" audiences, and women *as* counterpublics in order to constitute them as *the* public. As Warner points out, a counterpublic may consist of participants who are "not subalterns for any reason other than their participation in the counterpublic discourse." See below for a more detailed discussion of Warner. Michael Warner, *Public and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 121.

performance, and management were a driving force in the changing landscape of the culture industry.

This popularization of new forms of female performance and types of celebrity played out within an intensifying contest over the ownership and class structure of theater in which the status both of female performers and female consumers became increasingly central. Scholarship that has focused on struggles over the class cultures and stratification of commercial amusements has missed the degree to which women influenced these shifts in multiple ways and in diverse contexts.¹⁴ Likewise, women's history has failed to consider the commercial stage as a site in which women developed new public roles, new constructions of gender, and new constructions of the public sphere itself.¹⁵ In this dissertation I address these issues in a number of ways, examining women's shifting roles as contested symbols of respectability, agents of reform, marginalized but ever-present consumers, and finally, as celebrities whose performances

¹⁴ Some main examples are Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987). Notable exceptions dealing with the early nineteenth century are Rosemarie Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), but the majority of the scholarship on women, class, and public amusements deals with the late nineteenth century, as I discuss below.

¹⁵ The primary contexts in which historians have explored women's relationship with public life in the first half of the nineteenth century are religion and reform, education and literary culture, and labor history. Significant texts in these areas are Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf 1985); on women preachers and lecturers, Catherine Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: female preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Carla Peterson, "*Doers of the Word*": *African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); on women's education and literary culture Mary Kelley, *Leaning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006); and women's labor history, most notably Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

both onstage and off mobilized the fantasies and desires of female spectators. I show how the advent of new forms of performance, celebrity, and entrepreneurship expanded forms of public womanhood while successfully hailing middle-class publics. I define public womanhood here as a context, role, and repertoire of new actions through which women engaged with a public. The forms of public womanhood I explore are by no means exhaustive, but appealed to a particular category of publics—primarily those constituted around shared values of moral and intellectual elevation that we identify with the expanding middle class. The female performers and managers I discuss were instrumental and successful in hailing middle-class publics by emphasizing the particular fitness of women for cultural, intellectual, and moral elevation both onstage and off.

This dissertation thus argues for a re-conceptualization of the meanings of stage work in women's history, both as a site around which women developed new public roles and as a key context in which women participated in the rise of market capitalism, as laborers, managers, critics, and consumers.¹⁶ My decision to focus on commercial amusements is connected with a larger question about the developing relationship between women and consumer culture across the nineteenth century. A rich literature on print culture has demonstrated the central role women played as writers, editors, and

¹⁶ My work is informed both by scholarship on the market revolution following Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and cultural histories of market society, particularly James Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jean Thomas Haskell and Richard F. Teichbraeher III, eds., *The Culture of the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Jean Christophe-Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

audiences.¹⁷ But for the most part we have failed to see these expanding industries of print and the stage as mutually constitutive public domains that were overlapping, even competing, and indeed, part of the same historical process that transformed the terms and contours of public womanhood. This project draws on a broad range of print and manuscript sources that reveal the uneven ways in which the expanding industries of commercial amusements structured women's labor, entrepreneurship, and consumption. As we shall see, this process involved genres of entertainment like concert music and dramatic reading that competed with dramatic theater in the very same marketplace and appeared on the same stages. And all of these genres of entertainment I explore—dramatic theater, ballet, concert music, and elocution—raised similar questions about woman's intellectual capacity and moral and cultural role, the relationships between performance of femininity and female interiority, and the meanings of new forms female embodiment and physicality. Furthermore, many of the performers I discuss also moved between different genres and venues of performance and adopted different economic models over the course of their careers. Bringing the theater in dialogue with other genres of performance is facilitated—indeed, demanded—by the life stories of these

¹⁷ Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in a New Nation 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Vintage, 2010); Mary and Ronald Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Isabelle Lehu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Peterson, "Doers of the Word"; Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Richard Brodhead, *Culture of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Frances Smith Foster, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

women. But this approach also expands our vision of the field of competition in which theater was operating, and urges us towards a cultural history that looks horizontally across a vibrant, intertextual, competitive cultural marketplace.

Finding Women on Stage

In her introduction to *Female Spectacle*, an exploration of the connections between theater and feminism at the turn of the century, historian Susan Glenn describes herself as part of a “cohort of women who grew up haunted by the ghost of actress Sarah Bernhardt.”¹⁸ I might include myself in this cohort of women admonished for being “such a Sarah Bernhardt.” But if my family had possessed a longer cultural memory, they might have recognized another key namesake in this ancestry of female theatricality, the late-eighteenth-century English actress Sarah Siddons. Bernhardt’s engulfing celebrity has created a historical break—both in popular memory and certainly historiographically—around the history of the relationship between femininity, theatricality, celebrity, and the dramatic stage.¹⁹ With a few notable exceptions, the majority of significant United States scholarship on women and the stage, both in terms of performativity and consumption, focuses on the second half of the nineteenth century, a period we identify with a major transformation in gender roles, the expansion and consolidation of consumer-oriented industries, and a shift towards a more reflexive sense

¹⁸ Susan Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁹ Sarah Bernhardt is a prominent subject in celebrity studies. See for example Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi, eds., *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame and Power in Nineteenth-century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

of self indicative of a new modernity.²⁰

Glenn, for example, argues that celebrities like Bernhardt ushered women into this new reflexively modern sense of self via a culture industry oriented towards the female spectator. Her arguments fit into a larger body of literature concerned with the feminization of consumption and the larger class politics of women's relationship with industrialization and the beginnings of consumer capitalism.²¹ While the consumption habits of middle-class women came to define their public role and, as Glenn argues, actually offered middle-class women a powerful set of strategies for claiming the rights of citizenship, the alignment of consumption with women's shifting roles was also problematic. As Nan Enstad has demonstrated, working-class women's behavior as consumers was often pitted against their identity and politics as laborers.²²

Much of this literature has been based on two premises that are rarely joined

²⁰ Scholarship focused on women and theater in the second half of the nineteenth century includes Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was The Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Jayna Brown, *Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Renee Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Issacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Glenn, *Female Spectacle*; Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*; Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); and with a special focus on the stage and modern feminism see also Pamela Cobrin, *From Winning the Vote to Directing on Broadway: The Emergence of Women on the New York Stage, 1880-1927* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009); Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford, eds., *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

²¹ For scholarship on consumer culture and modernity see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); consumer culture and women see Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Jennifer Scanlon, ed., *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); on women's consumption of public amusements Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Lauren Rabinowitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

²² Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

together and examined critically. One concerns the narratives of women's history. Implicit in scholarship on women and gender at the turn-of-the-twentieth century is that the rise of this new public culture was responsible for beginning to break down the rigid gender system that characterized much of the nineteenth century, a "system" characterized by scholars of the 1960s and 70s as a "cult of domesticity" constructed around an ideology of separate spheres.²³ Meanwhile, scholarship on theater and early mass culture has also identified the importance of gender, primarily through the "feminization" of American theater audiences around the middle of the century, which helped make theater into a more respectable, middle-class family space.²⁴ These feminization arguments, however, have generated a troubling asymmetry, whereby the recognition of this shift has rendered women invisible as agents of historical change *prior* to the historical moment when managers supposedly recognized them *as* a viable market. Scholars who began in the 1960s to examine the nineteenth-century culture of theater and public amusements were concerned with the relationship between emerging commercial entertainment industries and class formation, raising questions about the degree to which forms like blackface minstrelsy, theater melodrama, or dime novels shaped working-class

²³ The "cult of domesticity" comes from Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174; and the key work laying out the ideology of "woman's sphere" is Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

²⁴ This argument about "feminization" is laid out principally in David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (1968; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Peter Buckley, "To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1800-1850" (Ph.D. Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/ Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base of High Culture in America," in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*; and Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

identity and created a space for the articulation and expression of class interests.²⁵ This literature demonstrated that the rise of new mass cultural forms changed the relationship between class and culture, creating avenues for the expression of class interests that mediated between the working class and a “dominant genteel culture.”²⁶ What remains troubling about this literature, however, is the degree to which locating the interests and politics of the rising working class around emerging forms of mass culture has effectively marginalized women, a group implicitly aligned with the feminized sensibilities of prurient reformers and dour tastemakers and who only reclaim—and redeem—the “popular” at mid-century.

One sees this narrative at work in the long-running cycle of historical scholarship on the Astor Place Riots, most of which privileges men as exclusive historical actors—on

²⁵ Core theoretical texts are Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum 1997); Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001); Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular” (1981) in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2nd edition, John Storey, ed. (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), 442-453. For a deeper discussion of these genealogies see James Cook, “The Return of the Culture Industry” and James Cook and Lawrence Glickman, “Twelve Propositions for a History of U.S. Cultural History,” in James Cook, Lawrence Glickman, and Michael O’Malley, eds., *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Scholarship includes Denning, *Mechanic Accents*; Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Marxist cultural analysis also transformed scholarship on blackface minstrelsy when, in the early 1990s, David Roediger and Eric Lott developed compelling interpretations that linked the appeal of minstrelsy to white working-class politics, thus providing compelling evidence for the intersectionality of racial and class politics. Roediger’s arguments about the “wages of whiteness” in an industrializing wage- labor economy connected the racial politics of cultural consumption to a larger question consuming American labor historians about why the United States, in contrast to early industrial Europe, failed to develop a successful labor movement.

²⁶ Following Stuart Hall, who pushed towards a closer examination of the dialectics of cultural consumption, Michael Denning argued that mass cultural forms were contested sites of struggle over the signs of class. In *Mechanic Accents*, Denning drew a crucial distinction between class as a sociological category and the “class accents” of the emerging nineteenth-century dime novel industry. While dime novels helped capture the struggles of industrializing society, Denning argued that they should not be read as a form of working-class culture. Rather they show how the rise of new mass cultural forms helped change the relationship between class and culture, as mass industries were able to adapt a series of narratives or class “accents” to market culture. Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 47.

stage, in the audience, and on the street. On 7 March 1849, rising tensions between working-class and elite publics came to a head as Bowery theatergoers attempted to drive English actor William Charles Macready from the Astor Place Opera House, where he was appearing in direct competition with American actor Edwin Forrest, the darling of working class pit-ites who epitomized hyper-masculine rugged individualism. Although the Astor Place Riot was very much in keeping with a longer tradition of theater riots through which audiences asserted their sovereignty, here the working-class publics took their class struggle from the Bowery to the Astor Place Opera House, and challenged the elite ownership of that space. Scholars have treated this event as a crucial tipping point, one which led managers to reshape the culture of amusements in the 1850s around new conventions of spectatorship, exerting more control over the behavior of audiences and pushing out working-class publics, which suited their mounting appeals to women and the middle class—a highly lucrative new market.

However, the place of the expanding middle classes and women of all classes in the half-century *prior* to the Astor Place Riots is far less clear from this literature. For the most part, women appear in this literature exclusively as performers or prostitutes, a pattern that has failed to acknowledge the class biases in the image of prostitutes, as well as the silences around other kinds of women in theatrical space. One of the difficulties facing historians of public amusements is the challenge of using marketing strategies and newspaper puffing to see the sociological reality of theater audiences. Categorizations of audiences in print called competing visions of theatrical space into being. Descriptions of “fashionable” audiences and “elite of the city” were not literal social portraits of the audience, so much as attempts to invoke respectability through calculated discourses that

appealed to particular segments of the middle and upper classes. Close attention to how shifts in marketing shaped audience demographics is crucial, yet we also need to be careful not to marginalize other important actors in these shifts, particularly women, whose acts of consumption, criticism, and performance are too often read through the influence and address of men. In contrast, I present women performers, managers, and reformers as major forces in shaping new entertainment markets, but not always on the same sides. My project introduces new watersheds into the periodization of United States cultural history, identifying women who sparked major shifts in the structure, content, and address of public amusements, and whose stories introduce new ways of conceptualizing the boundaries and terms of women's public lives.

In 1989, literary scholar and theater historian Tracy Davis admonished scholars on women and theater to approach this terrain not as recovery work, but rather to “challenge the terms, periodization, and categories” of theater history while bringing the history of dramatic performance more closely into dialogue with the themes and patterns of women's history.²⁷ In my view, this represents an important starting point, but could be pushed considerably further. Above all, we need to bring theater into the same historical frame with other genres of performance, and we need to use the history of the commercial stage to open up new ways of thinking about the relationship between women and public life, both operating, in turn, at the intersection of racial and class difference. We also need to connect this history of gender and public amusements with problems of class formation, social reform, and the rise of market capitalism. In fact, the

²⁷ Tracy Davis, “Questions for a Feminist Methodology in Theatre History” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, Thomas Postlewaite and Bruce McConachie, eds. (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1989), 64. A recent work of theater history that does this is Elizabeth Retiz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

history of female stage performers, managers, and publics provides an ideal site around which to approach a central question raised by United States cultural history: how have socially marginalized groups engaged with and been appropriated by commercial cultural forms?²⁸ I approach this question from a new direction, informed by the problematics of women's history. Locating women within the publics of commercial amusements offers another opportunity to push back against the framework of separate spheres for conceptualizing women's lives and worlds in the nineteenth century by asking how commercial culture has made particular modes of racialized and classed womanhood visible and normative.²⁹ I ask whether the invisibility of women from our history of early-nineteenth-century public amusements is really a function of their absence, or rather reflects women's struggles to gain access to these spaces as performers, consumers, and critics, struggles that have been marginalized both historically and historiographically because of the terms, periodization, and categories through which scholars have approached this history.³⁰

²⁸ An apt example of foundational approaches this set of questions in American history can be found in essays by Lawrence Levine, Jackson Lears, and Robin Kelley as part of a forum in the December 1992 issue of the *American Historical Review*, especially Lawrence Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences" *American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1369-1399; and T. J. Jackson Lears, "Making Fun of Popular Culture" *American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1417-1426.

²⁹ As Carolyn Lawes noted, in a review of Barbara Cutter's *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels*, the ability to break out of some version of this formulation remains hindered by the lack of a compelling alternative. My arguments in this dissertation are very much in agreement with Cutter's argument that an ideology of redemptive womanhood framed women's public behavior. Moral intention was more important to negotiating the boundaries around women's behavior than the spatial metaphor historians continue to deploy, albeit with considerable qualification. Carolyn Lawes, review of *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830-1865*, by Barbara Cutter, *The American Historical Review* 110:1 (2005): 152-153; Barbara Cutter, *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830-1865* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

³⁰ A notable exception is the work of Rosemarie Bank, whose critiques of the terms and categories of theater history have informed my work. Faye Dudden's study of American actresses is an important contribution to historical scholarship on nineteenth-century theater, but her teleology hinges on a critique of women's place within the shift from a culture of aurality to visuality over the course of the century. Dudden argues that women in theater ultimately bought into the ascendance of the visual, thereby trapping

Women, the Market Revolution, and the Problem of Separate Spheres

Scholarship on women in the nineteenth century has been consumed with the problem of “public” and “sphere” for locating and defining women’s social and cultural worlds in the nineteenth century. Women’s historians writing about early nineteenth-century America in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably Barbara Welter, Gerda Lerner, and Nancy Cott, identified an ideology of separate spheres as constitutive of gender and according to which middle-class women claimed or were relegated to the domestic sphere while men occupied the world of business and politics.³¹ Scholars used separate spheres to explain the effects of industrialization on gender, thereby constructing a symbiotic relationship between structural change and ideology. While Welter identified an ideology of domesticity that characterized “women’s sphere” in the early nineteenth century, Gerda Lerner subsequently connected this ideology to middle-class formation. But as Linda Kerber cautioned in her 1988 article “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” the ideology of separate spheres rapidly became a “prism” through which subsequent scholars read all of women’s experiences.³² Thus, scholarship on wage labor and reform culture continued to assert the central discursive and ideological function of separate spheres even while opening up room for recognition of a greater diversity of women’s lived experiences, connecting

themselves in a sexualized male gaze. This critical framework traps women in a reductive binary according to which the opportunities theater offers women is reduced to the capacity of female performers to resist becoming vehicles of their own objectification.

³¹ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood” (1966); Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the State of Women in the Age of Jackson,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10 (1969): 5-15; Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*.

³² Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75 (1988): 9-39.

evangelical women's reform crusades with middle-class formation, and calling attention to the visible and rowdy public presence of urban working-class women.³³ In 1984, Mary Kelley offered another key context in which to examine these questions. Women's engagement with the literary marketplace, she argued, was mediated by an ideology of "literary domesticity" whereby these writers struggled to navigate competing motivations to live according to middle-class ideals of domesticity while engaging with the marketplace.³⁴

Attempts to complicate and widen our understanding of separate spheres, then, followed two main currents: first, via women's reform and associational cultures and invocation of religious and domestic authority; and second, through women's engagements with commercial markets. As Nancy Cott and Jeanne Boydston and other foundational women's historians recognized, gender ideology of the nineteenth century was intimately connected with the shift in the relationship between labor, capital, and the home under the shift to market capitalism and the beginnings of industrialization. In 1984, Jeanne Boydston showed how the pastoralization of housework and its separation

³³ Mary Ryan's extensive study of Oneida County, New York connected women's associationalism with middle-class formation. Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Lori Ginzburg are among the scholars who have demonstrated how women deployed the ideology of "woman's sphere" to engage in social reform and make claims on state, but from a position as the moral conscience of the nation, rather than as public citizens. The extensive literature on women's antebellum reform culture includes Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Carolyn Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Susan Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). On working-class women see Stansell, *City of Women*.

³⁴ Kelley, *Private Woman Public Stage*.

from the new wage economy linked the new gender and labor systems. Separate spheres thus folded neatly into emerging scholarship on the market revolution. Scholars in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly agreed that while the ideology of separate spheres did not accurately describe the structural parameters of women's lives, it nevertheless managed the displacements and uncertainties of life and labor under market capitalism by enshrining the home as a site protected from the market. The preservation of rigid gender hierarchies, in other words, managed the social instabilities of the world outside. Amy Dru Stanley offered an important corrective to this analysis, pointing out the centrality of slavery to conceptions of domestic life and market society, and thus raising the possibility that the inequality of the home in fact worked as a promise of the potential equality of the wage labor market.³⁵

But as scholars looked more closely into the diverse ways women engaged in market society, both within and outside the home, the ideological salience of separate spheres appeared even more uncertain given the degree to which the market was fully interwoven with most women's experience of domestic economy. Studies of various local economies uncovered how women experienced and shaped the market revolution, not only as mill workers drawn from the New England countryside to expanding urban centers, but as social and economic actors who educated their daughters, sent them into domestic service, allocated domestic labor and economic resources towards dairy production in the home, took in boarders, and served as "deputy husbands" while their husbands sought financial opportunities in the West. Scholars recognized that women's labor, regardless of where it occurred, was instrumental to a family's social mobility and

³⁵ See Stanley in Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in Early America: social, political, and religious expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

class status.³⁶

My project contributes to this broader effort to make visible women's engagements with market capitalism. The history of the rapidly expanding culture industries is part and parcel of the history of the market revolution of early America. The histories of female performers, managers, and critics likewise constitute a key site through which to explore women's participation in the economic, structural, and social transformations of America's transition to market capitalism.³⁷ Between the 1780s and the Civil War, the number of stage performers and venues increased exponentially, responding to growing demand from diverse urban publics. These performers rode an expanding national infrastructure of canals and turnpikes, and later railroads, from eastern port cities into the towns and cities of the growing republic. Their celebrity was shaped by regional and

³⁶ Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Gamber, *The Female Economy: the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Sally Ann McMurry, *Transforming Rural Life: Dairying Families and Agricultural Change, 1820-1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Stansell, *City of Women*; Faye Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). Also see Catherine Kelly's review of this literature in "Gender and Class Formations in the Antebellum North," in Nancy Hewitt, ed., *A Companion to American Women's History* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005): 100-116.

³⁷ The publication in 1991 of Charles Sellers's sweeping monographic history, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* touched off a decade of scholarly debate concerning the nature and engines of the major transformations of the first half of the nineteenth century. While most historians of early America agree upon the existence of a market revolution in this period, scholars continue to disagree about the key forces at work, in particular challenging Sellers for his characterization of the market revolution as a series of almost impersonal forces driven by capital consolidation. Was the market revolution a series of economic changes from which all others—social, cultural, political—followed? Scholars since Sellers have consequently emphasized contingency and variation in the nature and experience of the market revolution, which in turn has broadened our understanding of the relationship between women's lives and ideologies of race, class, and gender in market society. See especially a collection of essays based on a conference in response to Sellers, Stokes and Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in Early America*. In 2007, David Walker Howe offered the Whig response to Sellers, replacing Sellers' romantic yeoman betrayed in the pitched battle between democracy and capitalism with a narrative centered on religious awakening in which the nation embraced the promise of economic change and market capitalism. David Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of American, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

nationally circulating newspapers and periodicals, which also helped generate demand and open up new markets to a range of competing entertainments. When we place theater within a larger context of structural changes we can see the range of economic models that made public entertainment profitable on different scales and for different kinds of entrepreneurs, including women.

Women's careers as public performers also offer a unique site to consider the relationship between women's participation in the market revolution and the meanings and narratives attached to their labor. However, the culture industries are missing from our picture of the larger landscape of the forms that women's labor took in the early nineteenth century.³⁸ We know a great deal about mill hands and needlewomen, and forms of white-collar labor like teaching and publishing, but far less about the rigors of being a performer. Stage labor was physically arduous and intellectually demanding. Consider the demands of a position within a stock company. Stock actors performed five or six nights a week from a constantly rotating repertoire of close to a hundred plays for a season that ran from fall through late spring.³⁹ Daytime was devoted to study, altering the dramatic wardrobe for the night's performance, and rehearsal, the evenings to performance, study, and more sewing. A stock company might be called upon to learn a

³⁸ The best example of the history of theater as labor history is Tracy Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

³⁹ Stock repertoire expanded significantly in the first half of the century, then dropped in the 1860s in part because of the advent of long runs (see Chapter 6). Consider Philadelphia's first theater, the Chesnut, which opened in 1794. In 1822, when English actor Francis Courtney Wemyss joined the company of the Philadelphia's Chesnut Street Theatre as a light comedian, it employed nineteen men and seventeen women stage performers, in addition to the two managers, prompter, musicians, as well as painters and handymen. That season the company performed from a repertoire of eighty pieces. Two decades later, the repertoire for a season had more than doubled, although it now included ballet pantomimes and opera. In the 1860s, however, when farces and burlesques were no longer offered at the Chesnut, the number of pieces in a season averaged between twenty-five and fifty. See Weldon B. Durham, *American Theatre Companies, 1749-1887* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986) for sample repertoire for American theaters; F. C. Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years in the Life of an Actor and Manager* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846), 74.

new play in a matter of days—if that—to satisfy the demands of a touring star actor. Roles were assigned according to dramatic line, which also determined weekly salary.⁴⁰ Stock actors could lose their position for refusing a part, for missing too many nights due to illness, or playing at a rival theater, but many stock actors moved between different theaters and cities seeking a better salary or new line of business, a more lucrative market, or following a family member. Touring performers followed a grueling schedule of their own, traveling on a weekly, even daily basis across increasingly dense regional circuits.⁴¹ A stage career always required a degree of mobility—even stock actors frequently moved between different markets or toured in small companies during the summer months—and by the second half of the century nearly all performers would practice some form of touring during their career, if not for the entirety of their life on the stage.

Women's stage labor provides a unique perspective on gender, labor, and the family economy in this period. Actresses and other stage performers were a highly visible minority who engaged in labor that occurred outside the physical space of the

⁴⁰ At the bottom of the hierarchy of positions was the walking lady and gentleman, valued principally for their dress and appearance, while the rest of dramatic business was divided by type of player and part according to gender—leading heavy, light comedian, juvenile, chambermaids (a class of female juvenile), old men and old women—and ranked according to status of the player—first leading heavy, first old women, second comedian. Actors drew the bulk of their yearly income from benefit performances, which were usually held in the middle and at the end of the season, from which they took the night's receipts after expenses. See Chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion of these practices.

⁴¹ A tour might begin in New York or Philadelphia, branching out from Philadelphia for appearances in Baltimore or Washington, and then double back for a second series of engagements in Philadelphia and New York, before traveling north to Boston, with a night in Providence, or move south to Charleston. Improvements in infrastructure and agreements between managers to host foreign star expanded the geography of touring from the 1820s to include New Orleans, Mobile, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. In the 1840s, the Gold Rush drew performers to California, and by the 1860s a continental railroad network made it possible for itinerant performers and entire companies to travel from town to town even on a daily basis in a succession of "one-night stands." Simon Williams, "European Actors and the Star System, 1752-1870" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870*, Vol. 1, edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 311; John Frick, "A Changing Theatre: New York and Beyond" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, 1870-1845*, Vol. 2, edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 202.

home, but remained connected both structurally and ideologically with a family economy. Public discourses that emphasized economic necessity, domestic sacrifice, cultural and moral elevation, and racial uplift made these careers culturally and socially legible and legitimate, though they remained controversial for the ways in which these women continued to stretch boundaries of gender, race, and class. And on a purely material level, while family economies had an ambiguous impact on the financial and professional autonomy of female stage performers, stage careers also provided women with economic agency both within their families and independent of familial structures. The history of women's stage labor supports the conclusions of an expanding body of women's labor history that whatever might still be claimed about the ideological separation of the home from the marketplace, for many women, labor within a family economy, if not the home per se, connected women with market capitalism. Thus this project uses stage performers to call attention to the variety of ways in which women functioned as savvy cultural, social, and economic actors within and outside their families, while also placing that activity in dialogue with the manifold structural constraints around women's professional and economic agency.

From Public Sphere to Publics

Were women in fact absent from public life, or should we interpret their absence as a bias of history and theory? And what of the women who helped build the expanding nineteenth-century culture industries? Were they in fact part of the public sphere or does their presence and participation signal something else entirely about the contours of public life in the nineteenth century? In her 1990 study *Women in Public*, Mary Ryan

went in search of women in public life to retain the utility of the categories of public and private while dissociating them from an overdetermined spatialized gender binary. Her crucial touchstone was Jurgen Habermas's 1962 *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which had only recently been translated into English. In *Structural Transformation*, Habermas argued for the emergence of a historically distinct bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe, which he then connected with the emergence of democratic society. The public sphere was formed as groups of private citizens came together through print culture and in new commercial urban spaces like coffee houses, salons, and the theater and participated in rational-critical debate that functioned as a critical check on the state and civil society. Rather than simply emphasize the unmarked male figure who occupied the center of Habermas's public sphere, Ryan explored whether the historically specific and fragile phenomenon of the public sphere could accommodate women and why or why not. Ryan concluded that while nineteenth-century women "battered at the walls" of the public sphere, they rarely realized the political efficacy and power enjoyed by men.⁴²

Habermas's concept of public sphere has continued to offer both promising possibilities and analytical challenges to women's historians who find evidence of women's activity in public life but wish to break out of the spatialized gender binaries that have dominated analytical approaches to women's history. One recent approach is found in studies of women's education and literacy, which Mary Kelley located in Habermas's "civil society," a space engaged with the public sphere and through which

⁴² Ryan, *Women in Public*, 17.

some women successfully accessed the public sphere.⁴³ New scholarship on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provides an exciting opening for rethinking the terms of women's engagement with politics, but another set of historical and theoretical problems remains unresolved. In a 2011 essay on gender and the "body politic" in republican France, Judith Surkis pointed out that most critiques and appropriations of Habermas have continued to perpetuate "theoretical slippages between spatialized notions of publicity and the public as a normative or political category." Attacks on the "walls" of the public sphere notwithstanding, women remained excluded from the normative political category for much of the century. Surkis challenges historians of women and gender to engage more directly with a key historical conundrum, namely why and how women were "politically marginalized even when they were visibly present in many spheres of public life."⁴⁴ This is as true for America as it is for early republican France, and particularly in the context of the emerging culture industries of print and the stage.

If women continued to be barred from "the" public engaged with the state—even as women continued to make claims on the state—what kinds of publics did they constitute and in what ways were women able to hail wider publics? Scholarship on women writers in the early nineteenth century demonstrated that various forms of publishing provided educated middle-class women with a mode of income while enabling some to aspire to domestic femininity as well.⁴⁵ If managing this balance between their literary and

⁴³ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 2; also Rosemarie Zagari, *Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public After the Revolution* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ Judith Surkis, "Carnival Balls and Penal Codes: Body Politics in July Monarchy France," *History of the Present* 1:1 (2011): 59-83.

⁴⁵ Katherine Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale

domestic lives remained fraught for many women authors, invoking new forms of “literary domesticity” enabled these women to privilege the central ideal of domesticity even as they engaged with the commercial marketplace. “Literary domesticity,” in other words, established a fundamental pattern whereby women’s professional labors would continue to be validated according to their larger fidelity to domestic ideals. Yet important questions remain. One wonders, for example, about the inverse question of how various forms of cultural labor were feminized in such a way that they contributed to an expanding definition of public womanhood.

One approach is to examine the creation of a set of associations linking women and public life through consumption and performativity that initially emerged in the eighteenth century, especially in relation to the distinctly modern phenomenon of female celebrity. Women were almost entirely absent from some of the first major studies of celebrity, such as Leo Braudy’s sweeping 1986 study *The Frenzy of Renown*.⁴⁶ More recent scholarship on the emergence of celebrity in eighteenth-century England has argued that the emergence of the public sphere constituted by print and theater not only democratized avenues for fame for men, but also created new, more legitimate avenues for female renown, to such a degree that, one scholar argues, fame was in fact feminized.⁴⁷ A crucial difference between the eighteenth century and the period under

University Press, 1973); Kelly, *Private Woman Public Stage*; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); and on African-American women see Foster, *Written By Herself*; Peterson, “*Doers of the Word*.”

⁴⁶ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); also David Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1992). Recent studies on fame in America have been biographical such as Thomas N. Baker, *Sentiment and Celebrity: Nathaniel Parker Willis and the Trials of Literary Fame* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sentilles, *Performing Menken*.

⁴⁷ See Claire Brock, *The Feminization of Fame, 1750-1830* (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell

consideration here is the degree to which American women who aspired to literary fame invoked domesticity and downplayed their active pursuit of fame.⁴⁸ Though the pursuit of fame was likewise an ambivalent goal for women in the eighteenth century, in nineteenth-century America, the pursuit of fame was increasingly contained by a performance of ambivalence or reluctance. Accordingly, legitimate fame was something conferred upon unambitious but deserving men and women rather than an aspiration; this was particularly so for women aspiring to literary celebrity.

But what of other kinds of celebrity? To the existing scholarship we need to add a fuller and more careful exploration of emerging culture industries. This project explores the terms of and narratives around celebrity in relation to the commercial stage. This history of female stage performers provides an ideal site around which to demonstrate the interplay of discursive and structural change, particularly around race, gender, and class. Narratives created in print about performers and audiences had real material effects—on consumption habits and audience behavior, but also in establishing the possibility for new kinds of performances and types of careers. And yet, scholarship on women and gender in the early nineteenth century has failed to see theater as a legitimate site around which to consider these questions of women’s relationship with public life. We need to move beyond the tendency to preface discussions of actresses and stage performers with a qualifying statement about the social marginality and morally suspect status of the actress and the enduring Puritanical “prejudice” against the theater. The implication is that

University Press, 1997); Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Tom Mole, ed., *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ Kelley also explores the important role that European literary celebrities like Germaine deStael, Catherine Macaulay, and Mary Wollstonecraft played as a historical precedent through which nineteenth-century American women writers and educators framed their own literary ambitions.

because actresses were Other, they cannot be centrally relevant to studies of the cultural work and social organization of gender in the nineteenth century. Yes, actors and actresses were socially marginal figures, and antitheatrical discourses from clerics and reformers regarded the actor as morally suspicious and susceptible. The actor and actress carried the stigma of the theater as the gateway to an immoral lifestyle. But as I argue, a closer examination of the continually shifting constructions of female performers in relation to ongoing debates about theater and public amusements and changing promotional practices reveals that individual performers, forms of performance, and marketing strategies succeeded in challenging these overarching associations. In fact, a performance of hyper-respectability became one of the opening moves and dominant strategies of female stage celebrities, many of whom drew in new audiences by invoking values shared by the increasingly desirable market of the middle classes. But such shorthands about perceptions of the stage in the nineteenth century miss a crucial aspect of its cultural and social role: the commercial stage was a key site in which the relationship between women and their public roles was continuously constituted, negotiated, and contested.

In order to examine the historical meaning and impact of women's engagement with the cultural marketplace we need a new language that can capture relationships constituted by a public address that straddle both print and the stage, that are not tied to arguments about the state and politics transformation, and that can incorporate market factors without privileging them as the basis for cultural transformation—even in the case of capitalist industries like theater. To this end, I draw on the concept of “publics”

developed by literary scholar and theorist Michael Warner.⁴⁹ Unlike the categories of “audience” and “market,” Warner’s concept of publics and counterpublics can be used to describe relationships between producers and consumers, products and audiences that take into account conditions of address and forms of engagement that occurred across different physical and print contexts, while also breaking out of the analytical dichotomy of public/private for understanding and framing the history of women in the nineteenth century. Warner defines a public as a “space of discourse organized by discourse,” one that only “exists by virtue of being addressed.” Warner draws on Habermas’s “public sphere,” but also incorporates relationships constitutive of the public sphere and its central role in shaping modern subjectivity, while pushing beyond historically specific notions of *the* “public sphere.” The crucial characteristic of a public is that it constitutes a “relation among strangers” that is constituted by “mere attention.” Publics are intertextual, self-reflective, and temporal. Most important to Warner is the creative function of a public—it is a form of “poetic world making” that “characterizes the world in which it attempts to circulate.” A counterpublic, by contrast, is a form of public that is conscious of its subordinate status, or constituted in some way in conflict with *the* public, a concept Warner draws from the work of political theorist Nancy Fraser. Fraser, significantly, has pointed out that the “bourgeois public was never *the* public,” but encountered a “host of competing counterpublics.”⁵⁰ Fraser’s definition of a “subaltern

⁴⁹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

⁵⁰ Fraser’s definition of a “subaltern counterpublic” is closely tethered to the question of political change and social movements, while Warner is interested in the increasingly generative role of mass culture in constituting change. Fraser’s concept of a “subaltern counterpublic” is drawn from a history of social movements whereby subordinated groups have been able to create “arenas” in which the circulation of “counterdiscourses” have made it possible for them to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” It is this capacity of the counterpublic space of discourse—to “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities”—that excites and inspires Warner, who is committed to

counterpublic” is connected to questions of political change and social movements, while Warner is interested in the increasingly generative role of mass culture in constituting change. Thus, Warner’s elaboration of public and counterpublics is particularly useful for conceptualizing the world-making of consumer-oriented culture while resisting an approach that either privileges or marginalizes the role of market capitalism.⁵¹

While Warner’s primary concern is with print culture and the nature of textuality, examining the publics of commercial amusements forces us to grapple with the embodied nature of publicness, placing print in dialogue with the contested politics of urban commercial spaces.⁵² What is a riot, after all, but a counterpublic that acts? For my purposes here, describing women in the early nineteenth century as a counterpublic acknowledges how their very real presence (so frequently ignored by scholars) was likewise marginalized and problematized in its own time, both physically and discursively. The majority of educated white middle-class women who attended and wrote about theatrical amusements were aware that their presence was unusual or problematic and even problematized their own class performances—when carousing men harassed them, critics ignored them, and social conventions and even city ordinances mandated a male chaperone. The presence of middle-class women in theaters potentially

developing an alternative theoretical framework for conceptualizing sexuality, identity, and public life for example, in contrast to the current framing of “the closet.” Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990) 61, 67.

⁵¹ Of course, market capitalism is a condition for creating publics, though not the sole condition. Basically, the concept of publics allows us to consider how commercialized forms of culture create the condition for new forms of identity, community, and allowed for the articulation of new interests and needs, but in ways not exclusively tied to or dependent upon a particular site of consumption, moment, or mode of address.

⁵² Significantly, a public can be bigger or smaller than an audience or a market. The publics and counterpublics of a stage performance, for example, included but were not limited to the physical audience on any given night, or even the target market. Likewise, the conditions accordingly to which the publics of commercial amusement were addressed were fundamentally intertextual. They included publics hailed in the auditorium of a theater by a curtain address, on the side of building by a broadside, and in a drawing room periodical, newspaper, or memoir.

jeopardized their claims to respectability and their willful lack of knowledge of sexual matters and class-accented behaviors. But we know that white middle-class women attended, and wrote, read, and spoke about these spaces and performance—particularly those by women.

The circularity of address and awareness constitutive of publics can help us to evade the constraining question that has come to loom over scholarship on women in the early nineteenth century of whether women were active in public life. Examining the pivotal role female performers played in attracting female publics, and examining the shifting terms of this address and relative visibility of women in the audience of commercial amusements reminds us that the presence of women in public life is as much a creation of discourse, address, and context as it is a function of actual physical presence.

Chapter 1 places the career of English actress and writer Fanny Kemble, who toured America in 1832, in dialogue with the careers of the first female stage performers. Women were among the first waves of English performers to access American markets in the late eighteenth century, but it was the emergence of a new form of female stage celebrity that drew women into theater audiences in unprecedented numbers. Kemble's 1832 tour was a watershed moment in which this new model of female celebrity began to change the status of theater and the actress.

And yet, women's participation in the world of public amusements was continually contested throughout this period. The movement for moral reform, for example, coalesced around urban commercial spaces where prostitution flourished, including the theater. In Chapter 2, I argue that ongoing debates from the 1820s through 1840s about

women in theater audiences that fixated on prostitution actually signaled larger class tensions about women's consumption of public amusements and women's behavior in commercial space. Class struggles over the ownership of theater were worked out around female consumers as theater managers appealed to middle-class women by eliminating working-class women from their audiences. This chapter tracks these developments in the licensing debates in Boston, the managerial career of Charlotte Cushman in Philadelphia, and the mounting popularity of scenic spectacles and ballet. Placing a "manageress" and ballet spectacle in dialogue with concerns about prostitution and rowdy working-class women reveals that appeals to respectability and women's consumption were also facilitated by the silencing of particular women's bodies both onstage and off.

Theater was not the only industry through which women expanded their public role. Women also developed new forms of performance that appealed to the evangelical and reform-minded middle classes, in part by taking leisure practices from the middle-class parlor and presenting them as a legitimate alternative to dramatic theater, which is the subject of Chapter 3. Dramatic readers following Anna Mowatt, in 1841, moved a performative literary practice from the schoolroom and private parlor into the commercial marketplace. But while Mowatt's elite social status facilitated her appeal to genteel publics, Matilda Clarendon struggled to align herself with literary gentility that could support her in this venture. The category of elocution thus lies at the center of my dissertation as a key category that brings together the dramatic stage, the print marketplace, and the platform—and in the remarkable case of Mary Webb, who appears in Chapter 5, antislavery and racial uplift.

Anna Mowatt's multifaceted career takes us into the ongoing realignments of audiences in the 1840s and 1850s as the stage became a major site where new ideas about women's social and cultural role were negotiated. Chapter 4 examines how American actresses Anna Mowatt, Charlotte Cushman, and Matilda Heron expanded the kinds of femininity performed on stage, which in turn contributed to a larger cultural discourse about female heroism. This chapter presents the crucial role that female biography played in providing women with narratives of artistic and professional agency.

These same themes emerge in the stage careers of women of color, the subject of Chapter 5. The proliferation of non-theatrical amusements and the popularization of antislavery politics in popular culture also created avenues through which opera singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and dramatic reader Mary Webb became performers. The fraught racial politics around Greenfield's career, in particular, reveal gendered patterns of patronage and entrepreneurship that shaped the parameters according to which women of color pursued economic autonomy and social and cultural influence.

The theater remained one of the most significant and visible sites of female entrepreneurship for much of the century. Following these shifts in women's entrepreneurial ventures offers an alternative perspective on the larger narrative of the shift from the stock to combination system. Thus the final chapter of the dissertation explores forms of entrepreneurship by actresses who managed theaters in the 1850s and headlined and ran touring companies in the 1860s and 1870s. Women parlayed their celebrity as star performers into managerial careers of varying degrees of success, drawing on social and professional networks to run urban theaters. Following the passage of Dramatic Copyright Law of 1856, actresses seized the opportunity to invest in

new plays, pursuing a wide variety of different types of touring and managerial careers.

This dissertation argues that the commercial stage became a key context through which women in the nineteenth century addressed new audiences and developed new public roles. While white middle-class women were always *a* public for commercial amusements, between the 1820s and 1870s, their relationship with commercial amusements shifted. This shift was part of ongoing attempts to broaden the market for public amusements, in which managers hailed counterpublics like women or the rising middle class by way of attempting to constitute them as part of *the* public. This project demonstrates the centrality of female performers, managers, critics, and consumers to this process. In the 1830s and 1840s, female stage celebrities made women visible as a kind of counterpublic within the cultural marketplace. But by the 1850s a shift had occurred such that the interests, values, and priorities of white middle-class women came to occupy the center of this world. Women now constituted *the* public of a rapidly expanding and diversifying entertainment industry.

Chapter 1

“The Most Remarkable Woman of the Age”:

Actresses and Female Celebrity in Early-Nineteenth-Century America

On 17 April 1833, an ecstatic Anna Quincy finally got to see the English actress Fanny Kemble in her first appearance in Boston, at the Tremont Theatre. The twenty-year old Anna “ ‘was wild’ to see her.” Despite some “confusion” over whether or not tickets could be obtained, she dressed early that evening, and so was ready to make the five-mile trip from her Cambridge home to Boston when her brother Josiah “flew in” at half-past six, brandishing three tickets for himself, Anna, and her elder sister, Susan. The curtain rose with a “thunder of applause from an overflowing house.” After a trio of “graceful bendings” by the “fair” Miss Kemble, the production of *Fazio! Or, the Italian Wife* commenced.⁵³

Anna was not disappointed. She wrote in her diary that she found Miss Kemble “entirely equalled - indeed passed my expectations” with her “grace, the expressions of her countenance” and, in particular, Kemble’s “shreiks [and] starts,” which moved Anna and companions with their timing and emotional intensity. Anna and her neighbor, Miss Hodgkinson, held back their tears in vain during the scene in which Bianca hears the bell that proclaims the death of her husband, leading to her own insanity and death. Anna described the scene vividly in her journal: “She stood, I should think five moments - a

⁵³ Anna Cabot Lowell [Quincy] Diaries, 16 April 1833, Massachusetts Historical Society.

perfect statue - and the death like stillness that reigned over the crowded audience, every person seeming to hold their breath - was very striking.” The bell tolled, and “at that sound the full sense of her wretchedness seemed to write upon her mind - and nearly to destroy it - she gave a start, which every one seemed to feel, & with one of her thrilling screams of agony rushed from the stage.”⁵⁴ This description captured Kemble’s signature juxtapositions of stillness with effusive outbursts to create dramatic effect. When Quincy accompanied her mother to see *Fazio* a second time, she found herself even more moved by Kemble’s “wonderful powers,” which Quincy identified as her “astonishing force, grace & expression.”⁵⁵ Kemble’s ability to move her audience emotionally was judged by American and English critics a major factor in her appeal as a performer, in addition to the other requisite traits, like grace and sweetness, for a female star of the stage.

Anna Quincy was no stranger to the theater in Boston, though she was hardly a habitué. Quincy was a member of Cambridge’s elite, daughter of Josiah Quincy, a former mayor of Boston and currently president of Harvard University. Attending theater and dances with family and friends was among the many amusements with which she filled her days, and that included extensive social visits, concerts, and lectures in both the city of Boston and her hometown of Cambridge. She came out to see William Charles Macready, another celebrated English actor, during his Boston debut in 1826.⁵⁶ Kemble’s Boston run between April and May 1833 looms large in Quincy’s diary of that year. Quincy returned to the theater at least four more times between April and May to see Kemble perform in her most celebrated roles, as Mrs. Haller in Kotzebue’s melodrama

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 25 April 1833.

⁵⁶ Anna Quincy Waterston, *A Woman’s Wit and Whimsy: the 1833 diary of Anna Cabot Lowell Quincy*, edited by Beverly Palmer (Boston: Northeastern, 2003), 54.

The Stranger, Belvidera in *Venice Preserved*, and as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* opposite Charles Kemble. Throughout this cycle, Quincy wrote highly detailed entries about the performances and about her encounters with Kemble in Boston society.

Quincy's assessment of Kemble's acting was surely influenced by the extensive coverage of Kemble's tour in the local press, which preceded Kemble's arrival on American shores, establishing the terms according to which American audiences and critics would evaluate her acting and signify her renown. Quincy's interest in Kemble followed the tenor of this print culture and extended beyond Kemble's considerable powers as an actress. Kemble's arrival in New York, in September 1832, was greeted and signified by articles about her family pedigree and personal and artistic "accomplishments" that were reprinted and circulated in a broad range of regional newspapers and periodicals. This "culture of reprinting," in which articles, stories, reviews, puffs, and correspondence that circulated within a wide transatlantic orbit were reprinted and repurposed for regional American markets, constituted a vibrant print public sphere that shaped and resignified transatlantic celebrities like Kemble.⁵⁷ In early September 1832, the *Boston Investigator* reprinted an item from the *New York American* that described Fanny Kemble as "the most interesting woman living." It imagined that arrival of the Kembles would "be an era in our dramatic history" and "produce a complete revival of the legitimate drama upon the American boards."⁵⁸ Items such as this surely shaped the terms of Quincy's own assessment of Kemble's character, delivered after Quincy's second social encounter with Kemble, at a party held in the actress' honor:

⁵⁷ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

⁵⁸ *Boston Investigator*, 7 September 1832.

“Uniting great skills, & animation with perfect grace & ladylike deportment She is indeed a creature gifted most highly and I should think deserved what has been said of her, that ‘She is the most remarkable woman of the age.’ ”⁵⁹

What did it mean that Kemble was the “most remarkable woman of the age”? This chapter argues that Kemble’s career and celebrity introduced a new model of public womanhood and female achievement that constructed the actress as an intellectual and literary figure, and as a worthy celebrity and model of femininity. As the “most remarkable woman of the age” and the “most interesting woman living” Kemble drew together acting, writing, and ideals of genteel femininity in a new way, which suggested that the theater could be a site of respectable feminine achievement and intellectual accomplishment and ennoble the category “woman.” A new image of actress *as* woman of education and intellect joined the woman of letters as categories of genteel feminine achievement, respectability, and celebrity. This was particularly significant within the American cultural marketplace, in which the status of theater as a moral and respectable entertainment continued to be contested. Among educated white middle-class Americans and elites like Quincy for whom edification was the watchword for all forms of leisure, Kemble’s celebrity resolved the strained relationship between dramatic literature, theatrical amusements, and social and cultural edification around a new ideal of female celebrity.

Kemble was hardly the first actress or actress celebrity to walk the boards of American stages. Kemble arrived in America following a steadily increasing trail of English actors and actresses, singers, and dancers who sought opportunities in America’s

⁵⁹ Anna Cabot Lowell [Quincy] Diaries, 23 April 1833.

expanding theatrical marketplace. But unlike many of the stock actresses with whom Kemble appeared, who had been acting on American stages since the late eighteenth century, or some of the other stars, English and American, who preceded Kemble, and whose careers usually grew out of stock work, Kemble stepped directly from a relatively privileged and highly educated private life onto the stage and into transatlantic stardom.⁶⁰ The significance of theater as a vehicle for female celebrity was not new, as the long eighteenth century history of English actress-celebrities can attest.⁶¹ But in the context of persistent ambivalence towards theater, theatrical femininity, and women's consumption of public amusements in America in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the contours of Kemble's celebrity in America created new possibilities for figuring the relationship between the commercial stage, femininity, female performance, women's education and literary aspirations, and the appropriate sphere for female achievement. This chapter will situate the social and cultural impact of Fanny Kemble's American tour within the larger landscape of women's employment and growing prominence in the emerging culture industry of theater, and within ongoing debates about theater as a moral and intellectual amusement, before demonstrating how Kemble contributed to a shift in

⁶⁰ Discussion of Kemble's career see Ann Blainey, *Fanny and Adelaide: the Lives of the Remarkable Kemble Sisters* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001); Catherine Clinton, *Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Deidre David, *Fanny Kemble: a Performed Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, "'So Unfemininely Masculine': Discourse, True/False Womanhood, and the American Career of Fanny Kemble," *Theatre Survey* 40, no. 2 (1999): 27-42; and Faye Dudden, "Fanny Kemble and the Actress as Heroine" in *Women in the American Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 27-55.

⁶¹ Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). Much of recent scholarship in celebrity studies emphasizes the relationship between the eighteenth-century theater in England and female celebrity, underscoring how actresses like Mary Robinson have used print to shape the contours of their celebrity. On the theater and female celebrity in eighteenth-century England see Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity* (Princeton: University of Princes Press, 2010); Tom Mole, ed., *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Claire Brock, *The Feminization of Fame* (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

the terms of female celebrity in America, as well as in the image of actress, the construction of acting as an art, and theater as a legitimate or edifying amusement. Fanny Kemble's 1832-1834 American tour is the first time in America that we see a celebration of female celebrity that connected acting with other cultural ideals of edification and genteel feminine accomplishment that had conferred legitimacy on another form of female public achievement and renown, literary celebrity. Significantly, it was Kemble's association with literary accomplishment *and* the stage that made her such a woman of interest for her American publics.

Fanny Kemble arrived on American shores in September 1832, already heralded in the American press as the dramatic heir of her aunt, the celebrated and memorialized English actress Sarah Siddons, who had passed away the year before. Though Siddons never performed on American shores, her celebrity reached American publics through a transatlantic print culture that emphasized Siddons's dramatic abilities in tandem with her exceptional respectability, in contrast to other actress celebrities of her day. Throughout her career, Siddons deployed her maternal identity to invoke the sympathy of her publics and present herself as deserving of patronage and esteem. Her representation of herself as a mother struggling to support her family and her choice of roles that emphasized "suffering womanhood" identified Siddons with the maternal, pushing back against competing images of actresses as self-aggrandizing aspirants to celebrity through the notoriety of their romantic lives off the stage.⁶² This legacy played an important role in establishing Fanny Kemble's claim to respectability as an actress, also supported by Kemble's unique history. Unlike her aunt who rose to the ranks of London stock actress

⁶² Laura J. Rosenthal, "The Sublime, the Beautiful, 'The Siddons'" in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture* edited by Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 56-79.

from a family of strolling players, Kemble was educated in private boarding schools in England and France from childhood, by theatrical parents who envisioned a different path for their two daughters and son. Thus Kemble was familiar with the world of theater, but from a remove. She only launched her theatrical career in London in 1829 to help save her father from the ruin he faced managing the Covent Garden Theatre. In October 1829, she stepped onto the Covent Garden stage as Juliet, into her mother's arms and into a life of stardom as the heir of the Kemble legacy, the Siddons of her generation. In 1832, her father, Charles Kemble decided to leave the disastrous Covent Garden speculation behind and attempted to revive his fortune by performing with his daughter in American markets. The Kembles toured American cities for two seasons, from 1832-1834 until Fanny left the dramatic stage shortly after her marriage to Southern planter Pierce Butler. Significantly, she did not retire completely from public life, but in 1834 published her journal of her American tour, which built on her reputation, established prior to her arrival in America, as a "woman of letters."⁶³

The second component of Kemble's biography that shaped her celebrity was Kemble's reputation as an aspirant to literary merit, a "woman of letters" who had circulated among the literati of England. Kemble's reputation as a "poetess" preceded her American tour, as did the publication of her historical drama, "Francis the First."⁶⁴ This reputation made her interesting to the growing numbers of young women, like Anna Quincy, who were educated in female seminaries and avid consumers of an expanding body of poetry and prose by and for women from England and America. Over the

⁶³ *Boston Investigator*, 7 September 1832.

⁶⁴ The first New York edition of "Francis the First" appeared in 1832. In Boston in 1833, Hillard, Gray & Co. advertised the sixth edition, which included "poetical pieces," as well as an "original Memoir" and portrait of the author. See *Boston Courier*, 20 April 1833.

eighteenth century, literary fame became a recognized and legitimate form of female renown as growing numbers of women engaged with opportunities of an expanding print public sphere.⁶⁵ Kemble's literary reputation lifted her outside of the world of theater, and placed her simultaneously in two spheres that interacted to produce her as a different kind of celebrity and a different kind of public figure than either the actress or women of letters as previously known in America. While aspiring theatrical celebrities in eighteenth-century England had used the print marketplace to shape their renown and position themselves as literary figures, this was not true of actresses in America's significantly smaller theatrical markets. Kemble's reputation as an actress with literary aspirations was new to a generation of Americans who would have been far less familiar with these antecedents, barring of course the lionized Siddons. Kemble represented a new set of possibilities of female achievement for American publics. Charles Kemble arranged to have Fanny Kemble's poetry published in American papers during her tour, and obtained introductions for her among the best and brightest of American political, intellectual, and social elites, introductions that fueled newspaper coverage of her as a woman of interest, *the* woman of her age, and a woman who could change the way Americans thought about theater.

This unfamiliar combination of actress and literary figure in one woman was significant at a moment in which theater was the object of a major reformist discourse from critics as well as performers and managers who championed theater's potential to

⁶⁵ Claire Brock argues that this in fact resulted in a feminization of fame against which Romantic-era poets were reacting with their performative masculinity and ambivalence towards cultivating renown. Brock's sweeping argument points to a significant but too easily glossed history and context of public femininity upon which women writers in America also drew to construct their own ambitions and public role. Likewise, it offers a valuable corrective to arguments about the importance of the eighteenth-century print public sphere for democratizing avenues to fame for men, arguments which, as Brock points out, have missed the significance of the print public sphere for women.

serve as a respectable and rational amusement that could elevate American society.⁶⁶ Kemble's celebrity helped bolster claims that theater was a rational and edifying amusement. Her gender was central to the cultural work that her celebrity performed for the elevation of the theater, supporting arguments that theater could serve as a site of edification should publics patronize appropriate plays and stars. Kemble was just such an appropriate star because she epitomized a form of genteel femininity and female accomplishment associated with an emerging middle-class ideal, but from within a profession otherwise readily marginalized as outside the purview of respectability. This is not paradoxical, but indicates precisely why and how Kemble's celebrity mattered. Tracy Davis's claim that the actress was not simply an "anomaly" within the Habermasian formulation of the public and intimate spheres, but actually should complicate our understanding of how these spheres worked for women is borne out by Kemble's celebrity and career, particularly when we introduce the additional analytic of celebrity, and place Kemble's career in dialogue with the careers of stock actresses who did not achieve celebrity status. Davis eloquently explains that while actresses were "neither private citizens in the public sphere nor private women in the intimate sphere," actresses were still able to "convey [a] normative ideology of the private/intimate sphere" even one to which they "clearly do not confine themselves."⁶⁷ But unlike the other actresses with whom Kemble labored, Kemble's celebrity, the combined product of her family pedigree and mutually constitutive labors in the physical public of the commercial stage and the print public spheres, was able to introduce a new model of public femininity

⁶⁶ David Grimsted examines William Dunlap's role in shaping these discourses through his managerial and publishing ventures in the early decades of the century. David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (1968; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁶⁷ Tracy Davis, "Private Women and the Public Realm," *Theatre Survey* 35 no. 1 (1994), 68.

into public culture that was *not* contained by the world of theater in which she primarily labored.

Kemble offered a different image of the actress that was more closely aligned than ever before with literary culture and social respectability. But she also, and quite significantly, provided a public face for a new kind of woman, who combined the appropriate social graces of the drawing room with smart conversation that bespoke her knowledge of the literature and philosophy of the age, and a high degree of schooling, either in the home or, increasingly, in private female seminaries and academies that were populating America's growing towns and cities. Ultimately, she suggested that the stage could be a legitimate and significant sphere in which a woman of talent and accomplishment might deploy those attributes and contribute to the distinction of her sex, in turn producing, as her heralds in the press hoped, "a complete revival of the legitimate drama upon the American boards."⁶⁸

Women in the Early American Theater 1790-1840

Fanny Kemble's career and celebrity comes into focus in a new way when we place her history and American tour in context with the stock actresses who performed on American stages before her arrival, and in some cases performed with Kemble throughout her tour. For example, the Boston stock actress Mrs. Barnes who played the Nurse to Kemble's Juliet at the Tremont Theater on 20 April 1833, had been appearing on Boston stages for nearly thirty years.⁶⁹ But this "favorite actress in old women on the

⁶⁸ *Boston Investigator*, 7 September 1832.

⁶⁹ I have chosen throughout, to refer to actresses by their professional or public names, as they appeared in playbills, advertisements, and reviews, at the time under discussion.

Boston stage” is still a shadowy figure within the history of the theater industry.⁷⁰ Her name can be found among the endless lists of stock performers that appear in newspaper advertisements and on broadsides. What little we know of her biography comes from the early stage histories and memoirs published in the 1830s onward by men who had been involved in the theater their entire lives—like manager and playwright William Dunlap and newspaperman William W. Clapp—and sought to account for the expansion and transformation of the industry and their own contribution to it, likewise contributing, as they saw it, to the elevation of the stage.⁷¹ These histories are a valuable record of the sheer number of men and women who labored on American stages, toured regional circuits, and constituted expanding professional networks of performers and managers who would help to open new markets to theatrical entertainment and draw in larger publics. Following a stock performer like Mrs. Barnes reveals how itinerant stage performers experienced and participated in the new opportunities created by what scholars call the transportation, communication, and market revolutions of the first half of the nineteenth century, transformations that would establish the infrastructure that Kemble traveled in her 1832 tour, between markets that actresses like Barnes had helped to open up.⁷²

⁷⁰ Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis: G. I. Jones, 1880), 330.

⁷¹ These texts include William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832); Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years in the Life of an Actor and Manager* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846); William Warland Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1853); Noah Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It* (St. Louis: G. I. Jones, 1880).

⁷² The concept of a “market revolution” as the defining transformation of the first half of the nineteenth century comes from Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and the concept has been debated and parsed further by Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) prefers the concept of “communications revolution” to distinguish the transformations of the early-nineteenth century from the longer reach of market transformations that had been drawing local farmers and communities into regional

At the turn of the nineteenth century, theater troupes could be found in urban seaboard centers of three emerging markets, in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, where they catered primarily to elite audiences. In the 1790s, businessmen in these cities established joint-stock ventures to build new theaters on a much larger scale. Theaters constructed in Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston demanded larger company outfits than these small provincial troupes, which created new opportunities for English actors to find work in America. Around 1793, the actor-manager Thomas Wignell brought Mrs. Barnes' parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bates, along with at least fifty other English actors from England in order to form a company for his brand new theatre in Philadelphia, the Chesnut Street Theatre. Mr. and Mrs. Bates acted in Philadelphia for a few seasons, before traveling north with their children to join the company of the Boston (Federal Street) Theatre.⁷³

Theater companies were based upon the stock system, in which a group of 15 to 20 actors and actresses were hired to fulfill particular "lines of business," such as leading lady, first comic old men, or, as W. C. Smith described his wife's business, "first line of Chamber Maids, second singing, Romps, Melo Dramatic Boys, and principal Dancer."⁷⁴ Stock actors received a weekly wage and the right to one benefit performance per season, sometimes shared with another company member, and from which the headlining

markets since at least the mid-eighteenth century. Howe's concept of the communications revolution draws on the "transportation revolution" identified by George Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Rinehart, 1951).

⁷³ The entry for William Bates cited here makes no mention of whether Bates' children were born in England or after Bates and his wife arrived in the United States. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, edited by Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim, Edward A. Langhans (SIU Press, 1973), I: 386-388.

⁷⁴ W. C. Smith to Charles Hood, 13 July 1828, Boston Theatre Papers, Boston Public Library.

performers of the benefit night received a percentage split of the net receipts.⁷⁵ A company would perform a set repertory over the course of the theatrical season, which ran from September through March, with variations. This only guaranteed actors a salary for two-thirds of the year.

In the summer months, enterprising actors might assemble in smaller companies and journey to theaters in towns within a regional circuit. In the spring of 1803, for example, a young journeyman printer named Joseph Tinker Buckingham, who would become the editor of the *Boston Courier* but was currently employed in the Boston printing house of Thomas and Andrews, joined up with a small group of actors led by Bates who hoped to continue to make a living over the summer months, when the Boston Theatre closed its doors, by playing in the smaller theaters in the towns of Salem and Providence. Buckingham would serve as prompter and occasionally, actor, for a company led by Boston stock actors Bates and Harper that included Bates' son and daughter, Mrs. Harper, Mr. and Mrs. Dykes, Mr. and Mrs. Darley, Mrs. Darley's mother, Mrs. Simpson, two actors from the Virginia theater, and a recently immigrated "cockney"

⁷⁵ Wages and terms of engagement were by means uniform in this period and were subject to negotiation, as correspondence between actors and managers indicates. Managers also reserved the right to withhold individual wages in the case of debt, and in some cases a struggling manager suspended the theater's regular stock season and therefore the payment of the stock salaries, and instead held a succession of benefits for stock actors to make up the wages that they would not be paid. The tradition of the benefit night grew out of an early modern England tradition that positioned the strolling theater company within a patron client relationship with the hosting community. In the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries, the benefit practice continued to invoke the patronage of the wider community, as an alternative to the manager's contractual obligation. Benefits ensured stock actors and other theater employees, and increasingly, touring stars, who were also granted a benefit night as part of their terms, an additional form of income that could in turn make up for an abbreviated season, and for a touring star, a meager run. It was customary for the headliner of the benefit to choose all or part of the evening's bill, which gave actors the opportunity to perform a favorite part, a role in which they were particular popular with their audiences, or to introduce a new production into the repertory to see if it took. For examples of how the touring and stock systems worked in the early decades of the century, see Calvin L. Printer, "William Warren's Financial Arrangements with Traveling Stars-1805-1829" *Theatre Survey* 6:2 (November 1965): 83-90. For memoirs that explain the structure of the theater business in this period see William Dunlap, *A History of the American Theatre* (New York: J & J Harper, 1832); Ludlow, *Dramatic Life*; Francis Courtney Wemyss, *Twenty-Six Years of the Life of an Actor and Manager* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co, 1846).

from London's East End who handled the scenery.⁷⁶ America's expanding but more atomized theatrical market produced a different model than England. The theatrical profession in England was divided into a three-tiered system of strolling players—the lowliest class of actors—players who performed in the Provinces, and players in London theaters. These were not hard categories, particularly as actors sought upward mobility in the profession. The Kemble family, for example, began as strolling players in the mid-eighteenth century.⁷⁷ Thus in England, the most elite actors remained with the stock companies of London theaters, whereas the mobile strolling players enjoyed the lowest status and poorest income. In America, on the other hand, no single regional market dominated, nor could actors rely on a single theater or city to provide employment for a year. Thus groups of stock actors moved between different regional theaters on a seasonal schedule, gradually breaking into new markets.

The theater industry expanded significantly between the construction of the first major playhouses in the 1790s and Kemble's arrival in New York in 1832. For her 1832-1833 tour Kemble traveled primarily by boat, from New York to Philadelphia, then to Washington by way of Baltimore, and back to New York with another stop in Philadelphia, and from thence to Boston. In June, the Kembles took a leisure tour along the Hudson, traveling again by steamer. In the 1810s and 20s, the construction of turnpikes and canals linked together expanding towns and cities and facilitated greater communication between rural outposts and these new economic centers. Farmers were drawn into widening regional markets, linked by credit relationships. This formation of

⁷⁶ Joseph Tinker Buckingham, *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life* Vol. 1 (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Field, 1852), 52.

⁷⁷ Blainey, *Fanny and Adelaide*, 4.

new credit systems helped standardize the price of goods, facilitating the exchange of goods across a wider geographic expanse. Movement and trade in goods meant movement and trade in people and culture, from theatricals to revivals. While this movement in goods, people, and credit meant that farmers could find more distant markets for their good, rural folk also found themselves pushed out of the local textile markets, for example, by an influx in cheap industrially produced goods. The very factories that produced textiles also drew sons and daughters to the cities, where they traded their labor for a wage, predominantly in factories and domestic service.⁷⁸ While much scholarship has shown how major social movements of the 1820s and 1830s, like forms of evangelical Christianity that grew up in the expanding canal towns of the Midwest, or the temperance movement were constituted in response to these upheavals, so too did this circulation of people and capital expand the market for public amusements.⁷⁹ Thus, as factory jobs and growing merchant economies brought country folk into the cities, particularly young and often unattached folk, new institutions with a variety of social and religious content provided a place for people to meet, mingle, and make meaning out of their new urban lives. Actors and their audiences were among these people.

The expansion of the theater industry is another example of early nineteenth

⁷⁸ In addition to the literature on the market revolution, key texts here are Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and recently adding to our understanding of teaching as another mobile but periodic form of employment for young women see Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁹ On religious and social movements as a response to industrialization, urbanization, and migration see Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

century forms of capitalism at work. The development of theatrical amusements in the western outpost of St. Louis serves as a compelling example of how the integration of rural outposts into the market economy enabled itinerant performers to access and shape new markets. The introduction of the steamboat, in 1817, brought the first professional acting troupe to St. Louis in January of 1818, which put on a series of plays in the town courthouse. The troupe was led by an English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Turner, who had been traveling between rural western outposts and attempted, unsuccessfully, to establish a theater in Pittsburgh. Turner was successful raising the company of subscribers who built the first theater in St. Louis, which opened in January 1819. Most theaters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were raised by solicitations of stock and then formally incorporated, the theater building leased to a manager who would take care of all operations. The St. Louis Theatre was tiny by standards of east coast cities, with a single tier of boxes and seating for only 600 persons, but established St. Louis as a potential destination for individual performers and touring companies. Noah Ludlow arrived in St. Louis in 1820 with a company of comedians with which he had been traveling throughout the lower Mississippi Valley. Ludlow and Sol Smith helped raise the money for what would become the New St. Louis Theatre, which opened in 1837 to a seating capacity of fifteen hundred. In the 1840s, Ludlow and Smith sought to control and expand a regional market, rotating stock companies between their theaters in St. Louis and Mobile, Alabama and eventually New Orleans, and Nashville, Tennessee.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ This history is discussed in more details in William G. Carson, *Managers in Distress: The St. Louis Stage, 1840-1844* (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1949); William G. Carson, *Theatre on the Frontier: The Early Years of the St. Louis Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); also helpful is Mary Henderson, "Sceneography, Stagecraft, and Architecture in the American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870*, Vol. 1,

Theaters throughout the country changed hand repeatedly, some managers barely lasted a season, whereas others succeeded in establishing (albeit somewhat embattled and unstable) monopolies, like Ludlow and Smith or Robert C. Maywood, H. H. Rowbotham, and Lewis Pratt, who as Maywood & Co. attempted to corner the market in Philadelphia in the early 1830s by securing the lease of all three of its theaters, though they rarely succeeded in holding more than two of a season.

Theaters needed a steady and relatively interchangeable body of actors to draw upon to employ for a weekly seasonal wage. The hierarchy of lines of business within the stock system meant that some kinds of performers were more fungible than others. The supernumerary, for example, male or female, needed only a suitable dress or costume that could be made over readily for different plays and a willingness to work for \$3 or \$4 a week. This was a good weekly wage compared to that of factory laborers or seamstresses, who might earn \$1 to \$2 a week, although the supernumerary labored in an industry that remained morally suspect to the majority of American society.⁸¹ There is evidence that among the scores of young men making their way into the cities for work between the 1820s and 1840s, those that sought out the theater for their leisure time also fantasized about and even pursued some form of employment on or about the stage (at least when their regular employers did not expressly forbid the theater as an acceptable form of amusement).⁸²

edited by Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 399-406.

⁸¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out To Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸² In my survey of letters to managers soliciting work, for example from the Tremont Theater Papers, Boston Public Library, there are some fascinating examples from the early 1840s of theater-struck young men hoping for a chance—any chance—to get up on the stage, and eagerly taking work as supernumeraries. On factory managers' attempts to prevent wage laborers from attending the theater see

The theater had more in common with the artisan workshop than the factory floor for an additional reason: like the artisan workshop, it relied on the relationships created between actors to reproduce itself, to find, employ, and exchange talent. The family connections between actors facilitated the transition of theater business into a capitalist system by creating and reproducing a skilled labor force from which to draw. Actors relied on siblings, parents, in-laws, friends, and colleagues in other markets to inform them of new openings and opportunities for employment, provide references and recommendations, and even negotiate on their behalf. And managers, the majority of whom had been actors themselves, tapped into these networks to build their theaters, networks that reached from Philadelphia to St. Louis. Early troupes that helped open new markets for theater, like the Bates company that journeyed to Providence in the summer of 1803, or Mr. and Mrs. Turner who took an early steamboat ride down to St. Louis, consisted of intergenerational family groups. Actors and actresses frequently married within the profession, traveled together, and contracted their weekly salaries as a family unit. Miss Bates was probably a teenager when Mr. Barnes joined the stock company of the Boston Theatre, around 1805. The two actors married in 1808 or 1809 and were probably contracted at a joint weekly salary.⁸³ During their brief marriage, they traveled between the Boston and the Providence theaters, where they appeared together during the summer season. Mr. Barnes passed away in 1813, and Mrs. Barnes supported herself for the rest of her career. Historian Faye Dudden points out that the overall practice of hiring women as part of family groups headed by men had the potential to

Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). The degree to which these rules were followed or even enforceable remains in question.

⁸³ Charles Blake, *A Historical Account of the Providence Stage* (Providence: George H. Whitney, 1868), 72.

alienate women from their earnings.⁸⁴ But marriage within the profession was not necessarily stable for men or women, whether for reasons of death, divorce, or professional or personal separation. Marrying also provided actresses and actors with access to new markets, promotions, and positions of authority, as the long nineteenth-century history of women who took on greater authority within theater in cases of the absence, indisposition, or death of their husbands or fathers reveals.⁸⁵

The enduring social stigma of acting as a profession and theater as a place of employment, for women in particular, likewise made the family a critical site in which women were educated for the skilled labor of the stage, even though the family had the potential to restrict women's autonomy, mobility, and alienate them from their earnings. The role of husbands and fathers as mediators and managers of the careers of their wives, daughters, and sons cut in multiple directions. Seniority within the profession had the potential to trump gender both within the hierarchy of the stock system, and as part of the politics of negotiating wages and terms of employment. After the close of the 1827-1828 season at the Boston Theatre, Cecelia McBride, a dancer with the stock company, hoped to obtain a raise from \$7 a week to \$10. In July, McBride's mother, Eliza, wrote to the treasurer, Mr. Sturges, who handled wage negotiations on behalf of the lessee or

⁸⁴ Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses & Audiences 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). For additional treatment of women within the economy of the theater industry see Edna Hammer Cooley, "Women in American Theatre, 1850-1870: A Study in Professional Equity" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Maryland College Park, 1986); Claudia Johnson, *American Actress: Perspective on the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984). Johnson argues convincingly in *American Actress* that theater was one of the few forms of labor in which women had the potential to earn equal pay for equal work with men, although Cooley shows, with an analysis of several New York theater salary lists from mid-century, that the salaries of single women stock performer wages were an average of 20% lower than that of single male stock performers.

⁸⁵ Some of these examples include Mrs. Snelling Powell of the early Boston Theatre, Mary Maywood of the Chesnut St. Theater Philadelphia, and Sarah Crocker (Mrs. F. B.) Conway of Brooklyn's Park Theatre. See Jane Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

manager. Eliza McBride used the competition of the recently opened Tremont Theatre as leverage in her request for a raise for Cecelia, noting that despite an offer “from the New T [she] prefers to Remain with you,” but only if “you Can Make her Salary and business Adequit to her Ability.”⁸⁶ Cecelia McBride didn’t remain at the Boston Theatre--or perhaps she had no intention of remaining, pending the success of her bid for a raise--and the following season she was performing in the ballet corps and presenting her “Fancy Dance” with Miss Eberle at the Tremont Theatre, instead.⁸⁷

Samples of letters to managers in Boston from the late 1820s and early 1840s demonstrate that while the majority of solicitations for employment and negotiations over engagements terms came from husbands, fathers, and in the case of an international touring stars like Madame Celeste, a manager, this did not prevented women from negotiating aggressively on their own behalves, particularly if they remained unmarried, like McBride, and occasionally on behalf of their husbands or sons and daughters.⁸⁸

Women in the early theater industry realized a significant potential for professional autonomy in the conduct of their careers. Together Mrs. Barnes’ story and the story of

⁸⁶ McBride to Sturges, 2 July 1828, Boston Theatre Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁸⁷ Cecelia McBride continued to dance at the Tremont over the next decade. She left Boston for New York in 1838 in a second attempt to succeed as an actress. McBride had tried to appear as an actress in Boston in 1825, as Mrs. Hardcastle in “She Stoops to Conquer,” and though Ludlow remembers it as a “success,” she was unable to break out of her “line” as a dancer as long as she remained in Boston. Advertisements for the Park Theatre from the early 1840s demonstrate McBride’s success in remaking herself as an actress in light comedy between 1838 and 1842. She also toured in the South, another strategy employed by actors and actresses effecting a professional transition and hoping to create some notoriety that would allow them to sell themselves in a different line in their “native” markets. In May of 1842, McBride returned to the Tremont Theatre and appeared for a fortnight as an actress with the company. That fall, she was performing the standard repertoire of the comic ingénue, including Grace Harkaway in *A London Assurance*. McBride’s acting career was shorter than her tenure as a dancer. According to Joseph Ireland, she died of consumption in 1846, at approximately 39 years old. For the trajectory of McBride’s career see advertisements in issues of the *Boston Courier*, *Boston Daily Atlas* and *New York Herald* from 1830s and 1840s. Some biographical material in Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It*, 641; and Joseph Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage* (1866-67; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 2: 226.

⁸⁸ These include the Tremont Theatre Papers and Boston Theatre Papers, Boston Public Library; Tremont Theatre Books, Harvard Theatre Collection; and Henry Warren Correspondence, Chicago Historical Society.

another actress who played with her at the Tremont Theatre in 1833, Mrs. W. H. Smith, reveal the difficulty of assessing the implications for women of a system in which women's wages were on the one hand closely equivalent with that of the men in their profession, but married women were paid as part of a family wage. The transportation and market revolutions created opportunities for managers and performers to access new markets, and stock actors might cover a remarkable geographic terrain over a lifetime, whereby they could tap into new networks and even remake their lives and careers. But this did not necessarily separate women from the domestic household or family economy. However, the case of Mrs. W. H. Smith supports a nuanced reading of the operation of marriage and its implications for women's social, professional, and economic autonomy in the emerging theater industry.

Mrs. W. H. Smith was born in 1808 into a theatrical family employed at the Chesnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, the same theater at which Mr. Bates and family got their start in America. According to Noah Ludlow's memoirs, in 1824, Sarah Riddle, as Smith was then known, traveled west with her mother, sister Eliza, and brother William, to join Ludlow's fledgling company and perform at his Nashville and Mobile theaters. The following theatrical season, Sarah traveled to New York to join the company of the new Chatham Garden Theatre.⁸⁹ In March 1828, she was acting breeches parts at the Salem Theatre with her sister, Eliza Riddle, and in the summer joined the company of the brand new Tremont Theatre in Boston.⁹⁰ It was in Boston in 1828 that Sarah Riddle probably met and married W. H. Smith, who had been acting in the city,

⁸⁹ Ludlow, *Dramatic Life as I Found It*, 527.

⁹⁰ *Boston Courier*, 17 March 1828; *Boston Courier*, 23 June 1828.

according to Clapp, for nearly “a quarter of a century.”⁹¹ Over the next two decades, Mrs. W. H. Smith performed in stock companies in Boston and Philadelphia, also returning to work with Ludlow in the West.⁹²

W. H. Smith was no longer in the picture by 1840. Although he would continue to perform in Boston theaters in the 1830s and 40s, Smith and his wife appear not to have continued contracting as a couple. The marriage between Sarah Riddle and W. H. Smith “was not a happy one,” wrote Philadelphia actor and dancer Charles Durang in his history of the Philadelphia stage; and “as all the world knows,” he explained, alluding to commonly held but not scandalous public knowledge, “ended in her separating from him.”⁹³ As Edna Cooley points out, the ability of actresses to earn and continue earning a viable living outside of marriage made divorce more economically feasible. Meanwhile, in 1844, Smith attempted to launch herself from stock actress to regional star, surely counting on her longstanding connections with actors and managers all over the North and West. Smith’s history demonstrates the degree to which the expansion of viable theaters and theatrical networks requiring stock companies made acting an increasingly mobile profession, alike for stock actors and touring stars such as the Kembles.

Remaining within a single regional marketplace for a lifetime, as Mrs. Barnes did, would

⁹¹ William W. Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage*, 269.

⁹² In 1840, she began the season earning a solitary wage of \$28 a week as a stock actress at the Tremont Theatre. Smith was certainly at the upper end of the wage scale. While joint wages for couples varied from \$33.60 weekly to \$63, the highest weekly wage for an individual performer was George Andrews’ \$35 salary; both Mrs. W. H. Smith and Mrs. Cramer received salaries of \$28, while the majority of stock members received weekly wages between \$5.60 and \$16.80 a week. Actors received the highest salaries, among the individual performers, and the lowest salaries were for supernumeraries (\$5.60). Over the course of the season, J. S. Jones reduced the company’s wages by 30%, would to avoid debt in a struggling theatrical marketplace following the Panic of 1837. This reduction in salary may have been a factor in Smith’s decision to leave Boston for the Midwest. Tremont Theatre Books, Harvard Theatre Collection.

⁹³ Durang *History of the Philadelphia Stage Scrapbook, 1854-1863*, Library Company of Philadelphia. Durang’s *History of the Philadelphia Stage* began serialization in the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* in 1854.

become increasingly unusual as the century progressed and the industry expanded. While actors continued to travel and contract in family groups, expanding opportunities for work made it economically feasible to leave a parent, a sibling, or an unhappy marriage.

The careers of Barnes, McBride, and Smith offer some instructive comparisons with the professional history of Fanny Kemble. For all of these women, their place within a family economy was critical to the shape of their careers. Kemble, Barnes and Smith each stepped onto the stage to contribute to a family economy. The locus of that family economy shifted when Barnes and Smith married, and in Smith's case, shifted again when she separated from her husband. Only Smith and McBride ever earned and controlled their own wages exclusively—Kemble would one day control her own wages, when she returned to the stage in 1848 during her divorce—but the careers of these women never existed independent of the social, professional, and familial networks of which they were a part. These other women's voices and motivations are largely inaccessible to the historian, easily overshadowed by Kemble's celebrity. Kemble also published her journals of her first American tour in 1835, and continued publishing selections from her journals and correspondence over her lifetime. Kemble would profess a profound degree of ambivalence about the theater and her career on the stage, and historians disagree about the degree to which Kemble was sincere, or contributing to the construction of her celebrity by performing a particular kind of public role—like the characters of dutiful daughter turned reluctant actress. But how did Miss Bates (Mrs. Barnes) feel about leaving Boston in 1803 to travel around New England with her father and a company of actors? How did Mrs. Riddle and her three teenage children make decisions about where they would travel and with whom they would contract for the

season? To what degree did seventeen-year-old Sarah Riddle (Mrs. W. H. Smith) break away from this family economy in 1825, when she left her mother and sister behind in Philadelphia and joined the company of the Chatham Garden Theatre in New York? Was this move an assertion of her own agency relative to her family and her career on the stage? Or was the Philadelphia marketplace no longer able to sustain stock employment for these three women at optimal wages?

For all of these women, a place within a family economy provided social capital that helped launch their careers, and provided them with access to professional networks. But unlike each of the three Boston stock actresses, whose agency and place within a family economy is difficult if not impossible to determine, Kemble's specific role within her family economy formed the basis of the narrative that created her public image. This narrative presented Kemble as a dutiful daughter who helped to alleviate her father's economic hardship by going on the stage. Kemble's agency relative to her move onto the stage was always already contained by this. Hers was a culturally appealing story of filial duty, rather than individual ambition. Both the circumstances of her debut and the broad public construction of her motivations may have contributed to her lifelong ambivalence towards the theater. But Kemble also was able to use her status as a theatrical celebrity and her reputation as a woman of letters to talk back, in print, and contribute to the ongoing construction of her celebrity.

Kemble's first American tour contributed to an ongoing debate about the moral, social, and intellectual value of theatrical amusements, and helped transform the image of the actress. Kemble's celebrity in America repositioned the actress as a cultural figure and shifted the terms of the debate about the social and cultural value—or danger—of

theatrical amusements. This repositioning occurred in part through the juxtaposition of Kemble's theatrical performances with her private character. Kemble was not the first actress whose private life was deployed to shape her public figure. In the eighteenth century, her aunt Sarah Siddons performed her motherhood to shape her popularity, thus taking advantage of a significant cultural shift towards the idealization of the maternal in the late eighteenth century. Siddons's "maternal self-fashioning" provided her with a way out of the usual construction of the actress as prostitute and sexualized figure.⁹⁴ Likewise, Kemble's self-fashioning as a woman of letters also reframed the cultural role of the actress, which facilitated the ongoing efforts of managers and critics to market theater as a genteel and edifying amusement. A celebrity actress like Kemble, with a distinguished professional pedigree and a compelling story that appealed to contemporary domestic ideals about gender roles within the family, supported claims that theater was a rational and uplifting amusement. These claims were crucial to the intensifying efforts of managers, male theater critics, and performers to market theater to American audiences.

The Actress and the Question of Rational Amusements

American critics were convinced that Fanny Kemble's arrival in America meant something new and significant for the future of the drama. *The Spirit of the Times*, an elite male sporting paper, followed its iteration of Kemble's celebrated qualities—these included her simplicity, modesty, innocence, and lack of pretensions—with the observation that “in *this* land and in this age, such claims will be acknowledged—such

⁹⁴ Rosenthal, “The Sublime, the Beautiful, ‘the Siddons’,” 72.

attractions will be irresistible.”⁹⁵ America in 1832 was on the brink of a culture war over the social ownership and moral regulation of society. Theater and public amusements quickly became a key battlefield as an increasingly successful commercial marketplace drawing in socially diverse audiences—most noticeably wage laborers—met a rising evangelical reform culture. Reform Protestant religious traditions had long condemned theater as a morally corrosive institution that drew the flock away from the church—that is, a form of competition. Between the 1790s and 1810s, when the first theaters were constructed in northeastern cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, the leading defenders of theatrical amusements emphasized theater as a school of morals vital to rather than corrosive of a republic, this in direct response to critiques of theater from the reform Protestant theological tradition. The development of dramatic criticism was mobilized around ideals that theater could provide a natural and rational exhibition of vice and virtue. In the 1820s, the tenor of antitheatrical criticism began to shift, as burgeoning evangelical reform movements took as their primary focus the evils produced in the theater proper, of alcohol consumption, prostitution, and rowdiness of the growing working-class audiences.

Kemble’s celebrity intersected and managed one longstanding strain of theological opposition to the drama, a concern with the relationship between the actor, role, and performance—a question about the meaning of the drama itself—and whether drama constituted a rational and edifying amusement. Expectations that Kemble would be “irresistible” in America of 1832 claimed a correspondence between Kemble’s particular type of celebrity and the social and cultural politics of this historical moment that

⁹⁵ “The Kembles,” *Spirit of the Times*, 15 September 1832.

responded to concerns about the kind of amusement theater was becoming and could be, and about what kinds of people actors and actresses were socially and culturally. This section will examine the shift in antitheatrical discourses in relation to the representation of acting as a profession, the actress as a public figure, and as a woman with a private and domestic life.

In the 1820s through 1840s, antitheatrical critiques were increasingly concerned with how the theater created a consumer world of vice. In 1827, David Hale published a pamphlet in Boston, “Letters on the new theatre,” in which was compiled a series of letters, previously published in the Boston papers, concerning the construction of a second theater in Boston, what would become the Tremont Theatre. The letters, each signed “A Father,” laid out a series of arguments against the erection of an institution that Hale and company felt posed a threat to the “moral welfare of our community,” in particular to the sons and daughters of Boston, who would find temptation to all kinds of vices inside its walls. The “Letters” called upon the community of the theater’s subscribers to halt their patronage or see “how far they will be responsible for its demoralizing influence.”⁹⁶ One author lamented that within the theater, “he who seeks his Savior” will find the “name of God” instead mentioned “in profanation, or to add weight to curses” and the Bible spoken of only “with contempt.”⁹⁷ The second letter quickly dispatched what had become, since the late-eighteenth century, a familiar defense of theatrical amusements: “The long maintained doctrine that it is a school of morals, is now held by very few.” To the contrary, “The disreputable lives of most of the actors, the scenes of the upper boxes, of the lobbies, saloon, and neighboring rooms, have poured

⁹⁶ David Hale, *Letters on the new theatre* (Boston: s.n., 1827), 2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

forth proof to demonstration.”⁹⁸ The majority of the “Letters” focused more on the problems within the space of the theater, the intoxication and prostitution rife within its walls, rather than engaging with an older strain of theological discourses critiquing the moral bankruptcy of theatrical mimicry. Nevertheless, these critiques formed a crucial backdrop to all antitheatrical discourses in the nineteenth century, contributing to a “sameness of argument” that theater historian David Grimsted has identified in the corpus of “attacks” on the theater across religious denominations, which drew in particular on the writings of eighteenth-century American theologian John Witherspoon.⁹⁹

In the 1780s and 1790s, American clerics and theologians like Witherspoon witnessed, with considerable dismay, the repeal of state legislation forbidding theatrical representations in northern states like Massachusetts, along with the construction of theaters in expanding commercial centers, from Philadelphia to St. Louis. The burning of the Richmond theater on 26 December 1811 provided the religious establishment with a touchstone for a renewed crusade, since the destruction appeared, to ministers like Samuel Miller of New York, to be a clear providence from God, “point[ing] to this Amusement, with a distinctness which cannot be mistaken, and with a solemnity which,” Samuel intoned in his sermon on the subject, delivered 19 January 1812, “ought to excite our deepest attention.” Samuel published his sermon, a jeremiad in the best reformed Protestant tradition, along with Witherspoon’s “A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage” and “Letter Respecting Play Actors,” from 1792. Together these documents laid forth the same basic set of arguments, that theater is a “crime” against the principles of the gospel, that it is inherently “useless” because it cannot provide any

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁹ Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 25.

“benefit” in “either body or soul,” and in fact produces a demoralizing tendency in its audiences and its players through the manipulation of false sympathy and sentiment. Furthermore, by feeding the passions, theater works against the Gospel by failing to restrain “flesh [from] lusting against the spirit.”¹⁰⁰ Witherspoon and Miller expressed concern that in learning to convey counterfeit emotions, an actor “cultivate[s] the propensities” for falsehood, and for particular kinds of emotion, “which he ought to mortify.”¹⁰¹ Witherspoon in particular lamented, “by so frequently appearing in an assumed character, [players] lose all character of their own” and “lose all sense of sincerity and truth.”¹⁰²

Meanwhile, late-eighteenth-century proponents of theatrical amusements attempted to show that theater *could* be used for social and moral good. Some went so far as to advocate for a national theater, like Bostonian William Haliburton whose 1792 pamphlet argued that a state-run theater could provide civic instruction and its profits benefit the poor.¹⁰³ The no less idealistic but more commercially-inclined New York manager and playwright William Dunlap wrote and translated at least seventy-five plays for his John Street Theatre. He hoped his theater could serve as a vehicle for moral and social uplift while realizing commercial success, though Dunlap ultimately struggled and failed commercially, unable to realize a winning balance to retain popular patronage.¹⁰⁴ The articulation of an alternative vision of theater as a moral and rational amusement picked up

¹⁰⁰ Rev. John Witherspoon, *A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage* (New York: Whiting & Watson, 1812), 14, 18.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰³ On the immediate political resonances of debates about theater in 1790s Boston see Ginger Strand, “The Theater and the Republic” in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism In American Theatre*, eds. Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 1999), 19-36.

¹⁰⁴ On Dunlap’s history see Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*.

a larger category of “rational amusement,” which was being mobilized around a range of entertainments to signify that they provided an edifying use of leisure time.

This category emerged out of proscriptive literature concerned with the proper management of leisure time in a new industrializing society. Over the first half of the century, both critics and proponents of commercial forms of leisure continued to debate what constituted “rational amusement,” meanwhile managers and proprietors of new institutions like Charles Wilson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum and a of a broad range of entertainments from concerts to lantern shows to theaters assured their publics that these constituted a rational and moral use of their time.¹⁰⁵ Take for example the 1825 column penned by aspiring playwright and newspaperman James Rees for the Providence *Patriot*, announcing the arrival of the Boston Theatre company for the month of May. Reese, writing under the *nom de plume* of Restoration actor and playwright Colly Cibber, insisted that theater is among the “rational amusements of this world” most “conducive to the improvement of the morals” and for developing and demonstrating in the community a “taste for literature, as well as for arts and sciences.” Rees appealed to the good taste of the Providence public, which he felt would be sure to patronize a company that was doing so much to “exalt the drama.”¹⁰⁶ This practiced rhetorical strategy of dramatic criticism turned the tables on audiences to examine the sincerity of their intellectual commitments, and invoked the sovereignty of the public to judge and patronize deserving public amusements.

These discourses grappled with an increasingly competitive commercial and

¹⁰⁵ On the category of “rational amusement” see Bluford Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U. S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Charles Sellers, *Mr. Peale’s Museum: Charles Wilson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980).

¹⁰⁶ *Providence Patriot, Columbia Phenix*, 14 May 1825.

noncommercial marketplace for leisure, in which a range of voices in turn competed for the ear, the time, and the pennies of the “public.” Such competition formed a key subtext in defenses of theater, the marketing of commercial amusements, and in ongoing clerical critiques of theater. Timothy Dwight, a president of Yale and the brother-in-law of William Dunlap, with whom Dwight shared some exchange on these questions in the 1810s, argued that the moral lessons of the stage would always fall short of the lessons of the Bible, and that this forced the true Christian to make a clear choice when allocating his leisure time. Dwight asked how in a world that is “one scene of moral defilement” a man who calls himself Christian could prefer to “exert himself to support the Stage, instead of the cause of God in the world?” Twenty-five cents admission to a theater pit was a shocking waste of resources when “Bible and Missionary Societies are restrained in their operations for want of funds.”¹⁰⁷ Churches responded to this concern with competition by embracing the print market, publishing and distributing tracts, and clerics discovered the draw of a more theatrical preaching style, honed by revivalist preachers like Charles Grandison Finney.¹⁰⁸

Dwight was also insistent that the theater and the church were fundamentally incompatible as teachers of morality, particularly because its so-called lessons ultimately exposed the students of theater to unchaste possibilities that the Bible foreclosed. In the matter of matrimony, Dwight explained, the “teaching of the Stage is perpetually

¹⁰⁷ Timothy Dwight, *An Essay on the Stage: In Which the Arguments in Its Behalf, and Those Against It, Are Considered; and Its Morality, Character, and Effects Illustrated* (Middletown, Conn.: Sharpe, Jones, & Co., 1824), 135.

¹⁰⁸ On Christianity and the cultural marketplace see especially David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and on American Christianity more broadly see Nathaniel Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

exhibiting intrigue” and jealousy, in contrast to the “word of God,” which “condemns all unchaste thoughts, words, or gestures.”¹⁰⁹ The stage was corrosive of gender ideals and the conduct of a Christian marriage. While Christianity “exalted” the female character, teaching the “reciprocal duties” between husband and wife, the intrigues of the stage and its jealous and vengeful wives, for example, disrupted the ideal gender order.¹¹⁰ Nor was the stage a consistent moral teacher, but rather its morality was defined by its “mutability.”¹¹¹ Fears that publics would learn a suspect and mutable morality from the stage, rather than the elevated lessons of the Christian Bible, hinged on larger concerns of churches and religious organizations with the allocation of time and money. Clerics like Dwight insisted that there was no middle ground. The teachings embraced by a Christian man would be undone by a visit to the theater.

As clerics, theater managers and amusement proprietors, and dramatic critics struggled to navigate an expanding and diversifying markets for leisure, categories of rational, moral, chaste, became the watchwords of dramatic criticism. Thus the categories of moral and rational amusement mobilized to market theater to a virtuous republic shaped many of the conventions of early-nineteenth century theatrical criticism for evaluating the merits of a drama. The “legitimate drama” should, in Shakespearean parlance, “hold a mirror up to nature” by exposing vice and rewarding virtue. Effective acting was praised with terms like “chaste” and “natural” that reinforced ideals that theater should model moral and social ideals.

Tensions and dissonances in nineteenth-century dramatic criticism reflected its dual

¹⁰⁹ Dwight, *An Essay on the Stage*, 26-28.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

purposes relative to the development of theatrical amusement. Critics were writing on the one hand in defense of the theater as a valuable moral and intellectual institution, while also hoping to use their criticism to shape what was appearing on American stages and “help save the drama from its [own] abuses,” thereby producing a theater that would be a force of moral and cultural elevation.¹¹² These abuses included many of the entertainments that American audiences high and low apparently enjoyed, including novelty acts, female breeches performance, and melodrama. Some critics writing for more high-toned periodicals, such as the *New York Mirror*, simply ignored those types of performances that they deemed low, restricting their commentary to the “legitimate drama.” For these more elite dramatic critics, the Kembles’ tour promised a return to ideals about what dramatic entertainments should be: Shakespeare and English plays rather than ballet, equestrian drama, or forms of low comedy like “Tom and Jerry” that instead of holding an idealized “mirror up to nature” channeled a working-class culture that was taking over theater pits in growing numbers in the late 1820s. In the 1830s, theater critics like the editors of the *Spirit of the Times* would begin to deploy a discourse about the “decline of the drama,” which became one way of articulating how urban theaters were increasingly marketing to the tastes of a growing working-class male audience, rather than the elite male stockholders who built them.¹¹³ The celebrity of Charles and Fanny Kemble provided critics with the opportunity to continue to push back

¹¹² Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled*, 37.

¹¹³ The discourse of the “decline of the drama” was a transatlantic development. On theater criticism and historiography in the nineteenth century and the emergence of the “decline of the drama” discourse see Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On tensions between working class and elite tastes in the 1830s and 40s that were shaping these discourses see Peter Buckley, “To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1800-1850” (Ph.D. Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984) and David Rinear, *Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals: William E. Burton and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2004).

against antitheatrical critiques of the drama, while mobilizing new ideals of dramatic uplift against the growing and increasingly divisive class diversity of the theater audience.

While theater critics wrangled with managers over the choice of plays, attempting to police the pitch and positioning of theater through their reforming discourses, they also struggled against larger questions, raised by voices like Dwight, following Witherspoon, about the nature of the public role that actors played, the meaning and implications of their prominence. The cultural viability of Haliburton's fantasy of a civil theater in which actors could educate politicians about virtue was comparatively short-lived relative to the persistent dismissal of player as "notorious for wickedness."¹¹⁴ Dwight followed Witherspoon in questioning how a man can avoid becoming too much like the "character he mimics." If he speaks from the heart he cannot excel in his profession when called upon to portray wickedness, but "a man, in the character of a liar, or a devil, who speaks from the heart...is a man too like the character he mimics." The actor was a consummate confidence man—"perpetually deceiving, he is himself deceived." He is a man "bound by no ties," a man without the core character that was the basis for a virtuous and moral life.¹¹⁵ Instead, the actor is perennial a wearer of masks. Antitheatrical discourse thus picked up a larger discourse of the confidence man, that plague of a mobile, industrializing urban society that was being defined in an emerging genre of urban advice literature.¹¹⁶ Critics like Dwight insisted that actors threatened the ideal of sincerity around which the conception of the virtuous Christian self was organized. Participation

¹¹⁴ Dwight, *An Essay on the Stage*, 101-102.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹⁶ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

in theatrical culture exposed Americans to a shadow world of confidence men and the “perpetually deceiving [and] deceived.”

While theater critics were never entirely effective at countering the claim that playacting was intrinsically corrosive of internal character and led to an immoral life, critics responded to these claims by invoking the private virtue that supported praiseworthy professional careers on the stage, using statements about an actress or actor’s “character in private life” to make a claim that a performer deserved public patronage and esteem. In his 1825 column for the Providence *Patriot*, Rees presented the Boston company to the Providence public as a group of studious and industrious individuals, commendable in private life, and correct in their delineations on the stage. This was, by 1825, an established mode by which actors were presented to the public. Mr. Fielding received laurels for his “chaste” performances, and Miss Clarke for being “studious and industrious” in her pursuit of the “higher walks of the drama” and “histrionic fame.” Rees felt little need to introduce the acting merits of long-time stock actress Mrs. Barnes, noting merely that she has “sustained high reputation as a professional lady, and in the private walks of life always commended respect.” Barnes’s “private” life was knowable by reputation but protected from the revelation of detail.¹¹⁷ Such rhetorical invocation of respectability in private life, which were used to establish and legitimate performers’ claims to a public, were recurring gestures that could shield more complicated domestic histories, particularly as actresses accessed newer and distant markets, while insisting that the private had a bearing on the public. The details of that private life remained beyond—or beneath—the purview of the newspaper publics, even

¹¹⁷ *Providence Patriot, Columbia Phenix*, 14 May 1825.

as the fact established Barnes' claim on her own public.

Stock and visiting performers used similar language to solicit patronage for their benefit performances. Twelve years earlier, following the death of her husband and father, Mrs. Barnes took a benefit in Providence which, Charles Blake recalled, was "very remunerative," particularly because the "general sympathy" for Barnes's bereavement brought in a large audience.¹¹⁸ Benefit performances in particular provided performers with an opportunity to communicate with their audiences beyond the usual conventions of the stage performance, to present themselves as individuals with private lives with which their communities might find new ways to identify. In this respect, actors and actresses led the way in pushing back against claims that play acting compromised their private characters. At the conclusion of Mr. and Mrs. Hamblin's visit to Providence during the summer of 1826, the Providence *Patriot* published an announcement for Mrs. Hamblin's benefit that encouraged Providence's citizens to attend for a "lady, who, whether as an actress or a member of the domestic circle, has always commanded admiration and respect."¹¹⁹ The press participated in the ongoing construction of actresses and actors as people with private lives, the estimable qualities of which should advance their public character, rather than the other way around.

This wasn't always the case, given the prevalence of divorce and separation among actors. In several key moments of highly publicized sex and divorce scandals, the private lives of prominent actors threatened the delicate webs of respectability that actors continued to try to construct around their profession. English actor Edmund Kean's adultery scandal and subsequent divorce, in January 1825, which found him the target of

¹¹⁸ Blake, *A Historical Account of the Providence Stage*, 141.

¹¹⁹ *Providence Patriot, Columbia Phenix*, 17 June 1826.

a vicious campaign in the London press, had a disastrous effect on his already fractured reputation in America. Kean's first American tour in 1820-21 generated considerable excitement among audiences who were familiar with Kean's reputation as a distinguished tragedian in London and the provinces. Kean's ego did him few favors. In Boston, he walked out on a poorly attended performance of *Richard III* at the very end of his tour, and earned himself the ire of the Boston marketplace. When he returned to the United States in November 1825, the press stirred up the memory of this affront which, when combined with the circulation of the lurid London coverage of his adulterous affair and divorce, made him a challenging sale to American audiences. Kean returned to Boston 21 December 1825, to revive, in good faith, that aborted production of *Richard III*, but it never went off. A riot ensued to prevent the actor from playing, which shut down the Boston Theatre, and threats of rioting followed Kean throughout his second tour.

Kean's return provided critics with a target in their ongoing effort to police the stage for the benefit of the drama, and papers that demonstrated a longstanding ambivalence towards the theater, like the *New-York Spectator*, led the charge against theaters for booking him, even drawing Kean's supporting cast into the line of fire. The Boston riot was the low point of a tour that was rocky from the start. The *Spectator* reported that on the evening of Kean's New York debut, November 15, the Park Theatre was the scene of an uproar as the audience rang with alternate cries of "Down with the Keanites!" and "Send the Bostonians home!" -- which alluded to particular animosity of Boston audiences. But Kean's sexual peccadilloes with the infamous Mrs. Cox also made his leading lady, stock actress Mrs. Hilson, the target of audience jibes. Calls of "Alderman Cox" directed at Kean were joined by shouts of "Mrs. Cox" as Mrs. Hilson

took the stage in the part of Lady Anne. New York theater-goers would have been familiar with the plot of *Richard III*, in which Lady Anne is successfully wooed by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, even though he is the murderer of her husband and father. The pointed jibe of “Mrs. Cox” thus alluded not only to Kean’s success as the seducer of Mrs. Cox, but also collapsed the distance between Hilson as Anne and Kean as Richard, and marked Kean as a threat to Mr. Hilson. Hilson, meanwhile, who clearly marked the insult and the threat of a rowdy crowd now targeting his wife, “rushed upon the stage, and carried Mrs. Hilson...behind the scenes.”¹²⁰ Mrs. Hilson was a popular member of the Park stock company, but would continue to be singled out for her professional association with Kean. Later that week, the *Spectator* published an item from the Baltimore *Federal Gazette*, which expressed “astonishment” that “Mrs. Hilson, an actress whose character we have always esteemed so much, should on the occasion of Kean’s appearance in New-York, have consented to perform with him.”¹²¹ Whatever personal scruples Mrs. Hilson may (or may not) have felt about Kean’s private character, they probably could not have extended to a suspension of the terms of her contract with the Park Theatre as a salaried member of the company. But arguments like the *Gazette*’s positioned actors and actresses within a politics of respectability that the *Gazette* felt should take precedence over professional commitments, and that targeted women in particular as key markers and agents of respectability.

More so than male actors, the actress was in a delicate position relative to the politics of respectability because of longstanding associations between the actress and public sexuality, both in the theater proper and within the history of actress celebrity.

¹²⁰ *New-York Spectator*, 18 November 1825.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 22 November 1825.

Actresses shared a physical and metaphorical proximity with the prostitutes who plied their trade in the reserved third tier, or third row, of the theater boxes. Prostitution was an established practice in nineteenth-century theaters, and the prostitute, a solitary, painted woman, was a ubiquitous figure in contemporary imaginings of theatrical space and in popular representations of the economy of the theater. Both the prostitute and the actress participated in an economy of the flesh; both women earned money through the display of their persons in public spaces. However, this association can be overstated in flattened readings of the semiotics of female theatrical celebrity. Actresses were a moral and social Other within nineteenth-century culture and society not only because of a simplistic correspondence between actress and prostitute, but because the acting of both men and women destabilized the relationship between the interior self and the performance of self, a relationship that an emerging nineteenth-century culture was anxious to stabilize in response to the displacements of an industrializing, highly mobile market society.¹²² But as nineteenth-century culture enshrined women as the moral center of society, embodied in the idealization of maternal identity and feminine domesticity, the performativity of the actress was potentially more problematic than the actor, and certainly in comparison with gender and celebrity in the eighteenth century. But as I argue here, Kemble's celebrity aligned the defense of the stage and ongoing claims for the respectability of the theater with the figure of the actress because her celebrity participated in a realignment of the relationship between the self and celebrity. Kemble's

¹²² On sincerity as a problem in early nineteenth-century life see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women* and John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990). For a deeper intellectual history of Reform Protestant attitudes towards the theater and theatricality since the sixteenth century see Jean Christophe-Agnew, *Worlds Apart: the Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1500-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

celebrity was made possible by a shift in the meaning of acting relative to the actress's self that was begun by Sarah Siddons's celebrity in the late eighteenth century.

In the 1750s and 60s, the English theater produced the first major actress celebrities who proved adept at using the print public sphere to shape their renown. This renown remained strongly associated with their romantic intrigues—a fixation that literary scholar Felicity Nussbaum regrets misses other key features of theatrical celebrity in this period. The fixation on the romantic lives of eighteenth century actress celebrities has also contributed to outsized claims about the singularity and historical break occasioned by Siddons's celebrity. Scholars have in part explained Siddons's unique and longstanding renown as a function of her success deploying her private life—specifically her maternal identity—to shape her public image, which bolstered her claims to respectability and actually supported some of her more radical and unprecedented interpretations of characters like Lady Macbeth.¹²³ Nussbaum parses this relationship between public celebrity, the deployment of a private self, and dramatic personation in the eighteenth-century English theater somewhat differently. The English actresses of the 1750s and 1760s, Catherine Clive, Margaret (Peg) Woffington, and Frances Abington, whose celebrity made Siddons's own career and renown possible, brought a performance of self into the parts they played; their personations of comic characters were read as revelations of the self. If this “relaxed the tensions between the proper lady and the actress” at mid-century, creating new possibilities for the performance of gender, Siddons's career “redrew the division” at century's end through a new calibration of the relationship between the self and the role. The celebrity of the Siddons thus was not

¹²³ Peggy Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality*; Rosenthal, “The Sublime, the Beautiful, ‘The Siddons’.”

simply a function of a new respectability around the actress, but of how this maternal respectability constructed the relationship between the personal self, the public performance of self, and the art of acting. Nussbaum argues that Siddons “withdrew her own person from the audience’s scrutiny in order to merge with her dramatic characters,” which enabled her to produce the kind of “cathartic” and “morally inspirational performance” for which Siddons would long be celebrated. Thus Siddons became a different kind of “public commodity” than her predecessors.¹²⁴

Implicit in Nussbaum’s argument is a larger historic shift in how the public and private and the self manifested in the culture of theatrical celebrity. The revelation of Siddons’s maternal identity, a crucial framework for her celebrity, was *not* dependent upon the revelation of her individual or unique interiority. Thus Siddons’s interiority was kept separate both from her public persona and dramatic personations through the invocation of a culturally salient construction of a universal feminine that possessed a powerful political efficacy and salience in the 1780s and 1790s. The dynamics of Siddons’s celebrity expose a key distinction between the revelation of private life and character and the revelation of the personal, of personality. Scholars in celebrity studies have argued that a fundamental component of celebrity at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, exemplified by Sarah Bernhardt, was the perception of a distinctive charismatic personality.¹²⁵ Nussbaum’s analysis suggests an opportunity for periodizing cultures of celebrity. The rise of a celebrity culture in the eighteenth century coalesced around an emergent print public sphere which enabled a new class of figures outside the nobility,

¹²⁴ Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, 280. Nussbaum sees this shift as indicative of a lost possibility, that “by repudiating the practice of incorporating a competing self-presence on stage as earlier actresses had done, may well have interrupted a certain line of thespian possibility.”

¹²⁵ Edward Benerson and Eve Giloi, eds., *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

particularly writers, actors, and politicians—to manifest a performative individuality. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century experienced a shift and redefinition of the relationship between public celebrity, the deployment of a private self to constitute celebrity, and dramatic personation. The public performances of actors and actresses off the stage that appeared in biographic sketches and *on dits*, for example, involved carefully rehearsed almost formulaic invocations of respectability in private life. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, celebrity perpetuated a new relationship between the public role and the private self in which the carefully orchestrated revelation of the latter could serve to legitimate and elevate the public role. But this performative private self was distinct from the individualized personality of the eighteenth-century celebrity actress or Romantic-era poet. In the eighteenth century, the celebrity of the English actress was associated with a highly individualized revelation of self in which her acting was seen to *reveal* the personal. In the nineteenth century, critics continued to read dramatic roles back onto actresses. But this existed in tension with efforts to deploy universalizing notions of private respectability to shield the interiority of the actress from public view. Kemble’s celebrity helped to disrupt the reading of the role back onto the actress, continuing to raise new possibilities about the relationship between acting and the self of the actress, in which acting became an intellectual art that could be deployed by women to elevate their sex.

Fanny Kemble, “Priestess of the Temple”

Twice during Kemble’s Boston engagement, Anna Quincy met Fanny Kemble at private parties held in the actress’s honor, where she attempt to parse the relationship

between Kemble's social mien and the powers she employed in the stage. Initially, Quincy was somewhat disappointed. Kemble was "not handsome" and much too soft-spoken and almost shy—not to the taste of the socially vivacious Quincy, who could "hardly believe that this delicate, gentle, subdued, shadow creature, was the Bianca, who had exhibited such power." Quincy was sure that Kemble's "manner in company is one of her finest piece of acting," but conceded that Kemble had chosen "her part well - & played it with good effect." The part, that is, of "any other young lady" who might experience some difficulty with "being stared at in a private party, where she appeared as a young Lady." Thus Quincy's assessment of Kemble's manner in private lifted tacked back and forth between a recognition of the social performances expected of and enacted by every "young Lady" at a "private party." Kemble's power on the stage called attention to the performativity of gender in private life, which made Quincy uncomfortable, as it likewise highlighted Quincy's own complicity in a gendered social performance. Where did the truth of Kemble's character lie? In the fiery stage Bianca or the retiring young woman with the plain features but "very intelligent expression and "fine eyes"?¹²⁶

At a party the following week, Quincy again scrutinized Kemble's "striking" face, and noted its haunting quality, which Quincy compared to "some Sibyl, or enchantress." If Kemble did not conform to ideals of beauty off the stage, her powers as an actress changed the way Quincy read Kemble's physiognomy, and Quincy now praised Kemble's "expressive" and "flexible mouth" and "muscular" body, which enabled her to "express the strangest emotions" on the stage, and appear the embodiment of grace off

¹²⁶ Anna Cabot Lowell [Quincy] Diaries, 17 April 1833.

the stage, with her perfect dancing. Thus the tension between Kemble's dramatic powers and private graces that originally disturbed Quincy now seemed to suggest Kemble's remarkable gifts: "uniting great skills, & animation with perfect grace & ladylike deportment She is indeed a creature gifted most highly."¹²⁷

Newspaper critics anticipated the arrival of the the Kembles by celebrating this unique combination of qualities in the young actress—a discourse that surely shaped Quincy's own efforts to assess Kemble's qualities as a woman and artist. Fanny Kemble appeared as a paragon in the imaginations of dramatic critics who had probably never seen Sarah Siddons perform, but who imagined the young Kemble in the mold of this greatest of female tragedians. *The Spirit of the Times*, leader among proponents and arbiters of the legitimate drama in New York, found itself (nearly) speechless about Miss Kemble's many qualities: "There is so much for the imagination to suggest, and our busy fancy is so awakened when we witness united in the same angel form, the most immutable fascination of an actress, and the lofty endowments and unchallenged pre-eminence of the poetess, that half our pleasure is swallowed up in wonder." *The Spirit* described Kemble's upbringing "amid a most refined and accomplished circle." Kemble's role relative to the drama was defined—rather, mythologized—by the titular "Priestess of the Temple."¹²⁸ *The Spirit* hoped to experience Kemble's resemblance to Siddons in her acting, though it already judged Siddons "eclipsed" in greatness "in one department" by her niece's capacity as an authoress. Miss Kemble has "given to the world the most perfect tragedy of modern times," the play *Francis the First*.¹²⁹ The

¹²⁷ Ibid., 23 April 1833.

¹²⁸ *Spirit of the Times*, 15 September 1832.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 8 September 1832.

American press largely followed the example of the *Spirit* in introducing Kemble into new cities and audiences. Kemble's claims to popular notoriety as an actress were always joined by commendation of her abilities as poet and "authoress."

Kemble loved literature and loved to write, and her father saw the value of encouraging her to continue publishing in America, although her *Journal* conveyed ambivalence about the degree to which Kemble was comfortable using her poetry to generate public interest in her celebrity. On September 6, she wrote, "My father asked me, this evening, to write a sonnet about the wild pigeon's welcoming us to America; I had thought of it with scribbling intent before, but he wants to get it up here, and that sickened me."¹³⁰ The following week, the editor for the *New York Mirror*, an illustrated literary paper that also reviewed drama and opera, solicited a poem from Kemble. In early November, her poem, "Autumn. Written after a ride by the Schuylkill, in October" appeared in the *Mirror* and was reprinted in multiple periodicals, including the *New-York Spectator*.

Kemble's literary achievements were also used to promote her but within a discourse that celebrated Kemble in spite of her career as an actress. This kind of qualified praise appeared in press and private commentary on her acting, revealing the limits to the construction of theater as a legitimate art. The *Spectator*, which feigned a lack of familiarity with theatrical amusements, presented the poem as a way of introducing Kemble and her father to its readers, which in turn facilitated a class critique of the state of the drama. The *Spectator* felt that the stage had "sunk so far beneath what it ought to be, and what it once was...a school of morals where lessons were taught by

¹³⁰ Frances Ann Butler, *Journal* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lee & Blanchard, 1835), I:57.

holding the Mirror up to Nature, and exhibiting vice in its own image, and virtue in its own likeness” because of the rising popularity of “Kick-shaws and German Extravaganza...Elephants, and Rope Dancers” at the expense of the “sterling old English drama.” The Kembles, the *Spectator* hoped, would reignite a love of English drama. In order to counter accusations that Kemble’s renown was merely a function of “the fascination of her manner, or the practiced *duperie* of the stage,” the *Spectator* presented the poem as a measure of her true merits, declaring, “Let her poetry speak for itself.” Kemble’s reputation as a poet allowed her to rise above the “*duperie*” of stagecraft and the questionable status of theater as an art.¹³¹

The persona that the press created of a genteel and intellectual young woman, a “priestess of the temple” and savior of the legitimate drama was not always easily mapped onto the moral ambiguity of some of the parts and plays in which Kemble appeared. While critics and actors mobilized the private character of actors and actresses to show that acting was not morally corrosive, they never really got rid of the idea that there was some essential connection between the actor’s ability to play a part and the part itself, which made it possible for acting to be a mirror for nature. And yet, in part because of Kemble’s elevated status within the profession, she was successful in calling attention to acting as an intellectual skill. This allowed her to resist, to some degree, the continued tendency of critics to collapse the actress with the characters she played. Of course, Kemble was not entirely successful, and critics persisted in identifying her with ingénue roles, like Juliet, or Julia in *The Hunchback*, a much heralded new play written for Kemble by Sheridan Knowles. Kemble’s success ultimately facilitated an ongoing

¹³¹ *New-York Spectator*, 19 November 1832.

shift in critical discourse towards viewing acting as an intellectual art that was an expression of an actress's powers of interpretation rather than an expression of some aspect of her internal character.

Kemble arrived in America with a repertoire that included dramatically challenging as well as morally ambiguous roles like Bianca, in Milman's tragedy *Fazio*, and Lady Macbeth from Shakespeare, and equally morally ambiguous parts from comedy, including Lady Teazle in *The School for Scandal* and Bizarre in George Farquhar's *The Inconstant*. Kemble alternated the roles in which she gave her debut performance in a new city, sometimes appearing as Juliet or Julia, other times as Bianca, a very controversial role and yet one of her acknowledged favorites. The order of productions in which the Kembles appeared may have been as much a function of the manager's demands based on knowledge of his market and the preparation of his company, but it also reveals Kemble's refusal to be only an ingénue actress, and her persistent desire to master and appeal to her audiences in a broad range of female characters. Kemble chose roles that she found interesting, like Bianca or Lady Macbeth, and that showcased her range and expressive power. She held her own artistry to a high intellectual standard, and despite her reputation as an exceptional delineator of ingenue roles, she preferred those that allowed her a great dramatic range, regardless of their moral content. Kemble successfully conveyed a broad range of gender styles through these diverse roles, while contributing to claims about the intellectual and moral benefits that acting brought to literature, a claim fundamental to the category of "rational amusements."

Kemble believed strongly that acting could lend powerful meanings to texts that could not be found only on the page. Her ambivalence towards her own career did not

extend to a critique of the drama; Kemble's views on the drama were quite the opposite. As she explained to theologian William Channing in an animated debate on the merits of theater relative to dramatic recitations, Shakespeare "could not be appreciated" only in recitation, but required the embodiment of the actors to convey the full meaning and power of the texts.¹³² Kemble's writings from her American tour, published in her *Journal* in 1835, reveal a powerful defense of the theater that grew out of her deep love of Shakespeare, her independent intellectual engagement with the roles she played, and from the empowerment she experienced when she played these roles. Although Kemble conceded to the extreme moralists who gave theater their "unqualified condemnation" that their opinion may not be entirely wrong, she felt it was a highly impractical one, especially given the continued ability of plays to provide a "highly intellectual, rational, and refined amusement."¹³³ Kemble objected more strenuously to the play-going moralists who were squeamish about some kinds of plays and characters, like Bizarre, in *The Inconstant*, or Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Though uncomfortable with shows of immorality in serious drama, some of these play-goers, Kemble claimed, still found delight in the "gross immorality" of popular farces, burlesques, and bawdy Restoration comedy like Beaumont and Fletcher's *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife*. Though Kemble expressed unqualified disdain for low comedy and participated in the class critique that was part of the argument for the elevation of theatre, she rejected a double standard in the representation of moral ambiguity. Kemble's analysis of controversial plays reveals her struggles to reconcile her intellectual delight in these works with her

¹³² Katherine Sedgwick (Minot) to Charles Sedgwick, 23 May 1833, Charles Sedgwick Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹³³ Butler, *Journal*, I:118.

need to judge the overall standards of their moral message, particularly around the performance of gender. Like contemporary critics, Kemble struggled to reconcile a play's overall moral message with its faithfulness to truth and nature, which in many cases involved immoral characters and women "free in their manners and language."¹³⁴

Kemble brought these questions to bear on the problem the actress faced in certain kinds of parts. Ultimately, she defended the tone and language of seventeenth-century Farquhar plays like *The Beaux Stratagem* or *The Inconstant*, and the women in them, by pointing out that "it was the fashion of their times, and of the times before them, when words did not pass for deeds, either good or bad," and that though "free," characters like Bizarre are "essentially honest women." In the process of locating a valuable moral message within the "coarse" characters she occasionally chose to play, she developed her own analysis of popular plays that frequently went against the grain of popular opinion or dramatic criticism. In her analysis of *The Inconstant*, Kemble argued that despite her "coarse expressions," Bizarre is the woman with "real delicacy," unlike the sweet-spoken Oriana, "whose womanly love causes her too far to forget her womanly pride." Ultimately, Kemble did not believe that drama needed to be purged of wit or moral ambiguity in order to be intellectually and morally uplifting, and argued that plays should be judged in the context of the times in which they were written.

Contemporary actresses appear not to have shared this view. Some parts were so unflattering to contemporary ideals of womanly character that actresses resisted playing them, for fear that this would reflect on public judgments of their private character. In Philadelphia, the actress assigned to play "that naughty Aldabella" with Kemble was

¹³⁴ Ibid., I:119.

“shocked” at the casting, but found a way to convey her opinion of the role beyond the text: “when the Duke dismissed her in the last scene, [she] picked up her train, and flounced off in a way that made the audience for to laugh.”¹³⁵ According to Kemble, it was relatively common, “in performance of unvirtuous or unlovely characters” like Lady Aldabella or Queen Gertrude in *Hamlet*, for actresses to attempt to “impress the audience with the wide difference between their assumed and real disposition, by acting as ill, and looking as cross as they possibly could,” much to the satisfaction of “any moral audience.” Kemble had little patience with these kinds of scruples and dissemblance, for she felt sure that most audiences could distinguish between the actress and the “wicked woman” she played.¹³⁶ But Kemble experienced an actress’ career from a position of extreme privilege relative to the stock actors who played these “secondary parts” and whose claims to respectability were tenuous at best, and easily compromised, if only by association, as had been Mrs. Hilson’s experience acting with Kean. And even for many theatergoers, actresses were far more, if not wicked, then at least morally compromised compared to the respectable women who sat in the second tier of boxes with their husbands and fathers, or stayed away altogether, but in whose society Fanny Kemble, but not Mrs. Hilson, was admitted to circulate. Kemble’s elevated status within the profession placed her in an ideal position to interpret some of the more controversial female leads in English drama, and she emerges as unexpected champion of texts like *The Inconstant*, which the *North American Magazine*, a literary periodical out of Philadelphia, admonished “contain[s] allusions and passages no modest woman should

¹³⁵ Ibid., I:197.

¹³⁶ Ibid., I:121.

pronounce, and no audience like that of Philadelphia should endure.”¹³⁷ Kemble disagreed. Her original readings of English plays developed from her experience of playing these roles. She delighted in the “pointed, witty, and pithy writing” of Farquhar’s *Bizarre* and Shakespeare’s *Beatrice*.¹³⁸ She also liked parts that allowed her to explore her dramatic range and, on some level, to explore different kinds of femininity. Acting, it seems, literally allowed her to try on different ways of being a woman in the world. While Kemble might not have become an actress had she the choice—had her father not gone bankrupt and then sought further income from an American tour—acting provided her with a way to achieve some feelings of agency. Kemble wrote to her friend Harriet St. Leger in January 1831, a little over a year after her debut as an actress, about her upcoming appearance as Bianca in Milman’s *Fazio*. “Do you know the play? It is very powerful, and my part is a very powerful one indeed. I have hopes it may succeed greatly.”¹³⁹ Kemble chose Bianca as her debut performance in New York in 18 September 1832 and repeated it in all the cities she visited, although the play was controversial for its moral content, the story of a manipulative seductress, Aldabella, an adulterous husband, Fazio, and a spurned wife, Bianca, who turns vengeful in her pain and jealousy. Bianca leaves her children in the pursuit of vengeance, exposes Aldabella and Fazio’s adultery, and arranges for her husband’s execution.¹⁴⁰ Though her remorse at the occasion of his death is one of the crowning emotional moments of the play, audiences and critics were troubled by the character’s active pursuit of vengeance. But

¹³⁷ *North American Magazine*, January 1833.

¹³⁸ Her particular contention that “freedom of expression and manner, is by no means an indication of laxity of morals” suited her own personality. Kemble later came under fire for the freedom of expression of opinions and judgments in the *Journal*.

¹³⁹ Frances Ann Kemble, *Records of a Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt, 1879), 323.

¹⁴⁰ Henry Hart Milman, *Fazio, a Tragedy*, 3rd ed. (London: John Murray, 1818).

Kemble had no patience for such objections. She defended the role of the “wild woman Bianca” in terms that acknowledge and celebrated the power of strong emotions and motivations, claiming that “great crimes” are nevertheless “in their very magnitude, respectable.” The “excess” of “mighty passions” cannot be compared with “the base, degraded, selfish, cowardly tribe of petty larceny vices,” which is exactly what makes them in their “evil grandeur” worthy of representation on the stage.¹⁴¹ It was her excitement with this intensity that led Kemble to develop the character of Lady Macbeth. The Kembles introduced *Macbeth* onto the American stage on their return Philadelphia in December 1832. Lady Macbeth, arguably one of the most evil of Shakespeare’s heroines, was hardly an obvious choice for an actress celebrated as an ingénue figure, in spite of her reputation as the heir of tragedian Sarah Siddons.

The American press overwhelmingly associated Kemble with the ingénue, rather than the mature dramatic heroine, in part because of her biography. This affected how Kemble’s portrayals of characters like Bianca were judged by audiences. While teenaged Bostonian Anna Quincy identified with Kemble’s emotional intensity in the part of Bianca, the English-born Philadelphia shopkeeper Joseph Sill had difficulty looking past Kemble’s biography to see her in that character. Sill was a regular habitu  of Philadelphia theater in the 1830s and wrote detailed reviews of the plays and operas he attended, analyzing the plays themselves and the styles and interpretations of touring stars like the Kembles, Edwin Forrest, and William Charles Macready. Sill’s writing also revealed his careful reading of theatrical criticism. He wrote of his particular disagreement with critics who preferred Macready’s thunder to Charles Kemble’s quieter

¹⁴¹ Butler, *Journal*, I:120.

acting style; Sill felt that Kemble continued to reveal his excellence in tragedy. Overall, Sill was much more taken by Charles than Fanny. Though he praised Fanny's conceptions of her roles, overall he found her too young for some of the parts she chose to play. He wrote of Fanny Kemble's Philadelphia performance of *Fazio*, on December 15, that "Bianca appears unfit for Miss Kemble – it is not sufficiently natural – the horrid idea of betraying her own husband shocks you; and her subsequent anguish & loss of Reason scarcely does away with the impression." Though Sill was clearly as moved as Quincy by Kemble's "subsequence anguish" at the death of her husband, he could not believe her as Bianca within the overall narrative arc of the play, for the part was not "sufficiently natural" for *her*.¹⁴²

On the other hand, Sill went to see Kemble twice as Julia in *The Hunchback*. On the second occasion Sill and his theater-going companion, Mr. Sanderson took their wives, who in turn were so delighted they spoke of going again to see the Kembles the following evening. Sheridan Knowles wrote the part of Julia for Kemble in 1830. It had brought her great success in London and she would continue to draw acclaim as Julia during her American tour. Julia is another character who struggles with her overpowering emotions, but whereas Bianca gives in to her desire for revenge, Julia takes responsibility for the caprice that has put her into a disastrous engagement, is ultimately rewarded for her obedience, and marries the man she has realized she really loves.¹⁴³ Sill described the production of *The Hunchback* as a "perfect piece of acting as I ever saw," which made him feel as if Kemble, as Julia, and her father, as Sir Thomas (incidentally,

¹⁴² Joseph Sill Diary, 15 December 1832, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁴³ On Kemble as Julia see Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 32-33.

Julia's love interest) "are the actual characters they only represent."¹⁴⁴ Sill needed Kemble to perform a character closest to his perception of her identity in order for her acting to rise to that contemporary critical ideal that a theatrical representation achieve a close approximation of nature.

Playing a broad range of roles highlighted Kemble's dramatic range as an actress, and critics paid careful attention to *how* Kemble achieved her dramatic effects, as they had done for Macready, Kean, and Charles Kemble. Kemble was one of the first actresses accomplished in comedy *and* tragedy to draw so much attention from the press, and from many different regions. The starring system, as it emerged in the 1810s and grew over the ensuing decades, introduced actors and plays and conventions of dramatic criticism outside of individual localities, and created a broader audience for theatrical performance. Though Kemble was not the first English actress to tour America as a star, she was the biggest to date, because of her family, personal history, and because her acting was carefully analyzed in the diverse roles she played. Dramatic criticism of Kemble's acting called attention to how her acting brought greater emotional and intellectual depth to the text. It was significant, therefore, that Kemble's debut performance in America was as Juliet and *not* as Julia, for Shakespeare was revered in America, as in England, as great literature, taught in schools and university, and presented by lecturers who discourses on Shakespeare at local lyceums. The *New-York Mirror* praised Kemble for her ability to show off the beauty of Shakespeare's passages, although it too found some of her delivery too "deliberate" and stagey. This quality was the influence of her father's style of acting, which was more declamatory and classical

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Sill Diary, 14 December 1832.

than the growing vogue for the greater emotionalism of rival English actors Kean, and his protégé Macready.

Reviewers did not find Fanny Kemble lacking in emotionalism, however, and commented repeatedly on her ability to convey many different emotions, “tenderness, jealousy, hate, and despair,” successfully and “with a truth that now melts the soul, now makes it tremble” within a single character or piece.¹⁴⁵ Kemble was consistently described as an “intellectual” actress. Her ability to convey many and complex emotions was viewed as the result of her masterful analysis and interpretation of the text. Critics also paid close attention to how Kemble achieved certain effects by using new strategies with familiar texts. Critics and viewers consistently commented on her skill with using silence and stillness instead of an intense outpouring of physical energy and volume to convey intense emotion and surprise. The *Mirror* praised Kemble for her “genius in great quiet acting.”¹⁴⁶ Kemble’s ability to balance emotional excess with restraint also fomented the association of her talents with intellectualism. Kemble was as skilled with her shrieks as she was with her silences, as twelve-year-old Katherine Sedgwick discovered when she accompanied her aunt, American writer Catherine Maria Sedgwick, to see Kemble play in New York in May 1833. Sedgwick gushed in a letter to her father that in the scene in which Kemble’s Belvidera pleads for her life, “a cold chill runs through you.” Like Quincy, Sedgwick was deeply moved by Kemble’s expressions of agony, such as when “she utters three piercing Shrieks, which make your blood curdle.”¹⁴⁷ Both Quincy and Sedgwick physically felt the emotional intensity created by

¹⁴⁵ *New York Mirror*, 29 September 1832.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Katherine Sedgwick to Charles Sedgwick, 23 May 1833, Charles Sedgwick Papers. Kemble and

Kemble's acting, and clearly drew on the discourses in newspaper criticism to articulate and signify their experience.

Kemble's tour both built on and introduced new parts into the repertoire of the star actress, and successfully embraced and explored the moral ambiguity in the roles she personated, arguing persuasively, within the ideology of the time, that acting could still advance greater morality—in fact, could only promote morality by showing nature in all of its moral and historical complexity. Kemble advocated a serious, intellectual, and moral drama that showed human motivation in its complexity. Kemble's reputation as intellectual woman created new kind of actress, who would uplift and restore the drama as an intellectual and moral art. Criticism of Kemble also continued to develop an analysis of acting as a craft that was not reflective or corroding of a woman's internal character. This had important implications for the social status of actresses, and their ability to represent something other than an implicit illicit sexuality. Although critics and viewers continued the practice of collapsing actresses with their parts, the relationship between performer and role was an ongoing negotiation in the development of dramatic criticism. Calling attention to acting as intellectual craft made it possible for Kemble to present parts that both appeared to resemble her, like Julia, and parts that pushed the boundaries of credulity relative to her identity, like Bianca.

The shadow of Kemble's celebrity sparked a significant shift in the discourses around the actress and around women's consumption of public amusements. This shift would help transform the artistic, cultural, and economic stakes of the profession for the

Catherine Maria Sedgwick had at this point begun to develop the close friendship that would draw Kemble into a close relationship with the Sedgwick family over the course of her lifetime. See Charles Sedgwick papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Catherine Sedgwick, *The power of her sympathy: the autobiography and journal of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, edited by Mary Kelley (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1993).

growing numbers of women moved into the acting profession in the ensuing decades while simultaneously drawing women into the theater as a growing consumer market. Kemble's celebrity tour revealed the potential that an actress could mobilize interest in the stage and within social circles fundamentally ambivalent towards the theater. Significantly, this interest was connected both with the power Kemble exhibited on the stage and the way in which her celebrity mobilized accomplishments beyond the sphere of theater. Kemble was *more* than merely an actress, and her acting likewise revealed her intellectual powers as a woman of letters. She was the gifted heir of a new era of female accomplishment, but her celebrity raised an important question about what the stage meant as a site of female celebrity and female consumption. The conclusions the Anna Quincy drew about the meaning of Kemble's celebrity reveal the persistent tensions around the kinds of contexts in which women were developing celebrated public roles. After Kemble took her leave of Boston, Quincy penned a glowing series of verses in honor of Kemble acting. And yet, Quincy perhaps echoed the opinion of her social circle when she expressed "regret" that Kemble's dramatic "powers" were "only employed in acting."¹⁴⁸ Acting was a poor medium for female accomplishment. Kemble's social proximity to Quincy intensified the fascination of the actress for this young woman without easing her discomfort with the ultimate professional and public contexts in which female genius should be deployed, and with the space and culture of the theater proper.

For Quincy also concluded, at the close of Kemble's engagement, that despite her love of the theater it was "no fit place for 'an elegant female'." At a performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the box Quincy shared with her brother and two female friends

¹⁴⁸ Anna Cabot Lowell [Quincy] Diaries, 10 May 1833.

abuted a box filled with a “horde of fierce barbarians,” the “half sort of gentlemen...who had apparently ‘passed the genial bowl’ more freely than soberly.” Their “disagreeable” noise along with the farcical afterpiece *Raising the Wind* disturbed Quincy’s genteel sensibilities and made her more aware of the “less fashionable aspect of the audience.”¹⁴⁹ Such scruples did not keep a woman like Quincy away from the Tremont, but suggests the care with which women aspiring to achieve and maintain genteel respectability guarded their behavior, company, and environments in which they exposed themselves to public view.

In dramatic criticism in the early nineteenth century, respectable, or to follow the parlance of newspaper critics, “fashionable” women like Anna Quincy rarely became visible *except* at the performances of female celebrities like Fanny Kemble. For critics, the prostitute and the actress continued to be the only women frequenting theatrical space. Female celebrities like Kemble provided a way for critics to hail a respectable female consumer in what remained, for them, an otherwise overwhelmingly male world, except for actresses and prostitutes. However, these moments of highly visible female spectatorship only cast into greater relief the tensions between the desire of critics to promote and police theatrical amusements. As the nineteenth century progressed, antitheatrical criticism focused more directly on how prostitution, as well as the prevalence of saloons and public intoxication, threatened moral and social order and compromised the respectability of theatrical space. The rise in the 1820s and 30s of temperance and moral reform movements gave a new life to crusades against the expansion of public amusements in American cities, like David Hale’s crusade against

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 30 April 1833.

the new Tremont Theatre in 1827. Meanwhile, a growing male sporting culture eagerly consumed sensationalized tales of urban vice in the sporting papers of the “flash press.”¹⁵⁰ The next chapter will show the fraught efforts of how managers and critics to invoke and hail a genteel female audience in the context of the persistent overdetermined imagery of prostitution in urban space.

¹⁵⁰ Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, Helen Horowitz, eds., *Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Chapter 2

Establishing Theater on “Respectable Principles”: Gender, Class, and Feminine Spectacle Across the Footlights

In March 1842, a rumor circulated in New York that Charlotte Cushman, the most celebrated stock actress of the Park Theatre company, was launching a subscription drive to build a new theater in New York, further north on Broadway and closer to the heart of the city’s rapid growth. Only a year before, critics in major cities of the Northeast lamented that “almost every theatrical speculation” of the past two seasons had resulted in “complete failure.”¹⁵¹ Actors’ salaries went unpaid, theaters burned, and managers found themselves bankrupt. Cushman was determined to apply her experience as a stock actress in Philadelphia, New York, and Albany to theatrical management, but along new lines. Cushman planned to offer more affordable entertainments but without sacrificing the moral tone of the content and in a setting in which new rules of conduct governed audience behavior; in doing so, she would attract a broad popular audience that was also “respectable.” Cushman intended to sell box seats for 75 cents to the usual dollar price, forgo expensive star performers and instead rely exclusively on a stock company, and “abolish” the third tier of boxes “entirely.”¹⁵² The *Herald* editor James Gordon Bennett, an early subscriber for the project, was optimistic. “A theatre established on respectable

¹⁵¹ *New World*, 3 July 1841.

¹⁵² *New York Herald*, 18 March 1842.

principles, embracing the abolition entirely of the...third-tier manners and morals, and comprehending every element of dramatic wit, character, and human nature, purified, must succeed in New York,” he wrote enthusiastically, noting, “we have begun a general movement of reform in every thing—and why not in theatricals!”¹⁵³ Later that fall, Mr. Simpson, manager of the Park Theatre, would face—and resist—mounting pressures to close his third tier. In the spring of 1842, an accomplished and respectable dramatic actress such as Cushman seemed ideally poised to lead this new “movement of reform” in “theatricals.” The strained economic climate of the early 1840s also reduced the likelihood of competition for such a project, increasing the likelihood that a woman could move into this male-dominated enterprise.¹⁵⁴

Alas for Cushman, alas for New York. Despite the initial success of her subscription drives amongst the Knickerbocker and merchant elites of New York, the mortgagee of the original property became reluctant, it seems, to place his financial interests in competition with the Park Theatre. Cushman was also hampered by her dependence upon male financial backers. In the 1840s and 50s, actresses who aspired to build or even lease a theater found themselves at a severe disadvantage because they could not obtain credit without a male guarantor. Though it was Cushman who advertised for subscribers, John Astor held the purse strings of the original operation. Cushman located an alternative property on which to build, but prospective tenants demanded an additional financial bonus for permitting the construction of a theater in their immediate neighborhood. The entire arrangement fell through. Meanwhile, in

¹⁵³ Ibid., 22 March 1842.

¹⁵⁴ The Panic of 1837 thrust the United States into an economic depression that lasted into the early 1840s. Actresses pursuing theater management in the late-1850s would again take advantage of economic downturn, finding openings in otherwise saturated markets through which they became lessees. See Chapter 6.

Philadelphia, businessman E. A. Marshall had outbid his former partner William Dinneford for the lease of the Walnut Street Theatre and was casting about for a capable manager.¹⁵⁵ In August 1842, Cushman accepted Marshall's offer to manage the Walnut for the coming season, following the same ideals of respectability that she had intended for her New York theater. When Marshall first acquired the Walnut Street Theatre lease in 1840, he actively tried to position the theater as a champion of legitimate drama and appeal to family audiences, and he would continue to do so with theaters he leased in Philadelphia and New York during 1840s.

In Philadelphia, Cushman used her unprecedented position as "manageress" to mobilize a new politics of respectability around the theater. In her address delivered at the Walnut Street Theatre in October 1842, a month into the season, Cushman invoked an ill-defined past in which theatrical representations had been given "in a manner and style, that secured the constant attendance of a respectable and cultivated audience." Cushman constructed a vision of the theater as the center of a community of patrons who sustained the "play house" because of the quality of its representations and the respectability of the space itself. Theater was not merely visited by "people of fashion" interested in seeing "some favorite star" but rather its "boxes" would display the "smiling and happy faces of whole families."¹⁵⁶ The pit remained a male-dominated space, frequented by the "artisan and man of leisure," but Cushman clarified her particular role in shaping the culture of the space, insisting that "order and quiet" reigned "under my management." Cushman promised content worthy of the "respectable and cultivated" family audience she hoped

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Davis, *America's Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theatre* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 2010).

¹⁵⁶ Here Cushman is also participating in the ongoing critical debate over the effects of the starring system on American theaters.

to draw and retain. Her plays would inspire a “healthy tone of feeling” with their “morality and generous sentimentality.” Cushman understood that promises of content alone would not draw the audience she desired. Rather, constructing a vision of the audience itself and of the kind of public space she hoped to foster was critical to drawing the audiences that would enjoy her “choice company.”¹⁵⁷

Cushman’s vision of theater management was part of a gradual and embattled shift over the 1840s in the internal arrangement, public address, performance content, and culture of the theater, which took place in the context of a disastrous economic depression and competition with a range of alternative forms of amusements, including museums, concerts, and lectures. The *New World*, a literary monthly out of Boston, observed in 1841 that “churches, lectures and prayer-meetings, with concerts, balls and gossiping re-unions, by turns divide [the] attention” of the “theatre-going public.”¹⁵⁸ The *New World*, which was edited by Park Benjamin and Epes Sargent, both aspiring writers closely involved with theater, was invested in encouraging a theatrical establishment that could be “placed upon a respectable footing” and serve as a vehicle for moral and intellectual uplift as well as amusement. The call for a moral drama—not particularly new in the annals of theatrical criticism—gained an added urgency in the context of this competition with non-theatrical amusements. The growth and popularity of evangelical movements for social reform since the 1820s created a parallel culture of urban sociability and amusement in churches and lecture institutes, which gradually expanded to include concert-going as well. Critics who deployed a by-then familiar discourse

¹⁵⁷ Charlotte Cushman, “Address I wrote and published on taking management of the Walnut Theater,” Charlotte Cushman Papers, Library of Congress. Also see Lisa Merrill’s analysis of this address in *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan: 1999) 52.

¹⁵⁸ *New World*, 3 July 1841.

championing a moral drama did so within a context in which these other forms of amusement increasingly seemed like competition, as opposed to a parallel and non-intersecting world, not only because the current economic crisis stretched purses, but also because there *was* audience overlap between concert halls, lecture institutes, and the theater. Drawing in new audiences for theater meant *not* losing merchants, managers, or mechanics and their wives and daughters to lectures and concerts.

In America's expanding cities, the nature of public amusements and urban sociality became a battleground in the context of the increasingly popular movements for temperance, moral reform, and the rise of a variety of evangelical sects and forms of social and religious ultraism from the 1820s through mid-century, as reformers acted to reshape the urban landscape around a new set of social and religious imperatives.¹⁵⁹ Efforts like Cushman's can be viewed in part as a response to this ongoing battle. Starting in the 1820s, when prostitution and intemperance were "discovered" as social problems, social reformers rerouted the critique of theater from the hypocrisies of impersonation occurring on the stage and toward the social evils committed in the spaces of the theater.¹⁶⁰ Social reformers targeting the theater were primarily concerned with

¹⁵⁹ There is an extensive literature on northern social reform culture and women's participation in these movements. Significant studies include Susan Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Carolyn Lawes, *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jean Fagan Yellin and John Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, NY 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹⁶⁰ On the "discovery" of prostitution as an urban problem see Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 11.

opportunities for social mixture within these socially heterogeneous, semi-public urban spaces.¹⁶¹ In both temperance and moral reform, narratives of social danger were erected around new opportunities for social and physical mobility in the expanding American city.¹⁶² While social reformers were concerned with cleaning up the evils of society more broadly, in targeting public amusements they fixed upon sites of contact between classes, and in the case of the theater, sites where middle-class families and young women would encounter working-class rowdyism and the proliferating urban sex trade. Rising concerns with the dangers of urban leisure were connected with a historic class divergence between wage laborers, who were also a fast growing market for urban amusements, and a burgeoning class of middling men who held small amounts of capital and controlled—though did not necessarily buy and sell—other men’s labor and who identified with an alternate set of moral values as part of their bid for social mobility and respectability. These men and their wives and children were the main champions of social reform, particularly moral reform. They also posed a tantalizing new market for urban amusements. Efforts to reform and regulate spaces of public amusement responded to fears that these middle-class publics and more socially ambiguous class of single male artisan laborers might be corrupted by these spaces.

Likewise, prostitution became an object of reform efforts at the same moment in

¹⁶¹ I refer to commercial venues for amusement as semi-public spaces because while access was restricted to paying customers, these venues drew in diverse publics and functioned as a different kind of “embodied public sphere.” On theater as an “embodied public sphere” see Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: Theatre of the Atlantic, 1660-1850*, forthcoming.

¹⁶² For a cultural history approach to temperance see John Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Manhood Lost: Fallen Drunkards and Redeeming Women in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); John W. Crowley, ed., *Drunkard’s Progress: Narratives of Addiction, Despair, and Recovery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); David Reynolds and Deborah Rosenthal, *The Serpent in the Cup: Temperance in American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: the Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

which the laboring woman became visible as an urban reality.¹⁶³ As this chapter argues, the fixation on prostitution within theaters also marginalized and problematized the urban public presence of laboring women. From the 1820s onward, critics of the theater increasingly focused on prostitution and intemperance as *the* problems with theater and urban leisure, which dovetailed with the concerns raised by moral reformers and temperance advocates. Critics of theater and moral reformers who focused on the problem of prostitution made suspect certain women's participation in the cultural marketplace. The problem of the prostitute in the urban theater is a highly effective example of how class tensions in urban America were gendered and, in turn, mapped onto urban space. The presence of prostitutes in the theater and the perception of the prostitute's increased mobility within the theater threw a negative light on other women within theatrical space. This was particularly problematic for working-class women assembling in the pit or galleries and who could be read or hailed as prostitutes with more ease than the wives and daughters deposited in theater boxes, who suffered from

¹⁶³ On urban prostitution and moral reform in New York see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf 1985); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Larry Whiteaker, *Seduction, Prostitution and Moral Reform in New York, 1830- 1860* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997); Patricia Cline Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (Norton: New York, 1992); Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); on New England and Boston see Daniel S. Wright, "*The first of causes to our sex*": *the female moral reform movement in the antebellum Northeast, 1834-1848* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Barbara Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*; and battles over sexual knowledge Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); as well as Helen Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002); April Haynes, "Riotous Flesh: Gender, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice" (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009). Also see Rosemarie Bank's discussion of prostitution in the antebellum theater in *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

proximity to prostitution but on whom the prostitute was less likely to cast a shadow.¹⁶⁴

Managing the meanings of women's presence in theatrical space, as markers of respectability or of illicit sexuality, would play a key role in efforts to transform theatrical space from the 1820s through the 1850s. The gradual elimination of prostitution and alcohol from urban theaters and the reorganization of the theater interior was not solely an economic strategy in an increasingly saturated and competitive cultural marketplace. Moral reform movements created a new set of imperatives for the organization of urban life and leisure that had real effects on policy, but also created incentives for cultural entrepreneurs to reimagine the landscape of urban leisure.

But while the circulation of women in the theater auditorium was problematized and policed by theater critics, reformers, and managers, women were appearing on the stages of theaters in many new ways, introducing new forms of performance, like ballet. Reforms of theatrical space were always connected to questions about the meaning, morality, and class address of stage performances. In 1840, Viennese dancer Fanny Elssler introduced American audiences to a new style of French ballet. While Boston's reformers were lobbying city government to eliminate alcohol and prostitution, the "ladies" of Boston flocked to the Tremont Theatre to see the twirling sensation, celebrated both for her incredible ability to dance, fairy-like, on her toes as well as for the notoriety of her love affairs with the nobles of Europe. Elssler was nothing if not controversial. But other forms of female spectacle, like pantomime, were also widely popular with the family audiences that managers like Cushman and Burton were hoping

¹⁶⁴ On the importance of approaching the question of women in antebellum theater audiences critically, and the problematic erasure of women in theater audiences see the Introduction as well as Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 113-114.

to draw. The popularity of ballet pantomime productions like Cushman's 1842 *Black Raven of the Tombs* with "family" audiences seems at first glance a contradiction in terms, when in fact ballet and pantomime appealed precisely because they managed the moral implications of the speaking female body onstage, even as they displayed female bodies in new ways.

This chapter examines a historical convergence that contributed to the gradual transformation in the social organization and marketing of theatrical amusements. In the 1840s, the concerns and pressures of social reformers met the growing desire of managers to market to the broadest public. Social reformers feared the implications of social mixture afforded by the theater auditorium, particularly as female publics asserted their own desires as consumers and flocked to entertainments like ballet and pantomime spectacles. As individual theater managers attempted to hail a respectable public, the status of women in theatrical space was contested around signs of class: critics and reformers stigmatized rowdy female publics, designated them as prostitutes, and attempted to eliminate rowdy women out of fear that their behavior threatened the class status and respectability of middle-class women. The gradual elimination of third tiers and alcohol bars and reorganization of theater seating from the late 1830s onward was not solely an economic strategy to appeal to new markets, but also reflected the success of urban reform movements with local government.

I begin the chapter by placing the 1827 battle over the construction of the Tremont Theatre and ongoing debates about the third tier in the larger context of movements for moral reform, focusing on how discourses of prostitution policed working-class women. This provides a unique but important frame for considering the popularity of pantomime

and ballet in the 1840s, in Philadelphia under Cushman's management of the Walnut, and in Boston, where Fanny Elssler drew unprecedented crowds of "ladies" to the Tremont Theatre. I then return to the history of licensing reforms in Boston, a case study that demonstrates how social reformers successfully lobbied city government and contributed to changes in the content, physical organization, and marketing of theatrical amusements. The Boston example demands that historians of popular culture look more closely at other social and political factors and pressures shaping the expanding world of public amusements. The history of shifting publics of theatrical amusements was never solely a matter of the economic motivations of managers, but in fact involved a complex interplay in which female counterpublics within the theater and reform publics exerted pressures on managers who were actively seeking new and larger markets.

Danger in the Theater

Despite the best of efforts of David Hale and the other "fathers" of Boston who believed that a new theater would "be of a polluting and ruinous tendency" and exert a "demonizing influence" on the city, the scheme to build a new theater in Boston in 1827 succeeded.¹⁶⁵ In February 1827, a group of gentlemen of "public spirit and highly respectable character," sympathetic to the accusations of mismanagement long levied at the Federal Street Theatre, launched a subscription drive to solicit stock for what would become the Tremont Theatre. Over the course of the spring, a series of meetings were held in order to assemble a committee to obtain subscriptions, elect a board of trustees, and establish a code of by-laws for the corporation. By June, the Proprietors of the

¹⁶⁵ David Hale, *Letters on the new theatre* (Boston: s.n., 1827), 1-2.

Tremont Theatre were officially incorporated before the legislature of Massachusetts.¹⁶⁶

The new theater rose rapidly over the summer, and in September its arched marble entrances opened to the Boston public. The three arches led into a large hall, from which a staircase rose to the level of the dress circle boxes. Here, patrons could “promenade” through the “spacious lobbies,” which boasted separate drawing rooms for ladies and gentlemen where they could take refreshment—alcoholic refreshment, that is—from among the six bars. The allotment of space for sociability and display was carried over in the theater auditorium itself, where an oval arrangement of boxes angled upwards away from the stage not only prevented the “spectator’s view being interrupted by those on the seat before him,” but also encouraged lines of visibility between theatre boxes, and presented the auditorium itself as a spectacle. The Tremont Theatre boasted an additional novelty: cushioned seats in the boxes and cushioned benches with backs in the pit.¹⁶⁷ Though the Tremont seated far fewer patrons than the barn-like Federal Street (Boston) Theatre, this was in part its appeal. It was a more intimate theater space designed for comfort, sociability, and self-display. But the question of *whose* sociability and display would immediately become a matter of public debate.

The opening night festivities were designed to foreclose any debate as to the respectability of theater and its suitability as an entertainment for ladies. The bill featured *Wives as they were, and Maids as they are* by the late-18th-century English playwright Mrs. Inchbald, a comedy that solicited sympathy for the oppressions of

¹⁶⁶ Documents Concerning the Early Years of the Tremont Theatre, Harvard Theatre Collection.

¹⁶⁷ *Boston Courier*, 20 September 1827.

women in marriage, though within the confines of a suitably resolved marriage plot.¹⁶⁸

The prize address, written by Mr. James Jameison and delivered by the actor Mr. Blake, appealed to the “Friends of the Stage!” as “the friends of Virtue too.” The address, presented in verse, formed an image of the theater that was already deployed in the auditorium decoration: the theater as Temple of the Muses. While the proscenium decoration featured a bust of Shakespeare surmounting a chariot of Apollo attended upon by the muses, the prize address celebrated the “mortal Actor, as the immortal Bard” and imagined the Drama as a goddess offering to the audience, “Herself, her priest, and this her virgin fane,” or shrine.¹⁶⁹

However, the image of theater as a temple flew in the face of growing national concerns regarding the kinds of practices carried out on the far side of the proscenium, in the refreshment lobbies where alcohol was sold, and in the third tier of boxes. These concerns were connected with the growing culture of evangelical Christianity in American cities, particularly Boston, which in part mobilized in response to the migrant waves of wage laborers seeking employment and amusement in the city. Temperance emerged as a major social movement in the 1820s, championed by the growing managerial class. This mechanic elite saw intemperance as the major problem amongst laboring men, and embraced teetotalism both as a bid for respectability and class mobility, and as part of a larger project of social uplift that was integral to evangelical Christianity in this period.¹⁷⁰ In Boston, temperance advocates lobbied the city aldermen

¹⁶⁸ Mrs. Inchbald, *Wives as they were, and maids as they are* (D. Longworth: New York, 1813) in *Early American Imprints*, Series 2, no. 28806.

¹⁶⁹ The prize address appears in *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, D.C.], 2 October 1827; on the decoration *Augusta Chronicle*, 5 October 1827.

¹⁷⁰ The classic study on temperance and class politics is Joseph Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963). On social reform

to restrict the sale of liquor licenses and to more vigilantly police the rampant illegal sale of spirits. Theaters, as well as saloons, grog shops, and dance halls became major targets in efforts to clean up urban life and steer working men toward leisure pursuits more in keeping with the morality espoused by evangelical Christianity.

Theaters in early-nineteenth-century America were neither sponsored nor closely regulated by local or state governments, but were usually the product of joint-stock ventures and overseen by a body of stockholders who leased the theater and its bars to tenant proprietors. But both the theater and its bars were subject to city licensing requirements. Theater stockholders jealously guarded the considerable profits that accrued from theater bars. Managers frequently wrangled with stockholders over ticket prices and even programming, particularly following the Panic of 1837. For while stockholders theoretically had no say over the selection of plays and stars, the pressure on managers to keep the theater out of debt and protect the theater property from riots meant that contests over management practices were not infrequent. But the lines along which theaters were conducted were not entirely outside of the grasping reach of social reformers either. When reformers in Boston failed to prevent the construction of the Tremont Theatre in 1827, they rerouted their efforts toward the cause of regulation, repeatedly pressuring the city government to restrict sale of liquor licenses and take up measures to prosecute and prevent prostitution occurring within and around theater, as well as within other public and semi-public urban environments.¹⁷¹

and class formation see especially Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millenium: Society and Revival in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

¹⁷¹ Scholarship on efforts to eliminate bars, sale of liquors, and prostitution from theaters rarely focuses on

The concern of social reformers with the problems of urban space also created new imperatives for the creation of an alternative kind of amusement where the citizenry's wives, daughters, and sons ran no risk of rubbing elbows with drunken debauchees. The lecture halls of private societies and churches, like Boston's Masonic Hall and Tremont Temple, or Stuyvesant Institute in New York increasingly functioned as all-purpose semi-public spaces that could be rented for private or public meetings and paid or ticketed events like lectures and concerts. On the most basic level, they lacked a third tier or bar and so appeared to sidestep problems of prostitution and intemperance. The fact that these spaces were owned or leased by religious or educational societies further separated them from the moral ambiguities that clung to theater as an institution and as a space. The opening of Moses Kimball's Boston Museum, in 1841, and the rise in entertainments held in these spaces, particularly in the early 1840s, demonstrates how the combined impact of economic depression and evangelical reform culture created a demand for entertainment that resolved the problems of space raised by social reformers, while also operating within stricter parameters of acceptable content and according to a less expensive model. The Boston Museum contained a "lecture room" that featured non-theatrical entertainments, although even lecture room theaters gradually relaxed to include didactic plays like *The Drunkard*, first produced at the Boston Museum in 1844 by W. H. Smith and shortly thereafter at Barnum's American Museum in New York. Staging plays like *The Drunkard* was an important strategy used by Smith and Barnum to

the local politics within a specific marketplace. For example, in her chapter in the third row, Claudia Johnson surveys the practice of prostitution and its uneven elimination in the 1830s and 40s in theaters from Mobile and New York. As this chapter will show, when we look closely into a particular market like Boston, we discover important connections between theater reforms and local politics and social movements. Claudia Johnson, *Church and Stage: the theater as target of religious condemnation in nineteenth century America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2008).

market museum theater to audiences who eschewed theater due to religious scruples. But the organization and regulation of theatrical space and culture of the audience was at least as important to the pitch of these new venues as was the content of the entertainment. An entertainment at the Melodeon, the Boston Museum or Masonic Hall not only foreclosed the possibility of theatrical performance; these were also places where vice was less likely to go forth in disguise. Likewise, the Boston Museum sold no alcohol. P. T. Barnum prominently displayed his temperance pledge in his American Museum in the early 1850s, signaling his growing alignment with reform-minded respectability. Starting in the 1820s, as critics of theater increasingly placed the drama within the *audience* at the center of their indictments of theater and urban leisure, newspaper critics and theater managers took note and by the 1840s were beginning to rethink the organization of theatrical space in order to solicit audiences who may not have found theatrical performances objectionable but were deeply concerned with the moral misrule in theater audiences.¹⁷²

Scholarship on the ongoing and protracted efforts of managers to transform and remarket theater in the 1830s and 40s have frequently framed these marketing efforts as a response to an ongoing contest between expanding working-class publics and elites struggling to retain control over local entertainment markets. However, the relationship between marketing strategies, appeals to new publics, and social shifts can be parsed

¹⁷² On the history of the Boston Museum, Barnum's New York American Museum, and the creation of "family amusement" see Charles Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Wilson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980); Neil Harris, *Humbug: the art of P.T. Barnum* (1973; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Bluford Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jay Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); J. W. Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); and for a more detailed survey of the early years of the Boston Museum, Edward Mammen, *The Old Stock Company School of Acting: A Study of the Boston Museum* (Boston: Published by the Trustees of the Boston Library, 1945).

differently, as a contest over the meaning and markers of respectability relative to the expanding and heterogeneous middle class.¹⁷³ The class status of clerks and artisans was much more ambiguous than that of managers and petty proprietors, many of whom embraced evangelical religious imperatives and participated in social reform causes.¹⁷⁴ As managers of theaters, museums, and even lecture halls sought to widen the appeal of their theatrical and “paratheatrical” amusements, managing these spaces around gendered markets of class became increasingly important.¹⁷⁵ The proliferation of many forms and spaces of amusement in the 1830s and 40s cannot be simply mapped onto a three-tier class structure of elite, middle, and working class entertainments.¹⁷⁶ To the contrary, managers and entrepreneurs deployed a range of strategies to shape the class resonances of their entertainments, attempting to appeal to a broad public and draw in the biggest possible audience while alienating the fewest segments of society.¹⁷⁷ In the context of theater, the patronage of social and economic elites, the merchants, businessmen, lawyers, and bankers, many of whom held shares in theater corporations and served on the board of trustees, could not alone sustain a large-scale economic operation like the

¹⁷³ I am not rejecting the validity of this larger framing, but pointing out additional categories around which struggles over the ownership and marketing terms of public amusements played out. See David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850* (1968; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Peter Buckley, “To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1800-1850” (Ph.D. Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹⁷⁴ Sven Beckert, “Propertied of a Different Kind: Bourgeoisie and Lower Middle Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States” in *The Middling Sorts: explorations in the history of the American Middle Class*, edited by Burton J. Bledstein and Robert Johnston (Routledge 2001): 285-294.

¹⁷⁵ Peter Buckley, “Paratheatricals and Popular Stage Entertainment,” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870*, Vol. 1, edited by Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 424-481.

¹⁷⁶ Rosemarie Bank delivers a similar correction to historians who map a three-tier class structure onto New York three main antebellum theaters, the Park, the Bowery, and the Chatham. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 50.

¹⁷⁷ See above for scholarship on P. T. Barnum and class conflicts around public amusements.

Tremont Theatre, particularly in the context of mounting critiques of theatrical space. As managers increasingly struggled to assure their publics of the respectability of their entertainments and spaces of amusement, the question of how to mark this respectability increasingly turned upon the management of social behaviors and boundaries, not only around alcohol consumption, but performance of gender in the audience as well. The presence and behavior of women increasingly served as markers of respectability—or signaled suspect morality.

For in spaces where intemperance was allowed to flourish, prostitution also occurred. Prior to the gradual emergence, in the 1820s and 30s, of a new discourse constructing prostitution as an endemic social pathology, prostitution was classed within a broader category of urban vagrancy and treated as a form of disorderly conduct or public nuisance. One of the earliest movements to curtail prostitution in Boston that identified prostitution as a primary target of urban policing took place under Josiah Quincy's tenure as mayor, in the early 1820s. Quincy launched his crusade against prostitution in 1823 with a raid on the Hill, a notorious den of saloons and dance halls in the West End of Boston. Historian Barbara Hobson argues that Quincy's raids against prostitution were primarily concerned with its public visibility and were likewise a historically unprecedented use of mayoral office.¹⁷⁸ At the end of his tenure in 1826, prosecutions for prostitution fell off dramatically, until the 1830s when prostitution would emerge even more strongly into public discourse as a distinct kind of social problem, first in efforts to reform urban leisure, and increasingly as part of the moral reform movement to curtail "licentiousness" in all of its forms, from the home to the

¹⁷⁸ Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*.

theater.

In August 1830, a group of concerned citizens approached the Mayor and Aldermen of Boston with a “memorial” directed against the city theaters. The memorial referenced a license granted by the City Council to a “victualler” who had installed “six or seven bar room within the walls of each Theatre.” This, the memo contended, had led to “scenes of licentiousness” in the “third row” and refreshment salons that are “not exceeded in any bar room in the most degraded section of the city.” The interior arrangements of the theater were also cause for concern, particularly the “direct communication from the two first rows to the third,” which “furnished inducements as well as facilities for evil *communications*” between the men of good family who held \$1 tickets for the first and second tier of boxes, but who might easily be seduced into the 75-cent seats understood to be the domain of prostitutes.¹⁷⁹ And yet, the memo also conceded the legitimacy of theater as a form of leisure. The memo that was reprinted in the *New York Herald* appeared to be intended as palliative, rather than censorious. The concerned citizens feared that the availability of alcohol would convert “a place erected and opened, to furnish amusement by the exhibition of the drama” into a common “dram shop.” The combined “allurements” of spirits and sexual vice, the memorial claimed, were the “principal cause” of the “present degraded condition of our theatres.”¹⁸⁰ And so, they urged reform.

But the excerpt from the memo reprinted in an evangelical Christian periodical, *The*

¹⁷⁹ Cost of tickets at the Tremont Theatre were nearly double that of the Federal Street (Boston) Theatre, no doubt part of the attempt of the proprietors to market the Tremont as a more respectable venue, which in the late 1820s and early 1830s involved aligning it with elite patronage. Minimum ticket prices were usually established in the by-laws of the theater and managers had to petition the stockholders for any reduction or alteration in prices.

¹⁸⁰ *Morning Herald* [New York], 21 August 1830.

Spirit of the Pilgrims, reveals a deeper critique of the place of theater in the context of the urban economy and the domestic family economy. The third row “has become a disgusting scene of intemperance, profaneness, and licentiousness of manners.” The memo deployed metaphors of contagion, imaging vice and “misery” “diffused” through the family, causing the “honorable hopes of parents” to be “blasted, and forever.” The memo argued that theater functioned as a blight on the urban economy that reached into the home, where “ten thousand dollar are annually expended, chiefly for intoxicating draughts; and where a greater part of this sum is expended by minors, in the society of wanton and abandoned women!”¹⁸¹ The memo thus picked up an emerging discourse, espoused in juvenile advice literature, reform publications, and in the mandates of new institutions like the House of Refuge, Boston’s juvenile reformatory, founded in 1827, that was concerned with the threats the new urban environment posed to inexperienced youths. Shortly after the publication of the memo, in September, the Reverend Mr. Palfrey delivered a sermon in which he too joined the chorus outlining the “notorious abuses” that took place in the Tremont Theatre’s third tier, but with particular concern for the “lures held out to thoughtless young men.”¹⁸²

Increasingly, theater became problematic within a moral economy that a new literature of urban life was erecting around the wage labor system and that was primarily concerned with the practices of impressionable young men. The 1830 memorial anticipates advice literature like John Angell James’ *The Young Man From Home*, published in 1839, which warned young men to stay away from the theater, lest it lure them into sins of “drunkenness and debauchery” that are not only “evil themselves” but

¹⁸¹ “The Theatre,” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims for the Year 1830* (Boston: Peirce and Parker, [1830]), 598.

¹⁸² From *National Gazette* reprinted in *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington], 20 October 1830.

also “consume the fruits of your industry” and lead to “bad company.” James imagined an endless replicating cycle of dissipation and dishonesty that would jeopardize—nay, destroy—a young man’s hopes of success at a crucial period for the development of both material and moral character.¹⁸³ Advice literature was concerned with creating responsible moral citizens out of the young men who arrived alone in the big city seeking a livelihood. While this literature presented the issue as one of personal economy that had moral resonances, social critiques focused on what was for sale and censured theaters for creating a space, removed from the street, in which prostitution could flourish. Palfrey raised the stakes of the conversation with his contention that the theater was “*not merely an introduction to the brothel, but a brothel itself.*”¹⁸⁴

The proprietors of the Tremont Theatre responded immediately to what they saw as a direct challenge to their longstanding claim that the Tremont Theatre was, to the contrary, a more respectable theatrical institution that “preserved the most perfect order and decorum of which a theatre is susceptible.”¹⁸⁵ But their defense of the theater also rested upon a tacit acceptance of prostitution in accordance with longstanding tradition. The “complaint” against the Tremont has “always existed against all theatres, conducted on the English and American system of setting a place apart for women of ill fame.” The question with which the proprietors concerned themselves was whether a “direct communication” between the third tier and the lower boxes would have a reforming effect on prostitution in the third tier, as some proponents of the new arrangement contended, by “subject[ing] the persons frequenting that part of the house to greater

¹⁸³ John Angell James, *The Young Man From Home* (New York: American Tract Society, [1839], 24.

¹⁸⁴ Quoted with italics in *Spirit of the Pilgrims*, 598-599.

¹⁸⁵ *Boston Courier*, 11 November 1830.

restraint.” The overwhelming verdict, however, was “against” the more open arrangement.¹⁸⁶ The report concluded with a vote of confidence in the new manager, Mr. Russell, in a critical show of solidarity between corporation and management.

But the report also exposed the divergence of assumptions about the role played by a theater within a growing urban culture, between the interests represented by the stockholders, businessmen and merchants who also served as directors of Boston’s major financial institutions, and the reformers and evangelicals who were extending their missionary zeal from the street into semi-public institutions like theater. E. M. P. Wells, an Episcopalian clergyman and superintendent of Boston’s House of Refuge, when asked to testify to the Investigating Committee about the accusations, recounted his interviews with youths in his charge and on his occasional investigative ventures into the theater galleries. Wells concluded that the lure of theatrical amusements led boys into practices of dishonesty and rowdiness: “most in the gallery...had either come dishonestly, or...their families were suffering for lack of what they were spending there,” and many were there “with unlawful associates for the evening or night.”¹⁸⁷ Wells was alarmed by claims that the Tremont Theatre was a more regulated and refined place of amusement. He explained that unlike the Federal Street Theatre, “so coarse and vulgar as completely to disgust the refined as well as the virtuous,” at the Tremont “they have stripped vice of her squalid vulgar garb, and dressed her in the more decent, the counterfeit apparel of virtue.”¹⁸⁸ Claims to refinement on the part of a theatrical institution was an act of dissemblance tantamount to that which occurred on stage, but which could produce a

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Wells published these statements in a letter in the Boston papers correcting the representation of his testimony to the Investigating Committee. *Boston Courier*, 29 November 1830.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

disastrous effect in the community as a whole if people were successfully lured into a space where vice went about disguised as virtue. Wells claimed to have little experience with the third row and therefore little to say specifically about the problem of prostitution. Palfrey, however, placed the “brothel” that the theater had become at the center of his critique. And advice writers like John Angell James would take up the image of the prostitute as seducer of innocents, warning that the “youth who frequents the playhouse is almost sure to fall a victim to the lips of the strange woman,” whose “mouth is smoother than oil” but whose “end is bitter as wormwood” and whose “feet go down to death” and to “hell.”¹⁸⁹

The Problem of the Prostitute

Unlike intemperance, which was hard pressed to appear in masquerade, the image of vice in the “counterfeit apparel of virtue” was gendered female, and given a name increasingly on the lips of moral reformers: the prostitute. Female moral reformers in the 1830s would relocate the key agency within the practice of prostitution with the male seducer, instead of with the prostitute, as part of a powerful critique of male sexual privilege, but not before critics of the theater had constructed the prostitute as a problematic agent and form of contagion within the theater audience.¹⁹⁰ The narrative of the low woman, prostitute, servant, or milliner as seductress persisted in anti-vice and advice literature of the 1830s through the 1850s. And female moral reformers continued to be ambivalent towards women laborers, even within a critique that focused on male agency and female vulnerability. The working woman remained a constant threat.

¹⁸⁹ James, *The Young Man from Home*, 24.

¹⁹⁰ On moral reformers and the critique of male sexual privilege, see Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*.

A pamphlet published in Philadelphia in 1834 is indicative of the ways in which the problem of the prostitute could not be restricted to the third tier, but threatened to engulf the entire space of the theater. The pamphlet, “An enquiry into the condition and influence of the brothels in connection with the theatres of Philadelphia,” published by a self-designated “Friend of the Drama,” described Philadelphia theater as a space in which the rules of recognizability and social hierarchy were overturned by a “swarm” of prostitutes who parade “open and undisguised” and “exhibit their shamelessness.” The “Friend” described in lurid detail a wholesale migration of “immoral women” from the relative seclusion and invisibility of the third tier into the lower boxes and pit, where they seduced unsuspecting young men. The pamphlet was filled with anecdotal narratives of men who indulged in these seductions only to wind up “ruined in pocket, in reputation, in health, and despised by themselves and by their associates,” and living in the “Poor-house.”¹⁹¹ While the larger moral narrative and warning would have been familiar to any reader of advice literature, the “Friend” shifted the terrain of the threat and constructed the problem of prostitution in Philadelphia’s theaters as a problem of misrule. Previously, “it was generally understood by play-goers that visitors [sic] of that description were allotted, by general usage, a particular portion of the house from which they were not permitted to range” and to which the “rakes of the town” took their quarter.¹⁹² Lately, however, a coterie of women had made their way into the pit and lower tiers of the theater where, “dressed with an artless and simple taste, that gave to [their] attractive and pleasing countenance a most seductive charm,” these women could

¹⁹¹ *An enquiry into the condition and influence of the brothels in connection with the theatres of Philadelphia by a Friend of the Drama* (Philadelphia: (Published for the booksellers), 1834), 5.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 7.

“shoot [their] arrows right and left, into the boxes among the young gentlemen” of good family, seated with sisters and mothers—perhaps even wives.¹⁹³

This was not simply a problem of prostitution, which the “Friend” seemed to tacitly accept as unavoidable urban reality, or even of the visibility of prostitution, but rather a problem of recognizability. Restricted to the third tier, the prostitute was identifiable as such and no respectable woman would choose to seat herself in such quarters. The new dilemma lay in the ability of these women to masquerade as respectable girls. On the one hand, prostitutes “are immediately known by their dress,” and yet some might “vie in neatness and modesty with that of the fairest Quakeress of our city.”¹⁹⁴ This very indeterminacy, the success of the masquerade, made the prostitute an even greater threat. As the “Friend” noted, the pit and upper boxes were often “frequented by many respectable individuals,” among them clerks, apprentices and “young women and others of small means” who “make a virtue of necessity” and take their 25-cent seats to enjoy the “school of morals” on the stage. But the “Friend” feared that these humble patrons could easily “grow familiar with the ‘monster vice’ ” performed on their side of the footlights. Proximity to immorality, the “Friend” felt sure, could serve “as an easy introduction to a career of pleasure and infamy.”¹⁹⁵ These young women “of small means” would be lured into the profession and, in turn, drag unsuspecting young men with them into infamy.¹⁹⁶

This anxiety about the transparency of female character that the “Friend” captured

¹⁹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹⁶ Notice as well the focus on consumers who occupied a more ambiguous class status and lacked the guidance of family. These solitary workers away from home, laboring on the boundaries of class would jeopardize their social mobility if they succumbed to temptations of vice rampant in theaters.

was indicative of a central problem of America's expanding market economy, that wealth could buy social mobility and access to new social spaces, thereby realizing the promise of America's "open society."¹⁹⁷ Karen Halttunen has shown how middle-class Americans managed the problem of theatricality by creating a cult of sincerity, which was based on the idea of the external visibility of internal character.¹⁹⁸ And yet, the pamphlet by the "Friend" articulated the instability of this performance, particularly in urban spaces that allowed for a diverse intermingling of people. The very problems of recognizability that made the prostitute such a threat in the unregulated terrain of the pit and lower boxes could also have the opposite effect. If prostitutes could appear to be respectable young women, then respectable young women, the wives of clerks and apprentices, or the new population of wage workers arriving from the countryside, could be interpolated as prostitutes. While the "Friend" placed the problem of prostitution in the theater at the center of the text, the problem of the unaccompanied women was its actual target.

As this text demonstrates, the ability of women to move between different kinds of physical and cultural spaces was constantly complicated by the power and readiness of the term "prostitute" to capture the meanings of women's mobility and self display and to police boundaries around women's physical and economic mobility. Prostitution functioned as the central metaphor problematizing women's labor, and this in turn impacted women's mobility within the expanding cultural marketplace. Scholars have

¹⁹⁷ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1982). Also see Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

¹⁹⁸ Halttunen places this problem at the center of her analysis of American culture in this period. Her work on the confidence man and the problem of character informs my interpretation here.

demonstrated that prostitution was pervasive in the antebellum city.¹⁹⁹ And yet, contemporary literature that constructed as prostitutes women who lingered on city streets, sat in the pit of theater performances in feathered hats, or plied their needles for an hourly wage marked working women and women who were solitary and mobile as participants in a sexual economy. These women may have participated in a sexual economy, but did so within a broad spectrum that the label “prostitute” failed to capture; indeed, didn’t care to capture. Historian Christine Stansell argues that for working-class women in New York, exchanges of sex for money was an occasional practice that was one among many strategies of getting by. The rigid system of sexual virtue through which reforming men and women constructed the prostitute and described prostitution as a social problem rejected any ambiguities of moral and social meanings around sexual practice. All sex that occurred outside of marriage was a form of licentiousness that fed the social epidemic of prostitution.²⁰⁰ Regardless of the different sexual and moral codes of urban America, when critics and managers described all single women in theater audiences as prostitutes, they implicitly placed independent female wage earners within that category.²⁰¹

Young working women found themselves caught between a thriving sex trade and rapacious reformist zeal. The lurid and probably fictionalized tales of seduction printed in the sporting male papers of the “flash press” suggest how the urban sex trade and its thriving sensationalist print culture may have impacted how female wage laborers

¹⁹⁹ For an exhaustive study of prostitution in America’s great metropolis of New York, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*.

²⁰⁰ Stansell, *City of Women*, esp. Chapter 9 “Women on the Town: Sexual Exchange and Prostitution,” 171-192.

²⁰¹ Bank, *Theatre Culture in America*, 131-134.

navigated urban space. For example, a letter published in James Baker's *Boston Satirist* in 1842 purported to expose the factory town of Lowell, dominated by female mill-workers, as teeming with prostitutes. "Although Lowell is not cursed with brothels, yet the flaunting courtesan walks our streets as unblushing as the painted sepulchres of the New York pave," it explained, noting also that the crowds of factory girls produced a ripe harvest for "agents" sent to replenish the brothels of Boston. These girls "are decoyed away even from the factory gates." Such accounts also served as fantasies for a predominantly male readership that operated by enabling readers to imagine that any young woman wage laborer could actually be or become a "flaunting courtesan."²⁰²

These discourses may also have had a material effect on the lived experience of working-class women. Consider an expose in James Gordon Bennett's *Morning Herald* of "The late outrage by the Watch upon females," published in September 1838, when the Moral Reform Movement was enjoying rising popularity in New York. The article targeted the perceived excesses of vigilante reformers on patrol, in turn pointing out the dilemma that solitary wage-earning women faced in public urban spaces. The recent detention of twenty to thirty women, taken up by these "indefatigable guardians of the night" and held overnight suggested an abuse of power and denial of liberty that the originators of New York's blues laws "never contemplated." "We have arrived at a fine state of morals, indeed," the editorialist declared,

If every female who may have occasion to walk through the public streets of any evening, and thinks proper to converse with a friend or a relative...shall be adjudged guilty of infamy, charged with the blackest crimes by every minion power, and dragged by them through the public streets, like a malefactor, thrust

²⁰² *Boston Satirist*, 19 October 1842. For analysis of the flash press see Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Horowitz, eds. *Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

into a loathsome dungeon, and be compelled to remain there nearly two days before a hearing of her case is granted.

There followed an extended explanation of all the innocent circumstances in which young women might chance to speak alone to a man in the street, which should urge restraint upon the watchmen. The theater was another matter entirely: “If the magistrates wish to correct the public morals...let them visit the theatres in their judicial capacity.”²⁰³

For this public advocate, the theater, in contrast to the street, provided a more stable site wherein to identify and police licentiousness. But the ways in which prostitution was more easily recognizable in the theater again suggests a class politics of gender performance. Targeting decorous working women in the city streets was a challenge to their liberty. On the other hand, in theaters, where prostitutes were known to flourish, targeting boisterous women was imperative for protecting “our wives, daughters, and sisters” from proximity to infamy. The writer counted upwards of “eighty abandoned women” at the Park “all entering at the same door with virtuous females—the pure and impure, all mixed up together in one indiscriminate mass.” How the pure were to be distinguished from the impure remained unclear. The problem raised here was not that innocent wage earners might be identified and targeted incorrectly as prostitutes, but rather that “the chaste young maiden, brought to the Park Theatre for the first time in her life, by her brother, from the country, has to be jostled and elbowed in the lobby for five minutes by these shameless creatures” and listen to their “obscene” talk. Like the Philadelphia pamphleteer, Bennett also raised the problem of social mixture, but with a different inflection. Bennett was not concerned that prostitutes might masquerade as Quaker maids. Rather, in a space in which prostitution was a known quantity, loud,

²⁰³ “The late outrage by the Watch upon females,” *Morning Herald* [New York], 10 September 1838.

uncouth women who did not follow conventions of decorum modeled by the ideal maiden sister—from the country, of course—marked themselves as prostitutes and legitimate targets of magistrates and vice squads.²⁰⁴ Bennett lamented that magistrates were too willing to attend theatrical representations to “joke” and “gossip with play actors,” rather than “drive away” the men who kept brothels and hack cabs and who “send into those theatres abandoned women” to seduce young men—clerks and young merchants in particular—into infamy.²⁰⁵

While female moral reformers were also deeply concerned with the occasions for seduction of innocent men by unscrupulous courtesans that theater lobbies and boxes facilitated, these commentators flipped this narrative around and constructed a scenario in which men became the seducers and the primary agents of sexual vice.²⁰⁶ Female reformers crafted a narrative that imagined men as wolves preying on the innocent lambs newly arrived from country farms to earn money in the expanding wage labor market. This narrative, in turn, shifted the focus away from efforts to reform prostitutes—though this continued to be a controversial strategy within the moral reform movement—and toward prevention. Instead of warning men away from licentious females, a strategy embraced by male reformers and that is reflected in much of the 1830s literature on theater prostitution, female moral reformers articulated a broad critique of *male*

²⁰⁴ Of course, one detects in this as well a gendered strategy for targeting the kinds of rowdy audience behavior that critics and managers were also struggling to eliminate.

²⁰⁵ Moral reformers were currently lobbying city government to regulate hack cabs, which were notorious for abducting young women.

²⁰⁶ The influence of this discourse is apparent in the *Herald* piece as well. Men commandeer brothels and hack cabs that bring women into the sex trade. While the *Herald* piece thus participated into a growing recognition and condemnation of male responsibility and culpability for the sex trade, notice how constructions of female agency flip, from the extreme innocence of female victims of vice raids and country sisters rubbing elbows with theater prostitutes, to the “wretches” who curse, swear, jostle, seduce and pollute the theater indiscriminately.

licentiousness and devoted themselves to helping women learn to protect themselves against male seducers. Much of their literature focused on the problem of young women new to the city. But even as female moral reformers succeeded in highlighting and stigmatizing male sexual vice, they also remained deeply ambivalent about the relationship between female wage labor and the practice of prostitution, along similar lines as the Philadelphia “Friend.”

Female moral reformers participated in a larger discourse shared by other reform organizations and advice writers about the dangers of bad company and the dangers of vanity. The didactic narratives in moral reform periodicals like the *Friend of Virtue* and the *Advocate* warned young women away from cab drivers, employment agencies, and theaters, as well as from the seductions of ribbons and feminine frippery. A series of articles published in the New York *Advocate of Moral Reform* on the “Temptation and Perils of Young Females” was directed especially at “young women, you of the working class” who are also the “*most honorable class*,” the *Advocate* assured readers, *if they followed the appropriate habits of dress, reading, and deportment.*²⁰⁷ But “too often,” the *Advocate* warned, a young woman who “can earn at best but a scanty pittance” and “desired very naturally to dress as well as others” forgets the Biblical injunction against covetousness and “adds to her sin by accepting the proffered gift from the hand of the gay deceiver, that she could not have earned by honest labor.”²⁰⁸ Moral reformers feared that a taste for ribbons and feathers were dangerous to the vulnerable country maid who might slip into casual prostitution to fulfill her desires in a burgeoning consumer marketplace, so they wrote urging vigilance against such desires and indulgences. They likewise

²⁰⁷ *Advocate of Moral Reform*, 1 February 1849.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15 January 1849.

warned young women away from environments where they might become acquainted and comfortable with immoral and lascivious company and fall prey to seducers.

But female moral reformers remained uncertain whether prostitutes were evil seductresses or innocent victims. The reaction of Boston's leading moral reform periodical, the *Friend of Virtue*, to the opening of the Tremont Theatre for the 1838 season illustrates of this tension between their larger critique of the system of male sexual license and their treatment of the prostitute. The narrator slips between tropes of female victimization and female sexual depravity. While the theater itself is a vile seducer, the *Friend* warned readers that its seductions straddle the footlights. For the "antidote" to the theater's base stimulation of "illicit passions" and "the lower feelings of our nature" lay close at hand, in the "unhappy beings who are at once the victims and instigators of man's depravity." The *Friend of Virtue* emphasized the problems of proximity, that Boston's "first citizens" would bring their "innocent daughters" to be corrupted not only by the exhibitions on stage, but also by the proximity of "the more real tragedies off the stage—the unblushing visage of lust, full of disease and crime, staring virtue out of countenance and triumphing in the unbridled license which the time and place confer upon her."²⁰⁹ The *Friend of Virtue* balked at this proximity to the prostitute's steady gaze.

And yet, if moral reformers were horrified by the prospect of sitting in close quarters with and looking upon vice undisguised, other narratives published in their journal reminded readers that seduction and licentiousness could occur anywhere that

²⁰⁹ *Friend of Virtue*, August 1838.

vanity and sexual indulgence went about unchecked, even in the home.²¹⁰ The tropes in fiction of the 1830s through 1850s borrowed from the cautionary tales that circulated in moral reform periodicals of the same period, but reform periodicals wrestled with the degree to which working women in their pursuit of a livelihood could step easily from innocence and passivity into exercise of a dangerous sexual agency. Cautionary tales frequently focused on particular places, like boarding houses, depots, or theatres in which physical, and therefore social, boundaries were unstable, thereby enabling dangerous forms of socialization. The tropes of the seamstress or milliner as seductress and the millinery shop as front for brothel were built around moral suspicions that associated the fashionable women with the prostitute, an image which was then deployed selectively around fashionable women in theater audiences.²¹¹ Gamber demonstrates how frequently in antebellum literature the milliner appeared as a sexually suspect figure, as in Justin Jones's *Tom, Dick, and Harry; or, the Boys and Girls of Boston* (1849), and fashionable women in theater audiences were marked as prostitutes, from the urban sensationalism of George Foster's *New York By Gaslight* (1850) to the popular novel *Caroline Tracy* (1849). While moral reform literature warned unsuspecting girls about the evils of

²¹⁰ In *Church and Stage*, Claudia Johnson argues that the obsession with the third tier in discussions of prostitution can be attributed to the "tier's violation of the supreme Victorian value of concealment" where "cultured people...came face-to-face with the dark side of society in the third tier." Although Johnson's point is taken, theater was not the only context in which prostitution went about undisguised. While the theater was unique in isolating the prostitute in the third tier, I think it is interesting that much of the contemporary discourse about prostitution actually dealt with it in the context of problems of the anonymity of urban life and the threat of the confidence man. Moral reform journals are filled with stories of young women abducted by cab drivers or of employment agencies and boarding houses that were merely fronts for brothels. The 1834 pamphlet from Philadelphia demonstrates that even the existence of the third tier failed to contain prostitution or isolate the prostitute as a stable figure. Furthermore, as other scholars like Rosemarie Bank have also pointed out, the obsession with prostitution in the theater must be understood in the context of women's emergence as wage workers. See Bank, *Theater Culture*, 138.

²¹¹ Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 18. Gamber points out that the line between the "good" milliner and the prostitute was drawn around the problem of ambition and entrepreneurship. Unlike the millinery shop owner turned madam, "good" tradeswomen were unambitious, workers rather than proprietors, and always passive victims of sexual villainy.

boardinghouses, they also warned respectable families to have care in the women they brought into their homes as domestic servants and seamstresses. One tale, directed as a warning “To Husbands,” published in an early 1839 issue of *Friend of Virtue*, described the experiences of a Mr. G. and his wife, who ill-advisedly “left the quiet of private life, to manage the affairs of a public house,” where they employed a young woman as seamstress. Mr. G found himself drawn in to the company of this “syren seamstress” by the “fatal influence of her tongue”—she liked to converse with him while at her needle. This boundary-crossing dialogue ended up destroying the fortunes of the tavern, as the landlord succumbed to “laziness and inattention” while Lucinda the seamstress sought from him “gay apparel” and “expensive furniture” for the house. The warning of the article was both to the husband, for being seduced by the attentions of Lucinda, and to his wife, for allowing their private domestic life to be drawn into the marketplace through the allure of entrepreneurship, which made her family vulnerable to a duplicitous confidence woman.²¹²

These tropes defining the moral and sexual threat posed by unmarried, wage-earning young women first emerged in the context of the major explosion of female wage labor in the 1820s, and cohered in moral reform discourses of the 1840s, which brought proscriptive discourses about the moral perils of the pursuit of fashion to bear on working women as well as married women aspiring to middle-class respectability. By the 1850s, as moral reform discourse increasingly shifted its focus to the education of children and management of morality in the home, the struggle over urban space seems to have been

²¹² *Friend of Virtue*, 1 Aug 1839. Also see Wendy Gamber’s discussion of the boardinghouse, which she uses to explore concerns about the permeability of the home to market transactions. Wendy Gamber, “Tarnished Labor: The Home, The Market, and the Boardinghouse in Antebellum America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* (Summer 2002): 177-233.

ceded, in part because reform periodicals were losing some of their target publics to the consumer marketplace of goods and leisure. “Strange as it may seem,” Charles K. Whipple wrote in *The Liberator* in 1846, while the Mayor and Aldermen of Boston were hearing petitions urging licensing reforms for the “suppression” of the third row of Boston’s theaters, “respectable women...do go to such places.” That was precisely the problem, the proximity of the “respectable” to the “assembly of harlots.” An anonymous observer was shocked to discover the repeated occurrence of “well-dressed married men [who] leave their families in the box, at the interim between the plays, go to the third row, make a sign to some female” only to return in a half an hour “having, it was presumed by them, been out just to escape the restraint of posture” or to “sip a little refreshment.” More shocking still, “those respectable men’s wives think they have no concern with the third row.” *The Liberator* admonished readers that “all the pure wives and mothers in the city, should *make* it their concern” at the very least looking out for “somebody’s husband or son, if not her own.”²¹³ This piece, reprinted two months later in the *Friend of Virtue*, after the Mayor and Alderman *had* introduced considerable reform to the licensing laws, suggests that while the public of these periodicals shared a deep concern with the impact of social mixture and proximity of sexual depravity upon the moral integrity of the middle-class family, there were otherwise “respectable” wives and mothers who were either convinced that the theater did not jeopardize their own and family’s respectability or acted on that concern without absenting themselves from theater audience. While moral reformers panicked about spaces where immoral and covetous young women threatened the sanctity of the family, whether drawn into the home as domestic servants

²¹³ *Liberator*, 18 September 1846.

or drawing husbands away from wives in the unstable environment of the theater, theater managers like Charlotte Cushman and E. A. Marshall worked to assure their publics that these concerns were outsized, that the sanctity of the family and Christian values would not be threatened either by the culture of the audience or the type of entertainments on the stage, that other far more subtle seducer.

Respectable Spectacle and “Divine” Femininity Onstage

At the end of the 1842-1843 season, the editor of the *Pennsylvanian* congratulated Charlotte Cushman for having “reformed a house once boisterous, riotous and vulgar, now quiet, attentive and respectable in its audience.” Under Cushman’s “industrious and able” management, “citizens who were before compelled to stay away from all theatrical representations” now brought their families to witness the “purest specimens of the drama.” Cushman’s reform of the Walnut Street Theatre was twofold. She drew in a new class of patrons with the promise of a well-conducted theater without prostitution or rowdiness, while also presenting the “pure drama.” The category of “pure drama” was capacious and ambiguous. It suggested productions that would not offend prurient sensibilities with tales of illicit love affair—like the Restoration-era comedies that were controversial but popular repertoire in American theaters—or newer plays that appealed to the pit-ites—male working-class audiences—by bringing working-class vernacular voices onto the stage. Even Shakespeare was frequently bowdlerized to eliminate low comedy or sub-plots involving illicit romantic intrigues. In fact, in the 1830s and 40s the kinds of theatrical entertainment least likely to offend, or alternately, that could appeal across a broad range of moral, social, and aesthetic sensibilities were scenic pantomime

spectacles like Cushman's 1842 Christmas production, *The Black Raven of the Tombs*.

Black Raven became the most popular and successful production of the season and continued to run—though alternating with other bills, as was customary—from December into March. *Black Raven* was designed to appeal broadly to the family audiences who were the key market for the Christmas piece but is representative of the larger genre of pantomime spectacles that seemed a more respectable alternative to drama. European pantomime artists like Celeste Elliot and the Ravel family of acrobats first popularized these entertainments in America in the 1830s. Cushman had direct experience with pantomime. In 1840, she appeared in William Burton's production of *Naiad Queen* at the National Theatre in Philadelphia, which featured an elaborate “bath scene” with women as luxuriating sea nymphs, while in another, Cushman led an army of fifty amazons clad in shining armor over tights.²¹⁴ *Naiad Queen* was such a success that it salvaged a financially disastrous season in Philadelphia and provided Burton's entry into the New York market.²¹⁵ Spectacles like *Naiad Queen* and *Black Raven* ran for months at a time, drawing in larger, more consistent audiences than touring stars, thus enabling managers to recoup the costs required to paint elaborate scenery, construct a range of mechanical devices, and hire extra ballet corps. Cushman's production of *Black Raven* followed and built upon this successful model, heightening the fairytale qualities that could commend the production to the family audiences who were the target public for her theater.

Playbills for *Black Raven* promised a “Gorgeous and Costly New Pantomime”

²¹⁴ See reviews of the productions mounted by Burton in Philadelphia 1840-1841 and New York in 1841 in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *New York Herald*.

²¹⁵ Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 49.

featuring “New And Magnificent Scenery, Dresses, Properties, Curious Mechanical Changes, Rapid Transformations, Unique Dances, &c.” A complete synopsis on the bill left little mystery as to the plot, which followed a familiar virtue-under-threat model in which the evil villain is ultimately punished. “The interest of the Pantomime hinges upon the adventures of the lovers, Flodardo and Marie” as they attempt to escape the evil Signor Montano, a “notorious Roue” who has designs upon Marie. The lovers are aided by the magic and counsel of the “BLACK RAVEN” in their “numerous escapes” from the “continued persecutions of Montano, till, at length, a dreadful punishment overtakes him.” The bill announced that this piece was based on a similar piece of *Mazulme! The Night Owl* presented at Niblo’s Garden in New York, a venue associated with both fashionable society and respectability.²¹⁶ Linking *Black Raven* to Niblo’s was an intertextual appeal to publics who preferred forms of amusement that occurred outside the theater and to those publics who aspired to emulate the tastes and practices of fashion.²¹⁷

Examining the popularity of dance and pantomime demonstrates the complex construction of femininity that facilitated appeals to family audiences. Managers hoping to appeal to a middle-class public by invoking categories like “family amusement” promised their publics that prostitutes and forms of working-class rowdiness—or working-class femininity that could be hailed and collapsed with the category of prostitute—would be absent. And yet, the performances that were successfully marketed as “family amusement” included forms of dance, pantomime, and acrobatics that

²¹⁶ “Immense Novelty. Walnut St. Theatre,” n.d., Library Company of Philadelphia.

²¹⁷ On Niblo’s and “fashionable” audiences see Chapter 4.

displayed female bodies in new ways.²¹⁸ In fact, in the 1830s and 40s, dance pantomime became a crucial category of entertainment that managed public anxieties about the moral content of drama and disruptive audiences. In the 1830s, dance pantomime artists from continental Europe, like the Ravel Family acrobat troupe and pantomime artist Celeste, followed English actors to seek financial opportunities of American stages. Performers like the Ravel Family were the first kinds of entertainments presented in museum theaters. The Boston Museum featured concert artists, dramatic readers, and rope dancers for three seasons before finally wrangling a stock company to introduce *The Drunkard* in 1844. Managers discovered that these performances bypassed concerns about the capacity of embodied linguistic performances to serve as a vehicle for immortality. These performances were framed by Orientalizing contexts, in the case of Celeste as the “dumb Arab boy” and the Italianate setting of *Black Raven*, and by sentimental and diminutive discourses, exemplified by the repertoire of “dumb boy” roles and descriptions of “divine” fairy-like ballerinas such as Fanny Elssler and Hermione Blangy. One of the most popular pantomime celebrities of the 1830s, Madame Celeste, impersonated a succession of “dumb body” breeches roles, which may have functioned as a “leg show” but in which her muteness and juvenile persona managed the explicit sexuality of the performance.²¹⁹ Compared to the silenced boy-woman, the embodied articulate actress could pose a more serious kind of social, cultural, and moral threat. While many remained shocked, particularly by Elssler, femininity as silent spectacle

²¹⁸ Opera is another key genre that was part of this shift. I have, however, chosen to focus on dance and female spectacle, because they provide the best illustration of my argument about the politics of the female body in commercial space. My reading also complicates interpretations of female bodily spectacle as intrinsically problematic for ideals of respectable consumption.

²¹⁹ Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

conformed more readily to the dictates of an anxious reform-Protestant morality than dramatic theater, displacing the threat of female orality.²²⁰

Fanny Elssler's celebrity tours in the early 1840s matched the sensation produced by Fanny Kemble a decade before, and made women visible as spectators. Women anxious to see Elssler took over theaters to the point of displacing men and working-class publics entirely—this in part a function of the higher prices that managers discovered they could charge for so anticipated a celebrity, even in 1840. Elssler arrived in New York from Paris in May 1840 and commenced a tour of the eastern metropolises. She had reputedly turned down a contract with the Paris ballet to accept Henry Wickoff's offer of a lucrative American tour, and New Yorkers clamored for a chance to see the woman known as "Europe's idol." The *Herald* was frankly shocked by the "*furore*" at the Park Theatre that May. Women hoping for box seats had to obtain tickets "many nights beforehand" because of conventions according to which "respectable" women avoided the pit, which was regarded as a rowdy male-dominated domain that only a

²²⁰ I am not arguing here, like Faye Dudden, that visuality replaced aurality as the dominant mode according to which female performers were evaluated and consumed. Rather, forms of oral/aural and visual female performance coexisted across the nineteenth century, but the terms according to which different forms of female performance and the value and danger their afforded were judged never remained constant. The examples I provide here demonstrate that forms of orality could be more suspect than visuality, especially in the 1830s and 1840s when prostitution and forms of rowdy female public behavior were being attacked by reformers committed to regulating men and women's behavior in public space according to genteel standards. The problem of talking female bodies recurs in the long history of female performance in nineteenth-century America. In the late 1860s, Lydia Thompson's *British Blondes*, an all-female British burlesque troupe, scandalized critics and audiences when her production of *Ixion* moved from the working-class Broadway Theatre to Niblo's Garden. The problem, historian Robert Allen emphasizes, was not "nudity" per se, but a nudity that talked back. While Niblo's had enjoyed ballets like *The Black Crook*, which pushed the boundaries of scant costuming in 1866, Thompson's performances reunited witty, even bawdy lyrics with the breeches-clad female performer. Her saucy songs changed the meaning of her body, producing a "horrible prettiness" that defied expectations about the acceptable presentation of the female body and female sexuality and rendered the performance scandalous. Burlesque in the late 1860s was a departure from decades of pantomime and ballet in which scantily clad female bodies were contained by diminutive and sentimental discourses, epitomized by the career and celebrity of Viennese dancer Fanny Elssler. Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 77, 25; Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

prostitute would frequent—again, a construction that collapsed the working-class girls who joined the crowd in the pit into the category of prostitute.²²¹

But the demands of female consumers transformed even these conventions of spectatorship. Over the summer of 1840, theaters in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and New York were “crammed to suffocation.” The “usual rules” of seating and pricing were thrown over. The pit was “turned into boxes for ladies,” all seats went for the same flat rate, and speculators discovered the windfall they could realize selling tickets at auction, which brought “nearly four times the usual price of admission.”²²² Critics lavished as much attention on examples of “Elssler Mania” and the draw of her celebrity as upon the content of her performance. Elssler’s celebrity defied expectations about the audience of public amusements, particularly given the notoriety of her affairs with European royalty as well as rumors that also circulated insinuating improprieties with her manager Wickoff. James Gordon Bennett noted, in a proverbial surrender of critical authority to the power of Elssler’s celebrity,

In spite of all that we, and the saints, and the hypocrites, and the penny critics, and the temperance people, and all other wise fools, can say in favor of sobriety, philosophy, and the pleasures of home; the people, and particularly the ladies, will not stay away from the theatre on the night of Fanny’s appearance.²²³

Like Kemble before her, and Anna Mowatt after, Elssler revealed the potential market power of “the ladies.” Sustaining their patronage beyond the isolated phenomenon of female celebrities proved more difficult.

In August, the *Herald* recounted the incident that would become enshrined in Elssler lore as indicative of the “mania” attending her celebrity—or alternately reveal the

²²¹ *Morning Herald* [New York], 21 May 1840.

²²² *Ibid.*, 1 August 1840.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 29 May 1841.

slavishness with which American audiences greeted foreign stars. After her performance in Baltimore, crowds swarming the theater had unhorsed her carriage and led it through the streets to Barnum's hotel, where they "startled inmates in their nightcaps" with their cheers and songs. The "smiling, the bewitching Fanny, descended from her car triumphal" and "skipped up the steps of the hotel." Thereupon she "curtsied" to the "brazen-voiced crowd," and delivered in "trembling tones"—this the only hint of what fear might have gripped a woman whose carriage was unhorsed by a mob—one of the trite heavily-accented speeches of gratitude that critics fixed upon in constructing her infantilized public image.²²⁴ This image also helped manage competing interpretations of her dancing.

Audiences were equally transfixed and troubled by her performance, particularly the wonderful leaps and twirls that lifted Elssler's diaphanous white skirts to expose her legs. As many scholars have recognized, critics managed the sexuality implicit in the new genre of French ballet through sentimental discourses that celebrated the "divine Fanny" and constructed her performance as an ethereal and spiritual dance.²²⁵

Lithographic portraits of Elssler and other European ballerinas depict these women as slender, bone-less sylphs. In an 1846 lithograph by N. Currier of Elssler in "The Shadow Dance" Elssler's sloping shoulders defy biology, and her tiny pointed feet seem hardly able to support her spinning form, however slight. [Figure 6.] But the environment in which this "divine" dance was performed also mattered. The reading of Elssler's performance was shaped by the reading of her publics. Ralph Waldo Emerson was

²²⁴ Ibid., 1 August 1840.

²²⁵ On Elssler's career and American tour see Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; Maureen Costonis, "The Personification of Desire: Fanny Elssler and American Audiences," *Dance Chronicle* 13, no. 1 (1990): 47-67; Ivor Guest, *Fanny Elssler* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1970).

enthralled by Elssler's performance in Boston in October 1841, and wrote in his journals of the poetics of her dancing. She seemed to him a study in contrasts, the grace and beauty of her dancing "enhanced by this that is strong & strange, as when she stands erect on the extremities of her toes" and by the "variety & nature of her attitude." Emerson was convinced that the "surpassing grace" of Elssler's dancing "must rest on some occult foundations of inward harmony." This was no immoral spectacle, but poetry in motion. Significantly, in a rather remarkable inversion of the customary terms of theater criticism, Emerson argued that the merit or danger of Elssler's performance was not inherent to the performance itself, but rather "lies wholly with the spectator." Was ballet poetry in motion or a lewd performance by a notorious mistress of the King of Prussia? The "immorality the immoral will see" but "the pure will not heed it."²²⁶

Emerson asserted that company and environment was everything. "I should not think of danger to young women stepping with their father or brother out of happily guarded parlors into this theatre to return in a few hours to the same; but I can easily suppose that it is not the safest resort for college boys who have left Metaphysics, Conic Sections, or Tacitus to see these tripping satin slippers," he reflected. On this last point, moral reformers would have been in agreement, for Emerson was echoing what they had long argued as part of their crusades against theater bars and third tiers, that environment and company was both the safeguard and the greatest threat to moral life. If theater was a space where women and families could go, Emerson need have no fear for young women of his acquaintance stepping out with father or brother, although for Emerson, the necessity of male guardianship, men as protectors of morality, was unquestioned. But

²²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Volume VIII, edited by William H. Gilm and J. E. Parson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1970), 109-111.

dance also seemed less likely to threaten moral scruples than some of the narratives found in plays.



Figure 6. N. Currier, “Fanny Ellsler in the Shadow Dance” (New York: Published by N. Currier, 1846), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C.

A diary entry by Boston-native Caroline Dall, who ventured into the theater to see Ellsler perform in 1841 despite her personal scruples, demonstrates how critical discourses could reframe a performance, establishing clear expectations for viewers. In contrast to the sylph Dall would have expected from newspaper coverage, she discovered that Ellsler possessed “the largest foot and ankle [sic] I ever saw—on a woman.” Dall admired Ellsler’s slender arms but criticized her large hands, and felt that in the dress Ellsler wore “her bosom seemed deficient and the bones of her neck far too prominent.” Nor did Dall consider Ellsler pretty, but complained that she “laughs too much—with a

broad ugly mouth an expanded forehead—and quick roquish eyes.” This prominent forehead, in phrenological terms, suggested to Dall that Elssler possessed an “immense intellectual development.” Though Elssler’s “naive childish manner...quite charms,” Dall concluded, “she did not realize my conception.”²²⁷ The “real” Elssler lay somewhere between the idealized sentimental portrait in the press and Dall’s rather cutting scrutiny of Elssler’s body and manner. But if we attempt to separate the values Dall assigned to Elssler’s body and physiognomy, we can begin to imagine what Dall may have seen, a muscular dancer and charismatic performer whose physicality threatened to destabilize the sentimental characters she portrayed in the ballet of *La Sylphide*. Critical discourse erected a powerful scaffold of meaning around her dancing body that legitimated Elssler’s popularity with her female middle-class audience and helped them understand what they were seeing. But critical discourses did not create the female publics for Elssler’s performance. Women who swarmed theater pits to see Elssler made their own values and interests culturally central and materially visible.

Cushman rejected the cost of a star like Elssler, preferring instead to design elaborate productions built around her stock company and ballet corps, but the continued success of pantomime spectacles followed from the lesson of Elssler’s celebrity. Not all critics were comfortable with the popularity of stars like Elssler, and their concerns expose the tensions between the categories of critics and the desires of expanding theater-going publics. Did critics insist upon the “exquisite modesty” of Elssler’s dancing to manage the implications of her popularity with female publics? What would it say about the “educated and accomplished female portion of society” if critics insisted that Elssler’s

²²⁷ Caroline Healey Dall, *Selected Journals of Caroline Healey Dall*, edited by Helen Deese (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2006), 383.

dancing was something other than exquisitely modest?²²⁸ The circularity of these assessments of performance and audience are maddening. Which came first, the “modesty” of Elssler’s dancing or the “proportion of splendidly dressed young ladies” in the audience? Like Kemble, Elssler arrived on American shores to publics already familiar with some of the terms according to which Elssler was lauded throughout Europe. And not all accepted them. A correspondent of the *New York Mercury*, reprinted on the front page of a Philadelphia Whig paper, the *North American and Daily Advertiser*, rejected the poetic gloss around Elssler’s dancing and noted pointedly that it was this “opportunity of seeing forbidden sights under an inoffensive name and in a fashionable way” that drew gentleman and ladies who under other circumstances, “if indecency had been advertised by its proper name...would have been ashamed to go near it.” The correspondent’s lament was over the decline of the legitimate drama of Shakespeare, which he felt was passing away like Sophocles, in favor of the attractions of a “female, with only a certain small quantity of clothing on her, who shall throw herself into such positions as to make that little appear considerably less.” Surely, ladies only attended to “please the gentlemen.”²²⁹ And surely his priorities and tastes as a consumer were no longer privileged in a market in which the attractions of a scantily clad female *could* please both ladies and gentlemen.

Remaking the Theater Interior

In May 1846, the performance of a fairy ballet provided yet another occasion for a reformer to venture into the third tier of a Boston theater and expose the operation of vice

²²⁸ *Morning Herald* [New York], 21 May 1840.

²²⁹ *North American and Daily Advertiser* [Philadelphia], 19 February 1841.

to the concerned public of the *Friend of Virtue*. Sydney Southworth was little interested in the play but delighted with the “short dance of fairy-like girls,” which he judged a “scene of graceful beauty, when I imagined it divested of its theatric paraphernalia.” Southworth did not explain what loss of paraphernalia in particular would have rendered the fairy ballet more graceful without sacrificing its fairy-like effect. Instead, his narrative veered into territory of greater interest, the third tier, where he had gone to investigate with a friend, and was summarily exposed to such “profanity and obscenity” that his “brain whirled in astonishment.” Southworth was led to conclude that a “degraded” woman sank far lower than a man, even as women could likewise ascend to heights of goodness and purity. His visit to the third tier instilled in Southworth a new appreciation of the importance of the right sort of female company—those “who are the breath of love”—to drive away the foul memory of “woman so transformed by vice...that all that remains of her is dross, lees, refuse.” In contrast, he “tremble[d] for those young men who are enticed to such a hell.”²³⁰ Surely Southworth and some of his public were among the citizens of Boston who applauded the decision of the Mayor and Aldermen to convene a hearing that August into the “internal arrangements” of the Boston theaters such that “the Theatres and Public exhibitions in the City may be put on a basis which may tend to guard the morals of the Citizens as well as encourage all rational means of entertainment.”²³¹ When the Committee on Licenses came back with their extensive revision to the theatrical licensing requirements, in September 1846, they implied a radical reorganization of theatrical space around new boundaries of class and gender.

In Boston, successive revisions to city licensing codes in the 1840s brought local

²³⁰ *Friend of Virtue*, 15 May 1846.

²³¹ Minutes of Mayor and Aldermen, 31 August 1846, Boston City Archives.

government more closely into the management of urban amusements around the cause of urban reform and maintenance of public order. These renewed pushes for more restrictive theater licensing requirements were connected to the proliferation of reform publics that extended from the temperance society to the museum theater. Since 1840, local-option campaigns against city liquor licensing had spread through Massachusetts and continued to galvanize local politics in the 1840s. Working-class men were also embracing the temperance movement in greater numbers, forming Washingtonian Societies and taking teetotal pledges. As temperance moved out of “radical religious moralism” and into what theater historian Jonathan Frick labels a more “secularized mainstream,” temperance was also becoming a regular subject of popular culture, most notably in the popularization of the temperance drama. The production of W. H. Smith’s *The Drunkard* at the Boston Museum in March 1844 is often cited as evidence of temperance’s move into mainstream culture, and Frick takes the tremendous proliferation of temperance drama as evidence that theater was “actively engaged in reform culture” at the time.²³² According to these discourses, the vices of urban leisure were seen as interconnected: intemperance encouraged prostitution, and together these practices licensed rowdiness and disorder. The elimination of bars and prostitutes went together in the minds of most reformers, but the reforms that were directed against prostitution were far more coercive.

The August 1846 decision to assemble a hearing followed a year of reformist agitation over the prospect of a new theater in Boston on the site of the former Millerite Tabernacle. Shortly after the Millennium predicted by Millerite clerics failed to come, the

²³² Frick, *Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America*, 11.

Millerite Tabernacle shut its doors and the land was acquired by the partners Johnson and Ayling, who intended to build a new kind of theater, despite some resistance from the land's former tenants. Unlike the former Tremont Theatre, the steadily enduring National Theatre, or the recently reopened Boston Theatre, the new Howard Athenaeum had no third tier, nor did it have lobby bars. Other theaters in America were being built in this period without third tiers, but the specific novelty of the Howard's interior arrangement was probably influenced by a renewed push from Boston reformers to get the city government to develop coercive policies against intemperance and prostitution in Boston's theaters. The first theater building built on the site burned before completion in 1845, and in the midst of efforts to start again, a series of petitions came before the Mayor and city aldermen, the first from the Boston Total Abstinence Society, in January, "praying that in all leases made by the City, there be inserted a clause prohibiting the lessees selling intoxicating drink."²³³

An example of how the elaboration of the role of public services like the police were organized around the expansion and maintenance of the growing world of urban leisure can be found in the history of city ordinances about police supervision of public amusements. Police had long been a familiar presence in early nineteenth-century theaters. Police presence was frequently advertised on theater playbills in the 1820s and 1830s, in part to deter the riotous behavior that managers were coming to expect from their growing working-class male audiences. In August 1842, the city of Boston established as a criteria for licensing that police supervision be maintained at the expense of the venue. The motion to revisit licensing requirements, in July, and the subsequent

²³³ Minutes of Mayor and Aldermen, 26 January 1846, Boston City Archives.

emphasis on police was probably influenced by a riot in June at the Tremont Theatre. By the mid-1840s, the maintenance of a permanent city police force was paid for in part through the licensing fees exacted by the city council for theaters, but also cabs and coaches.²³⁴ Each revision of the licensing codes made this more explicit, until finally in 1847, a special meeting on the “Police department Appropriation” of licenses determined that “all moneys which are hereafter paid to the City of Boston for licenses for Theatres, Museums, Circuses, and other exhibitions, where from their character the attendance of the police is necessary, and all moneys received for licenses of Hackney Coaches, Cabs, trucks, wagons, and Dogs be and the same shall be credited to the appropriation for a police of the City.”²³⁵

A riot at the National Theatre on 10 March 1846, over the nonappearance Mr. and Mrs. Thorne in their advertised parts for their final Boston performance revived fears about the impact of theater on the larger moral and social order of the city. On March 19, a group led by Charles T. Jackson petitioned directly against the proposed Howard, urging that “no license for theatrical exhibitions be granted for any building, which may be erected on the site in Howard street where the late Athenaeum building stood.”²³⁶ Jackson’s petition was unsuccessful in halting the construction of the theater, but the combined effect of the riot and the petition seems to have galvanized the city aldermen into revising their licensing code. At its next weekly meeting, March 23, the Board of Aldermen ordered the Committee on Licenses to examine the “interior arrangements” of any house applying for a license for theatrical exhibition, officially, to ensure “avenues of

²³⁴ Compulsory licensing of city cabs was a major goal of moral reformers, and was finally established in Boston in 1846 as well. Board of Aldermen Minutes, 1847, Boston City Archives.

²³⁵ Minutes of Mayor and Aldermen, 21 May 1847, Boston City Archives.

²³⁶ Ibid., 19 March 1846.

safety and convenience,” with a larger to end towards assuring public safety in case of riots as well as fires, which continued to be extremely common in the gas-lit interiors. The Board likewise declared that it would be in charge of appointing the police to supervise licensed exhibition spaces.²³⁷ Clearly, police supervision had not been adequate in keeping down the recent rioting, in which “benches were torn up, chandeliers broken” and the interior “considerably damaged” over the course of the evening, until the police finally succeeded in subduing and dispersing the crowd shortly before midnight.²³⁸

The new licensing requirements established in March 1846 did little to assuage the concerns about other kinds of disorder and the evils that fed it. In August, a large group of reform-minded men, who included noted temperance activist E. B. Whitney, Harvard professors and physicians John C. Warren and Walter Channing, and David N. Fales, George B. Emerson, Thomas B. Wales, William T. Eustis, and Julius A. Palmer presented a series of remonstrances against the recent petitions for licenses by William Pelby for the National, Oliver C. Wyman, who was reopening the Boston Theatre that fall, and Charles Graham for exhibitions at his Olympic Saloon. The reformers petitioned that the sale of “any sort of Drinks” in the theater be prohibited, that “the part of the House usually known as the “*Third Row*” be abolished” or policed to prevent it from serving as a “place of *assignation*,” and “likewise, that Boys and Girls may not be allowed to visit the Theatre, unless under the charge of their parents, guardians, or some person duly authorized.”²³⁹ With their emphasis on regulating the presence of children in the theater, the petitioners were participating in the enduring concern of moral reformers

²³⁷ Ibid., 23 March 1846.

²³⁸ *Boston Atlas*, 12 March 1846.

²³⁹ Ibid., 18 August 1846.

and temperance advocates with the effects of urban vice and leisure on the health of the family. Increasingly, in the 1840s and 50s, moral reformers focused their efforts on education within the family, with the pages of moral reform periodicals devoting more space to advice and cautionary tales about the proper way to raise children without exposing them to temptations that lead to licentiousness.²⁴⁰ The petitioners' claim that the third row "has too frequently proved the initiatory step to the deluded youth of both sexes, that has led to their ruin" was, by 1846, a familiar refrain, if laid out with greater degree of directness.²⁴¹ But the reformers had a further suggestion as to how the threat of prostitution be addressed most effectively: in September, George Emerson appealed, "That no woman, adult or young, be admitted unattended."²⁴² This time, the Committee on Licenses listened.

In late September, the *Liberator*, which represented that portion of society that looked askance at theatrical amusements and rarely if ever found cause to comment on theater, reported that the board of aldermen have "done themselves an honor" with the new regulations for licensing theaters.²⁴³ Licensed houses of exhibition were prohibited from keeping bars "for the sale of intoxicating liquors," an important victory for the temperance set. But the board also intervened more fully into the physical arrangements of space and economy, requiring that all box seats, the first, second, and third tier, be one price, that there be no partition between the central part of the third tier and the slips on

²⁴⁰ This shift in focus in the late 1840s and 50s towards the family as the site of reform may have had to do in part with the moral reformers' frustrations with their ineffectuality in eliminating prostitution or reforming prostitutes. While moral reformers had had some limited legislative success securing more stringent licensing of cabs, urban prostitution did not appear to be waning. Clearly, their efforts needed to start with the seedbed of morality, the child in the family. Some evidence of this can be found in a survey of the changing emphasis in moral reform periodicals. Also see above for literature on moral reform.

²⁴¹ *Boston Atlas*, 18 August 1846.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 4 Sept 1846.

²⁴³ *Liberator*, 25 September 1846.

the side, and, finally, that there be no private rooms accessible to the audience in the third tier. Lest this new configuration of theatrical space be ineffective, the fifth stipulation promised to tackle threats of prostitution that the regulation of space could not contain, with the following: “No female shall be admitted to the audience of a Theatre, unaccompanied by a male attendance.”²⁴⁴

The Boston *Investigator* offered extensive commentary on the new “restrictions” on theaters, but positioned their import within a larger field of struggle beyond the immediate concerns and reforming efforts of temperance advocates and moral reformers, that had to do with a struggle among theater audiences over the ownership and larger aesthetic purpose of theatrical representations. Theater critics in the 1830s and 40s railed with regularity about managers who capitulated to the tyranny of “public” opinion, which brought down the quality of theatrical representations and caused a defection of fashionable and respectable audiences. Reform of theater needed to occur on two fronts if theater were to be taken back from the working man, a prominent member of the questionable “public.”²⁴⁵ The abolition of third rows seemed to provide promise that the theater could be taken back by the people who truly valued it as a site of edification. The *Investigator* professed, “we do not believe that the theatre *makes* women abandoned, or men intemperate—they being made so *before* they go there—yet it has always appeared

²⁴⁴ Minutes of Mayor and Aldermen, 14 Sept 1846, Boston City Archives.

²⁴⁵ Early-nineteenth-century newspapers used the designation “public” to mean many different things, and the class valence is not always clear or implicit. The idea of “the public” as a force in politics and in the cultural marketplace was created in this period and was connected with competing claims about democracy and market society. When theater critics lamented the tyranny of the “public” they did not necessarily mean a particular class of people, but were engaging in a struggle over the power and authority to shape the content and imperatives of popular culture and terms of address. Critics argued that in the responsiveness of managers to the demands and tastes of their publics, managers missed an opportunity to elevate and educate rather than pander. In effect, critics were acknowledging the capacity of publics to influence the content of commercial amusements.

deeply mortifying to those who regard the theatre as a useful and deserving institution.” New regulations would go far towards “prevent[ing] the theatre from being any longer instrumental in promoting licentiousness and intemperance.” However, the *Investigator* was not overly optimistic that these reforms alone would restore theater to the good opinion of people of character, with money to spend to support public amusements, unless these people actually returned and embraced the theater as a “fashionable” institution: “there always will be theatres; and that their character will correspond with the patronage and approbation they receive. Fashion regulates them, as it does everything else; consequently if frequented by the influential and respectable, they will rise in public estimation.” This alone would prevent the managers from again resorting to “third rows” and “bars.”²⁴⁶ This spoke as well to the limitations of coercive reforms relative to the demands, tastes, and practices of different social groups positioned relative to the shifting commercial marketplace. Nevertheless, this commentary indicates that reforming theater spaces and theater audiences was a key instrument in the class struggle that cultural and theater historians have long identified in the antebellum theater.

Licensing reforms were not the only nor even the most successful instrument of theater reform, but they reveal a feature of early-nineteenth-century struggles over the publics of commercial amusements that is readily elided in analysis of critical discourses: these struggles were worked out around class-based signifiers of gender. Eliminating bars and third rows and requiring a more extensive police presence disciplined *all* men, but it disciplined *only* the working class women who may have moved between wage labor and casual prostitution but could be more easily interpolated as prostitutes for their

²⁴⁶ *Boston Investigator*, 23 Sept 1846.

style, their presence in the cheaper seats of pit and galleries, and now, by the absence of a disciplining male presence.²⁴⁷ The new licensing requirements disciplined single women, marking them as suspect consumers of public amusements. Working-class women were not eliminated from theater audiences, but instead moved to new venues in an increasingly segmented marketplace or submitted to the disciplines governing spaces like the Howard Athenaeum, Boston Museum, and the Boston Theatre.

Cushman Redux

In his 1846 memoir, actor-manager F. C. Wemyss provided an account of Philadelphia's "era of petticoat government," the season of 1842-1843, when Charlotte Cushman managed the Walnut while Mary Maywood took over from her father Robert Maywood at the Chesnut Street Theatre. Wemyss assured readers that he saw "no reason why the theatres should not be placed directly under the influence of the fair sex." But alas, Cushman and Maywood too soon "discovered they were out of their proper sphere of action."²⁴⁸ In March, Mary Maywood closed the bankrupt Chesnut, which was smarting under the financial burden of Robert Maywood's prior mismanagement. Cushman seems to have been pushed into a managerial partnership with Rufus Blake by early 1843, no doubt because of the challenge of handling managerial duties while simultaneously maintaining her position as lead actress. However, this abdication from her position as sole manager-director was taken by observers like Wemyss to be a sign of her failure—her failure as a woman. Wemyss did not dwell on Cushman's successes that

²⁴⁷ Of course, prohibiting unaccompanied women did not prevent prostitutes from being accompanied by their patrons. But it did promise to restrict the kinds of display that reformers feared from unaccompanied women in public space.

²⁴⁸ F. C. Wemyss, *Twenty-six Years in the Life of an Actor and Manager* (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1846) 378, 381.

season nor on the challenges she faced in her dual capacity as manager and leading actress. Rewriting Cushman's transition as failure restored a rightful gendered order that, for all his protestations to the contrary, Wemyss clearly felt Cushman had disrupted.

In 1844, Cushman launched a tour of England that transformed the scope and terms of her celebrity. Cushman would not be remembered for her successful managerial tenure in a challenging economic climate, but instead for her wonderful personations of male leads, like Romeo and Claude Melnotte, and the gypsy witch Meg Merrilles. Thus Cushman continued to push the boundaries around gender in the theater, but in her choice of roles. Though she never again attempted management, Wemyss's recollections may not in fact have been accurate in capturing contemporary attitudes towards her tenure. Consider a review of one of the final performances of the 1842-1843 season, when Cushman introduced her personation of Romeo to the Philadelphia public. The production and the "novelty" of the Romeo delighted "B.," the dramatic critic of the *Philadelphia Pennsylvanian*. However, B. concluded his glowing review with praise for Cushman's other equally novel role. "She has been an industrious and able manager" who "reformed a house once boisterous, riotous and vulgar, not quiet, attentive and respectable in its audience." In the eyes of her supporters, it seems, Cushman had lived up to her own vision, creating a theater in which "citizens who were before compelled to stay away from all theatrical representations, have been there with their families, enjoying the delightful representations of the purest specimens of the drama."²⁴⁹ To what degree Cushman's reforms had involved some policing of working-class women along the lines practiced in other cities, like Boston, remains unclear.

²⁴⁹ *Pennsylvanian* [Philadelphia], 9 May 1843.

In the 1840s and 50s, women in the theater profession would continue testing the limits to the authority women could wield within the theater and the financial and professional independence they could claim through their careers, while developing new forms of female performance and reaching out to middle-class female publics. Outside of theater, in lecture halls like Masonic Hall, where Anna Mowatt debuted as a dramatic reader read in 1841, middle-class women were being courted as desirable consumers. And increasingly, in the 1840s and 50s, after the example of the power of female celebrities like Fanny Elssler and Anna Mowatt to draw in middle-class and female audiences, theaters began to do the same.

Chapter 3

A “New York Corinna”:

Anna Mowatt and the Emergence of the Dramatic Reader

One evening during the summer of 1842, Anna Cora Mowatt, Mrs. Elizabeth Sedgwick, Dr. William Ellery Channing, and the girls of Mrs. Sedgwick’s Female Seminary in Lenox, Massachusetts participated in the putting on of a little play, written “some years before” by Elizabeth Sedgwick’s sister-in-law, Catherine Sedgwick. Mowatt was spending the summer in Lenox to recover her failing health, which had abruptly ended her successful first season delivering dramatic readings in cities and towns of the Northeast. Mowatt, like Channing, met Elizabeth Sedgwick through Catherine Sedgwick, a novelist and literary figure who circulated among various intellectual circles in New York, where she lived, and greater Boston, home of her extended family and her sister-in-law’s school for girls.

Channing expressed a strong interest in the culture and conduct of Mrs. Sedgwick’s school. In her narrative of the summer, extracted from her journals, Mrs. Sedgwick recounted Channing’s surprise at the “greater latitude” allowed her pupils. This “latitude” extended to the production of the play in which the girls would be “dressing in male attire.” Though Channing “was in great doubt about [the propriety of] it,” Sedgwick reported he “took great interest...in hearing about the rehearsals.” The entertainment proved a success, particularly with Channing, who declared “he had never

enjoyed anything in the way of amusement more” and “concluded that ‘it might be safe for Mrs. Sedgwicks [sic] young ladies to dress themselves in man’s attire, but not well for girls in general’.”²⁵⁰

Over the summer, Mowatt was also drawn to the society and culture of Mrs. Sedgwick’s school, where she assisted as “stage manager, costumer, and prompter” for the play.²⁵¹ Mowatt was well suited to this undertaking. Among other strengths, she had considerable experience mounting amateur theatricals with her sisters, which ranged from improvisations that “merely took the place of other childish games” to adaptations and original compositions performed at family parties and balls.²⁵² In 1840, while in Paris with her husband, Mowatt wrote “Gulzara, or the Persian Slave.” This “play without heroes” was ideal for a dramatic company (her sisters) that “wished to avoid assuming male attire.”²⁵³ The Ogden sisters acted “Gulzara” at a ball held in Mowatt’s honor later that year. In April 1841, Mowatt published “Gulzara” in *The New World*, a new literary journal edited by Park Benjamin, formerly of *Brother Jonathan*, and aspiring writer and playwright Epes Sargent, a close friend of Mowatt’s. She also published her poetry and travel writing in *The New World* and *The Ladies’ Companion*, another competitor for the attention of genteel, educated readers. Mowatt’s publishing ventures in 1841 were probably connected with her husband James Mowatt’s dire financial circumstances, but her literary aspirations had a longer history, dating to her first publication in 1837, as a teenager, of the epic poem “Pelayo.” In October 1841, as the Mowatts faced bankruptcy,

²⁵⁰ Elizabeth Sedgwick, *Extract from my Journal*, Charles Sedgwick Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²⁵¹ Anna Cora Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1854), 181.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 132.

Anna Mowatt held a series of “Elocutionary Readings and Recitations” at the Masonic Temple in Boston.

When Mowatt was introduced among the acquaintances of Mrs. Sedgwick in 1842, she would have been known as an educated and accomplished woman, someone who had taken the brave step of exhibiting herself in public as a reader of poetry and prose. Surely Mowatt, Sedgwick, and Channing discussed the merits of recitation as a form of entertainment. Mowatt also listened to the recitations of Mrs. Sedgwick’s students, though more for “their amusement” than for their instruction.²⁵⁴ Mowatt likewise recalled reciting for Channing, who “kindly pointed out defects.”²⁵⁵ Channing was an avid proponent of recitations as a superior alternative amusement to dramatic theater. When English actress Fanny Kemble met Channing, also through Catherine Sedgwick, in the spring of 1833, Channing took the opportunity to discourse upon his idea that “detached passages and scenes from the finest dramatic writers” be “declaimed in comparatively private assemblies...as a wholesome substitute for the stage.” Such entertainments, he felt, would still afford “intellectual pleasure and profit” from “fine dramatic works, without the illusion and excitement belonging to theatrical exhibitions.”²⁵⁶ Kemble initially professed a “horror” at his “proposition” in her 1835 *Journal*. But a decade later she had embraced the project and was giving readings in England and America of plays from Shakespeare edited by her herself and her father.

In 1837, Channing presented his ideas on recitations in an “Address on Temperance” delivered before the Massachusetts Temperance Society in Boston.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 180.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.

²⁵⁶ Frances Anne [Kemble] Butler, *Journal* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835), II:154-155.

Channing argued that a “Recitation” was a suitable alternative to “the drama” and would have the added effect of “spreading a refined taste through a community” while drawing men away from the theaters, where “exhibitions of dancing are given fit only for brothels, and where the most licentious class in the community throng.”²⁵⁷ The appeal of recitations thus figured strongly in the broader reconfiguration of public amusements, a process that included the vast expansion of lyceum culture as well as a series of reform movements targeting theaters as sites of drunkenness and licentiousness.²⁵⁸

Interestingly, Channing’s stern criticism of the drama did not preclude his hearty enjoyment of the “dramatic entertainments” put on by Mrs. Sedgwick’s students. To imagine the social and cultural world that could produce this little scene demands that we revisit our assumptions about the kinds of performances in which educated white women engaged and the contexts in which these performances occurred. A decade after Fanny Kemble’s triumphant American debut, and during the very same period when reformers were agitating to remake the American theater, large numbers of young girls were studying and practicing elocution at female seminaries and performing in amateur plays with their friends and family.²⁵⁹ While performance and speech by women was admissible and expected in these contexts of the schoolroom and parlor, other forms of women’s public activity had become increasingly contested in the 1820s and 30s.

²⁵⁷ William Channing, “Address on Temperance” in *The Complete Works of W. E. Channing* (London: George Routledge, 1870), 92.

²⁵⁸ See Chapter 2 on reform movements targeting theater. On lyceum and lecture culture see Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (East Lansing: Eastern Michigan University Press, 2005); Ronald Zboray and Mary Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders* (Lexington: University of Tennessee Press, 2006); Donald Scott, “The Popular Lecture,” *Journal of American History* 66, no. 4 (March 1980): 791-809; Carl Bode, *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

²⁵⁹ On middle-class leisure and amateur theatricals see Eileen Moira Curley, “Beyond the Pocket Doors: Amateur Theatricals in Nineteenth-century New York City” (PhD. dissertation, Indiana University, 2006); and Melanie Dawson, *Laboring to Play: Home Entertainment and the Spectacle of Middle-Class Cultural Life, 1850-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

Women lecturers like Frances Wright, Abbey Kelly, the Grimké sisters and Maria Stewart weathered storms of criticism in their efforts to advance social and political causes from the lecture platform. These controversies also had an effect on the gendered contours of the world of public amusements, shaping perceptions of oratorical, literary, and dramatic performances by women.²⁶⁰

Mowatt's short-lived career as a "dramatic reader" contributed to changes in the realms of possibility for female performance and public speech. An examination of the larger category of dramatic reading demonstrates how women contributed to a broader reconfiguration of the boundaries of public performance. These performances, especially those given by actors and actresses, contributed to ongoing efforts of managers, critics, and performers to appeal to the rising middle classes, a powerful potential market for public amusements. Although generally neglected in this history, the female seminary created crucial historical contexts in which girls rehearsed a variety of different performance genres, many of which would soon extend to spaces beyond the schoolroom. In this way, female performance outside the commercial theater was neither exclusively nor inherently stigmatized, or seen as the antithesis of respectable womanhood. To the contrary, the entertainments given by dramatic readers could also function as performances of white respectability and female literary citizenship. As such, these entertainments contributed to the ongoing negotiation of women's different public and intellectual and cultural roles.

This chapter contributes to the work of scholars to make visible the range of

²⁶⁰ This chapter thus engages with Rosemarie Zagarri's call to historians to examine "more closely when—and under what circumstances—the notion of women speaking in public came under attack." Rosemarie Zagarri, "Politics and Civil Society: A Discussion of Mary Kelley's Learning to Stand and Speak," *Journal of the American Republic* 28:1 (2008): 73.

public activities in which women in the early nineteenth century participated. The concept of spheres and the ideological division between the “public” and the domestic or “woman’s” sphere—nineteenth-century writers rarely used the binary of “public” and “private” that twentieth-century women’s historians would adopt—did important cultural work in the nineteenth century, particularly among the middling classes, to define the ideal social and political order in which respectable women aspired to the feminine domestic sphere while men dominated the masculine sphere of the market and government. While the identification of a powerful domestic ideology in the nineteenth century galvanized women’s history scholarship in the 1960s and 70s, beginning in the 1980s scholars began to challenge the utility of this framework for describing the parameters of women’s lives.²⁶¹ The binary of “public” and “private” spheres is now treated as metaphorical and discursive, rather than as a literal or physical description of the social order.²⁶² Scholars have increasingly become interested in interrogating the ideological parameters of women’s public activity and identifying other spheres beyond the “public” and “private” in which women’s social and political activity occurred, and

²⁶¹ See the Introduction for a more in-depth discussion of this literature. Foundational texts that identified the ideology of separate spheres include Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174; Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the State of Women in the Age of Jackson,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10 (1969): 5-15; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). Key scholarship that complicated the terms of this framework includes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf 1985); Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and for British history Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

²⁶² The identification of woman’s sphere as primarily discursive opened up a range of analytic possibilities, particularly for identifying how conceptions of the domestic and private could frame women’s activities that may have occurred outside the home. This was particularly important for scholarship on women’s participation in reform organizations. See above and Introduction.

indeed, which bridged the domestic and the political, such as “civil society.”²⁶³ This chapter and this dissertation will contribute to the elaboration of the many different kinds of public spaces women accessed and activities in which women participated, while working to open up and reveal contemporary understandings of the public that can make women’s challenges to the gendered social order more visible and intelligible.²⁶⁴

This chapter will situate dramatic reading within a broad context of public, semi-public (commercial ticketed), and domestic performances by women. Paying careful attention to the careers of dramatic readers who emerged in the 1840s and 50s contributes to our understanding of how different forms of public speech were produced, consumed, gendered, racialized, and ultimately situated within shifting cultural hierarchies. While men continued to dominate the lecturing field in this period, women elocutionists developed a new genre of performance that would resonate across the century. As a category of commercial performance, dramatic reading retained a particular utility as a livelihood both for professional actresses and actors, for women interested in a career on the stage—dramatic or platform—or for men and women launching and promoting a literary career. Dramatic readings gave women and men, particularly individuals employed in the theater, extra publicity and additional employment in competitive markets, as the case of Matilda Clarendon will show. In this respect, dramatic readings

²⁶³ Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 5.

²⁶⁴ A “private” woman organized her life according to a set of ideals, among them a reticence from interpolating herself as person in public or before a public, either by laboring outside the home—though many women took work and boarders into the home—publishing under her real name, or speaking and giving performances, particularly those which could be attended for money. And yet, even “public” women or women who lived public lives, like actresses, were also understood to have a “private life” that was frequently invoked to establish claims to respectability *in spite of* her profession. But an actress’s “private life” was not equivalent to that of the genteel woman who lived exclusively “in private life” and had no public reputation, audience, or celebrity. See Tracy Davis, “Private Woman and the Public Realm,” *Theatre Survey* (May 1994): 65-71.

functioned similarly to public lecturing, which Donald Scott argues played a key role in helping to advance or reposition an intellectual career.²⁶⁵ As dramatic reading proliferated in the 1840s and 50s, eventually becoming a mainstay of lyceum bureau lists in the 1860s and 70s, it served both as an “act in the construction and conduct of particular kinds of careers,” usually literary or dramatic, and as a career in its own right.²⁶⁶ As this chapter will show, through the careers of Anna Mowatt, Matilda Clarendon, and Fanny Kemble, dramatic readings by women involved a highly gendered, classed, and racialized mode of performance that remained inextricably connected to the lecturing and reading careers of men, such as John Vandenhoff and his son, George Vandenhoff. The reading careers of actresses and actors likewise resonated with ongoing debates over rational and family amusements, the nature and function of the drama, and the role of public amusements in the cultural, intellectual, and moral uplift of the nation.²⁶⁷

From the Seminary to the Rostrum: Creating Women Speakers

Anna Mowatt was seven when her father, James Ogden, relocated his family to New York from Anna’s birthplace of Bordeaux, France, where Ogden had spent the last decade nurturing his commercial interests. In New York, Anna Ogden (Mowatt) was placed in Mrs. Okill’s boarding school. When Mowatt wrote her *Autobiography* in 1853, she used her childhood idyll in Bordeaux and schooling in New York to recount her first

²⁶⁵ Scott, “The Popular Lecture,” 795.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. I am thus repurposing Scott’s argument about the utility of public lecturing for my own argument about the function of dramatic readings.

²⁶⁷ Most scholarship on dramatic readers is biographical, in the context of work on celebrities like Anna Mowatt and Fanny Kemble. There is far less work devoted specifically to dramatic reading as a commercial amusement. Some mention of dramatic reading within broader discussions of reading practices and lyceum culture and lecture-going can be found in Zboray and Zboray, *Everyday Ideas*.

experiences upon the “mimic stage” and establish a series of origin stories for a young woman destined to distinguish herself as an actress. In La Castagne, the Ogden family participated in domestic theatricals, a custom Mowatt “presume[d]” to be of “French origin.” At Mrs. Okill’s school, Anna and her sister Miranda “won many praises” for their parts in a French play presented by students for their families after a public examination.²⁶⁸ Though Mowatt did not dwell on this episode in the *Autobiography*, it reveals how the female seminary created a new context for women’s speech.

Mrs. Okill opened her “Select School for Young Ladies” in New York in early 1823. She emphasized “religious principles, morals, and manners” and mastery of French.²⁶⁹ Like other academies, the school year concluded with student exhibitions, in which the ladies demonstrated competence in “French Recitations, Music, and Dancing” before a “respectable assemblage” of parents and interested public.²⁷⁰ While Mrs. Okill’s clearly had more in common with an older model of ornamental education for ladies of the gentry, it was among the over 200 institutions devoted to female education that sprang up in the United States after the Revolution as American women sought the opportunity to create a “new era in female history.”²⁷¹ Recent scholarship by Mary Kelley and Carolyn Eastman has complicated the image of women’s revolutionary

²⁶⁸ Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 20.

²⁶⁹ Advertisement in *The Christian Journal, and Literary Register*, 1 May 1823.

²⁷⁰ *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, 23 March 1833; see also *Albion*, 3 August 1833.

²⁷¹ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 66. Also see Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). While some historians of female education have distinguished between “academic and ornamental instruction,” Kelley observes that schools founded in this period increasingly integrated this education with more academic subjects, thereby perpetuating the role of the female seminary in providing “the means to, and the evidence of, gentility” while also responding to new educational values stressing the importance of academic accomplishment. Mrs. Okill’s may very well have offered more academic instruction than is reflected in the few sources I have located. Certainly, school exhibitions emphasized the genteel and performance over the academic. Kelley, 69-70.

inheritance captured by Linda Kerber's concept of "Republican motherhood."²⁷² While the "Republican mother" ideal did effectively preclude women from demanding full citizenship rights by relegating their influence in the new Republic to their role as wives and mothers, at the same time women eagerly pursued new opportunities for education and accomplishments in the same republican skills expected of men, like elocution.²⁷³ The post-revolutionary emphasis on women's education built on arguments developed in the eighteenth century that differences between men and women were not the product of women's innate inferiority, but that women had the same intellectual potential as men if properly nurtured.²⁷⁴

Kelley counts 182 academies and 14 seminaries founded for women in the North and South between 1790 and 1830.²⁷⁵ This number would come close to doubling over the next thirty years. These academies pioneered an expanded vision of education beyond needlepoint, dancing, and French that included subjects previously restricted to the education of boys and men, like philosophy, mathematics, geography, logic and rhetoric. Mrs. Charles Sedgwick's School for Girls in Lenox, Massachusetts began in the late 1820s out of her home. Catherine Beecher, writer and purveyor of advice to ladies, began teaching 7 students out of a room above a harness shop in Hartford, Connecticut in 1823. When Beecher left her academy in 1831 to found an institution in Cincinnati,

²⁷² Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment – an American Perspective" *American Quarterly* (1976): 187-205; also Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* (1987): 689-721.

²⁷³ Zagarri goes further in complicating the "Republican motherhood" argument by demonstrating the greater range for women's political participation in the decade immediately following the Revolution. She argues that in the 1790s, in a process connected with the formation of political parties, a conservative backlash started to push women out of party and electoral politics. Rosemarie Zagarri, *Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

²⁷⁴ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*; Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*; Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*.

²⁷⁵ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 167.

Ohio, the school's population numbered 223.²⁷⁶ Though these institutes remained expensive, even by comparison to university, Kelley cautions that they should not be seen as catering solely to the elite. Like male students at university, young women educated at female seminaries probably came from a broad array of social and socioeconomic backgrounds, including daughters of merchants, but also shopkeepers or farmers. While some schools demanded a yearly tuition between \$100 and \$150, other smaller institutions were far more affordable to the middling sorts.²⁷⁷ Rutgers Female Institute, founded in 1839 in downtown New York, was attended by upwards of 400 students, according to the commencement report of 1842, and in 1843, advertised an academic year of four terms with tuition of between \$4 and \$12 a term.²⁷⁸

Female institutes played a key role in fostering female elocution. Eastman has examined the volume of girls' speeches from female seminaries that were published in newspapers in the early nineteenth century, helping to justify arguments for women's education. But, she argues, models of female oratory also existed beyond "elite urban academies," in the didactic dialogues published in schoolbooks and in the growing popularity of biographical sketches of learned and remarkable women, which celebrated eloquent women as heroines.²⁷⁹ This recognition of the degree to which female speech was both practiced and celebrated in an educational setting is a key corrective to earlier

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 84.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 81-82.

²⁷⁸ *New World*, 23 July 1842; 12 August 1843.

²⁷⁹ Eastman is more cautious in imaging the possibility for socioeconomic mixture at these institutions, which she points out, quite accurately, were predominantly urban institutions. On the publishing practices and popularity of biographies of women see Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Martha Vicinus, "What Makes a Heroine? Nineteenth Century Girls' Biographies," *Genre XX* (Summer 1987): 171-188.

scholarship that has treated the celebrated republican value of elocution as a male provenance.²⁸⁰ Not so, particularly in the early republican period. Eastman argues that the importance of speech in the early Republic helped Americans constitute themselves as a public. Men *and* women practiced and modeled their mastery of correct and educated speech in a range of different spaces not limited to government and the bar. Women demonstrated their discursive skills in the drawing room, but they also expanded the boundaries and subjects of women's rhetoric in female seminaries, literary and debating societies, and voluntary associations. But the considerable degree of experimentation and openness in the project of education and the creation of a "civil society" in which men and women participated—albeit not always on strictly equal terms—was followed by a "revolutionary backlash" in the 1820s, which in particular manifested as a gradual retreat towards more gender-specific models of women's education and female elocution. Women's participation in "civil society" persisted, but on changing and increasingly gendered terms.²⁸¹

Zagarri and Eastman attribute this backlash both to structural changes in the parameters of political participation and a broader cultural shift in America as well as England and Europe. Beginning in the 1790s, emphasis on electoral politics and expansion of the franchise occurred along with a new exclusive definition of the

²⁸⁰ This is particularly the case in scholarship on the American lyceum and the antebellum popular lecture (see above). This scholarship locates the emergence of the woman lecturer primarily in 1850s, while earlier cases of antislavery speakers stand out as exceptional. Until recently, scholarship on lecturing and speaking did not examine the seminary as a key site of speech for women, instead focusing primarily on public lecturing circuit as the main site in which public speech was produced. While the seminary is not in itself a public space, it constitutes a key part of what Mary Kelley has termed "civil society," a concept that opens up other spaces accessed and dominated by women and through which women contributed to civil discourses and engaged in a variety of knowledge-making and performance practices.

²⁸¹ On "civil society" see Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*. The concept of "revolutionary backlash" comes from Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*. On the contested politics of public speech see Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1990); and Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*.

franchise as the province of white men, which effectively pushed women out of formal politics, thus rendering women's political activism suspect. These structural changes were accompanied by a cultural shift in ideas about gender and social organization that had taken hold by the middle decades of the century, connected with emergence of the middle class, that involved the elevation of a domestic ideal of femininity. The nineteenth-century gender system was bolstered by an emerging set of scientific discourses that articulated an essentialized model of gender difference located in the body. These shifts produced a gendering of models of education and of social and political activism. A dominant set of cultural discourses represented women as the main guardians of social and moral virtues, and the home as the site in which these virtues might be nurtured most effectively and appropriately. Women continued to engage in a broad range of benevolent, reform, and other social organizations and activities outside the home that expanded rapidly across the first half of the century. But framing this activity in terms of a feminized sphere became an important strategy for protecting it. Female education and the object of female ambition were reoriented towards the domestic sphere and motherhood, which reached a historically unprecedented level of idealization. While girls in the 1820s and 30s continued to study elocution, they exhibited it less and learned to deploy a more exaggerated style of feminine modesty to frame their academic and intellectual performances.²⁸²

Still, white and African American women engaged broadly in a range of separate organizations and institutions, such as literary societies, ladies' lyceums, and reform

²⁸² Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*; Zagarri, *Revolutionary Backlash*; Rosemarie Zagarri, "Politics and Civil Society" *Journal of the American Republic* 28:1 (2008): 61-73.

organizations, where they continued to enjoy and practice their own oratory.²⁸³ Much of the institution-building of the 1820s and 30s, and the lyceum movement especially, was concerned with fostering self-education and broader edification of the masses through the practice and performance of elocution.²⁸⁴ Women participated in the lyceum, primarily as audience members, but also created their own separate lyceums. For example, ladies' lyceums were founded around 1830 in Hartford, Connecticut and Gloucester, Massachusetts. In Hartford, the local paper advertised that about fifty members of the Ladies' Lyceum met weekly for recitations and attended lecturers sponsored by their institution.²⁸⁵ The creation of all-female spaces became still another way some women orators, like Mary Gove, who lectured to audiences of women on the problem of solitary vice, successfully accessed audiences within the vale of respectability—a major concern for Gove given that her topics concerned the body and female sexuality.²⁸⁶ The creation of separate institutions like literary societies, voluntary associations, and ladies' lyceums continued to support women's elaboration of their own "civil society" that had begun with female seminaries and would continue as women orators gradually challenged male privilege to lecture before mixed audiences of men and women.²⁸⁷

The performance of feminine modesty became a requisite of women's speech, particularly from the 1830s onward as it moved from the classroom to the rostrum.

²⁸³ Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002)

²⁸⁴ Donald Scott, "The Popular Lecture"; Bode, *Town Meeting of the Mind*; Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture*; Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*; Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*.

²⁸⁵ *Connecticut Courant*, January 26, 1830; *Gloucester Telegraph*, March 20, 1830. In 1841, the *New Bedford Mercury* also advertised tickets to events held by the local Ladies' Lyceum. *New Bedford Mercury*, December 10, 1841.

²⁸⁶ April Haynes, "Riotous Flesh: Gender, physiology, and the solitary vice" (PhD Dissertation: University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009).

²⁸⁷ Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*.

Women speakers like abolitionists Maria Stewart and Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who emerged in the 1830s after the much-derided English radical Fanny Wright, crafted a style of exaggerated feminine modesty. They made a claim to the rostrum in terms of their higher moral authority as women, as the conscience of the nation, rather than through a claim of political rights as citizens. But the controversies over women speakers that arose in the 1830s were largely concerned with the political implications of women's speech. While overt political activity by women was openly decried in this period, women's reform activism could still have real political impact, particularly through public speech acts. Male critics overwhelmingly constructed the problem of women's public oratory in terms of the dangers of the "promiscuous audience." Susan Zaeske argues that at stake in these debates, which occurred *after* Fanny Wright's 1828-1829 lecture season, and around speakers like the Grimké sisters, was the effect that women's speech could have on men, who *did* possess the civil rights that women would begin to agitate for in the late-1840s and 1850s. Fanny Wright's lecture tour was a transitional moment prior to the emergence of specifically gendered attacks on female oratory. After Wright, attacks on speakers problematized the mixture of men and women in the audience and used the memory of Fanny Wright's appearances on American boards to castigate female speakers, who were called "Fanny Wrights."²⁸⁸ But the controversies that arose around Wright in 1828-1829, Eastman argues, can also be viewed as part of a broader set of debates that followed other public speakers and that were about "the makeup of the public and the proper means of forming public opinion."²⁸⁹ Speech by men was not wholly uncontested. To the contrary, claims to an auditory were particularly

²⁸⁸ Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Women's Rights Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 191-207.

²⁸⁹ Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*, 180.

contentious in the 1830s as the lyceum movement took off and public address flourished as form of public amusement, edification, and political mobilization. Gender was one piece within an avid debate in this period over who had the right to address a public assembly and shape public opinion.²⁹⁰

As the politics and style of female oratory shifted between the 1830s and the 1850s, women developed new oratorical styles and strategies of address. Women speakers in the 1830s positioned their speaking within the purview of the work of female benevolence and used moral suasion arguments to stake their claims to an audience. Only in the late 1840s did some women orators begin to deploy a language of political rights that would then develop into a new discourse of women's rights at mid-century.²⁹¹ As women's presence as orators increased in the 1840s, styles of delivery, demurs, and the performance of modesty continued to be important. Placing these histories of women's public speech, with their different contexts, content, and audiences in conversation signals the multiplicity of discourses and social and cultural contexts accessed by women as part of their activities as public orators. Nor were attitudes towards this range of activity uniform. Speakers, critics, and friends disagreed about the terms according to which women could and should address a public audience, of women or of men *and* women.

The school remained a key site for women to develop the skills to engage critically in "civil society" and develop new public roles. Women's claims to the rostrum continued to build from the expanding world of female education, which had its own explicitly public dimension, in the performance of commencement exercises and

²⁹⁰ Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*; Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence*.

²⁹¹ Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' " Controversy."

discussion of women's institutes in newspapers and periodicals. In July 1842, at the commencement exercises for Rutgers Female Institute in lower Manhattan, Park Benjamin delivered the report for the examining Committee on the Compositions of the First Department of students. Benjamin was one of the "literary gentlemen" called upon to examine the students and evaluate and report on their work and was himself well-known for his literary publishing endeavors. Reports of the commencement exercises would be published in the *New World*. His remarks celebrated the value of English Composition to Female Education, commenting "to write well—to convey her thoughts in a pleasing, correct and elegant manner—is an accomplishment to which every young lady should aspire." Benjamin regularly enjoyed the fruits of these aspirations in submissions to the *New World*. He noted that while one could hardly expect that "every young lady be educated for an author," the ability to "convey her ideas" well also commended a woman to her friends in "private life," where there are "many ladies, who write better than the professed authors of their own sex" though they "shrink from publicity."²⁹² Benjamin toed a delicate line here, lest his auditors interpret his remarks as an endorsement of female education as a stepping-stone for women to develop careers in public life. Though Benjamin professed that this was not the case, education did provide many women who became involved in literary production and social and political movements—particularly antislavery and women's rights—with the social and cultural capital, savvy, and confidence to do so.²⁹³

²⁹² *New World*, 31 July 1841.

²⁹³ Katherine Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973); Mary Kelley, *Private Woman Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995);

The newspaper coverage of the commencement of Rutgers Female Institute instead emphasized the aesthetic dimensions, reconstructing the graduation as a form of female spectacle of 400 ladies dressed in “simple white” who filed into Rutgers church in July, forming a “charming sight” for the “large and highly respectable audience, mostly of ladies” who showed an interest in the proceedings. Never at a loss for a classical reference, the *New World* likened the assembly of students to “one of the vestal trains that, in days of old, went up to the shrines of Minerva and thronged her temples.” The girls did not allow the unfeminine vices of pride and self-regard to mar appreciation of their accomplishments. Rather, “simple in attire, gentle in their deportment, without affectation and without constraint, they looked and acted, throughout the ceremonies which took place, as if they felt and appreciated the interest” in their “mental accomplishments.”²⁹⁴ This description signaled the continued importance of a style of demur and disavowal in female performance. An accomplished female student was unaffected and without pride. Her emotions were spontaneous, rather than practiced.

But this orchestral performance of unaffected and sincere appreciation on the part of the Rutgers students suggests how studied this unstudied feminine performance must have been and also how vital to the continued popular support of female education. The superior feminine “charms” of a blushing schoolgirl accepting her prize for best composition could easily be reread as a masculine violation if she stepped out of the script expected by the school’s all-male trustees, examiners, and reviewers. When

Patricia Okker, *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); on African-American women writers see Frances Smith Foster, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Carla Peterson, *“Doers of the Word”: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁹⁴ *New World*, 23 July 1842.

“Mary” wrote to the *New World* later that month begging it to publish the remaining prize compositions, the periodical dismissed the request with a cutting, “Let her apply in person; and, if her looks are more feminine than her chirography, we will promise to grant her request.”²⁹⁵ Of course, it wasn’t her penmanship that offended, but the student’s unfeminine request that her male patrons provide additional exhibition of the work of her peers. A proper showing of her feminine charms, however, would redress her masculine temerity.

This incident provides further example of how, in moving from the page to the stage, women’s solicitation of a public audience involved a fraught negotiation of tone and content. As Anna Mowatt moved her elocutionary performance from an ostensibly private world of drawing room entertainments for family and friends and into the commercial marketplace, she likewise grappled with the politics of representation facing all public speakers, particularly women. This politics of representation involved not only questions of gender style but also her rationale for moving into the commercial marketplace.

Situating Mowatt’s Reading Debut

In October of 1841, Anna Mowatt commenced her series of “Elocutionary Readings and Recitations,” drawn “from the Poets,” at the Masonic Temple in Boston. Mrs. Mowatt advertised that she would be reading from the English Romantic poetry of Scott, Byron, Coleridge, and “Mrs. Hemans.”²⁹⁶ The local papers spoke encouragingly of the endeavor, recommending her to the public because of her literary accomplishments

²⁹⁵ *New World*, 30 July 1842.

²⁹⁶ Advertisements in Boston *Daily Atlas*, 25, 26, 27 October 1841.

and her respectability in private life. The Boston *Daily Atlas* asked “our intelligent and literary community” to patronize a woman “known to the reading public, by her well-timed contributions to the literature of the day,” thereby connecting the Mowatt ascending the rostrum with the Mowatt recently published in several literary journals.²⁹⁷ Mowatt presented herself before her first public audiences as a literary figure and society lady; this constituted the chief basis of her claim to the rostrum. Mowatt’s social status—she was known to be the daughter of Samuel Ogden, a New York merchant and signer of the Declaration of Independence—and education worked together to establish her entertainment as of both moral and intellectual value.

The Boston *Journal* praised this entertainment for being “more intellectual and moral in [its] character” and therefore preferable to “‘exhibitions’...infatuating many of our inhabitants”—perhaps a direct allusion to the returning Viennese dancer Fanny Elssler. Much to the alarm of local critics, Elssler was then drawing more elite audiences to the Tremont Theatre, with \$2 orchestra tickets and auctions for boxes.²⁹⁸ Individual tickets for Mrs. Mowatt’s reading were priced at 50 cents, following precedent set by popular lecturers and English actor John Vandenhoff, whose own series of readings held in New York the year before clearly served as a model for Mowatt. The 50-cent price kept the entertainment competitive with a box seat at the theater, but classed it above the 25-cent Museum entertainments and audiences who swarmed the pit at the National Theatre at a quarter a person. Mowatt’s readings also offered a combined \$1 ticket that admitted a gentleman and two ladies, and thus explicitly solicited a female audience for

²⁹⁷ Subscribers to the *Ladies’ Companion* and the *New World* might have recognized Mowatt as the author of a number of poetry and prose pieces published that year. *Daily Atlas*, 28 October 1841.

²⁹⁸ Quoted in *New World*, 30 October 1841.

an unexpected, if not wholly unprecedented, form of public entertainment hitherto known only in private life. Mowatt was hardly the first woman to move from private life onto the public stage, but her “elocutionary readings” introduced a new genre of female performance into the cultural marketplace that would continue to complicate and reshape the relationship between women, the public stage, and the world of public amusements.

Praise of Mowatt repeatedly drew on the model of the woman author and the poetess. The *New York Herald* dubbed Mowatt “a sort of New York Corinna,” an allusion to an Ancient Greek poet known for her lyric verse and her “personal attractions.”²⁹⁹ A classical dictionary published by Harpers in 1842 noted Corinna’s numerous victories in the reading of poetry over the young poet Pindar. The appellation Corinna appeared fitting for a young woman who both wrote and excelled in the exhibition of verse—albeit not her own. In the 1830s and 40s, poetry became strongly associated as a feminine form of writing through which women could most effectively express their special sentiments. It was also more easily publishable, if not as highly paid as fiction. Though the poetry of men and women covered a similar range of form and content, the profusion of women’s poetry still provided occasion for predominantly male critics to deride the sentimental and standardized offerings of female poets.³⁰⁰ And yet, as one scholar has recently pointed out, poetry provided women with an avenue for public speech that departed from many of the sentimental ideals scholars have readily associated

²⁹⁹ *New York Herald*, 12 November 1841; Charles Anthon, *A Classical Dictionary: Containing an account of the principle proper names mentioned in ancient authors* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1842), 373.

³⁰⁰ Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (New York: Vintage, 2010); on women, poetry and transatlantic print culture see Meredith McGill, *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-century poems and transatlantic exchange* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

with women's writing.³⁰¹ Mowatt's performances of poetry feminized her while still providing her with an avenue into the new public role of public reader. She read pieces of "gay fancy" from which, the *New York Spectator* felt sure, "ladies need fear no rival in our sex."³⁰² Thus the performance of poet, in her writing and her reading, enabled Mowatt to remain within a feminized cultural sphere even as she performed on a public stage to a ticketed audience.

The description of Mowatt as a Corinna captures the degree to which her performance of white femininity was expected and recognized within an accepted category of feminine accomplishment. Mowatt was certainly an unusual figure within the commercial marketplace of public amusements, which underscores that her singularity lay in the *context* to which she brought her elocutionary performance. An examination of her singular move onto the commercial stage and the broader critical and social response reveals that women were playing with the boundaries around public careers, locating and testing them out. There was much in Mowatt's performance that seemed familiar to male critics who surely attended soirees where accomplished ladies sang and read or enjoyed the elocutionary exercises of their own daughters. The performance of readings was a regular practice in female seminaries and in private drawing rooms.

Nor did Mowatt step from total obscurity onto the commercial stage. Rather, a drawing room culture of literary and social "lights" in the Boston community provided a crucial bridge to a commercial public. The Boston papers informed readers that Mowatt

³⁰¹ Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2003).

³⁰² *New York Spectator*, 20 November 1841.

has “acquired much celebrity by her talents in recitation in private companies” and at her own “soirees and those of her friends.”³⁰³ But some of Mowatt’s friends who had praised her readings in the drawing room reacted strongly against her performances before a paying public. Mowatt recalled that while many came out to support her reading venture in 1841, a considerable number of her friends, particularly those from her youth, “turned from me.” She explains, “They were shocked at my temerity in appearing before the public. They even affected not to believe in Mr. Mowatt’s total loss of means. They tacitly proscribed me from the circle of their acquaintance.”³⁰⁴ While the new friends Mowatt made through her literary endeavors and with whom she connected through her interest in spiritualism supported her venture, the “continued coldness” of this older elite New York circle persisted, which suggests the variegated social and gender systems across different social geographies. A “public” and “private” distinction alone cannot capture the complexity and variety of meanings attached to different kinds of public spaces and public acts, like Mowatt’s, in which Mowatt took a genre of female performance and moved it out of the drawing room and schoolroom and into the commercial marketplace.

Critics who praised the entertainment emphasized its connections with this set of contexts, in part by constructing Mowatt as female spectacle, reducing her performance of poetry and literature to her aesthetic appeal, which further connected her entertainment with the accomplishments of a daughter in the drawing room. When critics praised Mowatt’s readings, their reviews frequently commented upon Mowatt’s feminine charms, but in terms that emphasized her gentility. Praise of her beauty underscored her class

³⁰³ *Boston Journal* quoted in *New World*, 30 October 1841; *Daily Atlas*, 28 October 1841.

³⁰⁴ Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 152.

performance. Her youth and beauty also supported the image of Mowatt as Corinna—figured as the beautiful poetess rather than Corinna the self-aggrandizing competitor. A woman’s beauty and performance of femininity could both support and work against her reception by a critical public. The broader discourse about the aesthetics of women’s performances could also contain and help police women’s claims to a public. New York mayor Philip Hone, an avid theater-goer and critical consumer of public amusements, had more to say in his diary about Mowatt’s unflattering hair-style than her performance as a reader.³⁰⁵

Discussion of beauty both trivializes and reconfigures that which is being consumed. Praise of Mowatt as “singularly interesting and beautiful in appearance” shaped the assessment of her accomplishments and limitations as a reader. Mowatt’s reading displayed “feminine grace.” Her expression was “natural” without “overstepping the modesty of nature” nor “falling short of truthful delineation.” This critic, quoted in the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, also enjoyed the “sweet, musical, and varied tones of her voice.”³⁰⁶ The *New York Spectator*, which classed her performances as a particularly feminine exercise, praised Mowatt’s “chaste unaffected delivery” and commended “the elocutionist” for her “modesty, taste and dramatic powers.”³⁰⁷ These reviews reveal less about the actual experience of Mowatt’s readings than about the qualities of female elocution that critics identified as praiseworthy in a lady’s performance. On the other hand, the *New York Herald* admitted itself constrained in critique *because* Mowatt was such a lovely woman, lamenting “Oh! that she were a man,

³⁰⁵ Philip Hone, *The Diary of Philip Hone 1825-1861*, Bayard Tuckerman, ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), II:574-575.

³⁰⁶ *Daily National Intelligencer*, 4 November 1841.

³⁰⁷ *New-York Spectator*, 20 November 1841.

so that we could unburden the soul.” But this reticence also implied that a woman needed little more than “light hair and sylph like form” to commend her to an audience. In a statement that managed to both acknowledge and snidely undercut the advancement of women, the *Herald* concluded, “The lillies of the field charter no banks, nor issue any paper money, yet Solomon in all his glory could not go ahead faster than they.”³⁰⁸

In her *Autobiography of an Actress*, published in 1854, Anna Mowatt took care to obscure the degree to which her move into a career as a public reader was part of a concerted effort to “go ahead.” Instead, she situated her agency emphatically within a family economy, which might well have been the case. In the *Autobiography*, Mowatt positioned her first move onto the public stage as an effort to help salvage the dismal financial situation in which her speculating lawyer husband found himself in the wake of the economic panic of 1837.³⁰⁹ Mowatt described her shock upon learning that they were to lose their home and desperately pondered a way to put her “talents” to good use. Despite her acknowledged talent for acting—in the privacy of her own parlor with her sisters—Mowatt dismissed the idea of turning to the theater: “The idea of becoming a professional actress was revolting.”³¹⁰ Instead, she took a cue from the recent success of a course of readings given by English actor John Vandenhoff in New York and convinced

³⁰⁸ *New York Herald*, 15 November 1841.

³⁰⁹ The Mowatts’ financial difficulty was probably known among their intimate circles at the time, but it was not part of press coverage of Mowatt’s career in the 1840s. Rather, it became prominent in accounts of Mowatt’s career only in the 1850s. This narrative exerted a powerful hold on Mowatt’s celebrity to such a degree that historians rewrote the significance of Mowatt’s elocutionary debut in terms of this piece of her biography. Back in 1841, critics saw a performer who embodied the social and cultural uplift that they sought for American entertainment. In contrast, in his 1853 history of the Boston stage, William Warland Clapp describes Mowatt’s 1841 debut as a “beautiful moral spectacle...of a wife turning her accomplishments to account, to relieve the necessities of her husband.” The narrative of social and cultural contribution was rewritten into a family drama of marital devotion. William Warland Clapp, *A Record of the Boston Stage* (J. Munroe and Company, 1853), 432.

³¹⁰ Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 139.

her husband that the key to their salvation lay in her doing the same, despite the possible perils of such an endeavor to her health—and her reputation. Inspired by his wife’s spirited resolve, Mr. Mowatt acceded to the plan and enlisted the help of a literary friend to set his wife on her chosen course.

This narrative of Mowatt’s reading career did important work within the larger project of the *Autobiography*, most notably by framing her first moves into public life and onto the public stage as a form of wifely sacrifice motivated by economic necessity. Together with Mowatt’s accounts of domestic theatricals with her sisters, the story of her reading career also set up a series of progressions toward her debut as a professional actress that both explained and excused, for a potentially critical readership, this genteel married woman’s choice to exhibit herself on the dramatic stage. The reading career helped Mowatt move her readers gradually towards her eventual career on the dramatic stage.

English actor John Vandenhoff’s elocutionary entertainments in 1839 and 1840 clearly served as a model for Mowatt. Vandenhoff explicitly connected his career as an elocutionist with his broader professional advancement and his growing interest in positioning himself as a teacher of elocution—particularly for ladies. Vandenhoff was an English actor who toured American cities in the 1830s as a “star,” hoping to cash in on the advantageous economic opportunities American markets offered English actors in the 1820s and 30s, the height of the much maligned (by American critics) “starring system.” In 1839, he brought his daughter Mary Vandenhoff with him, modeling their tour after the Kembles and likewise positioning himself and daughter as exponents of a high literary acting tradition and himself as a “gentleman” actor. Vandenhoff was not born

into an acting family, but he was among a number of “stage struck” young men in England who pursued a stage career in the late-18th and early-19th centuries, at a moment when the theater in England was experiencing a peak in popularity and regional theater was expanding. This made a career as an actor economically viable and desirable. George Vandenhoff attributed his father’s career to his discovery of drama at university, where Vandenhoff Sr. was to be trained for the church. George Vandenhoff’s narrative of his father’s journey from the university to the theater mirrored his own, in a carefully pitched apologia for George’s rejection of his law career. The distasteful “legal toils” George Vandenhoff endured as “Solicitor to the Trustees of the Liverpool Docks” proved to outweigh the social elevation afforded by moving out of the theater and into the professions, thereby reversing his father’s trajectory.³¹¹

Both Vandenhoffs Sr. and Jr. parlayed the capital of their university education to position themselves within a different class of actors and to broaden their careers to include the practice and instruction of elocution. American newspapers in the 1830s and 40s are filled with advertisements for professors of elocution, such as Professor King, who gave combined readings and lectures on elocution to demonstrate his accomplishments in dramatic oratory and who also frequently advertised private

³¹¹ George Vandenhoff, *Leaves from an Actor’s Notebook* (New York: C. Shepard, 1860), 8. George Vandenhoff offers no elaborate explanation in his published reminiscences for his sudden turn to the stage as a young man: “I made my resolution one sleepless night; rose early, took the express train to London, called on Madame Vestris [“manageress” of the Olympic Theatre], was graciously received, stated my wishes, and after expressions of astonishment on her part...I was duly engaged for the season about to commence, at a salary of L8 (\$40) per week.” Vandenhoff’s patrimony helped him move directly into the upper level of his chosen profession, much like Fanny Kemble. Unlike Kemble, no narrative of self-sacrifice to save a family from ruin was needed to supplement Vandenhoff’s reasoning. He just didn’t like being a law clerk. Vandenhoff also commented upon the difficulty of the theatrical profession, in particular its ill effects on a man of “spirit and ambition,” who as an actor will be cut off from the “civic laurels and political triumphs” of the citizen. He asked, “Who ever heard of an actor being sent to parliament or to congress?” Here, the chief problem with acting as a career is constituted solely in terms of the merits of the different kinds of public roles that a man might pursue. Acting is a public career that forecloses other kinds of public roles a man can take. Vandenhoff, 8, 36.

instruction for gentlemen and ladies.³¹² Actors and actresses increasingly saw an opportunity to market their skills to the public outside the theater. Vandenhoff Sr. used his university training for the church prior to bolster his credentials as a self-styled professor of elocution. George Vandenhoff, who first toured in America in 1842, both acted and gave dramatic readings and established himself as an elocutionist with lyceum bureaus in the 1860s. He published multiple editions of his guides to elocution in England and America, claiming authority as a “Professor of Elocution.” These manuals contained testimonials from various university professors, heads of female seminaries, and private individuals praising Vandenhoff for the instruction he offered to “classes of Ladies in *several private families*.”³¹³

John Vandenhoff first began giving his readings during his second tour of America in 1839, in the Saloon of the Law Buildings in Baltimore, presenting himself as a “practical teacher of elocution.” The Washington press, anticipating Vandenhoff’s appearance as a tragedian the following week, wrote in hope that Vandenhoff would offer a similar “intellectual entertainment” there.³¹⁴ These readings were part of Vandenhoff’s efforts to offer himself as a private instructor of elocution and draw income in excess of his acting engagements. The following year, Vandenhoff’s readings were receiving attention as an appealing form of entertainment patronized by people “who do not attend

³¹² Professor King began advertising his skills as an instructor in the 1830s. His “Elocutive Readings” at the Masonic Temple in Boston in the early 1840s featured a short lecture “in which he will illustrate his method of imparting instruction in Reading and Declamation, and the correction of impediments of speech,” followed by a recitation of “Mark Antony’s Oration over the dead body of Caesar” with analysis. *Boston Atlas*, 13 September 1842.

³¹³ George Vandenhoff, *The Art of Elocution* (New York: C. Shepard, 1847), iii.

³¹⁴ *Daily National Intelligencer*, 23 December 1839.

the theatre.”³¹⁵ Vandenhoff’s “Readings from the British Poets” in Boston in December was reviewed at length by a critic for the *Boston Courier*, an avid supporter of theatrical amusements, who consequently lamented that the entertainment left much to be desired in comparison to dramatic performance, even considering Vandenhoff’s excellent “expression of the softer passions and noble feeling.”³¹⁶ But when Vandenhoff delivered his readings in New York in January, the *New York Mirror*, a weekly newspaper devoted entirely to literature and drama, reported that he was listened to by the “the *elite* of the city,” clergymen and lawyers, “and a great number of that class of the community who are debarred from attending the theatre by conscientious scruples.” The artistry of Vandenhoff as an actor was of interest to them, so they sought the opportunity to hear his artistry in a less problematic space, while also connecting the appeal of dramatic literature to other social and cultural values. The *Mirror* connected the appeal of Vandenhoff’s entertainments to the important “art of communicating out thoughts by speech with elegance and effect” and urged “all public speakers, whether clergymen, lawyers, or political debaters” to “go and hear Mr. Vandenhoff.” It promised, “You will be pleased and improved; for you cannot fail to derive many new and valuable hints from his examples or oratory, aside from intellectual gratification which his readings will impart.”³¹⁷

When Mowatt delivered her readings, she followed John Vandenhoff’s example and read selections from the British poets. She featured Scott, Coleridge, and Bryon, but

³¹⁵ *Boston Courier*, 17 November 1840. Though Vandenhoff acted opposite his daughter, Mary Vandenhoff, she was not included in his elocutionary entertainments, restricting her performances to the dramatic stage. Mary Vandenhoff would go on to author several plays, including “Woman’s Heart,” her most celebrated and successful play, which debuted in London at the Haymarket Theater in 1852.

³¹⁶ *Boston Courier*, 17 December 1840.

³¹⁷ *New York Mirror*, 23 January 1841.

also included the influential, if lesser-known, Felicia Hemans.³¹⁸ In her second series, Mowatt further deviated from this model and included selections by American poets, including the Boston local Epes Sargent, whose poem “The Light of the Light-house” was a revelation to auditors. Critics rallied around Mowatt and praised her for highlighting the abilities of “native talent.”³¹⁹ Mowatt thus distinguished her readings from Vandenhoff in more ways than her gender. By championing American poets, Mowatt gave critics an additional stake in her performances that extended beyond the novelty of hearing a woman giving readings. Mowatt tapped into the growing concern of American critics, writers, and entrepreneurs with the outsized influence of British literature and British performers in the American cultural marketplace. A New York journalist lamented the double standard that imperiled the appreciation of American writing, contending “If Coleridge or Byron had written [“The Light of the Light-house”] three thousand miles over sea, it would long since have been familiar to every American ear.”³²⁰

While the content of Mowatt’s readings reveal her particular market savvy, the narrative Mowatt crafted around her move onto the rostrum also framed her as unpracticed and untutored. The *Autobiography* was a key instrument of Mowatt’s efforts, toward the end of her acting career, to put forth the argument that a career in public life on the dramatic stage did not diminish her essential claims to white respectability and gentility. It was part of Mowatt’s bid to present herself as a reformer of the dramatic profession from within. The broader politics of respectability within the theatrical

³¹⁸ *Daily Atlas* [Boston], 28 October 1841.

³¹⁹ *New-York Spectator*, 20 November 1841.

³²⁰ *New-York Mirror*, 18 December 1841.

profession shaped the rationale for, content, and broader narrative teleology of nineteenth-century theatrical memoirs. Actress autobiographies played a key role in this ongoing politics of respectability, although the revelation of private matters within an already public life and career was particularly fraught for women in the theater.³²¹ In order to gain the sympathies of her audience and support her larger argument about the respectability of the profession, Mowatt needed to explain how a private daughter of New York society came to a career in the dramatic spotlight. Mowatt did not come from nor marry into a theatrical family. Furthermore, given the ambiguous social and moral status of the actress, because of her proximity to prostitution in the theater and her own public participation in a labor economy, Mowatt's move into the theater could easily be cast as a major social fall. In many respects, as the *Autobiography* makes clear, it was. Mowatt did not retain the friends and acquaintances of her youth once she became a dramatic reader and actress. But her celebrity in the 1840s and 50s continued to draw on connections between her status as a performer and her elite upbringing. Biographical sketches published after Mowatt's acting debut, in 1845, reminded readers that Mowatt was a different kind of actress, one who brought her elite education and high moral standards into the theatrical profession. Mowatt developed this narrative in the *Autobiography*, but faced a variety of challenges in garnering the sympathy of her readers, who needed to be able to identify with Mowatt in private life and to recognize their own values. Though Mowatt was unusual in proclaiming her life-long love for the theater, she remained more ambivalent about her relationship with the dramatic spotlight. Mowatt could not present herself as coming too easily or too readily to a career in the

³²¹ On the genre of the theatrical memoir see Thomas Postlewaite, "Autobiography and Theatre History" in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, Thomas Postlewaite and Bruce McConachie, eds. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 248-272.

spotlight. And no doubt she hadn't, but not necessarily within the precise terms presented in the *Autobiography*.

In her account of her first performance as a dramatic reader, Mowatt presented herself as a reluctant performer, shrinking from the glare of her audience's gaze—even an imaginary audience. The day before her readings were to commence, Mowatt rehearsed at the Masonic Temple before an audience of her husband and a “paternal...old doorkeeper.” But standing at the head of the (nearly) empty hall, she discovered she could not speak. “The words came gaspingly forth, and I seemed to have lost all variety of intonation...my voice was choked.” Mowatt “grew sick at heart...overwhelmed with doubts and fears” of “disgrace added to our other [financial] ruin.” The doorkeeper tried to console her by describing “great speakers who look just as pale and frightened [sic] as you do now when they got on this stand here” but who “warmed up.” It was only once Mowatt returned to her rooms and found a letter of support and encouragement from her father that her courage rallied, “quickened by an influx...from his strong, never-wearing, and ever-buoyant spirit.” Mowatt placed her filial role at the center of her narrative; like many a good dramatic heroine, she recognized her father as the arbiter of morality, respectability, and duty. Mowatt retired for the evening “calm and strong of heart.” The following day, dressed in a “simple white muslin” with no ornaments save two white roses, she was led down the aisle by her husband. Then she calmly ascended the steps of the rostrum—alone.³²²

The *Autobiography* recounted Mowatt's actions at the reading as if experienced through a mesmeric trance. Spiritualism played a major role in Mowatt's life and in the

³²² Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 146-148.

Autobiography. Accounts of her study of Swedenborgianism and experiments with mesmerism were interwoven with the history of her dramatic career. The relationship between consciousness and performance is also a broader sub-theme in the *Autobiography*, emerging in the text particularly during moments of performance when the reader might expect Mowatt to be the most self-aware. The account of Mowatt's first public reading is a key example of this. At the commencement of the reading Mowatt was "half stunned" by the rounds of applause, the "blaze of light" upon her and the crowd of faces. She "mechanically" opened her book and began to read. Another burst of applause and she found herself in darkness, her veins "filled with ice" and her body "transformed into a statue." Mowatt remained suspended in this state for a moment before she commenced reading Scott's "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," "shivering" along with the words: "The way was long, the wind was cold." But the beauty of the poem ultimately returned her to herself. "A genial warmth displaced the icy chill, my voice grew loud and clear." Though careful not to admit to pleasure at her applauding hall, Mowatt the narrator explained that she had finally "become accustomed" to that which had at first so "frightened" her.³²³

In this passage, Mowatt is neither lecturer nor actress, but the words of the poem transformed her as if she were an actress inhabiting a part. And yet, this narrative connected Mowatt more with the trance speaker than with the actress or lecturer, particularly in the way the words of the poem inhabited her and inspired her courage. Mowatt the reader of poetry was the opposite of the actress who embodies, but is not yet inhabited by, her part. The degree to which an actress embodied and alternately was

³²³ Ibid., 149-150.

changed by a role was, in some respects, a central tension within the understanding of acting as an art, the actress as a woman, and in the criticism of actresses' performances. Attitudes of dramatic critics toward the kind of embodiment expected of and valued in an actress or actor were changing in the 1850s, at the exact moment that Mowatt published the *Autobiography*, which was clearly in dialogue with shifting attitudes toward acting and trends in dramatic criticism. But the trance lecturer is a better analogue for the kind of performance Mowatt is describing in this passage.

Indeed, readers in 1853 would have identified the imagery of the trance and associated Mowatt the dramatic reader with the trance speaker. The trance lecture was another genre of female performance that became particularly popular in the 1850s.³²⁴ Mowatt's interest in Swedenborg and mesmerism, as well as her use of the trope of the trance in descriptions of her performance experience, connect her with a much larger demographic of women who found a powerful social and political agency through the practice of spiritualism. Spiritualism and women's rights were closely connected in the 1840s and 50s, as women developed arguments for political and social equality that sprang from spiritualism's central claim of the spiritual equality of the sexes. For trance speakers, the trance state facilitated women's claims to a public platform while obviating the problem of female agency and authorial voice. And discursively, in literature like Mowatt's text, explication of the trance state established a kind of cognitive dissemblance that could enable a "private" woman to place herself before a public. Trance lecturing was a gendered performance that serves as yet another example of the diverse array of

³²⁴ On trance speakers and the séance as a site of female performance and of female authority, see Anne Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) and Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989).

modes of public speech that women adopted, and shows how certain forms of address became less controversial in particular contexts and spaces.³²⁵ Though Mowatt never explicitly aligned herself with women's rights in her published or personal writings, describing her interest in spiritualism would have signaled her alignment with this broader cultural phenomenon.³²⁶

But Mowatt's account of her stage fright also raises an important set of questions about the gendered experience of public speaking.³²⁷ While on the one hand, the trance served as a powerful vehicle for the development and elaboration of women's rights, a literary scholar has argued that in the *Autobiography*, Mowatt's accounts of her experiments with mesmerism actually worked to "domesticate" her athletic and performing body, enabling Mowatt to embody a sentimental woman while pursuing a career that defied the sentimental ideal.³²⁸ Mowatt's efforts to strengthen her body—her voice, lungs, and arms—for her dramatic performances contrast sharply with the mesmeric trance states that Mowatt used to heal her weakened body during her periodic physical relapses.³²⁹ Mowatt's accounts of stage fright and her efforts to overcome it, which mirror the trance states she experienced through mesmerism, can be read as a strategy to "align herself with submissiveness and docility" and neutralize her performing

³²⁵ See especially chapter 4, "The Meaning of Mediumship" in Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 82-116.

³²⁶ Spiritualism was connected with women's rights, albeit obliquely. Ann Braude notes that while not all women's rights activists were spiritualists, the vast majority of spiritualists became involved in women's rights; placing spiritualism so prominently in her text may have enabled Mowatt to signal some interest in the cause without overtly alienating a larger more hostile or ambivalent public.

³²⁷ For another approach to these themes in the *Autobiography* see Dawn Keetley, "The Power of 'Personation': Actress Anna Cora Mowatt and the Literature of Women's Public Performance in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (September 1996): 187-200.

³²⁸ Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 48.

³²⁹ There is evidence that Mowatt suffered throughout her life from tubercular symptoms. Her frequent physical relapses partially account for her hiatuses from the stage.

body.³³⁰ But the claim that Mowatt's stage fright was "a physical manifestation of her culture's proscriptions" against women's public performance is complicated when we consider the range of contexts in which women in this period actually did stand up before an audience.³³¹ Still, this interpretation raises provocative questions about the ways in which women orators understood, internalized, and defied boundaries and proscriptions around forms of public speech.

Mowatt's description of her reading debut shows that she was conversant with strategies deployed by other women performers, particularly the exaggerated style of feminine modesty and simplicity, which were necessary for constructing their claims to a public. Furthermore, Mowatt's account of her stage fright in the *Autobiography* actually helps obscure the degree to which Mowatt was already quite accomplished in self-presentation and in various genres of performance, albeit before both familiar and unfamiliar audiences in domestic settings. The literary account of stage fright can only distract from the larger narrative conclusion to the piece: though nearly fainting from fright, Mowatt mounts the rostrum and gives a stunning and celebrated performance that lives up to the skills she would have mastered through her education at female seminaries and participation in a world of parlor performance.

Still, in 1841, the terms according to which women's public speech could be recognized as socially responsible and commendable *outside* these contexts continued to be highly contested. The response of the *Ladies' Companion* to Mowatt's readings demonstrates that women speakers and performers continued to be assessed in relation to

³³⁰ This interpretation of the rhetorical implications of the trance state for the representation of women's agency discounts any larger social and political efficacy of the trance state within the women's rights movement or in women's increasing bids for careers in public address and claims to public authority. Piepmeier, *Out in Public*, 50.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

the composition of their audience, but also that the relationship between forms of female performance and questions of propriety, respectability, and social and cultural power remained unstable. Like many literary periodicals, the *Companion* provided licit exposure to the world of public amusements but from within a careful critical frame. The editor of the *Companion* favored the “legitimate drama” over novelties like equestrian drama, pantomime, or “Negro personation” and participated in a broader reforming discourse directed at the stage, which positioned the pursuit of “taste” against managers who “pandered to the morbid appetite of the masses.”³³² Its monthly reviews of theatricals demonstrate that the creation of the genteel literary consumer involved educating women to become critical consumers of a variety of forms of culture, including the theater. Readers of the *Ladies’ Companion* were not expected to spurn the theater uncritically, but rather to place their concerns and priorities at the center of cultural critique.

Meanwhile, the *Ladies’ Companion* treated the world of female oratory as an object of derisive concern. The *Companion* acknowledged, in an item devoted exclusively to “Mrs. Mowatt’s Readings,” that while the “lady” “reads correctly, and occasionally, beautifully...we are no admirers of female orators.” It felt that the “rostrum is not the province of woman.” But the *Companion* did grant Mowatt an acceptable alternative: “if she will aspire to it, let her confine herself, at least, to hearers of her own sex,” fostering a setting similar to a ladies’ seminary.³³³ From a distance of twelve years, Mowatt found the editorial laughable, commenting in her *Autobiography* on its “comical idea that the gentlemen were to be left at the door with the canes and umbrellas.” She

³³² *Ladies’ Companion*, June 1841; July 1841.

³³³ *Ibid.*, December 1841.

also expressed some frustration that this narrow view came from a woman whom Mowatt valued as a “gifted and estimable person.”³³⁴

Mowatt succeeded in moving a genre of performance long practiced by educated women out of the school and the drawing room and into a commercial marketplace, where she was able to raise money for her family while holding on to some vestiges of her reputation as a respectable lady in private life—even as many of her friends from private life shunned her. As a well-regarded member of a social elite, Mowatt was uniquely positioned to test the boundaries of the cultural marketplace for new forms of female performance. Many of the women who followed Mowatt’s example, like Matilda Clarendon, differed markedly from Mowatt in social upbringing, education, and professional experience. A comparison of Fanny Kemble’s efforts to revive her career by giving dramatic readings with Clarendon’s struggle to launch her career through dramatic readings reveals that as dramatic readers proliferated in the 1840s and 50s, giving dramatic readings increasingly became part of a set of strategies for transforming the scope of a stage career. Women as different as Kemble and Clarendon took advantage of new opportunities to expand the ways a woman could make a living as a stage performer. In the process, these women contributed to a broader reconfiguration of the status of drama as art and of the broader landscape of respectable family amusements.

Dramatic Readers after Mowatt

In the decade following Mowatt’s debut as a dramatic reader, an expanding cohort of women and men sought the platform as readers, offering a variety of new and hybrid

³³⁴ Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 154.

entertainments in an ongoing bid to appeal to non-theatre-going publics. The development of these hybrid entertainments was in part catalyzed by the financial panic of the late 1830s and early 1840s, which led to the collapse of many large-scale financial ventures, including theaters. Managers struggled to cover the expenses of the sprawling capitalist micro-economy of the theater, sustaining both a stock company and a rotation of headlining “star” performers. Both stock actors and touring performers suffered when attendance was thin, as managers reduced salaries, cut performances, or suspended the season early without pay. Competition for audiences between different forms of amusement increased, while entrepreneurs continued to solicit new audiences. Thus the financial panic also helped to create a broad opening for novel promotional gimmicks and cultural forms that required minimal financial investment and appealed to the larger concerns about public amusements raised by evangelicals and social reformers.

Dramatic readings can be read as both an effort to expand the existing public for theatricals and as an effort to create market niches independent of theatricals. The case of Clarendon demonstrates the degree to which women across the field of public amusements were actively engaged with creating and taking advantage of new genres of performance and forms of entrepreneurship, aggressively pursuing a range of strategies to earn a living and achieve public notoriety, which were mutually constitutive, as any Barnum—male or female—was quickly learning. And yet, the response to this “imitator” of Mowatt provides further example of the different ways the intense scrutiny of a woman’s appearance and evaluation of the feminine qualities of her performance cut in multiple directions, both advancing and complicating women’s efforts to expand their opportunities within the marketplace of public amusements.

Newspaper critics paid scant attention to Clarendon's first appearance in New York, at the Park Theatre in April 1841. She was twenty and pretty, "of a fine showy figure, and a pleasing countenance," an appealing addition to the stock company.³³⁵ Quickly, however, her enthusiasm for her occupation and efforts to distinguish herself in parts usually reserved for more experienced actresses brought stinging criticisms. The *Herald* noted dryly in its review of Clarendon's April 29 benefit, for which she chose Pauline in *Lady of Lyons*, that "the state of the weather last night was enough to damp the ardor of even a more ambitious aspirant for the honors of Mrs. Siddons than Miss Clarendon is likely to prove, although we see it insinuated for her by some of the Fungus order of critics, that the mantle of the great actress is destined to rest on the shoulders of this—their latest protegee." The *Herald* hoped to check Clarendon's ambitions, advising "Let Miss Clarendon begin with the waiting maids, and in a year or two she may be able to play the Mrs. Hallers and the Belvederas..."³³⁶ The problem also arose from Miss Clarendon's personal connections among the "Fungus critics." In May, for example, the *Herald* reported that the *Express* had alluded to an "unprincipled design" on Clarendon from the newspapermen of the *Signal*—the brothers John and Epes Sargent and Park Benjamin—who "wrote poetical addresses for her."³³⁷

The *Herald* was perhaps alluding—indirectly—to the address delivered by Clarendon at her benefit, which positioned her claims for the patronage of the public within the narrative of a trembling and humbled novice. The address is worth quoting at

³³⁵ *New York Herald*, 19 April 1841.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 April 1841.

³³⁷ While it appears Clarendon had secured the public and private support of Park Benjamin, the nature of their relationship remains unclear, notwithstanding the hints of scandal in the New York press, which likewise targeted Benjamin, a new competitor in the periodical industry. *New York Herald*, 5 May 1841.

length, in that it demonstrates how ubiquitous the rhetorical performance of modesty and reticence was for aspirants to public notice, particularly women. She begins, “Friends, generous friends, what gratitude is due / For liberal favor thus bestowed by you!” But then she demurs, acknowledging her own shortcomings, her ungiftedness: “The Drama’s votaress in your presence stands— / How should I grieve that not to me was given / Some inspiration from the poet’s Heaven!” She is a priestess undistinguished and untouched by the true gifts of poetry and art, and this because she is, after all, “New to the stage—to public effort new, / Young inexperience shuddered at the view. / I feared yet ventured, trembled yet essayed, / Alike of failure and success afraid.” Clarendon is not a confident aspirant to glory, and therefore deeply thankful for the “Aid, kindness, sympathy, support” that she has since claimed.³³⁸ The following fall, New York critics refused her the support and sympathy she needed to succeed an actress, and so Clarendon constructed her parallel career as a dramatic reader.

In October 1841, Clarendon acted the ingénue heroine opposite the rising star Charlotte Cushman in the new comedy of *A London Assurance*. The play was a hit, but Clarendon, the *Herald* opined, was “the poorest apology for a leading actress that ever walked the boards” and “in a cast unequalled for its excellence, her part...was woefully murdered.” Clarendon was unworthy of being called actress, but became instead a mere “girl, destitute of every equality necessary for the part.” The *Herald* concluded, “the veriest boarding school miss that ever eat bread and butter, and took part in a school examination, could have played it with better effect.”³³⁹ Benjamin defended Clarendon and a newspaper battle ensued. The Park Theatre’s leading actress, Charlotte Cushman

³³⁸ *New World*, 1 May 1841.

³³⁹ *New York Herald*, 12 October 1841.

entered the fray to defend her own interests and growing celebrity.³⁴⁰ In the course of the battle, Cushman succeeded in presenting herself as a “defenceless” but respectable aspiring actress while casting Clarendon, implicitly, as a woman of questionable virtue who relied upon an association with Park Benjamin to advance her career.

Clarendon lasted only a few weeks in the role of Grace Harkaway—whether because of audience dissatisfaction or green room politics—and at the start of November the part was given to a Miss Buloid. Hoping to salvage her season, Clarendon secured a weeklong engagement at the Chatham Theater, acting Pauline and her other preferred roles. The Chatham was a steep step downward in the hierarchy of New York theaters, a small cheap theater that catered to a far more rowdy, working-class male audience than the Park, which was patronized by genteel audiences as well as the rowdy mechanics who continued to make a nuisance of themselves in the pit. Though Clarendon played to a crowded theater in Bulwer’s *Lady of Lyons*, she no longer appealed to the New York “fashionables.”

Clarendon next joined the G. Hoffman Company touring western New York, and

³⁴⁰ This newspaper battle offers a key example of a woman successfully utilizing the press to shape readings of her career and to generate popular interest—and sympathy. After the *Herald* review, Park Benjamin jumped to Clarendon’s defense. According to coverage in the *Herald*, Benjamin sent a letter to the management of the Park insinuating that Charlotte Cushman, Clarendon’s co-star, had been the true author of the piece. Cushman responded in kind, authoring a cutting letter to Benjamin, which appeared shortly after in the *Herald*. In the letter, Cushman first called attention to her own role in Clarendon’s professional rise, by devoting “time, attention, and my interest” to the actress—efforts Cushman claimed Clarendon had received without showing any gratitude. Cushman then spoke explicitly of the matter of Benjamin’s own interest in Clarendon. She scolded Benjamin for going so far “on account of this private feeling” for Clarendon, that he would willingly “crush one lady [Cushman] upon the ruin of whose reputation that of the young person [Clarendon] might be built.” As for Benjamin’s threats to “hiss [her] from the stage,” Cushman coolly dismissed them: “that is a matter requiring some time and trouble...and I think you have business of more importance.” The letter skillfully repositioned Cushman as the chief injured party. Cushman professed, “I have felt what it was to be defenceless myself & would not attack so unfortunate a young lady—but with due deference to you I do not consider her defenceless while she has a person” such as Benjamin acting behind her. Cushman was not hissed from the stage, nor did her own reputation suffer. To the contrary, the press generated by their fight only aided Cushman’s publicity and the success of the play. The letter can be found in two versions: as a manuscript letter, C. Cushman to Park Benjamin, 13 October 1841, Charlotte Cushman Letters, Harvard Theatre Collection, and published, *New York Herald*, 16 October 1841.

in Utica, where she experimented with a program of readings.³⁴¹ She returned to New York in April 1842. This time she presented herself before the public as a reader, offering “Dramatic Readings and Celebrated Imitations” at Society Library in New York. The entertainment included selections of poetry—and like Mowatt, a piece by Mrs. Osgood—excerpts from popular drama, and imitations of the “histrionic talents” with which she had appeared at the Park. With this additional ingredient, which Clarendon first introduced in distant Utica, she strove to capitalize on popular interest in the personalities of the New York theater and clearly expected theatergoers to be among her audience.³⁴² Critics seemed exasperated by Clarendon’s tenacity and were dismissive of her talents, which they found weak and “schoolgirlish” at best.³⁴³ The New York *Mirror* alone admired her “industry” and found her “worthy of public regard.”³⁴⁴ The *Herald* set a new bar for insinuating critique when it reduced the appeal of Clarendon’s performance to the attraction of her physical person. “She is, in addition, a pretty woman, and this fact will always insure her an audience of young men, who will come to look at *her*, and of young ladies who will accompany the aforesaid young men, to distract their attention from the fair actress.”³⁴⁵ The *Herald* would not let New York audiences forget the past season’s dramatic disappointment, in which beauty was an untalented and possibly overly ambitious young woman’s chief claim to merit. Clarendon had the misfortune of being a pretty young woman with little talent to recommend her. Her beauty evoked not her

³⁴¹ Jane Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

³⁴² Imitations of contemporary figures and personalities was a popular form of comedy presented by men and, increasingly, women both within dramatic pieces and in soliloquy style, in theater performances, lecture hall events, and also as a major component of blackface minstrelsy.

³⁴³ *Albion*, 16 April 1842.

³⁴⁴ *New York Mirror*, 7 May 1842.

³⁴⁵ *New York Herald*, 26 April 1842.

gentility but quite the opposite, the sexualized appeal of a lower class women aspiring above her station. But her tenacity won out. Clarendon maximized the capital of her New York career while also repositioning her artistry through the performance of poetry and literature, particularly American.

Most of the dramatic readers of the 1840s embraced dramatic reading because of its appeal outside the theater, where they could access new publics and become part of the new category of family entertainment promoted at museum theaters like the Baltimore Museum. The majority of dramatic readers were actresses striving to move out of or supplement stock work, much like Clarendon. But in 1849, Fanny Kemble introduced a new variation on the dramatic reading entertainment into the American cultural marketplace, the Shakespearean reading. Kemble's career stands out in comparison with Mowatt and Clarendon's for her success in reviving her celebrity by incorporating and transforming an emerging form of entertainment. The category of "Shakspearean Reader" that Kemble helped created united the literary and cultural values associated with Shakespeare with the dramatic reader. While previously readers had included excerpts of Shakespeare in their entertainment, Kemble devoted each night to a single, albeit heavily edited Shakespearean play. A "Shakspearean Reader" distilled a feminine performance of literary womanhood through the genius of Shakespeare. This category of performance continued to be popular through the 1870s, although Shakespearean readers after Kemble rarely restricted an evening's performance to a single play and frequently incorporated poetry and other literary excerpts and dialogue readings. Descriptions of reading entertainments in the decade after Kemble were always

evaluated in relation to her, and the comparison could make or unmake woman's appeal to her public.

The popular interest in Kemble's 1849 readings was connected to Kemble's celebrity, as a new generation of Americans took advantage of the opportunity to see a woman who loomed large in cultural memory but had been retired from the stage for over a decade. Critics evaluated her readings in relation to their collective memory of her dramatic achievements and the scandals and controversies of the ensuing decades, principally the 1835 publication of the controversial and much-criticized *Journal* of her American tour and her publicized domestic troubles, marital separation, and divorce. Kemble commenced her readings in America during the ongoing divorce proceedings. Pirated copies of her own "Narrative," a sixty-page document submitted to the court in response to Piece Butler's own claims about the marriage, were well circulated by the time she returned to American boards in early 1849. Kemble's celebrity was thus also connected to a broader gender politics, in which she actively participated as a proponent of women's education and dress reform, which signaled women's rights. But in advancing her case in the divorce proceedings, her "Narrative" also laid out a powerful defense of maternal rights.³⁴⁶ There were many reasons for Americans to come out to hear Fanny Kemble read Shakespeare in 1849, in addition to the particular novelty of Kemble's style of entertainment.

Kemble was surely inspired by the reputation her aunt Sarah Siddons garnered for her private and public readings of Shakespeare, which she commenced after her retirement from the London stage in 1812. Thomas Campbell, posthumous biographer of

³⁴⁶ Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, " 'So Unfemininely Masculine': Discourse, True/False Womanhood, and the American Career of Fanny Kemble," *Theatre Survey* 40:2 (1999): 27-42.

Sarah Siddons, connected her readings with a continued bid for popularity. The entertainments that Kemble offered forty years later bore a striking similarity to those of her aunt. Siddons positioned herself behind a “reading-desk...on which lay her book, a quarto volume.” Her white figure and dark hair styled “*a la Greque*” stood out against a “large red screen.”³⁴⁷ A letter reprinted in Campbell’s text attributed to Siddons’s reading a deeper understanding of Shakespeare, praising her “composure and dignity, and ... sort of suppressed feeling, and touches, not bursts of tenderness, of matronly, not youthful tenderness.”³⁴⁸ The auditor praised Siddons’s presentation of Queen Katherine in particular. Even as a reader, Siddons was aligned with her most famous roles as an actress. Campbell expressed his own conviction that “no acting I ever witnessed, nor dramatic criticism I ever read, illustrated the poet so closely and so perfectly.”³⁴⁹

Throughout her career, Kemble’s public image and celebrity was connected to her legacy from her aunt, who was celebrated as a heroine and featured in biographical sketches in literary periodicals and composite biographies that were becoming incredibly popular in America.³⁵⁰ The style of readings Kemble developed likewise revealed her indebtedness to Siddons. At her first Boston reading, she presented herself behind a podium on which two large folios of Shakespeare rested, providing a tangible totemic link to Shakespeare and connecting her performance to the literary textual Shakespeare rather than the embodied dramatic performance. Kemble would also be praised in similar terms as Siddons, for offering her auditors a more advanced conception of Shakespeare’s language.

³⁴⁷ Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs. Siddons* (1834), II:350.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II:352.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II:351.

³⁵⁰ Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*.

In the decades overlapping Siddons's death in 1831, the status of Shakespeare in American culture reached unprecedented heights. The works of Shakespeare joined the Bible as requisite texts for an American household, and Shakespeare was upheld as a literary model for the American nation striving to develop a national literature.³⁵¹ Shakespeare was at once popular and elite, studied reverently in university and lectured upon in lyceums, but also avidly consumed by audiences in urban theaters, where plays were heavily modified or abridged, and actors and actresses made free to improvise topically within the text to provide social and political commentary. Male working-class audiences demanded to see preferred conceptions of Shakespearean characters and particular versions or excerpts of plays.³⁵² Nineteenth-century critics who were engaged in ongoing debates about the merits of different forms of public amusement frequently decried the impact of "mass" taste on the kinds of performances of Shakespeare found in theater. It was in the context of this ongoing class struggle over the ownership of theatrical space and dramatic texts that many critics claimed that the truest appreciation of Shakespeare's literary genius could only be realized through elocutionary performances.

Kemble attributed her more immediate inspiration for her readings to her father, Charles Kemble, who had been developing his own adaptations of Shakespearean plays for recitation. In the mid-1840s, he presented these in tours of London and the provinces. As Kemble explained in her memoir, this made it "impossible for me to thrust my sickle

³⁵¹ Kim Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁵² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Nina Baym, "Delia Bacon: History's Odd Woman Out," *New England Quarterly* 69:2 (1996): 223-249.

into a field he was reaping so successfully.”³⁵³ Instead, in 1847, Kemble attempted to return to the English dramatic stage to try to support herself financially during her estrangement from Piece Butler, who had cut her off from both an income and from seeing her daughters. The following year, Butler filed for divorce and Kemble was forced to return to America to plead her case in court while Butler continued to bar her from seeing her daughters, a right Butler possessed according to America’s laws of coverture. Butler likewise slandered Kemble publicly as an unfit mother and wife, placing considerable blame on her dramatic career.³⁵⁴

Kemble’s return to the English stage was not successful. As she ruefully explained, “A stout, middle-aged, not particularly good-looking woman, such as I then was, is not a very attractive representative of Juliet or Julia.” Kemble claimed to have felt unequal to taking on a new repertoire more suited to her age, of the “weightier female personages—Lady Macbeth, Queen Katherine, etc.”³⁵⁵ Conflicts with her costar William Charles Macready, whom she described as neither “courteous or pleasant,” and his “unnecessarily violent” acting style—on one occasion, in a production of *Othello*, he “frightened [her] to death”—may have played a great role in her swift departure from London theater.³⁵⁶ When Charles Kemble contemplated “giving up his readings,” Kemble jumped at the opportunity to organize her own series of readings, both as a way to realize an income but also to bring her studies of Shakespeare to more total realization

³⁵³ Fanny Kemble, *Records of Later Life* (H. Holt, 1883), III:140.

³⁵⁴ For account of the Kemble-Butler marriage, separation, and divorce and the role of Kemble’s dramatic career and politics in the marriage and divorce see Reitz Mullenix, “‘So Unfemininely Masculine’”; Deirdre David, *Fanny Kemble: A Performed Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Catherine Clinton, *Fanny Kemble’s Civil Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

³⁵⁵ Kemble, *Records of Later Life*, III:140.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, III:376, 391.

than she could achieve playing an individual role in a dramatic production.³⁵⁷

Her Shakespearean readings also afforded Kemble an opportunity to realize a personal intellectual “value,” taking the opportunity to make “of each play a thorough study in its entirety” that was impossible for “stage representation.” Kemble was an avid scholar of Shakespeare. Her readings provided the foundation for a broader critical project that is only hinted at in Kemble’s lone piece of published literary criticism, “Some Notes on Shakespeare,” which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1860. In preparing her readings, Kemble expanded from her father’s repertoire of the “most frequently acted plays,” rotating among twenty-four plays, which included a number of histories not popular for dramatic representation as well as a broader range of comedies than were commonly performed.³⁵⁸ Kemble hoped to avoid “becoming mechanical or hackneyed myself in their delivery by perpetual repetition of the same pieces, and so losing any portion of the inspiration of my text by constant iteration.”³⁵⁹ Giving dramatic readings provided Kemble with artistic control that most actors and actresses were denied. Kemble privileged her pursuit of an artistic and literary ideal over responsiveness to the market, reflecting in her memoirs, “for more than twenty years that I followed the trade of a wandering rhapsodist, I never consciously sacrificed my sense of what was due to my work, for the sake of what I could make by it.”³⁶⁰ This claim fit with the broader defense of her career that moved across her several volumes of memoir

³⁵⁷ Ibid., III:206.

³⁵⁸ The twenty-four, as listed in *Records of Later Life*: “King Lear, Macbeth, Cymbeline, King John, Richard II., two parts of Henry IV., Henry V., Richard III., Henry VIII., Coriolanus, Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice, The Winter's Tale, Measure for Measure, Much Ado about Nothing, As You Like It, Midsummer Night's Dream, Merry Wives of Windsor, and The Tempest.” Kemble, *Records of Later Life*, III: 372.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., III:372.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., III:373.

published between 1879 and 1891. But claims to artistic integrity were also important to other women mounting careers as literary elocutionists and likewise shaped the response of audiences and critics to these efforts, as women deftly interwove appeals to edification and entertainment in the promotion of these amusements.

Kemble was beginning to achieve success and generate demand in England, having established a style of performance repertoire that mediated her desire to present as much of Shakespeare's plays in as much as of their entirety as time and attention would allow, when the divorce proceedings forced her to return to America. Kemble introduced her first course of readings in America in Boston at the Masonic Temple in January 1849, selling tickets for 50 cents. Throughout her first year of touring, halls were repeatedly filled at or near capacity and tickets sold out nightly. The Boston correspondent reported to the New York *Herald* on the extravagant profits of the venture: "Each reading nets her from \$250 to \$300, which at three a week (she gave four last week) would produce \$750 to \$900, clear of all expenses," estimating that from her thirty readings she netted "at the lowest estimate, \$7,500."³⁶¹ Critics consistently commented on the "immense crowd[s]" and profits as the first leg of Kemble's tour took her from Boston to New York's Stuyvesant Institute, on to Albany, and back to New York, where she gave several courses at Stuyvesant, the Lyceum, and in Brooklyn.

In early 1849, the publication of excerpts from her 1835 *Journal* and her poetry in Boston papers also generated popular interest in Kemble as a celebrity. The Boston *Evening Transcript* commented snobbishly on the implications of this fame, for "*fashionable* assemblages, however brilliant soever they may outwardly appear, are not

³⁶¹ *Weekly Herald*, 17 February 1849.

always the most discriminating,” noting in this case that “fashionable” seemed “almost like a libel upon her powers of attraction.”³⁶² The combined appeal of Kemble’s celebrity with the outsized status and appeal of Shakespeare in American popular and intellectual culture is captured in a joke entitled “The Upper Ten,” published in Frederick Douglass’s *North Star* in March 1849: “At Fanny Kemble’s last reading, in the Masonic Temple, the daughter of a wealthy man, asked her husband who Shakspeare was. He replied without hesitation, that he was the man that wrote the New Testament.”³⁶³ Here the pretensions of the “Upper Ten”—the finest, fanciest, wealthiest families—are mocked by a paper aligned with the culture of educated, reform and evangelical-minded Americans. It suggests that the intellectual failings of the economic and social elites are matched by a false faith, while the appeal of celebrity and the popular—our critic might as easily have said the “fashionable”—have replaced any interest in the deeper intellectual or religious content.

The appeal of Kemble’s celebrity no doubt played a considerable role in the success of her first year of touring. That fall she started in Philadelphia, visited Baltimore, then traveled west to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Her final series of readings, in early 1850, moved between Boston and its neighboring towns and New York.³⁶⁴ Interest and attendance fell off considerably in 1850, which one historian suggests may have been connected with the recent scandal of the Edwin Forrest divorce case, which reignited an ambivalence towards theatrical celebrity and may account for the overall change in tone of newspaper reviews of Kemble’s readings. A New York *Herald* critic

³⁶² Quoted in Gerald Kahan, “Fanny Kemble Reads Shakespeare,” *Theatre Survey* 24 (1983), 84.

³⁶³ *North Star*, 9 March 1849.

³⁶⁴ Kahan, “Fanny Kemble Reads Shakespeare,” 83.

writing in March 1850, connected Forrest's publicity efforts to the model offered by "the *sui generis*" of "these modern tactics," Fanny Kemble, noting ruefully, "go ahead with divorce and popularity."³⁶⁵ Kemble's growing public alignment with Boston abolitionist circles also produced some alienating newspaper criticism. Ultimately, Kemble achieved tremendous financial and critical success from her 1849-1850 tour, which allowed her to purchase a small house in Lenox, Massachusetts, near her beloved friends, the Sedgwicks, and enjoy a comfortable retirement, from which she periodically returned in the 1850s to give additional reading tours.

Praise of Kemble connected the appeal and value of her entertainments to the broader critique of legitimate theater, even while some quarters problematized the allure of her celebrity. Kemble's readings were a site in which the potential of the drama as literary art could be fully realized. The New York correspondent of the *North American and United States Gazette*, a commercial daily out of Philadelphia marketed towards businessmen and sympathetic to Whig politics, took the occasion of Kemble's anticipated readings to criticize the "ignorant and barbarous manner in which three quarters of a play is usually delivered on the stage," an objection shared even by those with "no moral objection to the theatre." The correspondent positioned this "department of public amusement" within a broader struggle over the tone and style of theatrical entertainment, noting that for "nearly all respectable and refined classes" the Shakespearean reading "is doubtless destined to supersede...the grosser performance of the theatre with its unavoidable associations of immorality and dissipation."³⁶⁶ Unfortunately for our critic, in 1850, theatrical entertainment was poised to market itself more successfully towards

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 95.

³⁶⁶ *North American and United States Gazette*, 28 February 1849.

the “respectable and refined classes,” though dramatic reading remained popular an alternative to the theater (though hardly a replacement).

Dramatic readers would increasingly be identified and marketed as a distinct category of entertainer, particularly in the late 1860s, when they became a recurring offering on lyceum bureau lists and in lyceum courses. Critics and audiences recognized dramatic readings as an entertainment form in which the meaning and merits of drama but also non-dramatic literature could be realized in new ways. Dramatic readings are another example of the way mid-century print and platform culture were mutually constitutive in marketing literary and platform celebrities, from the local to the transatlantic level.³⁶⁷ Elocution as pedagogical and social practice as well as performance also persisted. The publication in the 1850s of elocution manuals marketed explicitly at ladies indicates that women continued to engage in this cultural practice, and dramatic readers in the 1850s and onwards frequently featured excerpts drawn from these texts.³⁶⁸ Dramatic readers both forged and made visible important connections between female performance and women’s education and leisure activities, literary production, and cultural consumption. This helped carve out a new space for legitimate female public performance.

³⁶⁷ Scott, “The Popular Lecture”; Angela Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture*; Sara Babcox First, “The Mechanics of Renown; or The Rise of a Celebrity Culture in Early America” (PhD Dissertation: University of Michigan, 2009). The relationship between the mechanics of American print culture, what Meredith McGill has called an American “culture of reprinting,” public performance, and the creation of celebrity demands further scholarship. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Re-Printing, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

³⁶⁸ Examples from the 1850s that include some of the same excerpts featured in these entertainments include Charles W. Sanders, *Sanders’ Young Ladies Reader* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1856); William D. Swan, *The Young Ladies’ Reader* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Coperthwait & Co., 1851); and Jonathan W. S. Hows, *The Ladies’ Reader* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co., 1860). Mowatt studied with Hows in the process of becoming an actress. Most of these texts were intended for ladies’ seminaries, and say so explicitly, but Hows also hails an existing market of domestic use for his *Ladies’ Reader Designed for the Use of Ladies Schools and Family Reading Circles*.

From various positions of cultural authority and celebrity, Mowatt, Clarendon, and Kemble participated in moving the growing feminization of literary production into the marketplace of public amusements. The commercial utility of this genre of performance for women from such different backgrounds is likewise significant. All turned to dramatic readings to seek relief from financial pressures. But as comparison of these readings careers demonstrates, reception of each woman's entertainment varied relative to her background, as did the perception of her authority to "perform" particular texts. Clarendon was far more limited in this respect than Kemble or Mowatt. While dramatic readers were not actresses, they continued to be read as such, which created a dynamic tension in the interpretation of the performance and the performer.

This in part accounts for why the majority of dramatic readers in the 1840s and 50s, with the exception of Mowatt, tended to be actresses striving to enlarge the scope of their careers. In Mowatt's case, the feminization of literature helped her mark her performance as genteel and respectable, disassociating it from theatrical performances. But responses to Mowatt also reveal that dramatic readers could be negatively associated with platform speakers. In this respect, the literary and dramatic quality of the entertainment helped distinguish it from the controversial implications of women's efforts to broaden their role in the civic arena. As for actresses who became dramatic readers, both Clarendon and Kemble contributed to an ongoing negotiation of the relationship between the theater and literature. Kemble succeeded where Clarendon struggled because Clarendon lacked the social and cultural capital to move more fully outside the category of female spectacle. As female dramatic readers negotiated the boundaries of respectability and commercial possibilities of new forms of female

performance, associations with the theater and with platform culture had conflicting implications.

Chapter 4

“Incidents in the life of a child of Genius”:

Writing Female Stage Celebrity

In 1856, a printer in Cincinnati published a remarkable little volume. *A Biographical Sketch of Miss Matilda Heron* recounted the history of the actress from her early residence as a child in Philadelphia, study of elocution, fascination with the stage, determined pursuit of a stage career, and early successes as a star in San Francisco, St. Louis, and ultimately, Cincinnati. The anonymous volume assured readers of its noble purpose, “to relate some of the more prominent incidents in the life of a child of Genius.” Heron’s history was not written “for glory,” nor mere “romance,” but as an apt lesson in the origin, obstacles to, and ultimate recognition and “triumph” of genius.³⁶⁹ With such a premise, one can hardly expect Heron to have put her own name as the text’s author, but it is inconceivable that she did not play some role in its composition and even publication. In fact, the premise of *A Biographical Sketch* might even suggest Heron’s own attitude towards her career in September 1856, when her triumphant return to Cincinnati was crowned by a coveted invitation for a star engagement at Wallack’s Lyceum Theater in New York City. Though not easily traceable to Heron’s hand, *A Biographical Sketch* seems to have been designed to frame the history and meaning of Heron’s career and rising celebrity at the moment of this shift to a market she had been

³⁶⁹ *A Biographical Sketch of Matilda Heron* (Cincinnati: James Bense, 1856), 3.

trying to access for half a decade.

Heron's active pursuit of instruction and performance opportunities lies at the center of this text, framed not by duty or sacrifice but instead by Heron's confidence in her genius and the legitimacy of her pursuit of artistic fulfillment. Heron is portrayed as a complete outsider to the theatrical profession and stranger to the theater whose fascination with the drama was kindled by the dramatic authors she read as part of an education in the "English classics."³⁷⁰ Heron was encouraged by her church-going family to channel her energies into literature instead of drama, and so Heron published her poetry and stories in periodicals. But, the narrator explains, Heron's writing only temporarily served as the "safety-valve to her mind."³⁷¹ Like other middle-class daughters from upwardly mobile merchant families—Heron's father was in fact a lumber merchant and emigrant from Ireland and her elder brother entered the steamship business and would become the president of the Heron Line—Heron studied elocution in her French Academy for young ladies and discovered that practicing elocution nurtured her native dramatic talents and fueled her desires. She sought out the instruction of Peter Richings, manager of the Walnut Street Theatre, presumably for elocution. Despite Richings's objections, Heron insisted that he prepare her for the stage and allow her to study dramatic roles as well as elocution repertoire. Though Richings cautioned Heron that she had neither the "voice, conception or fire" required for success on the stage, Heron was undeterred, and offered a truly remarkable reply.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

³⁷¹ This would have been in the mid- to late-1840s, the same period of Mowatt's publishing endeavors, when periodicals marketed to women increasingly solicited materials from women writers. This emphasis on the early career of the "young authoress" also set up a crucial theme and argument that would be developed throughout the text, that dramatic genius is evidence of a literary mind. *A Biographical Sketch*, 7.

I cannot think of bidding adieu to all my cherished hopes and dreams, I WILL SUCCEED. By labor and long years of study, to which I joyfully doom myself, so long as the smallest spark of hope lights me to the prize, I will win it one day, Mr. Richings, be sure of that.³⁷²

Of course, Heron defied her teacher's expectations and he agreed to place her on the stage of the Walnut Theatre.

How can we account for this remarkable document? Compare the tone and emphasis of *A Biographical Sketch* with Anna Mowatt's *Autobiography of An Actress*, published in 1854, upon Mowatt's retirement after eight years on the dramatic stage. Early in the text, while contemplating what "talents" she could market to help rescue her family from financial ruin, Mowatt declared unequivocally that though she "had talents for acting...The idea of becoming a professional actress was revolting." However, Mowatt's attitude was transformed, first by her experience as a dramatic reader, which allayed her fears of performing before a strange public, and then by her experience working with the Park Theatre company on her comedy *Fashion* in March 1845. This, Mowatt explained, produced a "total revolution" in her ideas about the stage. Mowatt was also influenced by her friend, the English writer and spiritualist Mary Howitt, who argued that "the stage [is] capable of becoming one of the great means of human advancement and improvement," but would benefit the most from actors of "high moral character and religious feeling" as well as "talent and genius."³⁷³ Mowatt became convinced that her talents and temperaments were a sign "pointed out by the unerring

³⁷² *A Biographical Sketch*, 10.

³⁷³ Anna Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854), 215.

finger of Providence” that the stage was a suitable sphere for her labors.³⁷⁴

While Mowatt framed her own agency within a narrative of domestic support and sacrifice that foregrounded ideals of moral uplift as well as personal and artistic fulfillment, *A Biographical Sketch* emphasized Heron’s commitment to her path and her “strong conviction that the stage was her legitimate field of action.”³⁷⁵ *A Biographical Sketch* shows a saavy deployment of narrative devices and critical discourses that had played a role in actress biography and in Mowatt’s *Autobiography of an Actress*, but with a remarkable shift towards the articulation of a new artistic agency that would have been impossible for a woman of Mowatt’s generation and social upbringing. The Heron text is inconceivable without Mowatt’s claims about the physical, psychic, and artistic benefits of her eight years on the stage—Mowatt explained that the “constant exercise” of acting had “visibly improved” her health and the “animating, exhilarating pursuit” bought her an “inner peace.”³⁷⁶ However, the Heron text rejected the domestic and moral framework that had made Mowatt’s own remarkable articulation of professional agency and fulfillment possible in the first place. In contrast to Mowatt in the *Autobiography*, according to Heron’s ghostwriter her professional choices were anything but fraught. Historically, Heron’s career also began a major shift in attitudes towards acting, the actress, and in the kinds of plays presented on the dramatic stage. But her career and her biography cannot be understood without first examining the terms and markets through which Anna Mowatt and her contemporary Charlotte Cushman developed a national and transatlantic renown in the 1840s.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 216.

³⁷⁵ *A Biographical Sketch*, 10.

³⁷⁶ Mowatt, *Autobiography*, 234.

In the 1840s and 1850s, actress celebrities Anna Mowatt, Charlotte Cushman, and Matilda Heron appealed to an expanding middle-class public. These women were celebrated as literary actresses, and Mowatt and Cushman in particular were aligned with ideals of genteel respectability shared by their audiences. Mowatt was a new kind of celebrity, whose stage performances were so shaped by her own literary practice that her celebrity dominated the dramatic performances she gave. But Mowatt's publishing practices also enabled Mowatt and later Heron to deliver powerful statements about acting as an intellectual and transformative enterprise. In fact, all of these women engaged with the print marketplace to help shape the terms and narrative of their careers, aligning themselves with the values of middle-class gentility, which facilitated appeals to middle-class women. Highly visible moments of female spectatorship around these women's careers open up a larger question about what the theater and dramatic performance offered to its growing female public. In the absence of detailed sources by women about their experiences as spectators, we can still draw on reviews written and published by men to understand the terms and frameworks according to which these women's performances were understood to be powerful or important—or dismissed as unworthy of regard. However, Mowatt, Cushman, and Heron's own publishing and copyright practices—particularly their use of biography—and choice of roles is compelling evidence of the existence of a female counterpublic within the cultural marketplace and that these women engaged in order to transform the scope of their careers, define their own public roles, and catalyze larger shifts in the marketing and culture of theater.

The careers and public roles these women developed were also shaped by the

popular genre of biography.³⁷⁷ Nineteenth-century Americans were voracious readers of biographies, of both historical and contemporary figures, consuming them in an incredible variety of forms and contexts. Biography served multiple and mutually constitutive purposes for periodicals seeking expanding readership, whether for commercial gain or advocacy. Mowatt's *Autobiography* was connected with a larger subgenre of women's individual biography, which expanded significantly between 1830s and 1850s. By one scholar's count, the number of new titles in collective female biography tripled between 1850 and 1858.³⁷⁸ Women's biographies offered models of female achievement that functioned both as inspiration for new generations of educated women, and served as evidence of women's capacity for success in every conceivable context. Meanwhile, biographical sketches of female performers featured in the new genre of illustrated literary periodicals drew in new publics for theatrical amusements by educating readers about theater and female celebrities, aligning these cultural and consumer practices. In Mowatt's case, the *Autobiography* also proved a financial windfall for a woman well experienced in the vagaries—and possibilities—of the print market, while deploying key tropes of women's superior moral influence and artistic genius to frame her career.³⁷⁹ The texts produced by and about Mowatt, Cushman, and

³⁷⁷ Biography served as a vehicle of celebrity, which helped establish the terms, implications, and legitimacy of celebrity. On the popularity of biography in the early nineteenth century see especially Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); for an examination of female stage celebrity that deals with questions of print and biography see Renee Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁷⁸ Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, 392.

³⁷⁹ In the early 1840s, Mowatt sold articles, fiction and poetry under a variety of pseudonyms to literary and women's periodicals, and sold the copyright of her novels and domestic advice manuals to publishers. Mowatt's success navigating the literary marketplace prompted James Mowatt to establish a publishing company of his own which was, Anna Mowatt later explained in her *Autobiography*, "supplied chiefly by

Heron reveal the central role that print played in shaping new forms of female celebrity at mid-century and reaching new markets for theater that made female spectatorship central.

This chapter will begin by examining Mowatt's 1845 move into the theater industry, first as playwright and three months later as an actress, while placing Mowatt's unusual career trajectory in dialogue with her contemporary, Charlotte Cushman. Mowatt's playwriting and acting debuts aligned longstanding concerns about the place of the American culture industry within the transatlantic cultural economy and the potential of American markets for supporting American talent, with ongoing questions about the respectability of the theater as a site of middle-class leisure. Mowatt and Cushman were celebrated for fueling a "theatrical revolution" in which American dramatic celebrities would transform the status and content of the theater in America and push back against the dominance of England in the transatlantic theater industry. Mowatt and Cushman's careers also offer a rich set of comparisons concerning the relationship between celebrity and the kinds of performances of femininity permitted on and off the stage in this period.

Mowatt's career, which followed a highly unusual trajectory, is especially provocative in the ways it opens up larger questions about the possibilities that the dramatic stage offered for the construction of new types of white-collar careers for women and models of female agency, during a period in which the meanings and publics for theatrical amusements were highly contested, particularly around gender. Mowatt is fascinating because she appears to conform and transgress simultaneously, forcing us to

me." James Mowatt believed he would make more money as a publisher than from selling the copyright of the books that Anna Mowatt "compiled." In 1844, while Anna Mowatt was writing *Fashion*, James Mowatt and Epes Sargent set to work on a play series that James Mowatt & Co. would publish as "The Modern Standard Drama." James Mowatt published the first four volumes of the series before his publishing venture went bankrupt in 1846. Mowatt, *Autobiography*, 186; Roger E. Stoddard, "Notes on American Play Publishing, 1765-1865," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* 81:1 (1971): 161-190. For additional analysis of Mowatt's *Autobiography of an Actress* see Chapter 3.

create some framework for defining what made her career possible. Did Mowatt perfect her performance of genteel ladyhood to enable her controversial move onto the dramatic stage, as some scholars have argued?³⁸⁰ Was Mowatt an exceptional pathbreaker who created new possibilities for women to imagine different types of public and performing careers, or does she only appear remarkable because her race and class status rendered her pursuit of work, and work on the stage, scandalous and exceptional?³⁸¹ The answer lies somewhere in between these three scenarios. Mowatt's racial and social status increased her visibility and enabled her to craft a unique career, which in turn resonated with larger cultural questions about the social, cultural, and economic role of white middle-class women and about the relationship between these women and the world of public amusements.

From the beginning of her acting career in 1845, critics presented Mowatt as ambassador of genteel culture within the morally unstable and contested terrain of the theater. Representations of Mowatt as a dutiful wife and daughter and an artistic intellect who had sought the stage as her ideal artistic medium also reversed paranoid narratives of

³⁸⁰ Theater historian Adrienne Macki argues that in becoming an actress Mowatt “relied on the genteel image she cultivated as a lady orator.” She carefully and artfully constructed herself as lady to legitimate her career. Likewise, her performances as an actress were all “characterized by a...feminine quality that foreground[ed] her status as a lady.” Mowatt’s “propensity to display the feminine” contributed to her acclaim. While I largely agree with Macki, my argument approaches the dynamics of Mowatt’s appeal and address to her publics somewhat differently. While I share Macki’s interest in how Mowatt legitimated her career, I am also interested in unpacking the specific kind of “feminine” performance and “public ideal of womanhood,” to quote Macki, that Mowatt achieved in her performances, and examining how her history and social status provided her with forms of social and cultural capital that shaped her celebrity, but also created opportunities for new kinds of female celebrity. Finally, I emphasize not only how Mowatt’s genteel image shaped her *own* celebrity, but helped transform the theater industry as a whole. Adrienne Macki, “Challenging Gendered Spaces: Anna Cora Mowatt’s Courageous Oratory,” *New England Theatre Journal* 16 (2005): 1-20.

³⁸¹ See Chapter 3 for my discussion of the race and class politics of Mowatt’s move into elocution. Early biographical scholarship on Mowatt by Marius Blesi and Eric Barnes constructs narratives that treat Mowatt as pathbreaker and emphasize her historical exceptionality and the romantic qualities of her life and career. Marius Blesi, “The Life and Letters of Anna Cora Mowatt” (PhD. dissertation: The University of Virginia, 1938); Eric Wollencott Barnes, *The Lady of Fashion: the Life and Theatre of Anna Cora Mowatt* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954).

theater as an agent of social and moral corruption and a sphere of mere self-display. Mowatt restored theater to its rightful status as art. This was appealing narrative in the context of ongoing efforts of managers and critics to remake the theater around a middle-class social and cultural prerogative. Of course, as other scholars have observed, Mowatt's careful performance throughout her career of a genteel ladyhood, which was enhanced by the dramatic roles she chose to play, supported these overarching narratives.³⁸² But her careful performance of gentility facilitated Mowatt's rather radical assertion, implicit throughout her career and made explicit in the *Autobiography*, about the importance of a vocation for middle-class women and the respectability of the theater, both as a site of amusement and as a site of middle-class women's public labor.³⁸³

The careers of Mowatt, Cushman, and Heron provide an alternative point of entry into a key historical shift. By the 1850s venues that hoped to appeal to a broad middle-class public had eliminated alcohol saloons, replacing them with refreshment salons, and reorganized the seating in the theater, in turn eliminating the third tier of boxes catering to prostitution. Thus venues like Niblo's Garden in New York and the Howard Athenaeum in Boston hoped to appeal as sites of "family amusement."³⁸⁴ Appealing to

³⁸² Mowatt's decision to go on the stage had real repercussions for her socially, but she maintained a carefully gendered class performance throughout her career, epitomizing the complexity and ambivalence of the social status of actors and actresses. Adrienne Macki makes such an argument in her article.

³⁸³ Also see Dawn Keetley, "The Power of 'Personation': Actress Anna Cora Mowatt and the Literature of Women's Public Performance in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (September 1996): 187-200.

³⁸⁴ Scholars identify P.T. Barnum as a key innovator and leading exponent of the new category of family amusement with his American Museum. But although museum theaters like Barnum's American Museum and Kimball's Boston Museum marketed to the emerging middle classes, the class address in Barnum's "family amusement" was calibrated differently than venues like Howard Athenaeum or Niblo's Garden, which were seen as resorts of the "fashionable." Both categories of venues catered to a broad social range of patrons, embraced values of temperance, and passive spectatorship, but with different middle class "accents." On Barnum and "family amusement" see Bluford Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); J. W. Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like it in the Universe* (Urbana: University of

women as arbiters of domestic leisure as well as domestic economy became a key strategy in other forms of commercial culture, including the rise of dry good stores and the first department stores. As scholars have shown, in a process that began in the 1850s, and was well-established by the 1870s, commercial amusements in major eastern cities were part of districts oriented around the consumption and leisure practices of middle-class women.³⁸⁵ While the appeals of theater managers to women did reflect the ongoing search for new markets consonant with recognition of the consumer power of the middle class, female celebrities who drew large numbers of women into theater helped make female publics visible as a viable market, and a key component of theater-going publics.

Much has been written about the culture of the theater in the 1820s and 1830s, when celebrities like actor Edwin Forrest and blackface minstrel performer T. D. Rice succeeded in capturing the rising class consciousness—and anxieties—of white working-class men. The rise of this public contributed to a class war over ownership of the theater, which manifested in periodic theater riots, until the Astor Place Riot of 1849 catalyzed the ongoing efforts of theater managers to police the spectatorship practices of audiences and appeal to the middle classes. Mowatt's acting career bridged this historical transition, but it is also a particularly rare example of movement across a growing divide between producers and consumers of public amusements. New conventions of audience

Illinois Press, 2005). On class accents see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture* (London: Verso, 1987). As I show in Chapter 2, the creation of the new category of family amusement and the efforts of theater managers to regulate and restrict audience behaviors responded to a combination of factors, including pressure reformers exerted through local government; competition with other forms of amusement in lecture halls and concert rooms; and the desire of theater managers to draw in and maintain a wider consumer base for theatrical amusements, a concern catalyzed by the Panic of 1837.

³⁸⁵ On urban shopping districts see Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990).

behavior effectively silenced the ability of the audience to talk back and shape the content of the performance—whether by demanding a revised presentation of a favorite character or speech, insisting upon an encore of a scene, or showing displeasure with the performance or the off-stage behavior of the actor by showering the stage with food and furniture or rioting. By the 1850s, the audience was rendered an increasingly passive public in the space of the theater. On the one hand, this ascendance of middle-class conventions of spectatorship can be viewed as the beginnings of an increasingly unequal relationship between producer and consumer, mediated by capitalism, which rendered the consumer a passive recipient of culture.³⁸⁶ And yet, the shift to soliciting a middle-class and female consumer base through changing conventions of spectatorship also enabled some strikingly new kinds of performances, careers, and kinds of celebrity, like Matilda Heron's. *A Biographical Sketch of Matilda Heron* and Heron's own publishing and copyright practices reveals how women in the theater industry took advantage of changes in the audience, geographic scope, and legal framework around the theater industry to reach new markets and publics.

“Theatrical Revolution”

“An American Comedy—a real, undoubted, genuine American comedy, has just been finished by Mrs. Anne Cora Maria Mowatt,” the dramatic critic for the *New York Herald* crowed in early March 1845. Mowatt's literary reputation preceded her: “she has written some of the sweetest pieces of poetry in the magazines, and is shrewdly suspected, in some quarters, of being the authoress of ‘Helen Berkley, or the Fortune

³⁸⁶ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Hunter,' ” a satire of fashionable urban life.³⁸⁷ And now, New York’s oldest and most distinguished theater, the Park, would be producing an original work by a young untried American dramatic author—a *female* dramatic author. The success of the play *Fashion*, the *Herald* believed, would “be one of the greatest novelties of the age, and will throw a new light on the literature of the country.”³⁸⁸ American dramatic writing had long suffered due to the absence of an international copyright law or national dramatic copyright law, which made the production of foreign dramas and adaptation of foreign fiction cheaper for managers than native scripts (though not protected by copyright, dramatic manuscripts could still be sold for royalties prior to publication). In the mid-1840s, laments over the decline of legitimate theater from the beginning of the decade were overtaken by a new discourse of revolution—in the content of theatrical amusements, composition of the theater audience, and recognition of American contributions to the transatlantic cultural marketplace. Mowatt’s emergence and success as a playwright and dramatic actress both fostered and signaled this shift. Across the pond, Charlotte Cushman’s critical success before London audiences suggested that Americans were leading a transatlantic “theatrical revolution.” The London journalists reported that American had given a “second Mrs. Siddons to England.” The *Herald* imagined that America might still “give them the next Shakspeare or Sheridan” and at the very least pay the “debt which our literature owes to the fatherland.”³⁸⁹

This imagined debt was both cultural but also reflected perceptions of the underlying economics of the transatlantic cultural economy. Cushman traveled to

³⁸⁷ “An American Comedy,” *New York Herald*, 7 March 1845.

³⁸⁸ “The Drama,” *New York Herald*, 16 March 1845.

³⁸⁹ “Extraordinary Theatrical Revolution in England and the United States,” *New York Herald*, 21 March 1845.

England at a historical moment in which transatlantic cultural economy was being recast by American performers launching themselves as regional and international stars. Though Cushman was not the first American performer to tour England—blackface minstrelsy had already made its way across the Atlantic, and Barnum introduced his variation of the American show trade with his exhibition of Tom Thumb—Cushman’s success as an actress performing in English dramas was regarded as particularly significant given the dominance of English actors and actresses in American markets since the 1810s.³⁹⁰ Nineteenth-century America was highly conscious of itself as in England’s cultural debt, and England’s cultural influence was further tied up in a complex history of economic relationships that shaped the culture industry itself. One of the most popular rants of the dramatic press concerned the ravages of the star system on the American theater economy. The *Herald* positioned Cushman’s success within a longstanding discourse treating American culture as derivative of and inferior to that of England, and Europe more broadly. America was finally able to produce a star to rival the posthumous celebrity of Sarah Siddons on her own soil *while* reaping profits—the *Herald* estimated that Cushman would take home upwards of one hundred thousand dollars, an “immense fortune.”³⁹¹

America’s position as a producer within the Atlantic cultural economy returned again and again in discussions of American “contributions” to the corpus literary and

³⁹⁰ There is a growing literature on the transatlantic culture industry of the nineteenth century, which embraced a range of cultural forms by no means limited to print. For recent work on American exports in the show trade, see Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*; Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). See also Lisa Merrill’s discussion of Cushman’s relationship with her English audiences in *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

³⁹¹ “American Actors in England,” *New York Herald*, 26 March 1845.

dramatic, which was always seen in transatlantic terms, both culturally and economically. In his efforts to sell Anna Mowatt's play *Fashion* to theaters in the South and West (after its New York success) James Mowatt picked up on discourses that envisioned the revival of dramatic writing in America, urging managers to re-imagine their place in the transatlantic theater economy. "Of one thing you may be certain that should Mrs. Mowatt or any other writer produce two such comedies a year it will effectually put a stop to the foreign stars taking all the profits which are made by our theatres, and having the Theatres almost in a state of bankruptcy."³⁹² Actually, the struggling state of the theaters in 1845 had less to do with the relatively cheap cost of producing revised English plays than with the cost of featuring English stars. But James Mowatt was allowing himself to imagine a cultural economy in which American audiences supported the efforts of American dramatists and the performances of American actors. A theater industry by Americans for Americans would fatten the calf all around, creating opportunities for American dramatists like Mowatt in America and for American stars like Cushman and Mowatt in both America and England.

The celebrity Cushman and Mowatt enjoyed in the 1840s was connected with the nationalistic politics of the transatlantic cultural economy as well as their successful appeal to female spectators. Cushman was celebrated throughout the second half of the century as the greatest actress America had produced, in part because her success in

³⁹² James Mowatt to Noah Ludlow and Sol Smith, 7 April 1845, in Brander Matthews and Laurence Hutton, *Actors and Actresses of Great Britain and the United States*, Extra-Illustrated Edition (New York: Cassell & Company, 1886), Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University Library. James Mowatt wrote to Ludlow and Smith, managers of a theater conglomerate between Mobile, St. Louis, and New Orleans, in April 1845 offering *Fashion* to their theater on the strength of its reception in New York. Mowatt had just completed arrangements for its run in Philadelphia, and offered Ludlow and Smith that same terms he had just made with Boston, "Fifteen percent of the gross receipts of the house on each of the first three nights of performance, and ten percent on each night the play was performed afterwards."

London reframed her as an *American* actress while proving that American actresses could rival the English on their own soil. Cushman's account of her Puritan ancestry—her father was the descendant of a Pilgrim who traveled to America on the *Mayflower*—bolstered this image of Cushman as a source of American pride and became a prominent feature of her biography later in her career. Cushman's success in London in turn provided critics with the framework through which to signify Mowatt's contributions as a dramatic writer and actress. Cushman and Mowatt were an unlikely historical pairing in 1845, but a comparison of their very different avenues to the stage exposes the expanding potential of the theater as a vehicle for new forms female celebrity in America, the interplay of regional and transatlantic markets in constituting these celebrities, and crucially, the increasingly central role that female celebrities were playing within the shifting class politics and address of theater in the 1840s and 1850s.

Cushman is a ready historical foil for Mowatt because whereas Mowatt appeared to bypass established professional hierarchies, moving directly into the profession as a debutante actress, Cushman's early history demonstrates how expanding theater circuits created opportunities for men and women without family in the profession to apprentice themselves in stock companies and, if possible, rise up through the ranks. The financial ruin and death of Charlotte Cushman's father was a key catalyst in the origin story of her turn to the stage in the 1830s, similar to the role that James Mowatt's financial ruin played in Mowatt's move onto the platform.³⁹³ Cushman, however, lacked the social and cultural capital that Mowatt would leverage both in 1841 and 1845. Initially determined to become an opera singer, Cushman apprenticed herself to Peter Richings in New

³⁹³ Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*, 21.

Orleans, but switched to acting because of difficulty with her voice. She first performed in New York as a walking lady in the stock company of the Bowery Theatre, but it burned in September 1836, leaving Cushman without a dramatic wardrobe or contract. Cushman applied to the Park and Chatham Theatres, but ultimately left New York to take a position with the Albany Theatre, where she was able “get practice” in a range of characters including many of the breeches roles for which she would become famous.³⁹⁴ Cushman returned to New York in September 1837 and secured a coveted position at the Park, largely regarded as the theater that brought out the finest talent and catered to the more elite publics—even as it continued to struggle to market itself as a venue for family and middle-class consumption.³⁹⁵

Both Cushman and Mowatt utilized publishing to expand and frame their emerging careers and growing renown. Mowatt’s publishing career preceded, even as it supported, her move on the platform and eventually the dramatic stage. Cushman, like Kemble before her, was extremely strategic in using print to establish a public renown in concert with her acting engagements. In 1837, upon her return to New York and the most elite stock company in the city, Cushman placed a story in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, “Extracts from My Journal: The Actress.” Thus from the start of her career, Cushman hoped to appeal to a genteel and literary public.³⁹⁶ Cushman worked the emerging print and theater industries simultaneously, publishing small pieces of poetry in newspapers in the cities in which she was performing and in literary periodicals marketed to middle-class women, like the *Ladies’ Companion* and *Graham’s Lady’s and Gentlemen’s*

³⁹⁴ Emma Stebbins, ed., *Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of her Life* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood & Company, 1879), 28.

³⁹⁵ Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*.

³⁹⁶ Charlotte Cushman, “Extracts from My Journal: The Actress,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, February 1837.

Magazine.³⁹⁷ Descriptions of Cushman as a poetess as well as an actress aligned Cushman with a hyper-feminized form of genteel accomplishment. By demonstrating that she shared the values of literary elevation with her publics, Cushman indicated that she might also share their vision for elevating the theater both intellectually and morally, and thus she became a worthy champion and object of patronage.

This contributed to the signification of Cushman's London success, especially as it came in the wake of Edwin Forrest's failure. While Cushman had "created a sensation" in London unrivaled "since the time of Kean, Kemble, or Miss O'Neill"—notice the comparisons with lionized English celebrity actors of the legitimate drama—Forrest, the most famous actor America had produced, had "entirely failed" in London. "His performances have been criticized with great severity, but strict justice," and he is "set down as a respectable second-rate or third-rate actor." Forrest was associated with the rowdy working-class publics whose tastes the *Herald* hoped to discipline and even push out of the New York marketplace altogether. The *Herald* clearly savored the irony that the comparatively lesser-known Cushman—and not Forrest—had fulfilled its prediction that the next "great dramatic genius" to transform the "English drama... would make its appearance in this country" rather than in England. The *Herald* hoped for an American-led revival in acting and dramatic criticism that would finally reject "imaginary standards created by the dreamy recollections of the past"—that English critics and audiences would no longer set the terms of dramatic merit based on standards constructed around

³⁹⁷ The following is a brief sampling of citations: Charlotte Cushman, "Cromwell at the Coffin of Charles I," *Graham's Lady's and Gentlemen's Magazine*, November 1843; "Sonnet—Manhood," *Ladies' Companion*, February 1844; "Monody; On the Death of Henry Ware Jr.," *Ladies Companion*, March 1844.

earlier generations of actors like the Kemble family and Charles Kean.³⁹⁸ The irony of this, of course, is that London critics elevated Cushman's reputation with American publics. But they had also vindicated the tastes championed by James Gordon Bennett, who felt that Forrest did not deserve the encomiums lavished upon him in America.

The fighting attention that rival New York dailies paid to Cushman and Forrest's London debuts reveals the implications that celebrity within a transatlantic theater industry held for the contested social and cultural politics in regional American markets like New York. At stake in all of this lay the question of how artistic merit was to be recognized and supported. The *Herald* deplored the influence of the green-room—that is, bribery of newspapermen and paid puffing—on newspaper criticism in America. Cushman's success promised to wipe the slate clean. When Forrest's "toadies" insinuated that Cushman had purchased her success from London critics, Cushman's supporters in New York reminded readers that that New York press had long been in his pocket—perhaps he should try the same trick in London! While Forrest "has always been overrated by his friends," Cushman "has risen to her present eminence without friends—without the means of procuring the aid of any portion of the press or any section of society."³⁹⁹ If the "conceited, empty-headed, impertinent, assuming, purse-proud codfish aristocracy of New York" had failed to recognize what a "treasure" it possessed in Cushman, the problem was clearly the foolishness, ignorance, and susceptibility of American audiences to "addle-pated critics" who didn't know true artistic genius.⁴⁰⁰

In the 1830s and 1840s, dramatic critics consistently invoked the influence of the

³⁹⁸ *New York Herald*, 21 March 1845.

³⁹⁹ "American Actors in England," *New York Herald*, 26 March 1845.

⁴⁰⁰ *New York Herald*, 21 March 1845.

public in order to criticize managers for the content of productions. Critics accused managers of pandering to a base public rather than to literature and art, or alternately of ignoring the desires of the public and presenting entertainments that failed to appeal, thereby bankrupting their theaters. More common was the former complaint, as critics urged managers to appeal to a higher cause than box office receipts. But how were managers to draw in the right publics, to respond to market demand, without sacrificing either artistic content or losing their precious foothold in competitive local markets? What role should economic decisions play in patronage of new stars and plays? Theater historian David Rinear characterizes the tensions at work in theater of the 1830s and 1840s as between “ ‘democratic’ and ‘aristocratic’ segments of the audience” that mapped on to a preference, respectively, for native versus foreign talent.⁴⁰¹ These tensions would come to a head in 1849 when Edwin Forrest’s riotous working-class publics started a riot outside William Charles Macready’s performance at the Astor Place Opera House. Cushman and Mowatt’s rising transatlantic celebrity proposed a remarkable solution to the nationalistic politics behind class tensions in the theater. Genteel publics could align themselves with cultural nationalism through the celebrity of these American women, correcting a cultural imbalance that exerted a real material economic impact.

The cultural and economic nationalism through which the *Herald* celebrated Mowatt’s play and James Mowatt attempted to market it were in fact woven into the dramatic plot and characters. Set in the parlors of New York Knickerbocker elite, *Fashion* deployed Mowatt’s social capital as daughter of a New York merchant and

⁴⁰¹ David Rinear, *Stage, Page, Scandals, and Vandals: William E. Burton and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), xi.

sometime member of the world of fashion she promised to represent, while simultaneously mocking its slavish emulation of all things European. Its plot and characters pitted the Europeanified pretensions of the new merchant middle class against Yankee wisdom and the modesty of the simple American girl. It called attention to a new more self-consciously ostentatious upper-middle-class culture in the making while serving as a cautionary tale about the values of that culture. It simultaneously satisfied and mocked the acts of emulation fundamental to the concept of fashion.⁴⁰² The spendthrift wife, Mrs. Tiffany, a “Lady who imagines herself fashionable,” is enamored of all things European and schemes to marry her daughter Serafina to the “fashionable European importation,” Count Jolimaitre. Alas for Serafina, the attentions of Jolimaitre are drawn to the young governess Gertrude. Meanwhile, Mr. Tiffany’s clerk Snobson attempts to leverage Mr. Tiffany’s impending financial ruin into a deal to marry his daughter. The maneuverings of the lovers are watched over by the French maid Millinette, who sees through the false Count; the black servant Zeke, a caricature indebted to blackface minstrelsy and whose own aspirations to gentility provide a cutting commentary on the Tiffanys; and finally by Adam Trueman, a Yankee farmer and old friend of Mr. Tiffany. Gertrude is the beloved of Colonel Howard, but all is lost when Howard overhears and misinterprets Jolimaitre’s attempt to seduce Gertrude. Trueman’s own good sense and keen observation save Gertrude’s reputation and expose Jolimaitre—the scene that the *New York Weekly Herald* chose to depict in its extended review of the plot. [Figure 7.] Gertrude is united with Howard, the spendthrift Tiffanys are packed off to the country to learn some economy, and Trueman reveals that Gertude is in fact his

⁴⁰² Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

daughter and an heiress.⁴⁰³



Figure 7. Scene from *Fashion*. *Weekly Herald* [New York], 26 March 1845. Nineteenth-Century Newspapers, Gale Cengage.

The play drew together plot devices from English Restoration comedies of manners and the core character types and plot twists found in popular melodramas, in particular the hero—in this case heroine—of humble origins who embodies all virtue in a corrupt world, but is ultimately rewarded with a revelation of noble birth or ancestral wealth. The play exposed the “absurdities, and follies, and vices of fashionable life” while ultimately crowning a core set of values recognizable to audiences as fundamentally

⁴⁰³ Anna Cora Mowatt, *Fashion; or, Life in New York. A Comedy, in Five Acts* (London: W. Newbery, 1850).

middle class.⁴⁰⁴ It also promised audiences a glimpse into the world of the “upper ten,” and featured stage sets and decoration made by the same artists who designed the “fashionable drawing-rooms up town.”⁴⁰⁵ As a satire of the Europeanized pretensions of the upwardly mobile, the play likewise dealt with the problems of social mobility—the financial consequences of the performance of affluence and the larger effects upon social and family values of the pursuit of wealth.⁴⁰⁶

Other critics objected to these themes and to the possibility that social satire should be regarded as elevating the American drama. The “literati” of New York agreed that *Fashion* was not anything approaching great dramatic literature, nor was social satire an appropriate mode for elevating the American drama. If anything, its satires hit too close to home. The *Spirit of the Times*, a men’s sporting paper with an elite and literary cast, delivered the harshest critique in the New York press. It considered the drama “unpolished” and poorly constructed, objected to its low comedy, and was particularly offended by the language, an “ordinary slip shod conversational stringing together of words, employed in every day life” that was not what comic writing “should be.”⁴⁰⁷ Critiques turned on the originality of the characters and plot, which according to Edgar Allan Poe were drawn entirely “from the usual *routine* of stage characters, and stage manoeuvres.”⁴⁰⁸ Poe found the play derivative of Sheridan’s *A School for Scandal*, and

⁴⁰⁴ “The Theatrical Revolution,” *New York Herald* 22 March 1845.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid. See Karen Halttunen’s discussion of *Fashion* in *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), esp. Ch. 6 “Disguises, Masks, and Parlor Theatricals,” 153-190.

⁴⁰⁶ According to Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, *Fashion* “reveals Mowatt’s profound concern for the Americans’ obsession with financial success, a social problem rooted far beneath the surface of fashionable foibles and follies.” Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, *Early American Woman Dramatists* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 104.

⁴⁰⁷ “Things Theatrical,” *Spirit of the Times*, 29 March 1845.

⁴⁰⁸ “The New Comedy By Mrs. Mowatt,” *Broadway Journal*, 29 March 1845. William Porter of the *Spirit*

concluded that though a “good play” in comparison to “the generality of modern dramas,” as a world of “dramatic art, it is altogether unworthy of notice.”⁴⁰⁹ In her offensive realism Mowatt had captured an aspect of a shifting middle-class culture than satisfied neither the elite *Spirit of the Times* nor Poe’s own vision for dramatic literature.⁴¹⁰ Regardless, *Fashion* enjoyed a long run at the Park by contemporary standards—three weeks, barring Sundays—followed immediately by runs in Boston and Philadelphia. Clearly, Mowatt *had* satisfied the desires of her middle-class and female publics.

Female Celebrity to Female Spectatorship

When Mowatt debuted as an actress at the Park Theatre on 13 June 1845, the *Herald* reported, she drew applause not heard in “old Drury since the time when Fanny Kemble carried all hearts by storm” and from a house that was “crowded to excess, the lower and second tier of boxes presenting an array of beauty and elegance such as we have rarely seen at any place of amusement.”⁴¹¹ Actually the Park had enjoyed such an “array” only three months earlier, for the first performances of *Fashion*. On both occasions, the Park Theatre, with its boxes “like pens for beasts,” hard benches “covered

of the Times agreed: “Mrs. Tiffany is a degenerated Mrs. Malaprop, Adam Trueman, Max Harkaway acclimated, and Snobson’s best part was a small imitation of Dick Dashall.” “Things Theatrical,” *Spirit of the Times*, 29 March 1845.

⁴⁰⁹ “The New Comedy By Mrs. Mowatt,” *Broadway Journal*, 29 March 1845.

⁴¹⁰ Poe preferred Mowatt’s talents as an actress to her abilities as a dramatist. He later wrote in “Literati of New York,” a series of critical sketches serialized in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1846, that *Fashion* “owes what it had of success to its being the work of a lovely woman who had already excited interest, and to the very commonplaces or spirit of conventionality which rendered it readily comprehensible and appreciable by the public proper.” Poe felt that whatever “genius” Mowatt possessed was “as yet unrevealed” in her drama and novels, but could be found in her “capacity as an actress.” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Literati of New York,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, June 1846.

⁴¹¹ “Park Theatre,” *New York Herald*, 14 June 1845.

with faded red moreen,” its “evil smells” and rats running “out of the holes in the floor” of the pit, was nevertheless filled with “ladies.”⁴¹² No doubt the attention Mowatt garnered from the “gay and brilliant” ladies of New York for her advent as dramatist again drew women to the theater for her acting debut.⁴¹³

This throng of female spectators marking the gentility of the audience was not unique to Mowatt’s rising New York celebrity, but it carried particular significance in the mid-1840s, when theater managers were more actively soliciting a middle-class public. Describing an audience as “fashionable”—or featuring an “array of beauty and elegance”—were tropes used by dramatic critics to signal a genteel public, while likewise provided evidence that New York was in fact witnessing a “new era” in the theater.⁴¹⁴ Mowatt was extremely strategic about positioning herself within these shifting markets. Though the Park enjoyed its reputation as the “Old Drury” of New York and its oldest and most distinguished theater, the Park interior lacked the comforts of padded benches, bucket seats, and carpeting that managers were increasingly introducing in new venues designed for middle-class consumption, like Niblo’s Garden in New York and the recently opened Howard Athenaeum in Boston, both venues in which Mowatt would act that fall. Mowatt’s choice of the Park Theatre for the production of *Fashion* and her acting debut made sense given her social connections with the Park manager Edmund Simpson and the historic status of the Park. However, Mowatt’s most extended New York engagement in the fall of 1845 was at Niblo’s Garden. Mowatt described Niblo’s satirically in her novel *The Fortune Hunter* as the resort of “all the fashionables” as well

⁴¹² From Richard Grant White’s recollections of the Park Theatre published in *Century Magazine* in 1882 and quoted in Blesi, “The Life and Letters of Anna Cora Mowatt,” 73.

⁴¹³ “The New Play at the Park,” *New York Herald*, 26 March 1845.

⁴¹⁴ “The Drama,” *New York Herald*, 16 March 1845.

as the “good religious people, who think the theatre (where Shakspeare’s noble dramas are represented) a shocking place—but look upon Niblo’s little stage, his vaudevilles and his rope-dancers, as perfectly proper.”⁴¹⁵ While the Park Theatre still possessed a third tier—which, a New York correspondent noted snidely, “will receive no share of [Mowatt’s] attention” at her debut—Niblo’s Garden had a parquet instead of a pit, and only two tiers of boxes.⁴¹⁶ Park manager Edmund Simpson repeatedly came under fire in the 1840s for continuing to allow prostitutes into his theater. Unlike new venues built without a third tier, such as Boston’s Howard Athenaeum, or theaters like Burton’s Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia, which Burton renovated to transform the third tier into the family circle, the Park continued to operate according to an older model of theatrical entertainment while struggling to draw in the same publics that flocked to Niblo’s Garden.

New venues like the Baltimore Museum, Boston Museum, and Howard Athenaeum—which Mowatt chose for her Boston run in November 1845 and for all her subsequent Boston engagements—were actively shaping a new culture of theater spectatorship. “Athenaeum” theaters signaled alignment with respectable and family amusements through the term “athenaeum,” which was associated with edification and literature and carried a more elite gloss than “museum.” Neither an athenaeum nor a museum theater would depend upon rents from alcohol bars or permitted prostitutes to roam the third tier, nor would the rowdiness of the theater pit be permitted. Plush bucket seats replaced the benches in the pit—now called the parquet—and in the second and third tier of boxes, which was renamed the family circle to signal the appeal of these

⁴¹⁵ Anna Mowatt, *The Fortune Hunter* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1844), 8.

⁴¹⁶ *Daily Gazette* [Cincinnati], 24 June 1845.

venues as a site of family amusement. Family amusement, of course, was marked by the enhanced presence of women and children and required that all audiences regulate their behavior according to middle-class standards.

On 26 April 1847, at the close of her second season touring American theaters, Anna Mowatt delivered an original address for the opening of the Cincinnati Athenaeum. This highly symbolic act deployed Mowatt's reputation as a source of uplift to the drama in order to hail Cincinnati's genteel public. Mowatt's verses celebrated the Drama and its "toiling children" who "forget their private wrongs—their private woes—forgo their ease—their pleasure, and repose" in order to throw "radiance o'er" the audience's "thronging faces." Mowatt acknowledged critiques of the stage but swiftly turned the tables on her public. For while "Drama...oft perverts her might, And swerves too widely from the rule of right," presenting scenes "to foster tastes that but degrade the heart!" she urged her auditors to "Reflect how oft with *you* the error lies." Thus invoking the power of the public to police the drama with its "chastning rod," Mowatt insisted that it lay with the public to "purify the Drama's stained career" by patronizing "scenes instructive and refined, To mend the heart and to exalt the mind!"⁴¹⁷ Conflicts over the culture and space of the theater and the question of content increasingly played out across segmented markets, rather than within individual theaters, as urban capitalists financed and constructed new entertainment venues that transformed the space and culture of the theater proper according to middle-class values.⁴¹⁸ As Mowatt's address demonstrates,

⁴¹⁷ Anna Cora Mowatt, "An Address Delivered at the Cincinnati Athenaeum on the Occasion of its Opening, April 26th, 1847," Anna Cora Ogden Mowatt Ritchie Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

⁴¹⁸ On the segmentation of the New York market see Peter Buckley, "To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1800-1850" (Ph.D. Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984); Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven:

praise and promotion of these new venues conflated the spatial transformations with a more elevated quality of entertainment. The survival of these institutions depended upon successful patronage. Emphasis on the consumer power of the audience to “chastn” the Drama was really a strategy for inviting patronage; attending a performance by this literary actress contributed to the elevation and reformation of the Drama.

Mowatt’s acting debut in June 1845 as Pauline Deschappelles in *The Lady of Lyons* was deemed a triumph by the New York press. English tragedian W. H. Crisp had chosen this play for his benefit and the last night of the season, probably with some influence from both Simpson and Mowatt, who would consistently use *The Lady of Lyons* to open her acting engagements. Acting opposite Crisp in a role made famous by English actress Ellen Tree positioned Mowatt within the genre of legitimate English drama and demanded comparison with respected English celebrity actresses like Tree. Critics marveled at Mowatt’s lack of apparent stage fright, the “graceful confidence and ease” with which she “trod the boards,” and her accomplished elocution.⁴¹⁹ The only hint of the amateur was her excessive gesticulation, in which some critics detected nerves and at the very least an incomplete understanding of conventions of stage acting. Caveats about want of experience notwithstanding, Mowatt’s acting “electrified the audience.”⁴²⁰ But the genteel spectacle in the boxes reframed the implications of the cheering audience, its “deafening shouts,” the bouquets and wreaths that rained down upon the stage, and the handkerchiefs and hats thrown in the air by gentlemen and ladies alike.⁴²¹

Yale University Press, 1994).

⁴¹⁹ “Editors’ Correspondence,” *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, D.C.], 17 June 1845.

⁴²⁰ From *New York Evening Mirror* in Anna Cora Mowatt Clippings File, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library.

⁴²¹ From *Sunday Atlas* in Anna Cora Mowatt Clippings File, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton

Mowatt's acting debut was simultaneously a triumph of a socially elite woman claiming the stage as her sphere of labor and influence, and of a genteel public reclaiming a commercial public space around a set of values that Mowatt was particularly able to exemplify. Her reputation drew on her publishing practices, which established Mowatt's reputation as a literary and moral woman who brought her considerable feminine gifts into her new professional sphere to elevate it. As we have seen, the two decades following Kemble's American debut were punctuated by moments in which the arrival of foreign female celebrities like Fanny Elssler made female spectatorship visible by transforming the gender and class order of the theater. These moments called attention to the power of the female market, and to the ways in which audiences of middle-class and elite women could mark a venue and performance with the imprimatur of respectability and cultural significance, and signify its economic viability. Mowatt was uniquely positioned to hail an increasingly desirable market of white middle-class consumers, which surely played a role in the decision of Park Theatre managers Edmund Simpson and Thomas Barry to produce her play *Fashion* and then try Mowatt as a "debutante" actress. The *Herald* declared that should Mowatt succeed on the dramatic stage, her "talent—the respectability of her connections—and her personal beauty are all in favor of enabling her to give a fresh impulse to the drama in this country, and elevate it to a point far beyond what it has every yet attained."⁴²² A writer for Edgar Allan Poe's *Broadway Journal* claimed Mowatt's debut was inaugurating a new era in the drama: "the appearance of so respectable a person as Mrs. Mowatt on the stage, we trust, will not be

Library.

⁴²² "A New Debutante," *New York Herald*, 5 June 1845.

without a purifying effect upon the atmosphere of the play-house.”⁴²³ Such declarations identified a shift in spectatorship in order to hail a desired audience base.

Mowatt’s new chosen sphere also gave critics an opportunity to reiterate longstanding claims about the respectability of the profession. The New York *Mirror* declared indignantly, “nothing can be more contemptible than the bigoted notion that a woman cannot be all that is most venerated in a woman, and an actress still.” This proud defender of the profession listed examples to “confute the wretched slander,” providing a “who’s who” of female dramatic celebrity in the Northeast: “Miss Kemble, Miss Ellen Tree, Miss Shirreff, Miss Fanny Jarman, Miss Hughes, Miss Seguin, Miss Ellis, Mrs. Maeder, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Vernon, Mrs. Wheatley and her beautiful daughters.”⁴²⁴ Efforts to reestablish the theater as a respectable space of middle-class and female consumption still required iteration of the respectability of the profession. Venerating Mowatt and defending her career choice contributed to both.

The evaluation of Mowatt’s abilities as an actress pitted her lack of professional experience against readings of her physicality and delivery. Because she was not from a theatrical family, Mowatt was not expected to have grown up with an understanding of established acting styles, nor had she moved up through the ranks of stock work like Cushman, from walking lady to chambermaids and old women, before attempting to launch as a star. Evaluation of Mowatt’s career frequently turned upon whether she demonstrated the requisite understanding of stage craft, and likewise whether her particular style of delivery and physicality was evidence of a dramatic genius or merely of ignorance and inexperience. Whether critics considered Mowatt overrated or insisted

⁴²³ “Reviews,” *Broadway Journal*, 14 June 1845.

⁴²⁴ *New York Mirror*, 14 June 1845, quoted in Blesi, “The Life and Letters of Anna Cora Mowatt,” 177.

she had the potential to rank as equal to Kemble and Tree, they consistently observed something different in Mowatt's style of acting, which those favorably disposed described as a more "natural" style of acting in comparison with established stage conventions. For nineteenth-century spectators, "natural" acting was not considered anathema to producing a desired stage effect; rather the concept constructed a relationship between the performer's use of stage effect and the conception of the role expected and favored by audiences and critics.⁴²⁵ When critics regarded a performer's conception of her role unfavorably, the critique was usually that it was unnatural. Likewise, a natural performance achieved the most widely regarded conception of the part. Audiences returned night after night to see the same play, like *The Lady of Lyons*, with different casts and star performers. The challenge for the star was to bring something new to a role, while living up to established conceptions. Mowatt certainly brought something new to her roles, and both the appeal and the strong reaction against her style of personation suggests the fascination of an actress who appeared to embody and act herself, an educated upper-class white woman, in familiar and popular plays like *The Lady of Lyons*. In Mowatt's acting critics saw Mowatt's celebrity.

The *Lady of Lyons* turns upon the romance between humble Claude Melnotte and

⁴²⁵ Stage effect, literally, signified the ability of an actor and scene to produce a particular effect through costuming, a combination of voice, movement, and gesture, and scenic and mechanical devices. Like elocution, the art of acting required learning a series of physical gestures, postures, facial expressions, and vocal modulations that were meant to convey particular emotions. For example, consult English playwright Leman Thomas Rede's *Guide to the Stage*. Francis Courtney Wemyss edited and published this 1827 text in 1861, after adding his own guide to the American Stage. Grief, Rede explained, required "a great deal of Stage trick" involving "beating the head or forehead, tearing the hair, and catching the breath, as if choking ; also by screaming, weeping, stamping, lifting the eyes from time to time to heaven, and hurrying backwards and forwards." Rede offered very detailed instructions for despair. A character like Cardinal Wolsey who "has lost all hope of salvation...bends the eyebrows downward, clouds the forehead, rolls the eyes, and sometimes bites the lips and knashes the teeth...the arms are bent at the elbows, the fist clenched hard, and the whole body strained and violently agitated..." Leman Thomas Rede, *The Guide to the Stage*, edited by Francis C. Wemyss (New York: Samuel French, 1861), 32.

the lovely but proud Pauline, the daughter of a wealthy French merchant who rejects all her suitors, former nobility and merchants alike. Her suitors vow revenge, and dress up the gardener Claude Melnotte, who dotes madly on Pauline, as the Italian Prince Como. He is to woo her, win her, and then humiliate her with the revelation of his humble peasant ancestry. The poetry Pauline spurned from the hand of gardener, wins her hand from the lips of a foreign prince. But on the eve of their wedding night, Claude repents and vows to protect Pauline's maiden honor. Pauline, humbled, also recognizes the folly of her pride. She vacillates between anger, shame, and a stubborn sense of duty to her lawful husband. Claude vows to make something of himself in Napoleon's army, and hopes, if Pauline remains faithful to him, to return as a man worthy of her hand. Over two years later, he arrives back in Lyons a distinguished soldier, only to discover that Pauline has been blackmailed into marrying her former corrupt suitor to save her family from financial ruin. When a despairing Pauline confesses her true love for Claude, he reveals himself to her and they are triumphantly united.⁴²⁶

Claude was regarded by audiences as the epitome of the worthy but humble lover, whose true nobility makes him worthy of the lovely but proud Pauline. The role of Pauline Deschappelles in *The Lady of Lyons* gave actresses the opportunity to demonstrate a broad emotional range, though the play was initially treated as a star vehicle for the male actor in the part of Claude Melnotte. Edwin Forrest first performed Claude Melnotte in New York in May 1838 opposite Park Theatre stock actress Mrs. Richardson.⁴²⁷ Shortly thereafter, both touring star actresses Ellen Tree and the American Josephine Clifton introduced the play into their repertoire and transformed conceptions of

⁴²⁶ Edward Bulwer Lytton, Baron, *The Lady of Lyons* (Philadelphia: Turner and Fisher, 1845).

⁴²⁷ T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage* (1903; repr. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), I:50.

the role. New York audiences and critics regarded Tree as the most perfect personation of Pauline on the New York stage to date, when Mowatt took on the part.⁴²⁸

For many of her supporters, Mowatt appeared to perform herself, while achieving a successful and even new conception of this established character. She seemed to abandon herself to the character while moving skillfully between “changes of passion or humor, illustrating all with a force, a truthfulness and forgetfulness of self, which bore the stamp of genius of the highest order,” the *New York Evening Mirror* explained. While critics insisted that Mowatt’s performance would have been received with as much acclaim had it been from an accomplished actress, the appeal of her performance was precisely that she was not an “actress of high and long established reputation.” To the critic of the *Sunday Atlas*, Mowatt was more than a “mere actress.” “Divested of the conventionality” of the professional stage, she achieved a more complete loss of the self in the character she played. She had the “delicate bearing of the pure-minded woman, unconscious of the gaze of a crowded theatre, and thus losing her own identity in the character she was personating.” Though the critic insisted this was the mark of the “great actress,” Mowatt’s ability to achieve this level of greatness was a function of her newness to the profession and the fascination of the unusual spectacle she posed, a society wife and writer, but who seemed to be “merging her own identity for the time in that of Pauline,” the proud but humbled belle.⁴²⁹ The *New York Evening Gazette* pointed to Mowatt’s wonderful display of hysterics upon her discovery of Claude’s deception, in which Mowatt performed abandon and despair to a level almost titillating. The

⁴²⁸ In his sample of plays performed in Philadelphia, Charleston, New Orleans, and St. Louis, David Grimsted lists *The Lady of Lyons* as the most frequently performed drama of the period between 1831 and 1851. David Grimsted, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theatre & Culture, 1800-1850* (1968; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 254.

⁴²⁹ Anna Cora Mowatt Clippings, Harvard Theatre Collection.

“dishevelled tresses and fragile figure of the fair actress, together with her perfect abandonment to her part, made it seem almost as if her excitement and the novelty of her situation had produced in reality what she represented with such art.”⁴³⁰ While critics recognized the skillful and original delivery of dialogue and broad emotional range through which Mowatt realized her conception of the character, and her careful choice of phrasing that in some cases transformed established interpretations, their emphasis on readings of her body and its significance suggested that something beyond her intellectual agency created the power of the performance.

Mowatt’s status as an amateur transformed readings of her acting. Mowatt embodied a particularly contemporary and American kind of femininity through her performances *by* appearing to bring styles of embodiment from outside the theater into dramatic representations. The chief way in which Mowatt departed from stage convention was her use of her body. Critics repeatedly observed how Mowatt appeared remarkably self-confident and at ease in her body as she strode the boards, especially in contrast to the careful gestures of a studied actress like Mrs. Kean. Mowatt’s distinct physicality as an actress called attention to and ultimately reaffirmed the natural as opposed to performed embodiment of racial and class status. Critics repeatedly observed that Mowatt did not need extensive training to play a lady. Mowatt’s physicality seemed to denote something beyond her control but intrinsic to her femininity, which revealed her elite upbringing and even suggested something intrinsic to American femininity. According to an “Englishman” who published an extensive examination of Mowatt’s acting in the pages of *The Knickerbocker*, a Whig literary periodical, while Mrs. Kean’s

⁴³⁰ Anna Cora Mowatt Clippings, Harvard Theatre Collection.

“every movement seems to be studied and prearranged,” Mowatt was “as natural as the stooping of a bird.”⁴³¹ In the context of a discourse of “theatrical revolution” in which American stars were finding favor in English markets—Mowatt joined this cohort in 1847—these descriptions took on a nationalistic gloss. Mowatt’s performance of “lady” departed from stage conventions, yet her celebrity as an elite and literary woman led observers to collapse the distance between Mowatt and the roles she played. Her performance became a true embodiment of a white American lady.

When critics saw Mowatt act, they saw not Pauline or Juliet, but Mowatt the poetess and novelist, Mowatt the literary celebrity who had satirized New York society with such cutting humor in her play *Fashion*. Mowatt’s literary practice shaped readings of her acting. Because Mowatt’s writing and her celebrity were so closely aligned with a model of white genteel femininity, critics likewise saw the society lady in her acting.⁴³² The identification between actress and part flowed in a different direction that had been made possible by celebrated actresses like Kemble, whereby the personality of the actress shaped the meaning and reading of the part, rather than the other way around. Recall the discomfort that an earlier generation of stock actresses in the 1820s exhibited in characters like Lady Anne from *Richard III* based on fears that the ability to personate an immoral villain might reveal some immorality in the actress’s private character. Of course, Mowatt played and therefore was identified with a very limited cast of characters, mainly in the juvenile or ingénue heroine line, like Pauline Deschappelles in *The Lady of Lyons*, Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Greek maid Parthenia who tames a German

⁴³¹ “The American And English Actress,” *The Knickerbocker; Or New-York Monthly Magazine*, January 1847, 58.

⁴³² Mowatt’s layered performance also resonated within a shifting middle-class culture increasingly oriented towards self-display and theatricality. See Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

barbarian with her sweetness, goodness, and absolute purity in the *Ingomar the Barbarian*.⁴³³ She also played female comic leads like Lady Teazle in *A School for Scandal*. But the cause and dynamics of the identification between Mowatt and her roles was connected to Mowatt's labors in the print marketplace, which reinforced the association between her acting career and her intellectual endeavors and unimpeachable respectability in private life.

Cushman, on the other hand, became famous for her unusual and riveting character interpretations. In the late 1830s, Cushman garnered attention from audiences and critics for her original interpretations of minor characters, like the gypsy Meg Merrilies in *Guy Mannering* or Nancy Sykes in *Oliver Twist*, which she continued to play once she left stock and became a touring star. Cushman biographer Lisa Merrill argues that Cushman was unique in allowing herself to appear unattractive in roles, which accounted for the sensation she created in these personations.⁴³⁴ And while, like many actresses, she took on breeches roles, Cushman was again unusual in that she consistently placed herself in direct competition with actors, especially Edwin Forrest, in roles such as Claude Melnotte in *The Lady of Lyons*. Cushman's transatlantic renown made it possible for her to demand to play a role, like Claude, hitherto dominated by male actors.⁴³⁵ Cushman's portrayal of Romeo drew the most critical acclaim and popularity from audiences and critics in England in 1845, but invective from actors like George Vandenhoff, who

⁴³³ *Ingomar, the Barbarian: a play in five acts*, translated from the German, and adapted to the English stage by Maria Lovell (New York: Wm. Taylor, [18--?]).

⁴³⁴ Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*, 47.

⁴³⁵ Both Merrill and Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, in her study of breeches acting in the nineteenth-century theater, challenge readings of the early nineteenth-century breeches actress as solely a leg show only legible relative to the male gaze. Breeches acting had subversive potential for both actress and audience, and possible homoerotic content under a female gaze. Merrill, 38-39; Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 2-4.

denounced Cushman's breeches performances as "perversions" in which she "denaturalizes the situations." Vandenhoff contrasted Shakespeare's day, when "women did not appear on the stage at all" with the effect of Cushman's celebrity: "now they usurp men's parts and 'push us from our stools.'" ⁴³⁶ Clearly, his objections had much to do with the competition from Cushman in the same roles. More so than any other actress in the early nineteenth century, Cushman's portrayals of male roles were regarded by critics as equal if not superior to male actors in the same. Critics regarded Cushman's androgyny as a triumph over the limitations of gender—her gender. ⁴³⁷ Although the narratives in which Cushman portrayed male characters continued to underwrite "dominant narratives" of gender, sexuality, and power, in her ability to successfully embody Romeo with her female body, Cushman's performance carried a subversive potential for her female spectators. ⁴³⁸ By competing openly with men in male roles, Cushman defied the gender boundaries in one of the few professions in which women had the same earning potential as men but only occasionally emerged as a direct threat to male actors by turning male characters like Claude Melnotte into breeches roles.

It is tempting to treat Cushman's life and celebrity through a narrative of professional triumph through subversion. Cushman is an appealing heroine for historians

⁴³⁶ Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches*, 124. One wonders to what degree breeches performances were also a convenient target in the broader context of the competition between touring celebrities—actors and actresses alike. Most starring actresses would have been less likely than Cushman to compete with Vandenhoff for his coveted roles, but they did compete with Vandenhoff for headlining engagements with managers.

⁴³⁷ For varying interpretations of Cushman's cross-dressing see Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*; Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*; and Reitz-Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches*.

⁴³⁸ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 136. In the 1860s and 70s, Cushman became the central figure in a salon of women artists and intellectuals in Rome, which has served as a powerful indication of the importance of Cushman's celebrity for creating new communities of women, both real and imaginary—what Merrill describes as the "concentric circles" of women around Cushman, from friends and lovers, to the countless female spectators and female fans who wrote to Cushman, wrote about Cushman, or even sought her in Rome.

of sexuality who have claimed that Cushman's celebrity, particularly the effect she exerted on her female audiences, is part of a history of erotic desire between women (albeit highly coded and difficult for the historian to access).⁴³⁹ But Cushman also inspired her female publics for many of the same reasons Mowatt would, as models and fantasies of female ambition. In 1858, when she was twenty-four, aspiring writer Louisa May Alcott had a "stagestruck fit" after seeing Cushman play in Boston.⁴⁴⁰ Alcott was dissuaded from a career on the stage by her family, but the figure of the actress and themes of theatricality and sincerity recur in her writing. The actress appears both as a romantic object of gothic horror, as in the duplicitous actress-turned-governess Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask*, and as a legitimate form of white-collar labor for respectable women, as in *Work: Stories of Experience* and *Jo's Boys*.⁴⁴¹ From one view, Mowatt's career speaks to the limits of the stage as a site in which alternative visions of gender and social order could be expressed because the roles she played conformed to such limited narratives of passive sentimental femininity. Mowatt and Cushman's careers cannot appear more different. But while Cushman created new dramatic opportunities for actresses, her career cannot be understood without the women who played Juliet and Pauline to her Romeo and Claude Melnotte—women like Mowatt.⁴⁴² The worlds

⁴³⁹ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, esp. 7-8.

⁴⁴⁰ Louisa May Alcott, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, edited by Joel Myerson, and Madeline Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 90.

⁴⁴¹ On the actress and stage in Alcott's fiction also see Christine Doyle, *Louisa May Alcott & Charlotte Bronte: Transatlantic Translations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000); Louisa May Alcott, *Alternative Alcott*, edited by Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴² Mowatt and Cushman never appeared together on the same stage, but in the 1850s Mowatt played the romantic female lead to actresses who followed Cushman in personating Romeo and Claude Melnotte. For example, in 1851, after her return from England, Mowatt played Juliet and Pauline opposite Fanny Wallack's Romeo and Claude Melnotte at Niblo's in August. Wallack was attempting to shift from "leading stock actress" to touring star actress. In recent appearances in Buffalo, Washington, and Boston, Wallack had performed the same ingénue roles as Mowatt, like Julia in *The Hunchback*, while introducing her interpretations of roles made famous by Cushman, Meg Merrilles and Claude Melnotte. When Wallack

Cushman and Mowatt inhabited, though Cushman's seems far more subversive, were indelibly intertwined.

Defining Female Heroism

In April 1854, *The Una*, a periodical “devoted to the elevation of women” and published by women’s rights activists Paulina Wright Davis and Caroline Dall, included a somewhat belated review of Anna Cora Mowatt’s *Autobiography of an Actress*. The *Una* felt compelled to notice a book “of so much interest for the cause of women,” and particularly in the face of what it considered the unjust criticisms from the English periodical *The Athenaeum*, lately reprinted in *Littel’s Living Age*.⁴⁴³ *The Athenaeum* classed “female autobiography” in the category of “Books by the ill-advised” — belittling Mowatt and her claims upon a readership. The review was dismissive, satirical, and seemed particularly offended by Mowatt’s breezy self-confidence. It pitted Mowatt’s public career as an actress against her public expression as a memoirist, and found the latter more problematic. For unlike the majority of actresses, who are “glad to be as private as Mrs. Mowatt seems bent on being public,” Mrs. Mowatt’s “sentimental exhibition” of her “private life” smacked too much of the world of “book-manufacturers

returned from a starring engagement at Boston’s National Theatre to perform opposite Mowatt at Niblo’s for two nights, she clearly hoped to advance her own renown and move from lower-class venues like the National to middle-class venues such as Niblo’s by linking her career with Mowatt’s. *Weekly Herald* [New York], 30 August 1851.

⁴⁴³ The *Living Age* was a literary miscellany established in Boston in 1844 by Eliakim Littell, which drew together excerpts from the expanding library of American and English literary periodicals, positioning itself as mediator of a new transatlantic cosmopolitanism located in Boston. *Littel’s* used the weight of of foreign periodicals to confer legitimacy on America topics, even while it also featured American authors and subjects quite prominently. Its publication of an English review of the autobiography of an American actress is in keeping with its position as a cosmopolitan authority constituting a series of transatlantic cultural relationships that relied on British authority to help construction American cultural identity. Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the culture of reprinting, 1834-1853* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 23-27.

who are more personal than select” in exhibiting themselves to turn a profit.⁴⁴⁴ On the one hand, *The Athenaeum* was correct in identifying the role that the print industry played in helping to manufacture and shape celebrity. But it accomplished this through a gendered critique of Mrs. Mowatt’s claims to public renown through authorship and autobiography. The *Athenaeum* preferred that actresses restrict their voice to their personations. By stepping into the public sphere of print, Mowatt extended the boundaries of her celebrity beyond the roles she played onstage—of dutiful daughters and virgins under threat—and stepped into a new role as an author and architect of her own celebrity at a moment of intense public discussion about woman’s capacity and appropriate role.

Mowatt was a keen reader of her historical moment. Her 1854 *Autobiography* married the more familiar genre of anecdotes from a life on the stage with the increasingly popular genre of women’s biography, making two interconnected claims: that the literary marketplace and the stage were legitimate spheres of labor for women, and that these forms of white collar labor provided white middle-class women with vital opportunities for intellectual and personal fulfillment, and social and cultural influence. The *Autobiography* saw multiple print runs over the 1850s—one scholar estimates that Ticknor and Fields published 20,000 copies in its first six years in print—and also received attention from quarters that rarely gave notice to the world of urban commercial amusement, including Paulina Wright Davis’ women’s rights periodical *The Una*.⁴⁴⁵

Paulina Wright Davis and the writers of *The Una* recognized and praised that which *The Athenaeum* resented and mocked. *The Una* was part of the effort of women’s rights

⁴⁴⁴ *Littel’s Living Age*, 1 April 1854, 33.

⁴⁴⁵ Blesi, “The Life and Letters of Anna Cora Mowatt,” 301.

activists to publish accurate reporting of the women's rights movement—in contrast to the mockery made of the women's movement by the male-owned and authored newspaper press—while also offering “stronger nourishment” for American women than existed in the genre of “Ladies' Books, Ladies' Magazines, and Miscellanies.”⁴⁴⁶ Davis felt that women needed to have access to a true history of the achievements of their sex to support their political and social advancement, an accounting that she believed “Ladies' Books” had ceased to adequately provide. For the writers of *The Una*, Mowatt's autobiography was a lesson in the benefits to women of a life of “mental and physical activity directed to important ends.” Likewise, Mowatt “conclusively proved that woman may occupy a public sphere without losing any of her feminine grace or purity or affection”—even in a profession so potentially threatening to feminine modesty as acting.⁴⁴⁷ As the editors of *The Una* recognized, Mowatt's insistence that it was her sense of purpose and professional exertions that improved her health provided a powerful argument for female education and a more broadly expanded definition of women's sphere.

Not all of Mowatt's readership looked uncritically upon her chosen sphere of action, though the majority agreed with *The Una* that Mowatt's *Autobiography* was a powerful argument for the expansion of women's public roles. Religious periodicals, like *The Ladies' Repository*, a Methodist monthly published out of Cincinnati, and the Congregationalist *Puritan Recorder*, which also reviewed Mowatt's *Autobiography*, maintained a stance of prurient discomfort with the theater, expressing regret that so

⁴⁴⁶ “The Introduction,” *Una*, February 1853. See an overview of the periodical in Kathleen Endres and Therese Lueck, eds. *Women's Periodicals in the United States* (Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 387-394.

⁴⁴⁷ C., “Autobiography of an Actress,” *Una*, May 1854.

“gifted and accomplished a lady” had “devoted” eight years to the stage.⁴⁴⁸

Notwithstanding this discomfort with Mowatt’s professional sphere, the book’s “sprightly, entertaining style” appealed widely.⁴⁴⁹ Clearly, Mowatt’s celebrity extended beyond her reputation as an actress, leading religious periodicals to review a rare book relating to the stage. *Godey’s Lady’s Book* recognized the potential that the *Autobiography* could serve as an ambassador for a “class of readers who have hitherto had no opportunities to form just judgments of [Mowatt’s] character, her talents, and her noble struggles” – presumably because of their ignorance of the world of theater due to moral, religious, and social scruples. Like *The Una*, *Godey’s* considered Mowatt’s memoir proof that “where the virtues of the heart and the energies of the mind are combined in motive and effort, the profession itself is elevated, and the professor triumphs.”⁴⁵⁰ The editors of *Putnam’s Month Magazine of American Literature* also commended Mowatt for the lesson she provided in the “importance of self-dependence,” regardless what “Mrs. Grundy may say.”⁴⁵¹ Mowatt’s account of her life indicated that a woman brought her character with her into whatever sphere or profession she chose to enter. Strong character in a middle-class woman would not be compromised by a life of action and purpose, even one in the public eye. This argument, that a woman did not compromise her femininity by moving into politics and professional life, was central to the claims of women’s rights activists, advocates of women’s education and of women’s movement into the “professions.” Claims about the resilient character of genteel white womanhood formed a crucial underpinning to the “expansive Christian womanhood” that

⁴⁴⁸ *Puritan Recorder* quoted in *Ladies’ Repository*, April 1854.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ladies’ Repository*, April 1854.

⁴⁵⁰ *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, April 1854.

⁴⁵¹ “Literature,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, February 1854.

writers like Sarah Josefa Hale were mobilizing through the genre of female biography, which in turn was mobilized around various movements for an expanded woman's sphere.⁴⁵²

For nineteenth-century Americans negotiating an expanding market society, biography organized central questions about how to judge and nurture character, using individual stories to explore questions of national identity and individual and national capacity, and define the nature of genius and greatness. Americans encountered biography in many different forms and contexts, including collective biographies of historical figures, religious tracts that featured conversion and missionary narratives, and sketches of prominent literary and cultural figures featured in popular periodicals like *Gleason's* or Sarah Josefa Hale's *Godey's Lady's Book*.⁴⁵³ Biographical sketches about women like Mowatt, which appeared in literary periodicals, were not simply explanatory mechanisms for unusual careers—as Mowatt's certainly was—but also a roadmap of model characteristics to which readers might aspire—without aspiring to a specific career in theater. Mowatt's career was important not because a generation of young women were expected to emulate her and pursue the stage—perish the thought!—but rather because her career distilled core values of feminine virtue and ideals about female accomplishment and influence. The invocation of genius was a common trope that framed the careers of men and women and provided a rationale for their celebrity, managing the troubling implications of seeking fame for its own sake. That ineffable quality—“genius”—separated the subject of biographical interest from the reader who aspired to a core set of virtues epitomized by the biographical subject. In Mowatt's case,

⁴⁵² Casper, *Constructing American Lives*, 78.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

her “genius” for the stage was used to legitimize her choice of this unusual sphere of labor for a woman of her status and background. Biographical sketches that shaped Mowatt’s celebrity in the 1840s and early 1850s in America and England emphasized the core virtues of her character: a woman “brave-hearted in adversity” and “energetic, unselfish, [and] devoted” both to her husband and to her art.⁴⁵⁴

The extremely popular genre of great woman biography mobilized compendia of gendered virtues to support arguments for women’s education and expanded sphere of professional labors. Sarah Josefa Hale’s biographical dictionary *Woman’s Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women, from “the Beginning” till A.D. 1850*, published in 1853, exemplifies how women’s biography in the early- to mid-nineteenth century was frequently organized around Christian conceptions of gender difference that played a key role in women’s ongoing push into reform culture since the 1830s. Hale attempted to compile a complete accounting—which consisted of sixteen hundred biographies—from “the beginning” to the present of the “capabilities of the sex” in order to expand the “true mission” of woman and support her move into law, medicine, education. Hale argued that God had chosen woman as the superior sex, more pure and virtuous than man, but “hitherto” she had only won her “fame through suffering.” Hale hoped that once women are correctly identified for their role supporting a “sustained mode of moral progress, it will be easy for the sex to make advances in every branch of literature and science.”⁴⁵⁵ Hale followed a growing interest in the lives and achievements of contemporary women, beyond extant categories of Biblical heroines and the lives of European queens. The

⁴⁵⁴ Mary Howitt, “Memoir of Anna Cora Mowatt,” *Howitt’s Journal*, 18 March 1848.

⁴⁵⁵ Sarah Josefa Hale, *Woman’s Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853) viii, x.

crucial point for Hale and other compilers of collective biography was to locate an “alternative history” of great women throughout that past, that when connected with the achievements of women in the present, would serve as irrefutable evidence of woman’s capacity while “validating” the influence that women were attempting to claim—quoting Hale—in “every branch of literature and science connected with human improvement.”⁴⁵⁶

Texts like Hale’s also marshaled women’s achievements to support nationalistic and racial arguments that were part of ongoing debates about the place of the new nation in global culture and expanding international markets. Hale constructed a clear hierarchy of racial and national endeavor and achievement, arguing that the Anglo-Saxon woman led the world in matters literary and moral. Hale apologized for devoting considerable space to the “Fourth Era” of women, from 1820 to 1850, while arguing for the importance of these living “examples” who provide “encouragement to those who are waiting some way to be opened to their endeavors.” This coverage focused primarily on American and British women; literary women dominated. Hale argued that this era witnessed the rise of Anglo-Saxon Christian womanhood as an archetype for the world to follow. Significantly, Hale contrasted the models of public and achieving womanhood of the Anglo-Saxon nations—mainly England and America—with continental Europe, where women’s genius was only appreciated as it offers “sensuous gratification to man.” While Europe provided countless examples of “romance-writers, public singers, dancers, artists,” Hale argued that because the Anglo-Saxon nations recognized that woman’s genius in matters moral was superior to that of men, these regions had produced an extensive array of “female missionaries, teachers, editors, and authors of works

⁴⁵⁶ Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 191-192; Hale, *Woman’s Record*, x.

instructive and educational.”⁴⁵⁷ Hale’s overarching message and studied ambivalence towards women performers reflected the prejudices and ideals of her New England Christian womanhood, but Hale also recognized that women’s prominence was too frequently recognized in matters sensual and ornamental rather than philosophical, moral, or intellectual. What to do, then, with the continued celebrity of “public singers, dancers, artists”? In spite of her framework, which implicitly presented the expanding cultural marketplace as a continental European import, Hale included her share of prominent English, American, and continental European stage celebrities. Anglo-Saxon stage celebrities like Mowatt and Cushman could be used to celebrate the achievements of American genius, as well as other virtues of perseverance, duty, and industry.

Other exponents of female biography and social reform grappled with the implications of female stage celebrity for the causes of women’s elevation, broadly conceived. Periodicals devoted to a range of social reform causes, from *The Liberator* to *The Lily*, a biweekly started by Amelia Bloomer in 1849 that advocated for temperance, dress reform, and suffrage, maintained a stony silence where theater and public amusements were concerned — with rare but noteworthy exceptions for celebrities like Anna Mowatt or opera singers Jenny Lind and Catherine Hayes.⁴⁵⁸ They celebrated the individual virtues and accomplishments of noted figures, while remaining largely

⁴⁵⁷ Hale, *Woman’s Record*, 564.

⁴⁵⁸ Reformers occasionally conceded the possibility that theater could be a force for social reform, exhibited by the popularity of temperance dramas like *The Drunkard*, first produced in 1844 at the Boston Museum by W. H. Smith, and later by the success of George Aiken’s dramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. (Although the range of social and political uses to which such a text could be put caused considerable anxiety amongst Stowe and her supporters.) Staging *The Drunkard* was an important strategy used by Smith and Barnum to market museum theater to audiences who eschewed theater due to religious scruples. Or as *Gleason’s Drawing Room Companion* explained in its profile of the American Museum’s “Lecture Room” theater, these museum theaters appealed to the “thousands, who from motives of delicacy, cannot bring themselves to attend theatrical representations in a *theatre*, [but] find it easy enough to reconcile a *museum*...to their consciences,” noting however that “it is very difficult for us to make a distinction between the two.” *Gleason’s Drawing Room Companion*, 29 January 1853.

uncomfortable with the women's professions or the publics that these expanding culture industries were successfully hailing. Portrait engravings of Lind and Hayes and a profile of Hayes appeared in the pages of *The Lily* in 1851, a rare instance of both visual portraiture and reference to public amusements. [Figure 8.] Perhaps Bloomer hoped to capitalize on the phenomenon of "Lindomania" and popularity of concert going more broadly to boost circulation of her periodical, or felt that the phenomenon of these women's celebrity, which was connected with spaces outside the theater—still suspect for temperance advocates—demanded some inclusion in her paper, which was reaching the height of its popularity. Celebrities like Mowatt, Kemble, and Lind thus became rare points of overlap in a divide between an urban culture of consumption increasingly being marketed to women, and this vast middle-class reform culture overwhelming and consistently ambivalent about the expanding world of commercial amusements.



Figure 8. Portrait of Jenny Lind. *The Lily*, October 1851.

Hale's contention, that woman's unique and essential qualities formed the key argument for her involvement in politics and the professions, remained an important ideological strategy that had played a central role in women's involvement in two decades of antislavery, temperance, and moral reform activism. But Hale was careful lest her celebration of women's achievements and arguments for women's education be taken as an endorsement of women's rights. This celebration of women's capacity, which rested upon a firm notion of essential gender difference, did not include a demand for

political equality.⁴⁵⁹ The 1850s was an intense decade of agitation around women's rights—particularly movements for women's suffrage, marriage reform, and dress reform—which built upon women's experiences in a range of social reform movements. Biographies of women formed a bridge between this more radical reform culture and a vast social and cultural middle that looked askance at these movements and would have been more comfortable with *Woman's Record* or Hale's periodical *Godey's Lady's Book* than with a copy of *The Una*. Of course, texts like Hale's and even Mowatt's could be put to alternate uses, just as a career like Mowatt's could be put to a variety of different uses.

Caroline Dall, a Boston native and the wife of a Unitarian minister, read Mowatt's *Autobiography* in 1854 and was inspired to take a trip to Buffalo to see Mowatt act in one of her final appearances on the stage. Though Dall found little to envy in Mowatt's choice of professional sphere, Dall lamented that she did not have a parent like Mowatt's "loving, and trusting father, who said to her, 'My brave girl!' when she was taking a step which he knew all his own friends may disapprove."⁴⁶⁰ Dall's sensitivity to her own position as the wife of a minister made her wary about attending theatrical amusements. But Dall was part of Mowatt's public long before she ventured into a theater, perhaps before she purchased a copy of the *Autobiography*. Surely Dall had seen broadsides advertising Mowatt's Boston appearances and may have read some of the pieces by and about Mowatt in literary periodicals or Boston newspapers. After her husband Charles Dall left to take a position as a missionary in Calcutta, Caroline Dall followed her

⁴⁵⁹ Kelley, *Leaning to Stand and Speak*, 214.

⁴⁶⁰ Caroline Healey Dall, *Daughter of Boston: The Extraordinary Diary of a Nineteenth-century Woman*, edited by Helen Deese (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 188.

intellectual and political commitments and became a women's rights lecturer in the late 1850s despite personal scruples and the objections of her father, who had long deplored Dall's involvement in radical antislavery circles. Throughout her adult life, Dall had surrounded herself with female intellectuals and activists and wrote regularly for *The Una*, which she would later edit. Dall's reaction to the *Autobiography* provides a compelling example of the lessons that a mid-century woman who was struggling to negotiate familial and social strictures in relation to her own desires for intellectual fulfillment and social change, may have taken from the *Autobiography*.

Mowatt was an unlikely champion for *The Una* just as Hayes and Lind were unlikely subjects for portraits in *The Lily*, until we consider the broader circulation of biographical accounts and images of these celebrities in a range of print media that helped expand the publics of stage entertainment and female celebrity. The circulation of *The Lily* during its peak in the early 1850s far exceeded any other reform or advocacy periodical, with an estimated 6,000 subscribers. But this pales in comparison with *Godey's Lady's Book*, generally regarded as having the largest circulation of any antebellum periodical, which grew from 10,000 in 1837 to 150,000 by 1860. The emerging genre of family-oriented literary weeklies, from which *Gleason's* hailed, which reached a circulation of 100,000 by 1853, after debuting in 1851 with a conservative run of 5,000 issues, would come to rival even this cornerstone of parlor literature.⁴⁶¹

Gleason's Drawing Room Companion was a illustrated weekly periodical modeled after the *Illustrated London News*, which exemplifies the commercial strategies that print and

⁴⁶¹ For these circulation estimates on *The Lily* see Kathleen Endres, *Women's Periodicals in the United States: social and political issues* 183; on *Godey's Lady's Book* see Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak*, 216; and on *Gleason's* see Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 410-411.

theater shared in the 1850s—a strategy to appeal across the widest possible market by invoking middle-class notions of respectability and gentility as inclusive rather than exclusive—this in contrast to reform periodicals like *The Una*. Significantly, *Gleason's* marketed to the middle classes while aligning with the expanding world of urban commercial amusements and thus brought the world of public amusements into the middle-class home, dovetailing with the increasingly successful efforts of theater managers to market to the middle classes and women in particular.⁴⁶² Each weekly issue of *Gleason's* was filled with woodcuts of national and foreign locales and portraits of celebrities, which were accompanied by biographical sketches, as well as serialized fiction and poetry, and informative articles on a broad range of topics, also accompanied by woodcuts. This class of illustrated weeklies drew Americans into an expanding consumer and leisure culture, which included theaters like Niblo's and new shopping emporiums, such as the dry good bazaars of Messrs. Hill, Lincoln & Geer in Boston, which *Gleason's* highlighted with a full page engraving of its interior, shown swarming with female shoppers, in September 1852. The majority of portrait engravings of women featured in *Gleason's* were either stars of the stage like Anna Mowatt or literary women like Sarah Stickley—Mrs. Ellis—famous for her *Young Ladies' Reader*, an elocution manual.

In September 1851, *Gleason's Drawing Room Companion* published a portrait

⁴⁶² Other titles in this genre include *Frank Leslie's Monthly* (1853) and *Harper's Weekly* (1857). Prior to the publication of these periodicals, major coverage of public amusements outside of newspapers was found in male sporting papers like the *Spirit of the Times*, which included theater as part of continuum of masculine amusements like boxing, horse racing, and pedestrianism. Though there is evidence that women read sporting papers and their racier cousins, the “flash press,” these periodicals were marketed predominantly to men. Periodicals like *Gleason's*, on the other hand, were marketed as family papers. *Gleason's* (1851-1854), renamed *Ballou's* (1855-1893), was widely affordable, but eschewed the appeal to literary pretensions or “fashionable” life like *Harper's* or *Frank Leslie's*.

engraving of Mowatt and reported that “this distinguished American actress” had “just returned to this country after a most extraordinary and brilliant professional career in England” and was shortly to appear in Boston at the Howard Athenaeum. [Figure 9.] *Gleason’s* provided some of Mowatt’s history, including her distinguished parentage, her early ventures into private theatricals and playwriting, the success of *Fashion* and Mowatt’s acting debut in 1845. “But it is not only as an authoress and actress that we are to admire Mrs. Mowatt,” *Gleason’s* explained. “In her private relations and fireside life, she shines with equal brilliancy and loveliness.”⁴⁶³ Mowatt was everything, a chaste and caring wife, accomplished artist, and distinguished actress. Though her “fireside” virtues were presented as an afterthought, they were the crucial underpinning for all other claims to admiration. Later that month, *Gleason’s* presented another engraving, this time of Mowatt in the part of Lucia de Lammermoor, and described Mowatt’s motivations for a career on the stage, focusing upon Mr. James Mowatt’s commercial failures and Mowatt’s own sacrifice. [Figure 10.] Mowatt’s savvy financial strategy to support her family by becoming a dramatic reader was recast within a narrative of wifely sacrifice, in which the “good angel stepped forward to rescue him from despair.” Mowatt “had from childhood seemed to be a favorite of genius,” which she realized she could deploy to “recue” her family: “in spite of all the diffidence that naturally rose up in her sensitive breast, [Mowatt] resolved by a public exhibition of those rare qualities which Heaven has granted her, to resuscitate his fallen fortunes.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ *Gleason’s Drawing Room Companion*, 6 September 1851.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27 September 1851.



MRS. MOWATT.

Figure 9. "Mrs. Mowatt." *Gleason's Pictorial and Drawing-Room Companion*, 6 September 1851. American Periodical Series Online.



MRS. MOWATT, IN THE PLAY OF LUCIA DE LAMMERMOOR.

Figure 10. “Mrs. Mowatt, in the Play of Lucia de Lammermoor.” *Gleason’s Pictorial and Drawing-Room Companion*, 27 September 1851. American Periodical Series Online.

This narrative would have been familiar to anyone who had followed Mowatt’s career in the United States and England in the 1840s. The narrative of wifely sacrifice and economic necessity provided a framework for understanding Mowatt’s motivations by emphasizing her higher calling to support her family *and* elevate the stage. The alignment of Mowatt’s motivations with domestic necessity calls to mind historian Mary Kelley’s concept of “literary domesticity,” which she argues early-nineteenth-century

writers mobilized to support their print careers.⁴⁶⁵ “Literary domesticity” is one example of a larger nineteenth-century pattern, with a longer legacy. Women who explored new forms of white-collar labor were most successful when they moved into spheres of employment that could be constructed as compatible with or an extension of domestic arts and accomplishments, like teaching or writing. While stage celebrities like Mowatt, Cushman, and Kemble carved out opportunities for white-collar employment by aligning these forms of labor with mainstream notions of genteel femininity, this process worked differently for stage performers than it did for women writers because of longstanding associations of acting and the theater with sexual impropriety and moral corrosion and the basic fact of the mobility of the profession. An itinerant career was fundamentally incompatible with contemporary ideals of domestic felicity—for men or women. The domestic themes in Mowatt’s biography established her claims to gentility by indicating that she was choosing a stage career for the right reasons. Mowatt quoted her friend Mary Howitt’s recently published essay on the subject to frame her decision. *If the stage was to be reformed and transformed into a vehicle for “human advancement and improvement” then the profession and its erstwhile reformers alike must welcome to the stage individuals who led by the example of their “pure and blameless lives” and possessed the ability to “teach, through the persuasive power of genius, and the benign influence of a noble womanly spirit.”*⁴⁶⁶ The added endorsement of Mowatt’s husband and father proved that Mowatt was correct in her beliefs and worthy of her unusual chosen sphere.

⁴⁶⁵ Mary Kelley, *Public Woman Private Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁴⁶⁶ Mowatt, *Autobiography*, 215.

Invoking genius was another trope that framed the careers of men and women and provided a rationale for their celebrity while managing the troubling implications of seeking fame for its own sake. As important and fraught as narratives of economic necessity and family sacrifice remained for women who pursued literary careers, for example, the disavowal of celebrity for its own sake conferred even greater legitimacy upon individuals of distinction. George Putnam recognized—inadvertently—the importance of this performance of hyper-femininity and sincerity and Mowatt’s emphasis on marriage and family economy to her tale of “self-dependence.” In contrast to the “rouge, spangles, and false sentiment” that Putnam would have expected from the genre of “green-roomish narratives,” Mowatt’s *Autobiography* was a “simply-told story of an earnest and heroic woman, whose life has been one of contention with adverse fortune, sweetened by many brilliant successes, which were the result of her own exertions.” Mowatt is ever “true, candid, and tender.” She is obedient and diligent: she “publishes her autobiography in obedience to the request of her husband.”⁴⁶⁷ While both Cushman and Kemble were frequently criticized—in Kemble’s case particularly after her divorce in the late 1840s—for attempting to “wear the breeches” off the stage as well as on, and therefore described as masculine, Mowatt’s career demonstrates how a hyper-vigilant performance of femininity, moral rigor, and evocation of domesticity could support an unconventional career.⁴⁶⁸ Some savvy observers saw through the performance of this performance. The *Athenaeum* editors tellingly described Mowatt as “her own Barnum.” But Mowatt as “her own Barnum” pushed against the gendering of ambitious

⁴⁶⁷ “Literature,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, February 1854.

⁴⁶⁸ On Kemble and Cushman see Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, “‘So Unfemininely Masculine’: Discourse, True/False Womanhood, and the American Career of Fanny Kemble,” *Theatre Survey* 40, no. 2 (1999): 27-42; Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*; Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches*.

showmanship.⁴⁶⁹ Aspiring female celebrities veiled their ambition in a series of powerful narrative tropes that were part of the gendering of female celebrity in the early nineteenth century. Thus female ambition for the stage was framed around moral uplift—what historian Barbara Cutter has called an ideology of “redemptive womanhood”—and the gifts of artistic genius, through which these women would elevate the world of public amusements both morally as well as artistically and intellectually.⁴⁷⁰

Biography after the *Autobiography*; or, Matilda Heron Redux

On a September evening in 1850, Matilda Heron “realized one dream of her life”: she achieved a success as a debutant actress at the Walnut Street Theatre in the role of Bianca in *Fazio*.⁴⁷¹ *A Biographical Sketch of Matilda Heron* thus departed from previous conventions in narratives of celebrity of disavowing of ambition, instead linking young Heron’s “desire to be an actress” with her desire “to be forever known.” Ambition born of genius was not problematized, but foregrounded: “the stage was to be the realization of her young dreams of Fame.” In the 1850s, the image of the “stage-struck individual,” male or female, emerged into public discourse. In September 1856, the sporting and theatrical *New York Clipper* lampooned the “sewing circle” for harboring “ardently whispering Paulines, always-ready-for-bed Lady Macbeths, and contemplative Lydia Languishes.” Likewise, the “workshop” was stocked with its “host of Richard the Thirds, Claude Melnottes, and Charles Surfaces.” The *Clipper* hoped it would not be “misunderstood” by its “lady friends.” It cautioned not out of morality, but rather

⁴⁶⁹ *Littel's Living Age*, 1 April 1854, 33.

⁴⁷⁰ Barbara Cutter, *Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels: The Radicalism of American Womanhood, 1830-1865* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 7.

⁴⁷¹ *A Biographical Sketch*, 14.

because “so many enthusiastic devotees of dramatic celebrity cannot possibly all attain to eminence.”⁴⁷² And until September 1856, it seemed that Heron would also be continually frustrated in her ambition.

Though the narrative teleology in *A Biographical Sketch* bespoke genius achieving its rightful recognition, which clearly was intended to frame Heron’s attempt to reignite a flagging career, also by explaining Heron’s distinctive approach to dramatic acting.

Heron rejected the “screamings, rantings and gesticulations which have grown up, rank and deep-rooted weeds on the dramatic field” in favor of a “naturalness of manner” not found in stage acting.⁴⁷³ For the past three years, Heron had struggled to recreate in cities east of the Mississippi the success she briefly enjoyed in her first starring engagement in San Francisco in 1853. Regretfully, some critics and plenty of spectators between San Francisco and New York had failed to appreciate her unprecedented style.

Heron’s acting career began in Philadelphia in 1850, at the Walnut Street Theatre, and included a brief but unsuccessful stint as a stock actress at the Howard Athenaeum in Boston and Bowery Theatre in New York. She departed for San Francisco in 1853, following reports of the tremendous success that actresses could realize in the thriving new city, and where Heron was able to star. Heron traveled to London and Paris in 1854 to study acting and acquire new plays and roles. Upon her return to the United States the following year, she found it impossible to regain any footing in eastern markets, despite her success in California. Factors may have included rumors about a family connection with notorious New York madam Kate Ridgeley, and the collapse of her marriage to Henry Byrne. Heron met the San Francisco District Attorney in 1853, but he deserted her

⁴⁷² *New York Clipper*, 20 September 1856.

⁴⁷³ *A Biographical Sketch*, 22.

shortly after their secret marriage in 1854, presumably over the rumored connection with Ridgeley and because Heron was unwilling to give up her acting career. Over the 1855-1856 season, Heron secured a few isolated engagements in the less competitive markets of western cities like Cleveland, Columbus, and Louisville, which helped her secure a coveted engagement at Bateman's Theatre in St. Louis. It was in St. Louis that Heron presented her own version of *Camille*. The sensation Heron created in St. Louis and Cincinnati in early 1856 with *Camille* ultimately transformed her career and brought her to the attention of Henry Wallack, who managed Wallack's Lyceum in New York, one of a growing number of venues that appealed to an expanding middle-class public.⁴⁷⁴

Heron's invitation to star in New York was made possible by her active pursuit of new plays she could star in and copyright, and by her persistent attempts to break into new regional markets in the West. Heron was part of an emerging cohort of actresses, including Eliza Logan, Annette Ince, and Julia Dean who established themselves as stars in the expanding theater circuits in western cities like Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Milwaukee before appearing before an audience in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia. The new category of the "Western star" conferred legitimacy on celebrity within these markets, without decentering New York as the key market in which true talent could be tested, just as London remained the key test for an American star. New York critics remained skeptical of the abilities of a Cincinnati audience to recognize true artistic merit. All the same, critics consistently saw and heard something different in the styles of these Western actresses, an aesthetics of personation that rejected the standards set by the continuing waves of English actresses like Jean M. Davenport, and that appealed as

⁴⁷⁴ For a more detailed history of Heron's life and career see Alberta Humble, "Matilda Heron, American Actress" (Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1959).

well to eastern publics.

In January 1856, Heron created a sensation in St. Louis with her original translation and production of *La Dame Aux Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas fils—known in America as *Camille*. *La Dame Aux Camelias* is the tale of French courtesan Marguerite Gauthier, who spurns her young lover Armand Duval at the request of his father. Her impending death by consumption and Duval's discovery of her noble sacrifice reunite them—tragically—on her deathbed. Heron was not the first actress in America to appear as Marguerite Gauthier, but unlike the versions presented by Jean Davenport and Laura Keene, in which Marguerite is portrayed as a thwarted flirt, rather than a courtesan, Heron's close translation from the French kept the overall plot largely in tact. Moreover, Heron's distinctive interpretation of the role, which appeared to audiences a shockingly raw portrayal of an actual prostitute, forced audiences to grapple with the moral ambiguities of the piece.⁴⁷⁵

That Heron's unidealized portrayal of the tragic courtesan brought such acclaim from audiences in St. Louis and Cincinnati and then in one of New York's most regarded middle-class theaters, Wallack's Lyceum in 1856 is indicative of the shift in the culture and class address of theatrical amusements over the last decade. The elimination of prostitution and alcohol consumption from the theater proper and successful cultivation of a middle-class and female publics by the early 1850s actually facilitated the rising popularity of dramas built around tragic female leads and that dealt more directly and provocatively with questions of sexuality and the sexual double standard—though not without controversy, of course. Heron and other aspiring star actresses like Davenport,

⁴⁷⁵ Gwen Jensen, "Matilda Heron: An Americanization of *Camille*" (Ph.D., The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003).

Keene, and Elizabeth Bowers were at the vanguard of the gradual introduction of these themes onto American stages primarily through translations of French melodramas like *La Dame Aux Camelias*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, and *Adrienne Lecouvreur*.⁴⁷⁶ Heron was also part of the first cohort to file copyright of dramas under the new American Dramatic Copyright Law, passed in February 1856, along with actor-managers Dion Bourcicault, F. S. Chanfrau, Barney Williams, and Laura Keene. Heron's copyright history bespeaks her determination to protect her investments in these plays and secure the exclusive association of her celebrity with particular roles and productions, ensuring that she would continue to be able to debut a succession of new roles and productions or make money by selling production rights.⁴⁷⁷

The *Sketch* likewise suggests the influence of Mowatt's *Autobiography of an Actress* on narratives of female agency and professional aspiration around the stage.⁴⁷⁸ In the *Autobiography*, Mowatt linked her theatrical conversion to Fanny Kemble's celebrity and Kemble's particular ability to engage and transport her female audience, thereby calling up an experience with which many of her readers could surely identify. The

⁴⁷⁶ On Laura Keene's contribution to this shift in dramatic roles and productions see Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*. These plays were associated with Rachel Felix, tragedienne of the Comedie Francais in the 1840s. Felix achieved a transatlantic celebrity in America long before her sole American tour in 1855. On Rachel's career and international celebrity see Rachel Brownstein, *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comédie-Française* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1993). In September 1856, Heron presented her version of Ernest Legouve's *Medea*, written for but never performed by Rachel. *Medea; A Tragedy, in Three Acts*, translated from the French of E. Legouve by Matilda Heron (New York: Samuel French, 1857).

⁴⁷⁷ In my research into the New York copyright records of 1856 and 1857, I noted Heron's copyright of her translations of *Medea* in October 1856, *Phaedra* in June 1857, and *Fiammina* in August 1857. In 1856, Heron accused dramatic publisher Samuel French of publishing her translation of *Camille*. French professed his ignorance and apologized. Their exchange appears in the 1857 edition of Heron's *Camille*, published in Cincinnati, along with her notice of its copyright in Ohio 1856. *Camille: A Play in Five Acts*, translated from the French of Alexander Dumas Jr. by Matilda Heron (Cincinnati: T. Wrightson, 1856). Also see Alberta Humble, *Matilda Heron, American Actress*.

⁴⁷⁸ I suspect that the literary and discursive influence of Mowatt's text was much wider than this, something I touch on in the previous section, but for the purposes of this discussion I am interested in the specific ways Mowatt's *Autobiography* contributed to an ongoing shift in narratives about women's lives and careers in the theater industry.

enduring cultural memory of Fanny Kemble's American debut continued to establish the terms for evaluating the cultural power and meaning of an actress's performance, and the relationship between female spectators and actresses, but deployed here in the shifting culture of theater spectatorship and female celebrity of the 1850s.⁴⁷⁹ Mowatt explained that at fifteen, she had a grim view of the moral perils of the theater, a view shaped by the preaching of her local cleric. Nevertheless, in June 1834, as Fanny Kemble took her final bows on the New York stage, young Anna Cora Ogen made her way to the theater because she wanted to witness the performance of a woman praised for her acting and also "talked of as a most devoted daughter and truly excellent woman." Mowatt claimed that this was her first visit to the theater. It was a powerful narrative strategy, enabling Mowatt to establish a key point of identification with her readership. Mowatt described how the dramatic powers of the English actress melted the moral squeamishness of her fifteen-year-old self. "I thought I had never beheld any creature so perfectly bewitching. The tones of her voice were richest music, and her dark, flashing eyes seemed to penetrate my very soul," Anna recalled, echoing American critics who regularly deployed this description to evoke Kemble's aunt, the great English tragedian Sarah Siddons, another dark-eyed beauty. Anna saw "a reality from beginning to end" in Kemble's portrayal of the dutiful daughter Julia in *The Hunchback*, and was moved to excesses of laughter and tears.⁴⁸⁰

As one of the origin narratives in the *Autobiography*, this anecdote summoned the enduring cultural memory of Fanny Kemble's American debut. It established Kemble's celebrity as the framework for considering the cultural power and meaning of an actress's

⁴⁷⁹ Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress*, 39.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

performance, in turn setting up a framework in which Mowatt's career, celebrity, and contribution to American theater could be evaluated. Mowatt, however, expressed far less ambivalence than Kemble about the experience of acting and pleasures of a stage career. Though Mowatt conceded that she had not found the "kind of absorbing fascination" with the stage that some experience, she frankly admitted to the "intense delight" she discovered personating some of her characters. Though the stage was not an absorbing "passion" for Mowatt—its "vexations [and] disappointments" proved to be too much for her—she enjoyed a "quiet love" of her profession.⁴⁸¹ Of course, explaining the feelings that she did not possess allowed Mowatt to readily admit to feelings of artistic and personal fulfillment that were no less remarkable or problematic for a woman of her social upbringing to express about a career on the stage.

Mowatt recognized the challenges that were intrinsic to a life on the stage, and concluded her memoir with "words of warning to young aspirants" that also functioned as defense of a life on the stage and is remarkably similar to the framing of Heron's career. Mowatt cautioned young women to avoid this path "unless her qualifications...seem particularly to fit her for such a vocation, unless she be strongly impelled by the possession of talents which are unquestionable, unless she be enamoured of Art itself." The calling to the stage should be the calling to Art, not to vanity, though Mowatt noted that a woman who would be susceptible to flattery might as easily be "led astray in the blaze of a ball room." Mowatt's advice to the stage aspirant worked also as a defense of the stage with this reminder that the perils moralists attributed to the stage could be found in many a sanctioned social context. The suitability of a stage career

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 425-426.

depended upon the qualities of the aspirant herself. She must have emotional and physical fortitude to endure disappointment and “fatigue which she never dreamed of before,” and “study incessantly.” But most importantly, she must be “sustained by some high purpose, some strong incentive.” If so: “let her enter the profession boldly.”⁴⁸²

The *Sketch of Matilda Heron* functioned as a biographical illustration of this set of criteria for a career on the stage. Heron is presented as committed to Art, undeterred by disappointments and discouragement, a committed student of her profession, and driven, by her conviction of her abilities, to “enter the profession boldly.” This, in addition to the explication and analysis of Heron’s unique acting style at the end of the text, provided readers with a framework in which to place Heron as she aspired to greater heights of celebrity and that might even have helped to foreclose dismissal of her abilities because of her choice of role and play. According to the narrative presented in the text, the part of Marguerite Gauthier and drama of *Camille* became the optimal choice for this woman to display the artistic genius that had compelled her towards this unusual career. Heron was no morally questionable actress reveling in dissolute French culture, but a genius seeking the height of her art in a suitably complex and morally ambiguous character. This type of role, a tormented and flawed female heroine like Marguerite Gauthier, would ultimately replace the class of female heroines that the preceding generation of actresses like Mowatt had played. In the 1850s, actresses seeking new roles created new opportunities within the profession, while redefining what a career on the stage meant for a woman.

By emphasizing the art within the profession, Heron transformed the terms establishing the stage as a legitimate site of women’s artistic expression and labor.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 426-427.

Biographies of aspiring stage performers from Kemble to Mowatt foregrounded economic necessity and their contribution to the uplift of the profession. Heron's biography bypassed these narrative devices and instead emphasized artistic genius—a narrative thread that also appeared in these earlier accounts—and her ambition for fame. Heron's ghostwritten statement of female artistic ambition depended upon a marked shift to which Kemble, Cushman, and Mowatt had contributed. Her raw and unprecedented performance of Marguerite Gauthier was likewise only possible in a culture of theater spectatorship associated with genteel femininity. In the 1840s and 1850s, narratives of women's artistic achievements offered lessons to women outside these professional spheres about female intellectual capacity, transcendent virtue, and the benefits of a professional career while appealing to women as *the* public for these performances. Only in a market in which women were increasingly regarded as the public for legitimate theater could Heron have emerged as a national celebrity.

Chapter 5

Black Swan, Black Siddons, and White Raven:

The Politics of Black Female Performance Before the Civil War

In late April 1855, Thomas C. Bowers of Philadelphia wrote to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* with an item from the *Pennsylvania Inquirer* that gave some of the history and evaluation of the career of concert singer Elizabeth Greenfield, widely known by her sobriquet as the “Black Swan.” The *Inquirer* piece summarized Greenfield’s recent successes in London, amongst the “upper circles of English society,” where “professors, connoisseurs, ammitters, and the musical world generally, endorsed her as a woman of transcendent vocal abilities.” Greenfield’s reputation was not longer as a “musical novelty.” She was now regarded by audiences on both sides of the Atlantic as a “superior *artiste*.” Americans who attended her concerts “expecting to hear something ‘pretty good’,” quickly discovered that the singer “ranks professedly with the Malibrans, the Sontags, the Jenny Linds of the age.” Greenfield was endowed with “extraordinary abilities”—particularly an extensive vocal range which covered “with perfect ease, thirty-one distinct notes”—and over which she had “the most perfect command.” She likewise understood the arts of performance, ornamenting her singing with “gestures...perfectly graceful, lady-like, and often thrillingly effective.” In short, the editors of the *Inquirer* believed that Greenfield was very deserving of public patronage on her forthcoming tour of the West.

Because the *Inquirer* was not known for any sympathies towards the anti-slavery cause, its encomiums were particularly significant to Bowers. He felt sure its praise would “advance our cause both with friends and foe.” In his own letter, Bowers observed with pride the continued advancement of black Americans in the “Arts and Sciences” explaining, “we have now a Black Swan, Black Mario”—Greenfield’s student and a tenor soloist—“and last, though not least, the Black Siddons,” a woman who was shortly to debut as a Shakespearean reader in Philadelphia. Bowers argued that the achievements of these artists not only provided “encouragement and comfort” to black Americans, who are “down-trodden and oppressed in...the land of our birth,” but also demonstrated that despite the endless “obstacles that are thrown across our path...our cause is upward and onward.” This advance would continue until black Americans enjoyed “equal rights and privileges with other men.”⁴⁸³

Linking the achievements of stage performers with the cause of racial equality and the project of racial uplift was part of what one scholar has called a “third wave” of black activism that in the 1850s focused on black achievement in the arts and culture.⁴⁸⁴ Entrenched racial attitudes amongst northern whites and longstanding practices of segregation caused many black community leaders and intellectuals in the North to reexamine the terms according to which the politics of antislavery would be joined by a broader bid for black citizenship. They recognized that the claims for black citizenship required a much broader challenge to longstanding arguments about the innate racial inferiority of black Americans. Arguments about the capacity of black Americans for

⁴⁸³ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 27 April 1855.

⁴⁸⁴ Heather Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787-186: Lifting the Veil of Black* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 239.

citizenship could be supported by evidence of their successful “acquisition of the Arts and Sciences” and their contribution to American intellectual and cultural achievements more generally. Bowers was also challenging arguments in favor of black colonization, by showing the investments as well as the contributions of black Americans, who have “planted our trees in the United States [and] expect to repose under their shade.”⁴⁸⁵

Bowers and leading intellectuals like William Cooper Nell and Frederick Douglass wanted to show white America that the contributions they had made could also help advance the reputation of the nation in the eyes of the world. The recognition by the editors of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of Greenfield’s achievements in London did important work for Bowers’ arguments. Greenfield not only advanced the status of her race; she could also advance claims of American cultural achievement, which was a high-stakes performance in the context of longstanding perceptions of American cultural inferiority and dependence upon Great Britain. Greenfield and other black Americans like the “Black Mario” and “Black Siddons” could be used to show American cultural achievement, but only if white America was willing to embrace black Americans as deserving and contributing members of the nation. And yet, the degree to which black Americans could and should represent America abroad was regarded with considerable anxiety by some whites. They lamented that British interest in black America was predominantly connected with antislavery politics.⁴⁸⁶ Indeed, Greenfield’s London celebrity in 1853 was part of the transatlantic phenomenon of “Tom Cabin-ism.”⁴⁸⁷

Between the 1820s and 1850s, black Americans struggled to carve out a space

⁴⁸⁵ Frederick Douglass’ *Paper*, 27 April 1855.

⁴⁸⁶ Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

⁴⁸⁷ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 20 March 1853.

for themselves in the emerging culture industries, as writers, lecturers, and performers. Elizabeth Greenfield and Mary Webb, the “Black Siddons,” were among the earliest black women performers who attained renown in America and England.⁴⁸⁸ They did so by cultivating careers in highly feminized genres of performance that were popular at the time with white and black audiences, and that both worked within and gently pushed against existing expectations for black performance, and black female performance in particular. Elizabeth Greenfield began touring widely as a concert singer in 1851, in the wake of Jenny Lind’s wildly successful American tour and amidst a wave of concert singers touring America from Great Britain and Europe. Mary Webb debuted as a Shakespearean reader in 1855, but went on to achieve the most popularity and success for her readings of Longfellow’s epic poem *Hiawatha* and *A Christian Slave*, a dramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Both women performed in England and were associated with and assisted by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote about Greenfield in *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, and wrote *A Christian Slave* expressly for Mary Webb.

In 1852, the unanticipated and unprecedented popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in American and Britain catapulted Harriet Beecher Stowe to transatlantic celebrity. Stowe

⁴⁸⁸ The most recent scholarly treatments of Greenfield and Webb deals primarily with their transatlantic careers. Julia Chybowski, “The ‘Black Swan’ in England: Abolition and the Reception of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield,” *American Music Research Center Journal* 14 (2006): 8-25; Elizabeth Ann Pryor, “‘Jim Crow’ Cars, Passport Denials and Atlantic Crossings: African-American Travel, Protest and Citizenship at Home and Abroad, 1827-1865” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2008); Tavia Nyong’o, “Hiawatha’s Black Atlantic Itineraries,” in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, edited by Meredith McGill (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Susan Clark, “Solo Black Performance before the Civil War: Mrs. Stowe, Mrs. Webb, and ‘The Christian Slave,’” *New Theatre Quarterly* 13 (1997): 339-348; Eric Gardner, “‘A Nobler End’: Mary Webb and the Victorian Platform” *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 103-116. Arthur LaBrew remains the most complete study of Greenfield’s early career prior to her departure for Europe and is primarily useful for the extensive documentary evidence LaBrew compiled of Greenfield’s early tours. Arthur LaBrew, *The Black Swan: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Songstress* (Detroit: LaBrew, 1969). My particular thanks also to Jay Cook, whose conversations with me about his own work on transatlantic black celerity and on Greenfield have informed many of the analytical choices in this chapter.

capitalized on the social opportunities of her new renown. During her first trip to Britain in 1853, made at the invitation of the Glasgow Ladies' New Anti-Slavery Society and described in *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), Stowe socialized with English nobility, like Lord Shaftesbury and Duchess of Sutherland, who had made antislavery their particular public cause, and also became interested in Elizabeth Greenfield.⁴⁸⁹

Through Stowe, Greenfield accessed an existing circuit of antislavery activism between Britain and America, constituted through the transatlantic circulation of print literature and, increasingly in the 1840s and 1850s, by touring stage performers. Both Greenfield and Webb became part of a transatlantic phenomenon of black writers, speakers, activists, and performers who rose to transatlantic celebrity through British antislavery circles.⁴⁹⁰ In England, these black performers accessed white audiences but without the threats of racial violence that plagued black performance and interracial assembly in the United States. The growing American and transatlantic celebrity of black Americans raised a series of important questions about the implications of black cultural achievement for the politics of race and nation, on a national but also transnational scale.

⁴⁸⁹ Joan Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Greenfield and Webb make only brief appearance in Joan Hedrick's biography of Stowe. Scholars like Robert Levine, Sarah Meer, and Audrey Fisch have reexamined the importance of Stowe's relationship with black writers and thinkers like Douglass and Delany and with transatlantic black performers Greenfield and Webb, demonstrating the importance of transatlantic print culture and reform networks to Stowe's rising celebrity and the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Robert Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁹⁰ This cohort included actor Ira Aldridge, and writers and lecturers Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry "Box" Brown, William and Ellen Craft, and Sarah Remond. Paul Gilroy's work on the "black Atlantic" has formed a crucial point of departure for scholarship situating black history and celebrity within the transatlantic currents of social reform, print culture, and celebrity. Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (Liverpool [England]: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*; Audrey Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Alan Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Also see Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), particularly Chapter 2, "The Escape Artist," on the performances of Henry "Box" Brown, 66-130.

Greenfield and Webb's performances in America and England simultaneously affirmed and challenged the terms of black cultural achievement and renown. But the questions of who and what they represented remained fraught—an issue that was highly visible in the discourse of critics, but no doubt also formed a piece of their own struggles to maintain a livelihood as public performers and achieve some renown. Greenfield and Webb were celebrated by a range of white and black critics as simultaneously exceptional and representative. But the very terms of their representativeness were slippery and contested, as was the frame and scope of comparison according to which they were evaluated. Their racial difference could be called upon both to support and undermine comparisons with white models and competitors, and to both advance and limit evaluation of their skill. In fact, critics repeatedly raised the question of how their race—both as an essential marker of their identity and capacity for achievement and as the cause of their “disadvantage”—should be figured in assessments of their talents and careers. Critics repeatedly asked, both explicitly and implicitly, “Does race matter?”

Gender mattered as well but in ways that can't be separated from questions about racial difference. These women entered genres of performance already highly gendered female, which increased the likelihood that they were embraced as models of achievement for black womanhood. But their racial difference also shaped readings of their gender that affected how their artistic performances, as a singer and a dramatic reader, were evaluated, and how their relationships with their patrons and audiences, white and black, male and female, were assessed. Greenfield's attempt to capitalize on the popular phenomenon of concert singing involved embracing a broad white public while alienating black publics, who were frequently excluded from her concerts in 1851

and 1852. Initially, Frederick Douglass lauded Greenfield's arrival in Western New York in the fall of 1851. But when he became aware of the practice of segregation at her concerts, switched from celebrating to shaming her for being a traitor to her race. Webb, on the other hand, accessed a much smaller audience in which black patronage was never explicitly problematized. Webb likewise remained more closely identified with a white evangelical middle-class milieu, which overlapped comfortably with the culture of antislavery. In fact, Webb accessed her largest public through the antislavery cause. After her return from England in 1855, Greenfield would as well.

Bonds of patronage were critical to these women's careers, both establishing their claims to a genteel public and, at moments in Greenfield's career, undermining her status as a model for her race.⁴⁹¹ Greenfield's struggles with managers demonstrates that politics of patronage for black Americans were fraught, and particularly so for black women. Greenfield's relationship with her white manager Colonel Wood and the criticism from Frederick Douglass for this relationship expose the raced and gendered politics of power that women seeking celebrity had to negotiate. Frederick Douglass ultimately replicated some of the same problematic politics of power that he decried in Greenfield's relationship with Wood. Meanwhile, the representational choices Greenfield made later in her career, in biographical sketches that she arranged to have published in England in 1853 and in Philadelphia in 1855, offer a powerful insight into the construction of a separate sphere of cultural patronage associated with domestic sociability and distanced from the commercial marketplace. Both sketches foregrounded

⁴⁹¹ On an earlier example of the importance of white female networks to the literary career of Phillis Wheatley see Joanna Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves," *American Literature* 82, no. 1 (2010): 1-28. Brooks corrects the narrative constructed and popularized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Trials of Phyllis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters With the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003). Augusta Rohrbach explore the complex market strategies of Sojourner Truth in

key relationships with white women that occurred in domestic spaces, rather than the commercial transactions with black and white men that were also key to Greenfield's career, but became the object of Douglass's critiques. By presenting Greenfield's career as the product of a series of interventions by white women, these biographical sketches helped to reframe the context and significance of Greenfield's career, and appeal to white middle-class publics.

A New Genre of Black Performance

After nearly two years of constant touring, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield finally secured a concert in the great American metropolis of New York, at Metropolitan Hall in March 1853. The *New York Herald* reported that Greenfield had "created some sensation throughout the cities of the Union" and was now going to give New York a "personal exhibition of the existence of this much questioned *rara avis in terris*." The Italian opera singer Marietta Alboni had heard Greenfield sing and "expressed a very high opinion of [her] vocal talents." Likewise, the *Herald* was eager to hear Greenfield's famous double voice. Greenfield possessed a remarkable vocal range, and showcased it prominently by singing popular selections "first in a male, and then in a female voice" such that "none of her hearers could believe, if they did not see her, that both were by the same person." This celebrated "Black Swan" was "no myth," the *Courier and Enquirer* explained, "but a most substantial entity of ebony flesh and blood, possessing a voice which those who have heard it pronounced to be both remarkable and beautiful." But more than this, "That we have heard the Swedish Nightingale, and the Irish Swan, is the very reason why

we should hear the Black Swan.”⁴⁹²

But the “we” of New York did not include New York’s “colored” citizens. On Thursday evening, 31 March 1853, while white patrons alighted from carriages at the hall’s narrow entrance on Broadway, an estimated thousand “colored persons” crowded Mercer Street, at the rear of the concert hall, hoping they might “catch her voice in the distance.”⁴⁹³ The concert placards had announced that because there was “no part of the house appropriated for them,” all “colored” persons would be excluded. The widespread interest of New York’s black community was clearly anticipated, but unwelcome. Segregation in venues of public amusement was longstanding practice in American cities. At many her concerts, including in New York, Greenfield was the only person of color in the room.

Meanwhile, upwards of a hundred officers patrolled the street and galleries of the concert room. Even the exclusion of blacks from the audience did not foreclose the threat of violence. The New York papers reported that letters had been sent to the manager “threatening dire disasters to the building, if the dark lady were permitted to sing.”⁴⁹⁴ Though New Yorkers did not riot that night, the rumors and threats reveals the ease with which Greenfield’s rising celebrity could be undermined by racial tensions in American cities. Her performance within a white middle-class cultural milieu did not insulate her from racial violence, but actually could make her more of a target as she carved out opportunities for black performance in white social and cultural spaces.

Metropolitan Hall had a short but distinguished history as a venue for concert

⁴⁹² *Courier and Enquirer* [New York], 18 March 1853 quoted in *A Brief Memoir of the “Black Swan,” Miss E. T. Greenfield, the American Vocalist* (London, 1853), 8

⁴⁹³ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 3 April 1853.

⁴⁹⁴ *New York Daily Times*, 1 April 1853.

singers. Built in 1850 on Broadway just north of Bleeker Street in New York's rapidly expanding commercial entertainment district, it was the first hall in New York intended exclusively for concerts. It was to be opened by the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind when she arrived in New York for her American tour and thus carried the name "Jenny Lind Hall" during its construction in the summer of 1850. But Lind arrived before the space was ready and so it opened as Tripler's Hall in October, with a concert by English opera singer Anna Bishop. When Elizabeth Greenfield mounted its stage and sang to its 5,000-seat auditorium in March 1853, it had changed hands again and become Metropolitan Hall, though it retained its foundational associations with the Swedish opera singer and with female prima donnas more generally. Critics noted that Greenfield was joining a distinguished cohort of transatlantic celebrities, consisting of Jenny Lind, Anna Bishop, Catherine Hayes, Marietta Alboni, and Henrietta Sontag. In her past two years of touring, Greenfield's path through the Northeast and Midwest had followed the tours of Lind and Hayes. Greenfield sang selections from their repertoire, demanding to be considered in relation to these celebrated foreign vocalists.⁴⁹⁵

Greenfield was born into slavery in Mississippi around 1820, but freed as a child by her owner Elizabeth Halliday Greenfield. Halliday Greenfield was the widow of a Mississippi planter who turned Quaker and moved to Philadelphia. While Elizabeth Greenfield's family emigrated to Liberia, Elizabeth remained with her former mistress, and worked as her servant until Halliday Greenfield's death in 1845. Halliday Greenfield was an exceptionally wealthy woman at her death, but legal battles over the terms of the will froze the legacy bequeathed to the servant Elizabeth. This placed Greenfield in a

⁴⁹⁵ Greenfield also introduced songs to showcase her alto range, or what observers described as her "bass notes" and Greenfield billed as her "double voice." *A Brief Memoir*, 9-10.

financial limbo, which is probably what prompted her to pursue a concert career in earnest. And yet, given this history, the fact that she launched a solo stage career as a response to these pressures is truly remarkable.

Greenfield's career existed at the intersection of several cultural shifts and cultures of performance that helped make her popular and intelligible, but also could readily unmake her successes and undo the reputation she had worked hard to achieve. Greenfield's concert career joined an abiding interest in racialized performances with the growing popularity of concert-going and of concert singers—the majority of them women. Greenfield's concert repertoire established her firmly within the genre of performance that women like Lind and Hayes had popularized in America, and which was increasingly marketed to appeal to broad popular audiences. Increasingly in the 1850s, entrepreneurs were trying to appeal across a range of markets and draw in the widest possible audiences for entertainments, anchoring respectability to mass appeal. This was taking place particularly in blackface minstrelsy, museum entertainment, and the marketing of concert artists like Jenny Lind and the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull.⁴⁹⁶ But categories like the “popular” and “family entertainment” remained ambivalent, depending on the pen that wielded them. Many critics continued to look askance at the social and culture mixture that occurred at museum entertainments or the popular concerts of Jenny Lind. Jenny Lind's 1850 tour stands out as a watershed moment in marketing an entertainment as simultaneously popular and elite, in part in response to the

⁴⁹⁶ See Chapter 2; on the transformation of blackface minstrelsy and its audiences see W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

violence of the Astor Place Riot the year before.⁴⁹⁷ P. T. Barnum, Jenny Lind's lionized manager in America, took care to distance Lind's celebrity from the charged class politics of New York marketplaces. While the values that Jenny Lind's public persona epitomized were closely aligned with ideals of genteel white femininity, Barnum also emphasized her broad social sympathies, both in her charitable causes and in his efforts to ensure that all could attend her concerts. Lind performed not in the Astor Place Opera House, but instead in New York's Castle Garden, a circus amphitheater also used to celebrate the visits of political celebrities like the Marquis deLafayette or Andrew Jackson.⁴⁹⁸

Barnum also drew on features of her biography popularized in Europe and America and promoted her more broadly as a figure of interest because of her exemplary personal qualities as well as her artistic accomplishments. Lind was a figure of interest both as a singer and as a paragon of sentimental femininity and charitable virtue. She was a public celebrity who performed sentimental femininity at a particularly fraught moment of "gender trouble." Her wild popularity in 1850 was not accidental. At the height of the women's rights and dress reform movements, when women were increasingly using the public platform to advance challenges to gender roles and privileges, Lind stepped onto the national stage as a highly public figure who appeared in

⁴⁹⁷ The financial success of the concerts notwithstanding, Bluford Adams points out that this effort was met with considerable criticism, from above and below. Bluford Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum: the great showman and the making of U.S. popular culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). For additional treatment of P.T. Barnum's management of Jenny Lind's first American tour see Richard Brodhead, "Veiled Ladies: Towards a History of Antebellum Entertainment" *American Literary History* 1, no. 2 (summer 1989): 273-294; Peter Buckley, "To The Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1800-1850" (Ph.D. Dissertation: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984); and Neil Harris, *Humbug: the art of P.T. Barnum* (1973; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁴⁹⁸ Buckley, "To The Opera House," 525.

hyper-conformity to an idealized set of gender roles.⁴⁹⁹ The narrative that Barnum is frequently credited with creating was actually composed by Swedish writer Fredericka Bremer, and was a standing feature of her celebrity both in Europe and in America, where she was known prior to her 1850 American tour.⁵⁰⁰ Barnum deployed the narrative strategically in promoting Lind's tour, but his main contribution to Lindomania lay in his use of advertising and a variety of promotional devices like song contests and ticket auctions, which he manipulated to generate a mass hysteria around each of Lind's concerts, driving up demand and ticket prices, even within a discourse of accessibility to all.

Lindomania was an extreme manifestation of the popularity of instrumental and vocal concerts in the 1840s and 50s. While theatrical companies and star actors and actresses had been touring America since the late eighteenth century, in the 1840s concert artists from both England and continental Europe began to seek out the financial opportunities of the American market. Improvements to the ease and speed of transatlantic travel by steamer facilitated this transatlantic circulation of entertainers and celebrities, European artists appealed to American's fascination with the monarchies of continental Europe and their state-sponsored cultural institutions. The most popular performers, like Jenny Lind and Ole Bull, also appealed to the immigrant nostalgia of white Americans, performing ballad music steeped in romantic nationalism. Lind's concerts combined ballad music with opera arias that most Americans knew as songs, rather than in the context of the operas, and practiced and performed in their own parlors.

⁴⁹⁹ My thanks to Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix for this insight.

⁵⁰⁰ Sara Babcox First, "The Mechanics of Renown: or, the rise of a celebrity culture in Early America" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

Interest in concert music was thus connected with the growth of a new set of domestic cultural practices located in the middle-class home. Between the 1830s and 1850s, the piano entered middle-class homes, becoming a part of domestic leisure and a requisite feminine accomplishment, much like elocution, performed by wives and daughters for family and friends. Families who aspired to middle-class status, and may also have remained ambivalent about the theater, instead flocked to concerts where they heard music performed that they in turn purchased from sheet music shops and played at home.⁵⁰¹

When Greenfield began her concert career she featured more opera than ballad music in order to showcase her vocal and aesthetic range. Greenfield's earliest concerts in 1851 featured as many as thirteen songs in a single evening, which Frederick Douglass deemed a "Herculean task" though worthy of her remarkable abilities.⁵⁰² Most critics questioned her choice of such a heavy program for appealing to a broad audience. By the time Greenfield secured Wood's management, she had shifted to a concise and effective formula. In one representative concert, in Worcester February 1852, in a program of eight selections Greenfield sang three ballads and the "Salut a France" from Donizetti, a coloratura aria with a martial flair, all pieces sung and popularized by Lind and other

⁵⁰¹ In April 1853, the New York music stores featured a new lithograph of the "Black Swan" in their windows, which drew small crowds. *New York Daily Times*, 8 April 1853. David Cavicci connects concert-going in this period to social mobility, noting a growing emphasis on music as an event that was a defining feature of middle-class culture but which also expanded upon music-making practices in the middle-class home. David Cavicci, *Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011); Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001); Nicholas Tawa, *High-Minded and Low-Down: Music in the Lives of Americans, 1800-1861* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000); Russel Sanjek *American Popular Music and Its Business*, Vol. 2, *From 1790-1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁵⁰² *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 18 December 1851.

singers like Hayes and Bishop.⁵⁰³ With the “Echo Song,” for which Lind became famous for imitating a bird, or the “Banks of Guadalquiver,” a song that Anna Bishop “has made...peculiarly her own,” Greenfield demanded that she be considered in comparison with these singers, in addition to appealing to audiences with the most popular music of the day.⁵⁰⁴ Ballads became the main fixture of her concerts. Greenfield quickly corrected her initial “mistake” of selecting too many operatic pieces, and thus followed a pattern, described by one Rochester reviewer, in which the “great singers have founded their popularity upon their brilliant execution of ballads and isolated songs and not the ‘Gems of the Opera.’”⁵⁰⁵ Rather than showcasing her cultural breadth, Greenfield was most successful with audiences when she placed herself firmly within the genre of popular ballad music.

While Greenfield was not the first black performer New York had experienced, she *was* the first black woman, also the first black performer to emerge within a genre of entertainment so closely associated with white middle-class gentility and idealized femininity. Prior to Greenfield’s emergence, black performance occurred within more subaltern cultural and social spaces. In the 1820s, a vibrant culture of interracial leisure grew out of the racial and ethnic diversity in gritty urban neighborhoods like the Five Points in New York. This interracial culture gave rise to new forms like blackface minstrelsy, which developed into a popular cultural form with both working-class roots

⁵⁰³ Horticultural Hall. The Black Swan...Vocal and Instrumental Concert [Worcester], 18 February 1852, American Antiquarian Society.

⁵⁰⁴ *Troy Daily Budget*, 17 January 1852 quoted in *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad; or, a Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, The American Vocalist* (Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1855), 14.

⁵⁰⁵ *Rochester Democrat* quoted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, December 25, 1851.

and a strong working-class “accent” and critique in the 1830s.⁵⁰⁶ But by the end of the 1840s, new troupes like the Virginia Minstrels succeeded in marketing themselves, through choice of venue and content, as respectable entertainers. Minstrelsy’s class critique shifted in tone as it drew in new publics. To paraphrase one scholar, blackface minstrelsy let middle-class audiences in on the joke, but in the process lost the edge of its subaltern critique of the empowered.⁵⁰⁷ The minstrel mask became less of a vehicle for telling truth to power, and instead served a more sentimental fascination with black life that facilitated a racial Othering no longer countered by a subaltern solidarity.⁵⁰⁸

In the early 1820s, New York’s free black community also attempted to establish their own institutions for entertainment and leisure. In 1821, William Brown opened a pleasure garden for New York’s expanding free black community, followed by a theatrical company. But rioting and police injunction repeatedly forced the African Theatre to disband and relocate, until its final demise in 1824. This early effort in black cultural entrepreneurship produced another solo black performer, James Hewlett. After the African Theatre closed for good, Hewlett developed a career performing imitations of prominent white actors to mixed race audiences of men in northern manufacturing towns. But he never performed in a staged drama again.⁵⁰⁹ In the 1840s, the popularity of

⁵⁰⁶ Lhamon, *Raising Cain*.

⁵⁰⁷ For example, the minstrel song and character “Zip Coon,” popularized by George Washington Dixon in 1843 served as a “burlesque on middle class pretensions” that managed “ridicule up and down the social ladder,” appealing to working class audiences and newer white middle class audiences. Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*, 93-94.

⁵⁰⁸ Key scholarship on minstrelsy and its audiences includes Lhamon, *Raising Cain*; Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder*; Lott, *Love and Theft*; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working-Class* (London: Verso, 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁵⁰⁹ Shane White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

minstrelsy and the persistence of a diverse leisure culture in places like the Five Points created an opening for the career of a black dancer, William Henry Lane, known as “Master Juba,” who was featured by P.T. Barnum in a series of challenge dances with other white jig performers. Juba captured the interest of Charles Dickens during his 1842 American tour and Dickens wrote about Lane in *American Notes for General Circulation*. Lane capitalized on his newfound transatlantic celebrity and launched a touring career in America and England, where he performed with several white minstrel troupes, including the Ethiopian Serenaders, between 1844 and his death in the early 1850s.⁵¹⁰

In contrast to Lane and Hewlett, we know next to nothing about the women who acted at the African Theater or danced jigs in saloons of the Five Points. These women occupied a world that Greenfield would have been unlikely ever to access, particularly because Greenfield positioned herself firmly within a religious middle-class milieu. Her Quaker upbringing and social connections among propertied whites in Philadelphia and Buffalo, where she traveled in 1851, provided her with forms of capital that facilitated her appeal to white middle-class patrons of her concerts—even though this capital would not admit her into the concert hall as an audience member. Greenfield’s claims to gentility as a black women required a rigid vigilance of both her physical appearance and the spaces and circles in which she moved. Other than antislavery lecturers, like Maria Stewart, who stood up in Boston in 1831, and Sojourner Truth, who began her speaking career as a lay preacher before becoming involved with antislavery and women’s rights, there was little precedent for black women participating in genteel and highly studied

⁵¹⁰ Jay Cook, “Master Juba, The King of All Dancers!” *Discourses in Dance* 3:2 (2006): 7-20.

genre of performance and soliciting a white audience, particularly a woman who had been born as slave.⁵¹¹ Greenfield helped create an opening for black women to develop careers in genres of performance anchored to white respectability, which had the potential to make visible the existence of a black middle-class that continued to be excluded from participating in white middle-class cultures of consumption, including from the cultural spaces Greenfield accessed and in which she performed.

The Makings of Greenfield's Concert Career

Greenfield first attempted to give a series of concerts in Baltimore in 1849 with black musician William Appo before shifting her focus to Buffalo, where she claimed social connections and accessed a thriving market for touring performers. Buffalo was politically and culturally dominated by a religious reform culture that Greenfield had grown up with in Philadelphia. Buffalo in 1851 was a booming town at the terminus of the Erie Canal, alive with commerce and a growing manufacturing sector and home to a range of civic and cultural institutions and activities to which its middle class was especially dedicated. Like other cities in the “Burned-Over District” of Western New York, Buffalo had experienced waves of religious revivalism over the past quarter century and in 1851 was feeling renewed enthusiasm for reform, particularly the causes of temperance and antislavery. Historian James Brewer Stewart has characterized the

⁵¹¹ Though there was a rich and growing literature by African American women. Carla Peterson, *“Doers of the Word”*: African-American women speakers and writers in the North (1830-1880) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: a life, a symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997); Frances Smith Foster, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Also see Augusta Rohrbach, “Profits of Protest: The Market Strategies of Sojourner Truth and Louisa May Alcott,” in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, edited by Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: New Press, 2006): 235-255.

Burned-Over District and New England as the domain of “Bible Belt” Whigs, evangelical and reform-minded middle-class whites who dominated the politics and culture of these young canal cities.⁵¹² By contrast, in larger and considerably older seaboard cities like Philadelphia and New York, evangelical reform communities struggled to gain a political foothold against entrenched merchant elites and rising working-class political machines. These conflicts over political power also played out in contests over the ownership and content of forms of public culture, particularly entertainment.

Greenfield traveled to Buffalo in October 1851 with black lecturer William F. Johnson as her agent, hoping to access these reform-minded publics. She obtained an introduction with members of the new local musical society, organized that October under the leadership of Hiram E. Howard and dedicated to the “improvement of the standard of Sacred Music in our city.”⁵¹³ The formation of the Buffalo Musical Association was surely inspired in part by the number of touring concert artists coming through Buffalo, including Jenny Lind. Greenfield debuted in Buffalo just weeks after Lind’s concert, and no doubt arrived hoping to hear Lind and at the very least to appeal to Buffalo audiences by comparison. Buffalo’s invitation for Greenfield to appear in concert was published over the course of a week in the pages of several city papers and signed by over two dozen of Buffalo’s citizens.⁵¹⁴ The list included prominent members of the new musical society, abolitionists, and members of local fraternal organizations, like the Young Men’s Christian Association, charitable aid societies such as the

⁵¹² James Brewer Stewart, “Reconsidering the Abolitionists in an Age of Fundamentalist Politics,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Spring 2006): 1-23; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned Over District* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950); David A. Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism: Buffalo, New York 1825-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); David Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁵¹³ *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, 1 October 1851.

⁵¹⁴ See for example *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, 17 October 1851.

Children's Reform & Aid Society, and local government. Greenfield also enjoyed the support of Buffalo's newspapermen, including the editor and assistant editor of the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, T. N. Parmelee and J. O. Brayman, respectively, and W. A. Seaver, publisher of the *Daily Courier*.⁵¹⁵ The men who published the invitation had probably also heard Greenfield's private recitals in the drawing rooms of local elites. At these recitals, Greenfield exhibited her abilities as a singer and extended the social networks that made her concert career possible. The invitation from the Buffalo Musical Society included a personal testimonial from Mr. M. L. P. Thompson of Philadelphia, who reported that he had heard Greenfield sing privately in Philadelphia and assured readers that Greenfield not only "possesses great musical talent" but is "entirely respectable and worthy of patronage."⁵¹⁶

In November, Greenfield performed in Rochester, where she met Colonel Wood, former manager of the Cincinnati Museum, and contracted with him to arrange her tour. Contracting with Wood opened up the markets of Western New York to Greenfield, traversing the extensive waterways that had brought the revivalist preachers who gave the region its name, as well as lecturers and other aspiring stage performers. Greenfield's 1852 tour with Wood moved east along the New York waterways, from Syracuse to Utica, Albany, and Troy, and then into Massachusetts. Boston served as a base for concerts in Salem, New Bedford, Providence, Worcester and Springfield. They veered westward through Pennsylvania to perform in the Northwest, moving through Ohio (Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland) to Detroit, Chicago, and into Wisconsin, then over the border to Upper Canada and back through New York to Vermont and sites in

⁵¹⁵ La Brew, *The Black Swan*, 25-26.

⁵¹⁶ *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, 15 October 1851.

New England. Greenfield managed to follow closely on the tails of other touring artists like Lind and Hayes, which facilitated comparisons and reveals the capacity of these markets for supporting a range of touring stars in the same genre of performance.

Like Barnum, Wood was an experienced showman. Neither was a musical impresario, but both pursued the financial potential in the popularity of foreign concert artists. They drew on their experiences as showmen who featured a range of curiosities, human and otherwise, both on the road and for their museums.⁵¹⁷ Barnum and Wood were part of an emerging class of managers whose skill lay in their ability as promoters. They marketed entertainments at the interstices of cultural and class boundaries in order to draw in the largest possible audiences for their entertainments. Barnum was famous for exhibits designed to challenge the credulity and test the cunning of viewers.⁵¹⁸ With Jenny Lind, Barnum hoped to remake himself as a purveyor of more genteel amusements. Col. Wood capitalized on the gentility of concert music while highlighting Greenfield's appeal as a racial curiosity, but without any of the components of racial uplift that can be found in the representation of Greenfield's earliest concerts or in the promotions she created after she returned from England.

Wood's billing announced only "BLACK SWAN" in large dominating letters, never mentioning Greenfield by name. This style of billing was unambiguous about

⁵¹⁷ On the human curiosity as entertainment, and in particular, the racial curiosity, both before and after Greenfield see J. W. Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like it in the Universe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Benjamin Reiss, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); John Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum*; Rosemarie Garland Thompson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Harris, *Humbug*.

⁵¹⁸ Cook, *Arts of Deception*.

defining the essence of Greenfield's appeal as a performer in terms of her racial incongruity, particularly when the nameless "Black Swan" was paired with Master Emile Kook, a ten-year-old pianist promoted as a "juvenile prodigy" and his teacher, Master Becht.⁵¹⁹ Wood's combination built on his experience with museum entertainments and appealed through the popularity of concerts, foreign performers, and figures of exceptional interest—Kook both young and foreign, Greenfield a racial curiosity. Such were the main ingredients of incipient celebrity, a quality of personal interest beyond the performance itself that became, implicitly, a part of the performance. Greenfield performed "Black Swan" to the tune of popular ballad music, and audiences enjoyed both familiar music and a remarkable phenomenon. After Greenfield, Wood would leave the concert business and remain firmly in the genre of human curiosities with his exhibitions of "the large woman" Mrs. Scholey and Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump, the "Queen of the Fairies," who would later become famous under P.T. Barnum's management as "Mrs. Tom Thumb."⁵²⁰

Greenfield's emerging celebrity in the early 1850s drew together her racial difference, personal history, and remarkable voice into a complex and at times contradictory package, which facilitated larger arguments of exceptionality that were crucial to marketing celebrity more generally. Though "Black Swan" followed the popular device of the ornithological epithet for female singers, like the "Swan of Erin" (Catherine Hayes)—and Greenfield may herself have been the author of the title, which preceded Wood—the "Black Swan" distilled, defined, and indeed, launched, her celebrity far more completely than her given name. If "Greenfield" remained a generic and

⁵¹⁹ Horticultural Hall. The Black Swan...Vocal and Instrumental Concert [Worcester], 18 February 1852, American Antiquarian Society.

⁵²⁰ See Wood's advertisements in the *Cleveland Herald* in June 1853.

comparative unknown, “Black Swan” was a question to be answered. The sobriquet “Black Swan” demanded that Greenfield be considered in relation to the “Swedish Nightingale,” even as it reinforced her status as a racial curiosity. In embodied and textual performances, orchestrated by a range of figures from managers to reviewers, Greenfield the public figure simultaneously conformed to and defied expectations. She raised questions about the capacity of “her race” for intellectual and cultural achievement. Her concerts posed the question, *Could a colored woman sing like Jenny Lind?* and white audiences flocked to hear and answer.

The expectations of newspaper critics are far easier to unpack from their reviews than a clear sense of the degree to which white critics allowed the consummate abilities of this concert artist to complicate preexisting ways of seeing a race and reading racial performance. Critics commended Greenfield on all the qualities of voice which audiences had been promised: power, sweetness, and flexibility. But the terms according to which audiences judged and appreciated Greenfield’s singing clearly reflected a prior set of assumptions about the heights of artistry that such an “untutored child of song” could reach. Describing Greenfield as an “untutored child of song” captured white conceptions of the innate inferiority and childlike ability of blacks while also referencing Greenfield’s lack of formal training. Critics tacked back and forth between assigning qualities found lacking in her voice to racial inferiority, while also predicting great promise for Greenfield’s singing with proper instruction. Whether criticized in terms of innate skill or learnedness, Greenfield’s singing was never good enough. Reviewers were struck by the tone and power of her voice, but ultimately urged the necessity of instruction. And while critics commended Greenfield on her tasteful renditions of

popular favorites, such as the Bishop ballad “Do not mingle” sung by Lind and Parodi, they warned that Greenfield’s “bold” selection of such pieces brought her “untaught natural powers” into “direct competition with the masterly training and careful cultivation of the *artistes*.”⁵²¹

In New York, in contrast, tensions and dissonances in this very different audience are reflected in the tone of newspaper criticism, which picked up many of these same themes but with a much more overt form of racial caricature and a detached performance of serious criticism that resounded with the damning of faint praise. Newspaper reviews of the 1853 New York concert suggest that the audience was socially diverse, composed differently than a concert audience for a white singer, or at the very least, that audience and the critics brought different expectations to a concert by a black woman. In their assessment of the audience as well as the singer, critics who saw their metropolis as a kind of gatekeeper for talent took care to police the implications of Greenfield’s growing celebrity. James Gordon Bennett indulged his readership with a cutting description of the singer’s entrance on the arm of her “little white representative of the *genus homo*, who seemed afraid to touch her even with the tips of his white kids, and kept the Swan at a respectful distance, as if she were a sort of biped hippopotamus.” The single moment of interracial mixture that was not managed by the footlights was thus managed by a literary burlesque that fixed Greenfield as a grotesque and distanced the reviewer from the reviewed through the caricature of the usher.⁵²² The *New York Herald* attributed interest to the “novelty” of the occasion—novelty was the “one thing needed to draw a crowd” in New York—but dared not call the audience “fashionable,” especially since ladies were

⁵²¹ *Rochester Daily American*, 13 December 1851.

⁵²² *New York Herald*, 1 April 1853 quoted in *A Brief Memoir*, 12.

“considerably in the minimum.” The *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer* disagreed: while ladies were heavily in attendance, there “were not so many gay toilets as we are in the habit of seeing on such occasions.”⁵²³ If the presence of well-dressed ladies was the mark of a fashionable audience, then clearly Greenfield sang before a lower order of patron. Critics grudgingly noted the tremendous popularity of the event, but insisted Greenfield appealed as novelty rather than art. The correspondent for the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* stated what New York critics hoped to imply, that the audience perceived the “whole Concert as a sort of joke.” He did not feel the police were superfluous; had it not been for the “police force, we are afraid that [the Swan] would have been ‘guyed’ unmercifully.”⁵²⁴ But despite threats, New Yorkers did not riot that night, and the audience restricted their expression to applause...and laughter. “Ill-mannered laughter,” one critic reported, though another deflected any hint of threat or discomfort by calling it “good-natured.”⁵²⁵

New York critics managed their surprise at the quality of concert they heard by attributing Greenfield’s powers and capabilities to natural ability that lacked cultivation. The *Herald* echoed countless reviews from throughout Greenfield’s career: Greenfield possessed a “natural sweetness of voice,” but her performance suffered from “want of confidence.” One New York paper conceded that Greenfield’s rendition of a wildly popular ballad by Bishop was sung “quite creditably,” then noted dismissively that as it “present[ed] no difficulties, exposed her to no danger of failure.” When Greenfield sang from the opera *Lucrezia Borgia*, and showcased her wide vocal range by shifting into a

⁵²³ *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, 1 April 1853 quoted in *A Brief Memoir*, 12.

⁵²⁴ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 3 April 1853.

⁵²⁵ *Evening Post* [New York], 1 April 1853 and *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, 1 April 1853 quoted in *A Brief Memoir*, 11-12.

lower key at the end of the aria, our critic was unmoved: “the song was evenly and correctly sung” but “without any particular mark of inferiority of superiority.” He concluded that “an audience blindfolded, at the opera, might have passed over it as well enough in its place,” implicitly exposing the centrality of race to his assessment of her performance by insisting that the absence of racial difference would have rendered her concert unremarkable.⁵²⁶ Critics recognized that race was at play in Greenfield’s reception and renown. They expressed surprise at her abilities then insisted she was overrated. A lady’s comment, quoted in the *Herald*, that that the Swan was admirable for having “so much pluck,” and even so was “such a charming singer,” is maddeningly belittling, but effectively reinforced hierarchies according to which white singers were accomplished artists and a black concert singer was “charming” (but might easily be laughable).

The description of Greenfield’s singing as “natural” was not intrinsically belittling. In the mid-century discourse of theater and music critics, “natural” could be high praise for white actresses and singers. A “natural” performer or performance corresponded closely to the essence of the performer herself or to the ideal for the performance. To be natural was not necessarily to be without affect or artistry. The important distinction for critics lay in *how* affect and artistry were deployed. But the kind of “natural” performance that was expected of and praised in a black singer was very different from the construction of natural when Jenny Lind was praised. The careful study that Jenny Lind pursued to realize her “natural voice” was not equal to the “natural” that Greenfield could never rise above, no matter how cultivated she became.

⁵²⁶ *Morning Express*, n.d. quoted in *A Brief Memoir*, 15.

Likewise, while the cause of racial uplift remained defined in terms of natural capacity, the ways in which Greenfield challenged or exemplified black racial capacity depended upon the observer. White critics evaluating Greenfield were primarily interested in her ability to rise *above* their estimations of her natural capacity, while black critics hoped that Greenfield would demonstrate that blacks possessed a larger natural capacity that previously recognized.

The discovery of Greenfield's remarkable talents could also be readily folded back into essentializing constructions of racial capacity and difference. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who first heard Greenfield sing in London in 1853, attributed Greenfield's abilities to the natural instinct of her race for music, explaining "like others of her race" Greenfield had a "passion for music, and could sing and play by ear."⁵²⁷ Stowe cast Greenfield as simultaneously exceptional and representative, but exceptional within the framework of innate racial musicality. Artistic accomplishments that were viewed as a reflection of a racialized ability created a slippage that constructed all black artistic performance as part of a continual struggle to achieve cultivation that would be forever unequal to the cultivation of whites. Despite Douglass's early conviction that it was "fortunate for our despised race, that one like Miss Greenfield should arise" and "dispute the palm with the fairest and most gifted in song, of the Anglo-Saxon race," naturalness anchored to race consistently consigned Greenfield to an ever slipping mark just below and beyond the reach of natural cultivation practiced by the "fair Swede."⁵²⁸

Black leaders and intellectuals hoped to use examples of black cultural

⁵²⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1854), 284.

⁵²⁸ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 11 December 1851; *Buffalo Express* quoted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 23 October 1851.

achievement, like Greenfield, to counter claims about the innate intellectual and cultural inferiority of the colored race. When Greenfield gave her first concert in Rochester in December, Douglass devoted a full column on the second page of his paper to his review of the concert; indeed, a “larger share of our editorial columns than is usual, in such notices.”⁵²⁹ Like white critics, Douglass scrutinized Greenfield’s body, her “ripe chestnut” skin color and African features. But Douglass also pushed against the claim, implicit in much white criticism, that Greenfield was a great singer in spite of her race. Instead, Douglass saw in Greenfield’s visage and performance the kind of woman he imagined could inhabit the role he was crafting for her as a cultural race leader, who would serve as a model for blacks and challenge whites to overcome their prejudice and recognize “merit and genius.” Douglass described a woman “dignified and self-possessed” but “unreadable and uninteresting” at first glance, “her face motionless.” That is, until Greenfield opened her mouth to sing: “It is not until you hear her voice, and take a second and more searching glance, that you get the first peg upon which to rest your inquiry into her mysterious powers,” Douglass declared. Douglass thus deployed a set of tropes that had readily been used by white critics to describe white concert singers. At first glance, Jenny Lind was unprepossessing, and indeed, uninteresting—until Lind opened her mouth to sing and captivated her audience with her beautiful voice, which transformed her plainness into beauty. Douglass urged readers to see Greenfield as transformed in beauty by her voice, like Lind had been. When Greenfield sang, he explained, her “small black eyes” became the “very index of [her] quickness, aptitude, discrimination, and a sort of flinty shrewdness.” Douglass discovered a woman who was

⁵²⁹ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 18 December 1851.

smart and saavy, capable of handling “a hundred *Barnums*.” Her mouth “formed alike for mirth and song” suggested the qualities of character that had “supported” her through her struggles.⁵³⁰

Significantly for Douglass, in her performance Greenfield remained a model of genteel restraint and, implicitly, of black respectability. In contrast to Jenny Lind, whom critics imagined emerged fully in song and revealed her true self, Greenfield’s true self remained veiled, Douglass explained, behind small eyes “which the general complexion so completely shades, as to permit them to elude a first glance.” Greenfield revealed little, even under close scrutiny. If Greenfield did not dissemble, neither did she embrace a highly performative revelation of self before her audience. Douglass’s descriptions of Greenfield’s singing suggested a dignified restraint in wielding her considerable vocal power. She sang, with “no distortion of countenance, no straining of the voice, no curving the neck, no gasping, no pumping for breath” but only “ease and grace.” What some critics interpreted as untutored outpouring, Douglass identified as a powerful command of her instrument. She “soars aloft with the strength of the eagle, and descends as smoothly and noiselessly as a dove from a calm sky” and “knows *what* she can do, and does that, and no more.”⁵³¹ Douglass approved of Greenfield’s lack of excess in performance.

Many of Greenfield’s supporters were concerned that she maintain an appropriate performance of gentility without slipping into excess or self-aggrandizement in dress or behavior. On the eve of her departure from London, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to Greenfield with advice about the appropriate style of self-presentation in manners and

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

dress. She urged Greenfield to retain her manner of simplicity and conform to behavior that read as authentic—the kind of authentic that Stowe and her friends expected Greenfield to be: “Don’t put on anything—don’t try to pass for anything but what you really are, and you will keep the friends that you have made.”⁵³² Stowe’s letter demonstrates at the extent to which Greenfield was expected to police her manner to conform to a model of deserving subaltern, which was a requisite counterpoint to her performance of musical genius.

Style of dress was central to this. The struggle to navigate conflicting expectations about dress was a constant for women developing careers in public life. Dress remained a constant strategy for performing respectability. Greenfield’s style corresponded to a model of restrained gentility that was expected of concert artists and epitomized by Jenny Lind. But Greenfield’s style was also caught up in a raced and gendered politics of respectability that operated differently for women of color. These politics of racial representation existed in continual tension with Greenfield’s efforts to appeal within a broader cultural marketplace alongside Jenny Lind and Henrietta Sontag. Advice from white women to Greenfield about dress reveals the tenuous balance Greenfield was expected to maintain between style befitting a concert artist and a restrained modesty that performed a racialized respectability and humility. Most newspaper critics commended Greenfield for her simple attire and lack of ornament, which some compared with that of Jenny Lind.⁵³³ One anonymous writer—a “well-

⁵³² *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 47.

⁵³³ The few portraits of Greenfield depart remarkably even from the relative simplicity of Lind’s white dress and unadorned décolletage. One portrait of Greenfield shows her seated in a dark gown with a simple white collar at her neck and long sleeves with white linen draped over her the wrists of her clasped hands. The portrait of Greenfield on the cover of her 1853 *Brief Memoir of the Black Swan*, published to promote her career in London, depicts a far more elaborate costume, a lace dress with the lace bertha, bare neck and

wisher” from Buffalo—suggested that Greenfield add a lace bertha to her plain dark gown and chose a richer color, particularly for her European tour. Stowe disagreed. She warned Greenfield away from décolletage or “showy colours,” and noted that keeping “a *plain modest respectful style*” was “very important for one in your position.” Stowe assured Greenfield, “if rightly managed” the proper style of dress would help her “secure respect.”⁵³⁴ Elizabeth Smith Miller, the daughter of Gerrit Smith and longtime supporter of women’s rights, wrote to Greenfield in early 1853 spelling out the dangers of immodest style for a black woman. Miller discouraged all excess adornment, observing that “in the midst of all the prejudice against those of your colour, [your] appearance should be *strikingly genteel*.” She instructed Greenfield to dress in plain black silk, over muslin or tartan—perhaps lace, but no lace sleeves—and for the dress to be cut “loosely” to “conceal the figure.”⁵³⁵

In these letters, a stance of friendship and patronage provided the opening for advice that both defined and reinforced the terms upon which Greenfield could be accepted by white audiences and patrons. This advice articulated a racialized style of respectability and gentility that barred Greenfield from the style of white genteel femininity to which Stowe and Smith Miller aspired. In order to be embraced by white audiences, Greenfield needed to perform a racialized respectability—indeed, a hyper-respectability—to counteract broader racialized aspersions against the respectability and sexuality of black women. The advice Stowe and Smith Miller provided, though unsolicited and patronizing, no doubt reflected their own hyper-awareness, as women

throat, and a lace cap. That portrait does not appear in her 1855 memoir published in Philadelphia. Greenfield may have felt pressure to conform to a more restrained Quaker style when appearing before American audiences.

⁵³⁴ *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 47.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

with public careers—Stowe a novelist with an international celebrity and Smith Miller a reformer and activist—of the complex politics of self-presentation demanded of all women in public life.

The Counterpoint of Mary Webb

In 1855, Harriet Beecher Stowe became interested in another black performer, the dramatic reader Mary Webb. She would later explain, in a letter of introduction for Webb to Lady Hatherton, leading member of Britain’s antislavery movement, that Webb’s success reading Stowe’s *A Christian Slave* “has been so great that even Pro-Slavery Lyceums have broken through the prejudices of colour so far as to solicit her assistance in their courses.” Stowe hoped Lady Hatherton would assist Webb in securing readings in London, presumably through Lady Hatherton’s close connections with the Duchess of Sutherland, who had helped arrange Greenfield’s concert at Stafford House two years before. Stowe presented her interest as both personal and connected to her own antislavery sympathies, noting that “every new development of a talent or a prowess in this much depressed people is a new argument for us & helps the struggle.”⁵³⁶

Six years after Greenfield first explored the possibility of becoming a concert singer, and three-and-a-half years after Greenfield’s Buffalo debut, Mary Webb presented herself to the public in Philadelphia and Boston as a dramatic reader “after the manner of Fanny Kemble.”⁵³⁷ From the start of her career as a dramatic reader, white critics linked Mary Webb with the cause of racial uplift. As an early editorial in the *Christian Register*,

⁵³⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe to Lady Hatheron, 24 May 1856, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture: Multi-Media Archive*, directed by Stephen Railton, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu>.

⁵³⁷ Reprinted in *The Liberator*, 4 May 1855.

a leading Unitarian weekly, explained, “The most effective argument against slavery is the appearance of a colored man, competing on equal terms with the white, in pursuits which require cultivation of mind and force of purpose.” Black Americans like Webb who “excel in pursuits which require intellectual culture” formed the strongest “evidence” that blacks were “fit for something besides slavery.”⁵³⁸

But Webb’s performance and status as a public figure was consumed within a slightly different racial framework than Greenfield’s. Critics fixated on markers of Greenfield’s blackness, the darkness of her complexion and what they perceived to be her “decidedly African features,” underscoring her racial and physical distance from the cultural milieu and role to which she aspired. They read her distance from her white audience and other white concert singers in her face, evidence that she “owe[d] none [of her marvelous powers] to any tincture of European blood.” One of Greenfield’s acquaintances in Buffalo described her to the papers as a woman of mixed parentage, her father “African” and her mother “a Choctaw Indian woman,” and though Greenfield included these details in her own biographical materials, this racial mixture did not feature prominently in the construction of Greenfield’s racial identity.

Webb, on the other hand, was contextualized within the category of the tragic mulatta or octoroon. Audiences and critics commented upon Webb’s light complexion, features of “Spanish cast,” and mixed Spanish and African ancestry. The papers reported that Webb originally hailed from New Orleans, where she had been raised in a convent. A biographical sketch written by her husband, Frank Webb, and published as an introduction to the 1856 edition of Stowe’s *The Christian Slave* explained that Mary

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

Webb was the daughter of a “Spanish gentleman of wealth” who had “made many efforts to purchase the freedom of her mother,” a woman of “full African blood” and a slave. Mary’s mother ultimately escaped to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Mary was born, raised, and educated with some nominal support from her father.⁵³⁹ Newspapers accounts from 1855, however, persisted in associating Webb with the exoticism of New Orleans and with slave concubinage, which loomed large in the imaginations and propaganda of northern abolitionists and no doubt increased her fascination for white abolitionist audiences.

In the 1840s and 1850s, abolitionists developed a critique of slavery built around the problem of sexual access to black women. They focused on the concubinage of enslaved women and destruction of the slave family by the internal slave trade. The spectacle of the enslaved woman on the auction block gained a wide cultural currency in the late 1840s and 1850s as a major form of abolitionist propaganda, both in literature, drama (Dion Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* in 1859 probably represented the height of this image in popular culture), and through Rev. Henry Ward Beecher’s famous mock-auctions at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn in the late 1840s. But framing the evils of slavery in this way had the effect of further sexualizing black and enslaved women. For example, in Beecher’s mock auctions the freedom of enslaved young women from the Deep South—usually women, sometimes girls, never men, always light-skinned—was purchased by a packed congregation of white onlooker-participants. These performances appealed primarily by creating a spectacle of the sexual desirability of light-skinned women narrowly rescued from certain sexual slavery. In 1848, Beecher raised money

⁵³⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Christian Slave* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Company, 1856), in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin & American Culture*, dir. Stephen Railton.

through his Plymouth congregation to purchase the freedom of the Edmonson sisters, two teenaged girls who had first attempted to escape from slavery on board the *Pearl*, which was captured in a famous raid and its fugitives resold into bondage. Beecher used the device of the mock auction to raise the initial funds, and then repeated the performance with the Edmonson sisters at antislavery fairs and rallies throughout New York state.⁵⁴⁰ The Edmonsons stood on the raised stage of Beecher's pulpit, their hair undressed and loose over their shoulders, as Beecher acted the auctioneer, asking audiences to imagine the fate in store for them. This performance encouraged the majority white audience, particularly the men, to imagine themselves as potential buyers of these women, and experience the vicarious thrill of the auction while holding on to the assurance that they were liberating these women from bondage.⁵⁴¹ Beecher's mock slave auctions of beautiful light-skinned women provided one context in which women of color appeared on stage before audiences of predominantly white middle-class evangelicals, which in turn framed and generated interest in Webb's performance.

Stowe's relationship with the Edmonsons also proved the first of her patronage relationships with women of color through which Stowe culled material for her fiction and shored up her reputation as a sympathetic friend and patron of deserving subalterns. The story of their mother, Milly Edmonson, formed a chapter in Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* whereby Stowe attempted to establish the truth of the representation of slavery in her novel. Stowe's relationships with Greenfield, Webb, and later, Sojourner

⁵⁴⁰ Beecher's mock slave auction was yet another iteration of the growing role that theatrical spectacle was playing in evangelical Christianity and social reform. R. Lawrence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴¹ Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage*; Jason Stupp, "Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performances on the Auction Block," *Theatre Survey* 63 (2011): 61-84; Joseph Roach, "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons," *Theatre Survey* 33:2 (1992)

Truth, about whom Stowe composed “The Libyan Sibyl” in 1863 for the *Atlantic Monthly*, a highly romanticized account based on a brief meeting, furthered Stowe’s reputation as a sympathetic white woman uniquely able to capture the plight of the former slave. None of this required that Stowe align herself with actual activist antislavery politics in the United States. Stowe chose to remain aloof from controversies over levels of women’s involvement in antislavery politics, instead publicly supporting the artistic accomplishments of women of color—though she was not, biographer Joan Hedrick notes, interested in supporting writers of color like Harriet Jacobs.⁵⁴² Or rather, Stowe recognized the social capital that could accrue from her relationship with the women, Greenfield and then Webb, who actively sought Stowe out for the networks that she could help them access, in turn marketing themselves in connection with Stowe’s celebrity. And Webb surely shared with Greenfield a savvy understanding of the complex performances of race and gender involved in appealing to these circles.

Webb occupied an uneasy racial space as a public figure. On the one hand, her parentage connected her with European refinement. But she also fit the narrative of the beautiful mulatto, which allowed her to serve, for her northern white supporters, as a particularly acute example of the problems of racial caste system and segregation—problems Webb experienced and Frank Webb wrote about. In his novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*, Webb exposed the virulence of northern racism and racial caste and explored the corrosive effects of racial passing through the story of Mr. and Mrs. Garie, a slave owner and his light-skinned slave turned wife, and their children. *The Garies* concludes with Emily Garie’s powerful statement of racial pride, that unlike her brother,

⁵⁴² Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*.

who “walk[s] on the side of the oppressor,” she remains “thank God...with the oppressed.”⁵⁴³ But Webb also introduced a cast of black Philadelphians in the novel, dramatizing the complexity of racial politics in the urban North where whites of all classes targeted blacks with wealth and commercial power, objecting to any black political or economic authority and social prominence.⁵⁴⁴

While Frank Webb wrote a novel about the fraught personal politics of being of mixed racial ancestry and light complexion in the free North, Mary Webb challenged the racial boundaries of white commercial spaces. When Mary Webb was barred from eating at the Marlboro Hotel in Boston, the *Liberator* constructed the insult in terms of Webb’s claims to gentility as a respectable light-complexioned woman, noting that it is “absurd...to call her a ‘black’ ” and yet a woman of “her fair color, her fine culture, and her professional calling” is “treated with gross incivility.”⁵⁴⁵ With her light-skinned complexion and mixed ancestry, as a public presence Webb was aligned more closely with whiteness, which in some cases fostered white recognition of the wrongs of race prejudice. In other words, whites saw race prejudice at work in the unwillingness of some to grant to a “fair” and refined woman the privileges of white gentility. But as Frank Webb’s novel argued, attaining the privileges of whiteness on an individual level would never solve the problems of a rampant racial caste system that acted upon all Americans with African ancestry.

⁵⁴³ Frank Webb, *The Garies and Their Friends* (London: G. Routledge, 1857), 254. See analysis of *The Garies* by Nyong’o, “Hiawatha’s Black Atlantic Itineraries.”

⁵⁴⁴ On Frank Webb’s life and career see Eric Gardner, “‘A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation and Refinement’: Recovering the Biography of Frank J. Webb,” *African American Review* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 297-308; Phillip Lapansky, “Afro-Americana: Frank J. Webb and His Friends,” in *Annual Report of the Library Company of Philadelphia for the Year 1990* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1991), 27-43.

⁵⁴⁵ *The Liberator*, 4 May 1855.

Reading Mary Webb's career in relation to Frank Webb's novel suggests the complexity of their racial uplift politics and strategies for exposing and challenging the racial caste system. Most scholars have passed over Webb's early readings and instead treated *A Christian Slave* as the epitome of her participation in racial uplift, which improved upon her early if flawed attempt to present herself in the vein of Fanny Kemble.⁵⁴⁶ But if we follow her moves through different phases of her reading career, while paying close attention to shifting readings of race and gender in her performance, we discover a woman who was adept at capitalizing on nascent categories of performance that could establish her artistic and intellectual accomplishments, claims to gentility, and advance a politics of racial uplift while appealing to the largest possible public.

The category of Shakespearean Reader that Kemble had helped create and popularize with her American tour in 1849-1850 retained its salience as a category of entertainments into the 1850s. Dramatic readings remained associated with literary culture and with the lionized status of Shakespeare in American culture more generally. Shakespearean readers after Kemble introduced an increasing cultural hybridity into their performance, including other dramatic selections and various speeches and dialogues. But readings continued to appeal by deploying a theatricalized performance outside the theater, for publics who remained ambivalent about the space theatrical amusements (perhaps even the content), but were comfortable with dramatic literature when presented in a lecture hall like the Tremont Temple and aligned with the literary. As the *Boston Atlas* noted, Mary Webb's reading "attracted a number of intelligent men and women,

⁵⁴⁶ Clark, "Solo Black Performance"; and Gardner, "'A Nobler End.'" Nyong'o, "Hiawatha's Black Atlantic Itineraries" is unique in its treatment of *The Christian Slave* in dialogue with Webb's readings of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*.

who listened to her with delight in the Tremont Temple, but who could not be induced to go and see her perform a part from which her selections were taken, upon the stage.”⁵⁴⁷ But Webb’s reading demonstrated an “intelligent and truthful conception of the meaning of the author.” Her “spirited, chaste, and elegant” delivery, along with the “self-possession of her bearing” equaled the task and “gave her supremacy over the passion of the character and the emotions of her hearers,” drawing “almost constant” applause. The critics seemed wish Webb could have brought those abilities to the dramatic stage, if Tremont Temple were still Tremont Theatre. Of course, in 1855 Mary Webb would have found it much more difficult to obtain a part in theatrical production than to mount a lecture platform by herself.

Dramatic readings had also become ubiquitous to the point of being tiresome to critics, many of whom noted how few of the Kemble’s imitators measured up to her. In the 1850s, Kemble had become the bar for evaluating elocutionary talent. The appellation given to Mary Webb of “Black Siddons” evoked Kemble’s dramatic inheritance from her aunt Sarah Siddons, regarded in an American public memory that had never seen her act, as the greatest actress of the English theater. Miss Kimberly, another dramatic reader who debuted just months after Kemble, in 1849, became known as the “American Fanny Kemble.”⁵⁴⁸ Even readers who did not explicitly present themselves as Shakespearean readers were evaluated according to Kemble’s example.

But unlike Miss Kimberly, who used Shakespearean readings as a stepping stone

⁵⁴⁷ Boston Atlas quoted in *The Liberator*, 11 May 1855. In the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, the Tremont Theatre fell heavily into debt, and at the end of the 1842-1843 the trustees decided to accept an offer from the Colyer Baptist Society to buy the Tremont Theatre and turn it into a church, the Tremont Temple, which became a multi-purposed space for religious services, as well as concerts, lectures, and literary entertainments.

⁵⁴⁸ For example see *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington], 27 March 1850.

to the dramatic stage and then into theater management, Mary Webb's own dramatic aspirations are only hinted at in early reviews of her 1855 entertainments. Instead, Webb's decision to pursue a career as a dramatic reader was presented as the result of encouragement from her friends after her husband's business collapsed.⁵⁴⁹ The impact of her performances upon racial prejudice ultimately proved the most lasting and compelling case for her platform career. The *Christian Register*, a leading Unitarian weekly, expressed a firm belief, in connection with Webb's debut, that "nothing can be done for the colored race of so much value as enabling them to show, that in the best qualities of manhood and womanhood, they are equal to the whites." The *Register* introduced Webb as a "woman of cultivation and refinement" who was motivated to give readings primarily at "the advice of her friends."⁵⁵⁰ Like Anna Mowatt, Webb's labors were aligned with female social worlds and networks. In the biographical sketch that prefaced the London edition of *A Christian Slave*, Frank Webb connected Mary's "genius for dramatic reading" with a youthful "fondness for poetry, and a taste for dramatic literature." Mary Webb's biography bore some striking similarities with elements from Anna Mowatt's biography—to a point. After her husband's business failure Mary Webb, like Mowatt, considered the "possibility of turning her marked elocutionary powers to some practical account." Frank Webb emphasized the genteel accomplishments of an educated woman of leisure now turned to "practical account," just as Mowatt had asked whether she "had no talents I could use." Had a "life made up of...poetic enjoyments"

⁵⁴⁹ The income Mary Webb earned through her reading career ultimately made it possible for Frank Webb to write his novel, *The Garies and their Friends*, which was published in 1857. See Lapansky, "Afro-Americanana."

⁵⁵⁰ Reprinted in *The Liberator*, 4 May 1855.

made Mowatt “unfit” for “exertion”?⁵⁵¹ But if Mowatt had to overcome the scruples of her elite upbringing to appear on a public platform, Webb’s aspirations for “public distinction” required that she “storm the ramparts of prejudice, and wring from unwilling lips of the despisers of her race a confession of her merit.” Her debut in Philadelphia in April 1855 was “a complete success.” Webb presented the success as a triumph of race in which racial difference was subsumed in the mastery of the performance: “the audience lost the mulatto in the artiste; genius had become the conqueror of prejudice.” Webb’s success in conquering prejudice proved the most compelling and significant rationale for her stage career that surpassed even as it built upon all others.

In an early private reading given in Boston at the Winthrop House Hotel, Webb read selections from *Twelfth Night*, *A School for Scandal*, and *Fazio*, all plays that were established repertoire of the legitimate stage and particularly popular as vehicles for comic female ingénue. For her public reading at the Tremont Temple, Webb decided to include a selection of “Negro, French and Irish eccentricities.” This helped to feature her strengths—remarked on throughout her career—in the comic line. The critic from the *Boston Courier* preferred this “vein of humor in her nature” and judged her a “fair reader,” but implied that she was mainly of interest to audiences because of her race, and read no better than any other pupil in the “first class in the Wells school.” Webb’s best performance was her French piece, “her ‘negro eccentricities’ not excepted.” However, her reading of the “Balcony Scene” from *Romeo and Juliet* failed to move her audience. While Webb could deliver a “pretty fair Munster brogue,” “she can’t speak Juliet’s

⁵⁵¹ Anna Mowatt, *Autobiography of an Actress* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854), 139.

love.”⁵⁵² Perhaps Webb was a more accomplished comic than dramatist. And yet, the *Courier* man’s insistence that “were she forty times a woman, and blacker than Egyptian darkness” she could produce no Siddons-like effect hints at a complex slippage of expectations and evaluation around race and dramatic performance. Webb’s failure to move her white audience in a performance of Juliet was framed in a reminder of her race. Webb was “as far from being *black* as she is distant from Mrs. Siddons,” which troubled white audiences over how to read her performance when she was not playing a racialized Other like she would in *A Christian Slave* or in her readings of *Hiawatha*. The racial references used by the *Courier* critic demonstrate that audiences and critics had a vast repertoire of racial imagery on which to draw when characterizing black performers, and demanded that these performances conform to expectations. The majority of this imagery came from blackface minstrelsy, where blackness and the black mask served as a vehicle for social critique through inversion and burlesque. If blackface performance created an expectation of humor linked to blackness, the preference of a white male critic for a genteel black woman to perform a comic monologue rather than a dramatic romantic dialogue becomes all the more intelligible.

Ira Aldridge’s effort to create a space for himself in dramatic theater provides an instructive comparison with Webb. Aldridge performed both from the legitimate drama and from minstrelsy. He created space for himself on the English stage playing tragic African characters in *Othello* and *Oroonoko*. His dramatic skill was regarded simultaneously as a reflection of his superior intellectual and cultural attainments erected upon his essential sympathy with these racial characters and their expressions of outrage

⁵⁵² Reprinted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 11 May 1855.

against injustice declaimed. But English audiences were equally delighted with Aldridge's minstrel performances, such as "Possum up a Gum Tree," which Aldridge no doubt included to appeal to popular tastes but also to demonstrate his range as a performer. What better way to call attention to race as performance and Aldridge's own performance as artistic mastery than to present audiences with the contrast between "passion in its most poetic shape" and then "descend to the broad farce of mock drunkenness."⁵⁵³ Critics repeatedly praised Aldridge for the dignity and restraint that he brought to roles like Othello and Zanga, otherwise treated with blustering histrionics by white actors. And while Douglas Jerrold appreciated Aldridge's "clever delineation" of Zanga, he vastly preferred his humorous performance of Mungo, a West Indian, in the comic afterpiece "The Padlock." Jerrold wondered whether Aldridge's "*forte* be not rather comedy than tragedy." Racial essentialism remained the resort of high praise. English critics applauded themselves for Aldridge's celebrity, and applauded Aldridge for raising the estimations of his race, while ultimately attributing his genius to his racial capacity—in the case of Mungo and Zanga, a capacity "for extremes."⁵⁵⁴ Critics agreed, Aldridge was a compelling and versatile actor. Biographer Bernth Lindfors notes that for the most part, English audiences came out by the hundreds to see him play, thrilled to discover that Aldridge was not the minstrel stereotype some expected, but a marvelously versatile actor, particularly in melodrama and farce.⁵⁵⁵

Webb, in contrast, was dismissed from the main category of roles opened to

⁵⁵³ From the *Era*, 26 March 1848 quoted in *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge, the African Roscius* (Onwhyn: London, 1850), 26.

⁵⁵⁴ From *Douglas Jerrold's Newspaper*, 26 March 1848 quoted in *Memoir and Theatrical Career of Ira Aldridge*, 28.

⁵⁵⁵ Bernth Lindfors, *Ira Aldridge: The Vagabond Years, 1833-1852* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2011).

young women, romantic ingénue leads like Juliet. While she initially attempted to show her own versatility as a reader, her greatest critical and financial success came in late 1855, when she appeared on the antislavery lecture circuit giving readings of *A Christian Slave*, which Stowe wrote specifically for Webb. Webb traveled on to England the following year, where she received acclaim for her readings of *A Christian Slave* and Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. Through her performances of *A Christian Slave* and her connection with Stowe, Webb accessed the transatlantic antislavery circuit that was fostering a new culture of black celebrity. Webb was preceded in England not only by Elizabeth Greenfield, but also by a long list of African American lecturers and platform entertainers who dramatically narrated their stories for growing English audiences interested in antislavery. These performers included Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, William and Ellen Crafts, and Henry Box Brown.⁵⁵⁶

Webb and Stowe's relationship was advantageous for the careers of both women. Writing a dramatized version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even one not intended for dramatic representation, afforded Stowe an opportunity to push back against the many dramatic adaptations, from the legitimate stage to minstrelsy, that had transformed the larger gender, race, and antislavery politics of the book. *A Christian Slave* placed the stories of its black female characters at its center.⁵⁵⁷ This enabled Stowe to deemphasize the novel's colonizationist politics, captured by George Harris's ultimate decision to emigrate to Liberia with his family, after having successfully escaped to Canada. Most antislavery activists no longer embraced colonization. Martin Delany had since turned

⁵⁵⁶ See especially Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania*; Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England*; Rice and Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn*.

⁵⁵⁷ Clark, "Solo Black Performance Before the Civil War."

away from the emigrationist pan-Africanism espoused by *Blake; or, The Huts of America* and in a letter to *Frederick Douglass' Paper* took Stowe to task for espousing colonizationism while dismissing “Hayti.” Douglass defended Stowe, historian Robert Levine points out, by reminding his readers of the importance of her “friendliness to the colored people” while likewise using his paper to convince Stowe of her error. Stowe in turn wrote to the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society expressing her regret about the novel’s ending.⁵⁵⁸ In *A Christian Slave*, Stowe shifted focus to the narrative of the tragic mulatta and the sexual depravities of slavery, which were a growing focus of antislavery in the mid-1850s.⁵⁵⁹

Webb’s shift to a more racially marketed performance repertoire afforded her space to engage explicitly in the politics of antislavery, beyond the example she posed as an accomplished woman of color. One scholar has argued that through her performances of *A Christian Slave* and *Hiawatha* Webb actually performed an indeterminate racial identity, fully conforming neither to blackness nor to womanhood. While appearing to conform to a racial essentialism in her performances of “American ‘ethnic’ types,” Webb was actually asserting an empowering alliance with the oppressed from which she highlighted racial and gender passing. This claim that the “transatlantic abolitionist space” that Webb accessed enabled her to become a “political octoroon” provides an important insight into how transatlantic circulation could inflect the readings of her performances.⁵⁶⁰ But the performances in which Webb was judged deficient remain

⁵⁵⁸ Robert Levine, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*: An Analysis of Reception,” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, and Context, Criticism*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons (New York: Norton, 2010), 574-576.

⁵⁵⁹ Clark, “Solo Black Performance Before the Civil War.”

⁵⁶⁰ Nyong’o, “*Hiawatha’s* Black Atlantic Itineraries.”

significant to understanding both her own visions for her career and the boundaries of black performance. Though Webb created an important political space for herself by capitalizing on “Tom Mania” and the broader fascination of transatlantic publics with racialized performances, the boundaries of racial passing remained close.

From Black Swan to White Raven

Throughout her career, Mary Webb remained in spaces largely associated with antislavery, though dominated by white audiences. In England, both she and Elizabeth Greenfield accessed predominantly white publics who identified with a progressive racial politics. Initially, in America, Greenfield’s attempt to access broad white publics under Colonel Wood’s management involved constructing northern blacks as undesirable consumers. At these concerts Greenfield consistently performed in halls in which blacks were restricted to a “colored gallery” if they weren’t excluded altogether. Wood was not the first nor the only architect of this policy. White community leaders in Buffalo were ambivalent about her relationship with the black community. Hiram E. Howard, president of the Buffalo Musical Association, who arranged Greenfield’s private concert before the Association and public concert at Townsend Hall, insisted that separate seats be assigned to black patrons. In early 1852, the black lecturer, William F. Johnson, who was Greenfield’s agent at the time, contributed to an expose in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* recounting Greenfield’s history of capitulation to such policies. Johnson reported that despite his pleas, and those of several prominent black church leaders of Buffalo, Greenfield “*did yield.*” Twenty-four people were “induced” by their “ardent love for music, and their deep interest for the singer” to “submit to the painful and insulting

proscription.” Johnson estimated that at least three hundred and fifty would have attended had the policy been otherwise.⁵⁶¹ As a result of this and other such intelligences, the black press shifted from celebrating Greenfield’s rising star to castigating her for submitting to racist management.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, as blacks tried to claim access to public amusements, especially associated with antislavery politics, the response was inconsistent, varying according to local politics, but occasionally violent. For example, while the Hutchinson Family Singers, who began singing for the antislavery movements in the 1840s, encouraged black patrons at their concerts, they encountered violent opposition in Philadelphia in 1847. Fearing a riot, the Philadelphia mayor ordered the proprietors to close Musical Fund Hall rather than permit blacks to attend the Hutchinsons’ concerts, and thereafter the policy of the hall forbid lessees to hold anti-slavery lecturers or to admit any black patrons.⁵⁶² These policies were presumably to prevent mob violence, but they likewise denied black Americans’ claims to middle-class gentility and leisure practices. When William C. Nell, Sarah Parker Remond and her sister Caroline Remond Putnam attempted to attend an opera performance of Henrietta Sontag at Boston’s Howard Athenaeum in May 1853, the manager stopped them from taking their seats in the family circle.⁵⁶³ Palmer insisted they leave or sit up in the gallery with the reporters. A police officer called to escort them out pushed Remond down the stairs, tearing her dress. While Remond succeeded in obtaining damages for the incident in Boston civil court, de facto segregation persisted in many of the new venues built for

⁵⁶¹ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 26 February 1852.

⁵⁶² Scott Gac, *Singing for Freedom: The Hutchinson Family Singers and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Antebellum Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 213-214.

⁵⁶³ *The Liberator*, 10 June 1853.

white middle-class amusement in America's growing cities. Greenfield's attempts in 1852 to secure a private box at Niblo's Gardens to hear Italian prima donna Marietta Alboni sing were refused by management. Personal acts of exclusion, intimidation, and violence as well as large-scale threats of mob violence barred black Americans from participating in forms of class performance that were shaping white middle-class identity.

Certainly, racial prejudice was at work here. But excluding blacks from the audience was more than an exercise in race phobia. If Greenfield drew interest from quarters sympathetic to antislavery—which had been a feature of her early Philadelphia career—the intermingling of black and white patrons could align Greenfield with abolitionism, prejudice other white audiences, and even draw violence. A item from the *Ohio Bugle* played up this tension for laughs. It mocked Greenfield's managers for touring in company with her and called out the pretensions and hypocrisies of her audiences asking, "Where are all the terrors of amalgamation, where the eggs, the tar and feathers, the rails and brickbats, that were formerly in requisition whenever aught was said of the colored man or women, in any connection of respectability?" The *Ohio Bugle* pointed out that if Greenfield's management was "engaged in making the wonderful powers of this lady available for the emancipation and elevation of her race, both she and they would be scouted by the heartless multitude who now applaud them." The orchestration of Greenfield's celebrity meant simultaneously multiplying and managing her appeal within a culture that avidly sought racial performances and images of blackness while requiring a clear racial distance between object and spectator. Or as the *Bugle* characterized it, with a strange sort of grudging admiration for Greenfield at the expense of her audiences, Greenfield "draws respectability, with its dogged, senseless

prejudice and hate and compels it to do her homage, despite her caste and color.”⁵⁶⁴

While allowing for considerable variation across different markets, local histories of race rioting and antislavery politics in the early 1850s, particularly following the Missouri Compromise and the Fugitive Slave law, meant that racial politics at work among the audience had the potential to be dangerously ambiguous, even within genres of entertainment anchored to respectability.

The Metropolitan Hall concert in New York makes as much clear. Removing blacks from the audience helped fix the racial context of Greenfield’s career within a white cultural orbit, defining black performance as a spectacle meant for whites alone. At her New York concert 31 March 1853, upwards of a hundred officers patrolled the street and galleries of the concert room. A concert by a black opera singer in the same hall where Jenny Lind sang drew threats of a riot. The police presence at Metropolitan Hall in 1853 suggests that even patronage of a black entertainer could be dangerous in cities where longstanding but embattled free black communities repeatedly became the targets of white mob violence. In 1853, racial mixture bore a longstanding association with abolitionism, and with mobbing that tore through northern and western cities in the 1830s and 1840s. Northern urban riots of the 1830s and 40s by working-class whites varied from seasonal conflagrations like the Christmas riots led by revelers in blackface targeting black Philadelphians, to drawn-out armed conflicts. In Cincinnati in the summer of 1841, racial tensions incited by unemployment and antislavery activism led to a pitched battle as blacks took arms to protect their neighborhood from white mobs

⁵⁶⁴ Quoted in *The Liberator*, 19 March 1852.

attempting to erase the free black presence from their city.⁵⁶⁵ White mobbers targeted black neighborhoods, churches, and schools, and sites in which blacks and whites mingled in the cause of antislavery, like lecture halls and boarding houses. Pennsylvania Hall, a new meeting site built by the Philadelphia Antislavery Society in 1838, was burned by rioters in May 1838 only days after it was built. Racial mixture became associated with antislavery politics, thus sites where blacks and whites met in leisure pursuits that could be aligned with antislavery were potentially dangerous.

Claims that Greenfield's concert represented a "triumph over all prejudices" were focused on the relationship between performer and audience alone.⁵⁶⁶ This discourse, which recurred repeatedly in white reviews of Greenfield's concerts, asked whether Greenfield's white audience could look past racial difference to appreciate true artistic merit, and whether Greenfield's artistic merit was enough to captivate a white audience. The locus of the burden shifted. At times it lay with the performer to prove her genius, and at times with the audience to willingly recognize it. But whether the triumph was the audience's, for recognizing Greenfield's ability, or Greenfield's, for winning their praise, this discourse displaced the performer, replacing the indulgent—sometimes grudgingly indulgent—white audience at the center of the story. The *Albany Register* insisted that Greenfield's "triumph" was "won" from a "discriminating auditory, not likely to be caught with chaff, and none too willing to suffer admiration to get the better of prejudice."⁵⁶⁷ This was not an assembly of abolitionists, the critic seemed to be implying. Thus Greenfield's ability and the audience's discernment of true talent were

⁵⁶⁵ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*; Nikki Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

⁵⁶⁶ *Daily Morning News* [Lowell], 7 February 1852 quoted in *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 17.

⁵⁶⁷ *Daily State Register* [Albany], 19 January 1852 quoted in *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 12.

constructed together.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's account of Greenfield in *Sunny Memories* exemplifies the politics of unquestioned white privilege bound up in claims that Greenfield's career represented a triumph over prejudice. In her acquaintance with Greenfield, Stowe readily stepped to the role that her celebrity as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life Among the Lowly* had created for her, as a friend and spokesperson for the "lowly" of her subtitle. Stowe was struck by the reception Greenfield received from British nobility like the Duchess of Sutherland, who conversed easily with her, "betraying by no inflection of voice, and nothing in air or manner, the great lady talking with the poor girl" and displayed no "disgust" with Greenfield's physical person.⁵⁶⁸ Stowe concluded from this that there "really is no natural prejudice against color in the human mind." She applauded the condescension of the English elites, without noticing, however, that this lack of prejudice in herself and her new acquaintances depended upon the maintenance of a clear racial hierarchy in white social spaces. Or rather, interracial condescension could safely occur in spaces from which black people were otherwise excluded.

The only white critics who called attention to segregation of Greenfield's concert halls were, like the *Ohio Bugle*, doing so to call out the pretensions and hypocrisies of her middle-class audiences. The black press, on the other hand, became the most vocal critic of the racial segregation of Greenfield's early concerts, but directed their criticism at Greenfield herself. The intensity of their anger was in proportion to the initial promise of a new kind of black celebrity. Douglass took great interest in Greenfield's arrival in western New York. Douglass wrote that he considered it "fortunate for our despised

⁵⁶⁸ Stowe, *Sunny Memories*, 319.

race, that one like Miss Greenfield should arise” and “dispute the palm with the fairest and most gifted in song, of the Anglo-Saxon race.”⁵⁶⁹ When Greenfield gave her first concert in Rochester in December, Douglass devoted a full column on the second page of his paper to his review of the concert; indeed, a “larger share of our editorial columns than is usual, in such notices.”⁵⁷⁰ In the months to come, Douglass and other black critics would hold up the Rochester concert as an example of the potential of black patronage, in contrast to Greenfield’s betrayal of her race by submitting to segregation at her concerts. In Rochester’s Corinthian hall, “no distinction of color was recognized in the seating.”⁵⁷¹ Though tickets sold for the lofty price of one dollar, an estimated five or six hundred persons were in attendance, “composed of all classes” but primarily representing the “two extremes of Rochester society,” the “upper ten” and a large segment of Rochester’s black community. Not only was the black community a lucrative but untapped market for refined amusements, Greenfield’s concert afforded the opportunity for its “wealthy, refined and influential” citizens to make their economic power and social presence felt.⁵⁷²

Ultimately, the white newspapers in Rochester were silent on the subject of Greenfield’s interracial audience, which suggests that there may have been more diversity in seating practices throughout Greenfield’s tour. For the most part, white critics retained a stubborn silence about the racial composition of the audience. Racial segregation did not factor into their analysis of racial prejudice, and indeed, would more readily have disrupted it, either by forcing an unwilling confrontation with racial prejudices that *were* at work, but more likely by suggesting that Greenfield’s audiences were composed of

⁵⁶⁹ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 11 December 1851.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 December 1851.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 26 February 1852.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 18 December 1851.

abolitionists and not “discriminating” whites with their natural prejudices intact. Ultimately, rather than problematize the prejudices that attached to racial difference, the question of whether Greenfield’s concerts had resulted in a “triumph over prejudice” retained the larger logic of white racial privilege to confer recognition upon a black subaltern. Critics who deemed Greenfield an overrated novelty and judged her voice untutored and unworthy of esteem rarely saw their own criticism as a triumph *of* prejudice. Ignoring black patrons of her concerts, on the other hand, can also be read as a stubborn refusal to acknowledge the market power and political interests of this vast public. The silences about Greenfield’s black audiences within the white press functioned similarly to the silences about female audiences of theater; treating them as a marginal public denied the ability of these groups to shape the culture of these commercial public spaces or the meanings and readings of the stage performances within them. These silences insisted that forms of public amusements were white male spaces—even at a historical moment in which the gender politics were shifting and racial politics likewise challenged, as the experience of Nell, Remond, and Parker at the Howard Athenaeum reveals.

In his account of Greenfield’s Buffalo concert, drawn from William F. Johnson’s testimony, James R. Johnson acknowledged the difficulty of “escap[ing]” the “contamination” of “pro-slavery philosophy.” But he ultimately upheld Greenfield’s individual obligation to her race to “do right in the sight of God” and resist submitting to the segregation of her concerts. Johnson suggested that Greenfield should have responded simply, “I will not consent to such an insulting proposal as that of seating the colored people by themselves; I love that people too well; and love the human race too

well, to lend my influence to sanction such a deed of darkness.” With this statement, Johnson imagined that she “would have done more for destroying wicked caste...than any Congress orator.”⁵⁷³ The high stakes that Johnson imagined for Greenfield’s career intensified his disappointment with her individual choices—if choices they were. Missing from Johnson’s critique is any sensitivity to the power imbalances Greenfield had to navigate to facilitate her career. Greenfield’s success operating within a world of white patronage to attain a celebrity before white publics came with a price that Johnson and others insisted Greenfield refuse to pay. Johnson’s criticism and suggestions attributed to Greenfield an independent agency and power that belied the complex power dynamics inherent in navigating a stage career, particularly for a woman.

Douglass showed far less empathy. In the same issue of the paper, on the page before Johnson’s letter a four-line item cuttingly reassessed Greenfield’s rising celebrity: “The conduct of the Black Swan (if not exaggerated) should be reprobated by the colored people. She should be called no longer the Black Swan, but the White Raven.”⁵⁷⁴

Douglass took the occasion of Greenfield’s concert at Metropolitan Hall to pour out his bitterness and frustration with the persistence of de facto racial segregation in Northern cities. “How mean, bitter, and malignant is *prejudice against color!*” he cried, pointing out the hypocrisy of prejudice that “can dine heartily on dishes prepared by colored hands” or “drink heartily from the glass filled by colored hands” and indeed, “can go to Metropolitan Hall, and listen with delight to the enchanting strains of a black woman!”⁵⁷⁵

Through these comparisons, Douglass placed Greenfield within a larger context of black

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 26 February 1852.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 8 April 1853.

servitude to whites, highlighting the power of white privilege to command black performance for white pleasure. But this insight into the politics and broader context of white privileged consumption and control over the black body and black music-making, in slavery and in the racial caste system of the free North, feel short of locating Greenfield's possible agency within the structural critique. Douglass's lament quickly turned upon Greenfield, and he attacked her integrity. The exclusion of blacks from Metropolitan Hall was an insult both to her and her race. Douglass could not imagine but that she felt "*deep humiliation* and depression while attempting to sing" before an audience that showed such "*palpable disrespect*."⁵⁷⁶

Douglass called upon Greenfield to play a different public role than she had hitherto proven able or willing to perform: "Oh! that she could be a *woman* as well as a songstress - brave and dauntless - resolved to fall or flourish with her outraged race - to scorn the mean propositions of the oppressor, and to refuse sternly to acquiesce in her own degradation." Greenfield was unwomanly. But it was not her career in public life that unsexed her; rather by pursuing her ambition to be a public singer at the expense of her duty to uplift and embody respect for her race she betrayed her femininity. Like Johnson, Douglass was unable to imagine the complexity of Greenfield's situation. Instead, he invoked his gender privilege to define her role within the uplift of the race. The kind of public role Douglass expected of a woman of color was not the role Greenfield had created for herself.

While these criticisms problematized Greenfield's choices as if she were an independent agent, William C. Nell and Martin Delany focused on Greenfield's

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

relationship with Col. Wood as an explanation for the terms of her career. William C. Nell believed that Greenfield was “under the complete control of that swell, Col. Wood.” When Greenfield refused audience to a correspondent for the *Salem Freeman* after her concert, Nell concluded that Greenfield “sees none without his permission.” Even Greenfield’s waiting maid was no doubt a “white woman of Wood’s selection.” Clearly, Greenfield was a woman “utterly destitute of self-respect.” Nell held up this evidence to Douglass’s glib assessment of Greenfield from the beginning of her career: “The sequel will determine whether she possesses that skill for matching a hundred Barnums, which you generously and hopefully give her credit for.”⁵⁷⁷ Delany informed Douglass that as proprietor of the Cincinnati Museum, Wood had excluded black patrons entirely. Delany was disgusted that this “*unprincipled hater of the black race*” was reaping a reward from Greenfield’s celebrity. He reported that Wood treated Greenfield’s private secretary and treasurer like a common servant, forcing him to relinquish his post, because he refused to have a “*colored man...about him, except as a servant.*” Wood’s racism extended to Greenfield’s person. Greenfield’s secretary had consistently witnessed Wood mocking her “*person and color,*” flattering her to her face, then making lascivious gestures behind her back.⁵⁷⁸ Delany was certain that Greenfield had no control over her money. Wood censored her correspondence and kept her from associating with people of color. And this was the man Greenfield had contracted to take her to Europe! It seems Greenfield had not proved the match for her “Barnum” that Douglass might have hoped.

Wood was no doubt a highly unpleasant character. Nevertheless the quality of these reports and the publicness of the expose are troubling. Douglass, Johnson, Nell,

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 18 March 1852.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 22 April 1853.

and Delany could not imagine what other motivations Greenfield might have had for contracting with Wood and performing under his management for over a year. Delany was incredulous that Greenfield had not chosen to travel to England with a “suitable colored gentleman and lady” instead of Wood. Greenfield was either a race traitor or completely under his control. Delany used the most powerful analogy available to him to describe this relationship: Greenfield “is the merest creature of a slave.”⁵⁷⁹ Actually, Greenfield dropped Wood prior to her tour of England, instead contracting with agent connected to P.T. Barnum, but whom Greenfield ultimately fired for breach of contract over payment of her salary. These details only emerged later in the promotional press materials published in Philadelphia in 1855, *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, which contrary to the narrative presented in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, reveals Greenfield’s careful negotiation of her relationship with white patrons in America, Hiram E. and Mrs. Howard, with the white antislavery circles she accessed in England through Harriet Beecher Stowe, and with her anonymous agent, whom she ultimately fired in Oct 1853 after a long summer of conflicts over money.⁵⁸⁰ Clearly, Greenfield was attempting to access antislavery networks and English peers like the Duchess of Sutherland while also contracting through her American agent.

Greenfield’s struggles in England suggest that her relationship with Wood was hardly as one-sided as Delany and Nell imagined, though power asymmetries of gender and race were undeniable. Furthermore, the power that male managers could wield over female performers was a concern that existed outside the fraught racial politics of

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ These details can be teased out of documents included in *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad* especially 40-42, 44.

Greenfield's relationship with Wood. Critics of Jenny Lind's concerts had also looked askance at her willingness to contract with Barnum, purveyor of museum curiosities, and questioned his sway over her career. During the 1850 tour, Barnum insisted on his own inconsequence compared with Lind, that her genius overshadowed his reputation for showmanship. Downplaying his own role as manufacturer of her celebrity shored up the authenticity of the phenomenon of Lindomania. Two decades later, Barnum would write smugly in his autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs*, about his consummate orchestration of Lindomania, attributing Lind's success in America to his managerial genius.⁵⁸¹ Even before Lind had landed on American shores, the question of Barnum and Lind's relationship, and relative control over the tour, was paramount in the press. The problem of Barnum's influence over Lind became a major subtext of criticism from elites who felt that Lind was pandering too entirely to popular taste by favoring ballad music over opera.

Vastly distant in celebrity and social and cultural power and capital, Lind and Greenfield's careers were equally caught up in negotiating the changing social and economic structures of show business. These changing structures, specifically, the greater public visibility and gendering of showmanship as a masculine enterprise concerned with female products, carried powerful cultural and political meanings, particularly when the relationship at hand was between a white man and a black woman. Black critics either inflated the power dynamics of the relationship to imagine Greenfield as powerless in Wood's grasp, which fit nicely into contemporary preoccupations with white male sexual privilege in the slave South, or demanded that Greenfield act outside

⁵⁸¹ Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum*.

of the existing structures of power and patronage that held her career in place. Greenfield proved adept at navigating white patronage structures to her advantage, a savvy that Douglass et. al. proved unable or unwilling to acknowledge, perhaps because of their own frustrations working with white leaders and intellectuals. Or they expected a black woman to seek patronage from men, and specifically from black men, perhaps even themselves, and not from Hiram E. Howard of the Buffalo Musical Association or Col. Wood.

Race, Gender and Patronage

When Elizabeth Greenfield arrived in London, she sought out Lord Shaftesbury and other prominent figures connected with through antislavery circles, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was currently in London capitalizing on her rising celebrity from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and socializing with English nobility like Shaftesbury. Through Stowe, Greenfield met Sir George Smart, the queen's musical director, and the Duchess of Sutherland, a leading figure in English antislavery circles. The Duchess of Sutherland hosted a private debut concert for Greenfield at Stafford house in London, with which Smart assisted. Greenfield, meanwhile, published a circular to introduce herself to the London public in anticipation of her debut.⁵⁸² Though Greenfield's acquaintance with Stowe was brief—Stowe left for a tour of Scotland soon after the concert—Greenfield's London career would remain linked with Stowe's celebrity, and Greenfield's rising celebrity drawn to the center of the transatlantic phenomenon of “Tom Cabin-ism” through their personal association.

⁵⁸² *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 45.

But like in America, the racial politics of black performance were situated within a larger context of unexamined white power and privilege. This is clearly demonstrated by the uncritical ease with which Stowe positioned herself as a magnanimous patron to Greenfield. Greenfield, no doubt, was familiar with the script and adept at the performance that would make her a worthy beneficiary of Stowe's largess. Stowe wrote about Greenfield in *Sunny Memories* (1854) and Greenfield featured the excerpts from Stowe prominently *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, which was the second of two booklets published to promote her career. The first, *A Brief Memoir of the Black Swan*, was printed in London in May 1853, shortly after Greenfield's arrival, and intended to introduce her to the British public. Both booklets featured long biographical sketches followed by pages of press excerpts recounting the extent and success of her tours, and testimonials and private correspondence from white patrons included to demonstrate Greenfield's respectability and deserving of renown. *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, published in Philadelphia in 1855, was far more extensive and included programs and press materials from her London concerts, which reintroduced Greenfield to American audiences as a transatlantic celebrity. Greenfield's own role in assembling these booklets and crafting their opening narratives is difficult to assess, though the wealth of personal detail about her early history is a compelling argument in favor of her involvement. The press excerpts aimed for exhaustiveness at the expense of a wholly glowing assessment of her concerts. The promotional booklets contain some of the uglier specimens of dismissal and racist burlesque but absent are the cutting critiques of Greenfield from the black press. Including the former facilitated the larger narrative of obstacles and triumphs, illustrating what Frank Webb referred to as the "ramparts of

prejudice.” But perhaps Greenfield had taken some of Douglass’s critiques to heart, and at least did not want to open old wounds in her promotional literature while she was reconnecting with her Philadelphia networks and cultivating new relationships with Northern free black communities.

But including reviews exclusively from white critics, positive and negative, laudatory and dismissive, also suggests that Greenfield may have been envisioning a predominantly white public, and thus presented her career as a creation of a white world of patronage and criticism. Both of Greenfield’s promotional texts favored narratives of white patronage, but obscured Greenfield’s connections with the black community. They presented Greenfield’s gradual moves into public life through a series of key relationships with white women, effectively marking white patronage as a normative condition of black ambition and achievement, but more specifically, white women as suitable patrons of black women. The inclusions of Stowe’s account of Greenfield from *Sunny Memories* fit nicely in with this framework, while also helping to bolster Greenfield’s celebrity in America through Stowe. Ultimately, the narratives featured both in *A Brief Memoir* and *Black Swan at Home and Abroad* obscured Greenfield’s savvy appealing to and working within white social and cultural networks. Within these texts, Greenfield appears less as an agent of her career than as the deserving object of white social elites and cultural authorities who recognized her remarkable vocal gifts and encouraged her.

Early in her career, Greenfield also generated interest because of her history, which featured prominently in her solicitation of a public. “Her story itself is a

romance,” one American newspaper intoned.⁵⁸³ Greenfield’s biography shaped the expectations brought to her performance, and contributed to her currency as a deserving subaltern. The narrative of economic necessity was a prominent feature in the careers of other women performers, from Fanny Kemble to Anna Mowatt, though worked somewhat differently in Greenfield’s case. Unlike Kemble and Mowatt, who were accomplished ladies forced into public life by circumstances, Greenfield made a bid for public life to *facilitate* her pursuit of artistic accomplishments. Greenfield was going to use the money from her concerts to support her musical education. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reported that all of the “proceeds” from her Rochester concert in December 1851 “are to be wholly appropriated to the completion of her musical education in Paris, under the world-famed *Garcia*.”⁵⁸⁴

The biographical sketches published in England and Philadelphia embroidered these basic features of her biography, developing the contrast between her humble origins and her musical gifts and highlighting the importance of white patrons while downplaying Greenfield’s agency, and thus following patterns that persisted in accounts of female stage celebrities. The contrast between these later texts and the first biographical sketches published about Greenfield in 1851 provide some insight into her own strategies to appeal to her publics. One of the first and most extensive sketches, printed in the *Buffalo Express* to announce her October 1851 debut and reprinted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, described her musical achievements as a combination of perseverance and patronage, in that order. As a young woman working in “service” in Philadelphia, Greenfield demonstrated “more than ordinary musical faculties” that her

⁵⁸³ From *Taunton Daily Gazette*, 12 February 1852 in *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 19.

⁵⁸⁴ *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 11 December 1851.

auditors judged “susceptible of cultivation and perfection.”⁵⁸⁵ And so they encouraged her to study music. The narrative is worth quoting at length. “Her tastes coincided with the suggestion, but she lacked two important aids in carrying out such a purpose - confidence in herself and the means of engaging a competent tutor. She finally resolved to study music, serving in the double capacity of pupil and tutor. Having obtained a guitar, with a limited assortment of music, she set out on her career towards Fame's temple. Notwithstanding her many impediments and embarrassments, she soon astonished her friends with her progress.”⁵⁸⁶ A sketch written for *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in December, in anticipation of her Rochester concert, strikingly similar, describes Greenfield as an individual genius, who “by her own energy, and un-assisted” made herself “mistress” of guitar, harp, and piano, and through “praiseworthy perseverance...attained great proficiency” as a singer.⁵⁸⁷

These early sketches assigned Greenfield an agency and degree of accomplishment that later puffing would work more elaborately to conceal and reframe. The *Buffalo Express* reported that after four years study without a tutor, Greenfield “now reads the most difficult music, with a readiness and precision that would do credit to a finished master, and possesses a power and cultivation of voice that surprises and confounds the listener.” The *Express* predicted that with the “cultivation and experience of the fair Swede, or Madlle. Parodi, [the Black Swan] will rank favorably with those popular singers who have carried the nation into captivity by their rare musical

⁵⁸⁵ Though not all papers described her as a former slave—the earliest biographical sketches like this one describe her as having been a servant—this early history became more prominent at various points in her career, particularly after she had met Stowe in London and found success aligning herself with antislavery circles there.

⁵⁸⁶ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 23 October 1851.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 December 1851.

abilities.”⁵⁸⁸ Some versions of this statement appeared repeatedly in puffing and reviews. It established Greenfield’s claims to financial support from her audience, and connected her to the sphere of artistry to which she aspired, but—critics felt—had yet to reach. In stark contrast to other white singers, Greenfield’s claims to a public was consistently in terms of her aspiration *to become* an accomplished musician, a height that she had yet to reach.

Later in Greenfield’s career, as she worked to maintain and advance her celebrity, the narrative of solitary perseverance was replaced by a new set of narratives of patronage by white women. These narratives effectively masked Greenfield’s active pursuit of a stage career while allowing her some ownership of her artistry. The importance of women to these narratives is unexpected and offers an intriguing counterpoint to the sexual politics of patronage that lay behind accounts of Lind and Barnum or Fanny Elsser and her manager Henry Wickoff. Narratives of patronage were critical to the careers of female celebrities, helping to shield while also facilitating women’s agency in becoming public figures. But the representative narratives of patronage through which white female celebrity was constructed and legitimated—or problematized—shifted over the century. In the 1830s, father-daughter combinations like actors Charles and Fanny Kemble or George and Mary Vandenhoff and husband and wife combinations like the Seguins (opera singers) dominated representations of deserving female celebrity. This gradually gave way to a new relationship of male manager and female performer, which dominated narratives of female celebrity by the second half of the century. The family as a site for the reproduction and management of performers was

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 23 October 1851.

replaced by new explicitly commercial relationships.⁵⁸⁹

Jenny Lind's career exemplifies a mid-century shift towards the primacy of the male manager and female performer relationship. Barnum had already played a major role in constructing showmanship as a masculine enterprise.⁵⁹⁰ But the sexual politics of these new relationships, between male managers and female performers who were unmarried or unrelated, had to be constructed in new ways that could be easily deployed against women. Legitimate patronage was essential for women attempting to build a public career. Or rather, the right forms of patronage could effectively legitimize a woman's claims to a public.

A Brief Memoir (1853) introduced two new characters into Greenfield's early history, Miss Price, a young white lady who served as her tutor, and Mrs. General Potter, who helped arrange Greenfield's introductions in Buffalo. Both women prefigured Greenfield's relationship with her most famous white patron, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and together these three figures combined to overshadow the more problematic patron in Greenfield's career, Col. Wood. In the 1851 newspaper sketches, Greenfield was a remarkable autodidact. But in *A Brief Memoir*, Greenfield's abilities and career became the collective product of the white community on which she depends for inspiration, encouragement, instruction and introduction. These narratives of patronage drive the story and obscure origin of Greenfield's desire to become a concert artist. *A Brief*

⁵⁸⁹ Interestingly, and perhaps because of this shift, the discourse of the family dynasty retained a powerful hold on theater history, particularly as it was constructed self-consciously by critics from the 1850s onward. The status and history of old theatrical families was frequently held up as a critique of the commercialization and demoralization of the post-Civil War theater industry.

⁵⁹⁰ Barnum began constructing his own celebrity and legacy with his first memoir published in 1855, *The Life of P.T. Barnum, written by himself* (1855; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). On Barnum's self-fashioning see Cook, *The Colossal P. T. Barnum Reader*; as well as Adams, *E. Pluribus Barnum*; Buckley, "To The Opera House"; Harris, *Humbug*.

Memoir (1853) explained that though Greenfield had attained some local renown for her “wonderful vocal power,” her desire for some further instruction was frustrated by prejudice. A Professor of music refused to “include her among his pupils” because the “admission of a coloured pupil would have jeopardized his success.” Thrown back upon “her own genius,” Greenfield took up study of the guitar, “on which, by ceaseless perseverance and indomitable energy, she overcame immense difficulties.”⁵⁹¹

Fortunately for Greenfield, one of Mrs. Halliday Greenfield’s neighbors was a physician, a “most kind and enlightened man” untouched by “prejudices against race and color.” According to the *Memoir*, his daughter, Miss Price, was curious to hear Greenfield sing and invited her to the house. Both memoirs identified this as a “turning-point” of Greenfield’s career and constructed a scene which dramatized a larger racial politics of patronage and performance from within the feminized domestic space of the parlor.⁵⁹² The importance of white female-dominated domestic spaces to Greenfield’s early career formed a recurring motif in *A Brief Memoir* and *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*. *A Brief Memoir* described Greenfield as transfixed by Miss Price’s performance on the piano and overcome by an intense feeling of interracial desire. Greenfield’s “heart beat high and her pulses were quickened” as she watched “with intense pleasure the skill of the white and fairy-fingered young lady, now her patroness.” In contrast to Price’s easy mastery of this domestic performance, Greenfield was both a hesitant pupil and a shy performer. But with the “generous encouragement of her gentle friend” her “difficulty vanished.”⁵⁹³ Greenfield’s singing drew attention from the household, who

⁵⁹¹ *A Brief Memoir*, 5.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

surprised and embarrassed her with their applause. This final image of Price's servants clustered around the parlor door dramatized Greenfield's entry into a new sphere. A natural musician, but not a natural performer, Greenfield learned through the coaxing and encouragement of those who recognized and value her talent.

Just as reviews of Greenfield's concerts celebrated the "triumph over prejudices" at work in the concert hall, effectively displacing the performer and replacing the indulgent white audience at the center of the story, the story of Miss Price did similar work within Greenfield's biographical narrative. This dynamic, in which the central figure of a text is displaced, narratively, by supporting actors, was characteristic of the larger genre of narratives and performances of slavery and freedom. These narratives and performances cultivated sympathy from white audiences through forms of racial displacement, like the mock slave auction, or pairing of a white mentor with a subaltern black subject, exemplified by Little Eva and Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Scholars have argued that these exercises in sympathy displaced the actual individual experience or subjectivity of the enslaved, as readers and onlookers re-imagined themselves in their place. If this was one of the larger modes of antislavery politics and propaganda in the antebellum period, it was most effective when deployed around the light-skinned mixed-race woman, who produced a chilling spectacle of whiteness—white womanhood—on the auction block, intensifying the horrible and thrilling displacement of sympathy.⁵⁹⁴

In the mid- to late-eighteenth century, black poet Phillis Wheatley accessed

⁵⁹⁴ Nathans, *A Spectacle of Suffering*; Saidiya Haartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Stupp, "Slavery and the Theatre of History."

networks of white slaveowning women who commissioned and circulated Wheatley's poems. Scholar Joanna Brooks argues that Wheatley developed a renown by trafficking in sentimentalism for white women, drawing on her own experiences of death, displacement from family, and bondage to compose funeral elegies for her patrons. While her cultivation of these networks enabled Wheatley to raise subscriptions and obtain testimonials for her first book of poetry, which she published in London in 1783, the manuscript of Wheatley's second book of poems, written after emancipation, did not survive nor did she succeed in raising the necessary funds for its publication. Clearly, these networks were highly unreliable, and the same women who turned to Wheatley to capture their grief in poetry actively turned away from Wheatley a decade later. Brooks's interpretation of Wheatley's navigation of these networks pushes back against the image that has come to dominate Wheatley scholarship, of a panel of Boston's white male civic leaders examining Wheatley to determine whether she could in fact be the author of her poems. Instead, Brooks's narrative exposes racial asymmetries that belie any fantasy of sisterhood, while likewise centering the narrative of Wheatley's career on the poet herself, emphasizing her navigation of these patronage systems to secure financial and social capital.

In Greenfield's narrative of her life, this pairing of the genteel and sympathetic white woman and the deserving black subaltern was crucial for generating a broader sympathetic patronage and eliciting interest in Greenfield beyond her vocal accomplishments. Like Wheatley, Greenfield trafficked in narratives that would have appealed to the sentiments and sympathies of white publics with a wide range of attitudes towards antislavery and questions of racial "capacity." These kinds of narratives also

encouraged white audiences to imagine themselves as patrons of this deserving aspirant—at a remove. In Greenfield’s account, Price’s kind indulgence enabled Greenfield to realize her potential as a performer. The source and substance of Greenfield’s motivations are blurred in juxtaposition to Miss Price’s magnanimity. Meanwhile, absent from these narratives is any hint of the importance of Philadelphia’s black community to her early career. Greenfield first attempted to give a series of concerts in Baltimore in 1849 with William Appo, and traveled to Buffalo in October 1851 with black lecturer William F. Johnson as her agent. With the omissions of these details from the text, Greenfield appeared to be the only person of color inhabiting the spaces of the parlor, in which she studied, and the concert hall. The vital connections she maintained with Philadelphia’s black community throughout her life, and that continued to facilitate her career in the 1850s and 60s, were rendered invisible in the 1853 and 1855 narratives in part to facilitate her embrace by the white publics on which her concert career depended. But omitting these figures from her story may also have allowed Greenfield to avoid confronting the controversies that arose almost from the start of her concert career about what Frederick Douglass called her “proslavery management” and capitulation to policies of racial segregation and exclusion at her concerts.

Instead, *A Brief Memoir* and *Black Swan at Home and Abroad* introduced a second anecdote and patron into Greenfield’s history, Mrs. General Potter, who first heard Greenfield sing aboard a steamer crossing Lake Seneca. On that fateful autumn voyage, the voice of the singer “came sweetly stealing upon the sense of the passengers,” drawing the particular notice of the ladies. Mrs. General Potter felt that the “power and

sweetness of her voice deserved attention, urged her to sing again.”⁵⁹⁵ An impromptu concert commenced. By the close of the voyage Greenfield found herself with a new “friend and patroness” who encouraged the singer to pursue a musical career “as her means of fame and fortune, and of doing much good to others—especially her benighted race.”⁵⁹⁶ This dramatic account of Greenfield’s discovery by Mrs. General Potter followed the same script that newspaper critics used to describe the effect of Greenfield’s concerts, and which became the main script for Greenfield’s career: a narrative of the natural artist discovered by a discerning white listener who overcomes prejudice to appreciate genius.

This account also mirrored what would have been the very familiar narrative of the discovery of Jenny Lind. In the narrative first popularized by Bremer, Lind was discovered as a child by an actress who heard her singing out of a window and, struck by promise in her remarkable voice, determines to train the child for the opera.⁵⁹⁷ For both Lind and Greenfield, the narrative of discovery helped manage the troubling problem of ambition in the pursuit of a stage career, though in Greenfield’s case, the basic chain of events was folded into a naturalized racial hierarchy in which Greenfield sings for white people listen who are amazed, encourage the singer, and then offer to take her under their wing and nurture her talent by providing her with access to both appropriate instruction and appropriate audiences.

And according to *A Brief Memoir*, Mrs. Potter did precisely that. After learning

⁵⁹⁵ *Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 5. The account in *A Brief Memoir* is less dramatized though essentially the same: Greenfield “exhibited a little over vocal abilities,” exciting the interest of the ladies and especially of Mrs. General Potter. *A Brief Memoir*, 6

⁵⁹⁶ *A Brief Memoir*, 6.

⁵⁹⁷ The basic features for this narrative came from Fredericka Bremer’s story of “Jenny Lind” and can also be found in George Foster, *Memoir of Jenny Lind* (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1850).

of Greenfield's history, Potter invited Greenfield to her Buffalo mansion where she held a private "soiree" to which the "elite of the town" were invited. The private entertainment proved a success, and Greenfield was next invited by the gentlemen of Buffalo, via a card published in the city papers, to give a series of concerts for the public. Gendered spheres of influence remained intact in advancing a woman to a public stage career. But while these texts constructed Potter's influence as apart from the world of the market and public opinion created in the press, they underscored how the world of white women's influence remained essential to establishing Greenfield's claims to respectability and ability to address a genteel public. Anna Mowatt's career followed a similar trajectory, as would Mary Webb's. For women attempting to move from domestic life into public careers, particularly women of color, the parlor and the world of female-dominated sociability proved crucial to establishing the legitimacy of the performance and testing its appeal with genteel white audiences. The influence of Price, Potter, and Stowe on Greenfield's career was framed in terms of patronage based upon established and unquestioned social and racial hierarchies. But in becoming patrons to Greenfield, these women were able to wield greater cultural and economic influence and advance their own social and cultural capital.

Focusing on relationships with women also elided the sexual politics that remained caught up in public representations of white male managers and white female performers, which proved especially problematic because of the sexualization of interracial spaces and alliances. For black women seeking a position in public life, claims to gentility risked being continually undermined by the association of black women with hyper-sexuality and sexual availability. While light-skinned women

embodied interracial sex, and posed a threat and a thrill in their very desirability—a thrill upon which Beecher’s auctions played—dark-skinned women embodied a deviant sexual other, that was taken up in the caricatures of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface drag performances and comic songs in minstrel shows portrayed black women as both emasculating and sexually rapacious and insatiable.⁵⁹⁸ Constructions of black women as always potentially the targets of white male lust, and at the very least, victims of enslavement, had figured prominently in representations of Greenfield’s relationship with Wood. In contrast, the narratives of white patronesses placed Greenfield within a feminized sphere of antislavery activism. Removed from an interracial sexual politics and placed in a feminized sphere of influence, Greenfield could now play upon the politics of sympathy that continued to be a powerful force within white reform circles.

Coda

Greenfield’s only allusion to the controversies her concert policies produced appeared in her own letter, reprinted in *A Brief Memoir of the Black Swan* that demonstrates that while she was sympathetic to the desire of black publics to hear her performance, her professional priorities lay with the broader markets in which she hoped to appeal. In March 1853, New York’s black pastors wrote asking Greenfield to repeat her a concert at the Broadway Tabernacle prior to her departure for England. Greenfield responded by expressing her “regret” that the “coloured people of this city” were “debarred from attending the concert” at Metropolitan Hall. And yet, she explained, “it was expressly stated in the agreement for the use of the hall, that such should be the

⁵⁹⁸ Lott, *Love and Theft*.

case.” But Greenfield would be glad to sing “for the benefit of any charity that will elevate the condition of my coloured brethren.”⁵⁹⁹

When she returned from England, Greenfield worked more closely with the black community, performing for a range of charities and benefit events, and offering more concerts for black publics. Greenfield succeeded in shifting the trajectory of her career, though she continued to face criticisms from black community leaders when she performed before segregated audiences or in venues from which blacks were excluded. But not all observers were wholly unsympathetic to Greenfield’s complex position as a rising concert artist called upon to serve as a model and champion of her race. In 1854, the black journalist Mary Shadd Cary, who published the *Provincial Journal* from the free black ex-patriot community in Toronto, offered a sharp rebuttal to charges in the *Providence Daily Journal* that Greenfield was “derelict in her duty” by “not associating with colored people.” Cary scoffed, “About what Miss Greenfield does, or what she does not, we know but little; neither do we know whether she professes to be a reformer or not; nor are we going to presume that she does, merely because she has a black skin and may have been a slave; for it is well known that many colored persons in the slave countries hold slaves after having themselves been considered as ‘goods and chattels’.”⁶⁰⁰ Though hardly a ringing defense of Greenfield’s politics, Cary at least exposed the racial essentialism in accusations that Greenfield was a race traitor. In her reference to black slaveholders, Cary came closer than many of her contemporaries to pointing out the class divisions within black society, and unquestioned privilege of class—and as

⁵⁹⁹ *A Brief Memoir*, 15.

⁶⁰⁰ *Provincial Freeman*, 18 November 1854. On Mary Shadd Cary see Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

Greenfield's career demonstrates—of gender bound up in the project and the promise of racial uplift.

Chapter 6

From Star Actress to Manageress:

Women's Entrepreneurship in the Mid-Century Theater

On 23 January 1859, the Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch* published the following “card to the public” from Mrs. D. P. Bowers, late manager of the Walnut Street Theatre. Bowers expressed her gratitude to her public for their support before laying out her claims against her persecutors who had driven her from management after a season and a half. Bowers presented these by way of a series of warnings to “any sister-artist [who] cherishes aspirations similar to those that tempted me.” “She will find herself,” Bowers explained, “at the termination of her adventures, with health impaired by toil and care. She will discover that the artist who both acts and manages is the hardest-working and worst paid member of the whole company.” She will find “masks of selfishness” behind “pretences of friendship.” Her efforts to “thwart[s] the sinister purposes of designing people” would make her a target of the “anonymous letter-writer and covert slanderer” who will “assail her with insults which she is powerless to resent.” In short: “Calumnies, as despicable as their origin is low, will creep around her fair fame, to sting and wound, if they cannot destroy.” Only the most resilient woman would be able to “break through the coils that are crushing out all her faith in human character,” and she instead will “find herself valuing, with an estimate before unknown, the comfort peace and security that lie in paths less pretentious and prominent.” Bowers had come to value the path “less

pretentious and prominent” only because slander and harassment revealed the price of these ambitions—particularly for a woman.⁶⁰¹

In case Bowers’s statement had left any room for misinterpretation, the *Sunday Dispatch* published an additional testimonial “from the pen of a gentleman” outlining the facts and the cause of the recent campaign against Bowers’s management. This “gentleman” insisted that the campaign was nothing less than a “war upon a woman,” aided and abetted by troops on the inside as well as the outside.⁶⁰² The *New York Clipper*, a sporting and theatrical trade paper, attributed some of the challenges this “deserving” lady had faced to the conduct of the company, in which “everybody fancied himself ‘the biggest ram in the pen’ ” and thus “would not work together in harness.” If the company was unmanageable, so was Bowers unable to manage them, in part because she lacked the proper male support. The *Clipper* regretted that Bowers “had not nerve enough to assert her independence, and stand up for her rights, alone and unprotected as she seems to have been.” As Bowers navigated the layered politics of management, particularly around the question of her authority to handle subordinates and negotiate with her stockholders, the perception of the widowed Bowers as “alone and unprotected” facilitated the campaign against her.⁶⁰³ While Bowers drew on the support of her sister Sarah Crocker Conway and brother-in-law Frederick Conway, who joined the company shortly after Bowers assumed the lessee and management of the Walnut St. Theater in December 1857, Bowers was particularly vulnerable not simply as a woman, but as a woman without the immediate protection of a husband or father who would back up her

⁶⁰¹ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 23 January 1859.

⁶⁰² Ibid.

⁶⁰³ *New York Clipper*, 29 January 1859.

authority, and likewise might have been perceived as the true source of her authority.

The Philadelphia public knew Bowers's personal history, of her marriage at the age of seventeen to fellow Philadelphia stock actor David Bowers and widowhood a decade later. David Bowers died in June 1857 of a heart attack. Elizabeth Bowers resumed stock work in September to support herself and her three young children. When the Walnut became available in December, Bowers jumped at the opportunity to run her own theater and company, perhaps emulating her colleague Laura Keene, who was managing Laura Keene's Varieties in New York. Bowers's longstanding reputation as a "favorite" with the Philadelphia public facilitated her appeal as a manager.⁶⁰⁴

But Bowers and Keene were not alone in aspiring to run their own theaters. In the 1850s, an expanding cohort of actresses sought management opportunities both in emerging and established markets, following the early forays of Charlotte Cushman and Mary Maywood in Philadelphia in 1842. Keene's first managerial venture, in Baltimore in 1853, coincided with Catherine Sinclair's opening of the Metropolitan Theatre in San Francisco. In the early 1850s, California proved a booming market for stage performers and managers, men and women alike. While Bowers was opening the Walnut in Philadelphia, in December 1857, Miss Kimberly, an elocutionist turned actress, took the lease of the Pittsburgh Theatre for a season. Julia Bennett Barrow joined her husband Jacob Barrow and managed the Howard Athenaeum in the summer of 1857 and spring of 1858. In 1864, Julia Barrow secured the lease of the Tremont Theatre, which she ran with the support of her husband; her name appears in the ledger of certificates filed with the city of Boston as part of the records of "Married Women in Business in the City of

⁶⁰⁴ *New York Herald*, 13 December 1857.

Boston.”⁶⁰⁵ With the exception of Keene, most of these tenures lasted no more than a season or two, at least in part because of the financial challenges intrinsic to management. The Howard Athenaeum, for example, changed hands several times in the five years following the Barrows’ management.⁶⁰⁶

The press singled out women in management with the label “manageress.” Thus their womanhood was always part of the discussion of their merits as managers. Actress-managers as well as their champions and critics both invoked and attempted to displace the question of gender difference in assessment of these careers. Both Bowers and Keene publicly invoked their femininity to assert their claims to authority, establish their professional competence, and protest unjust criticism and persecutions. They likewise called upon gendered conceptions of honor to protect themselves and protest against ill treatment. But Bowers’s January “card to the public” also indicates that women in positions of authority over men as managers had to struggle against a range of overt and covert tests of their authority and competence, the gendered origins of which can be difficult to tease out. The womanhood of the “manageress” was an omnipresent but ambivalent signifier, the inconsistent deployment of which reveals the double edge of

⁶⁰⁵ Married Women Doing Business Certificates, Vol.1, Boston City Archives.

⁶⁰⁶ The most comprehensive source for the history of women theater managers is Jane Kathleen Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994). The majority of work on actress managers in the nineteenth century follows a biographical mode and has failed to adequately place these women’s careers in dialogue with each other or a larger context of theater management more generally. Actress managers are discussed in Faye Dudden, *Women in American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Vera Mowry Roberts, “‘Lady Managers’ in Nineteenth-Century American Theatre,” in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, edited by Ron Engle and Tice Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30-46; Helen Deutsch, “Laura Keene’s Theatre Management: Profile of a Profession in Transition” (Ph.D. dissertation, Tufts University, 1992); Edna Hammer Cooley, “Women in American Theatre, 1850-1870: A Study in Professional Equity” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1986); Kathleen Morgan, “Of Stars and Standards: Actress-Managers of Philadelphia and New York, 1855-80” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1989); Claudia Johnson, *American Actress: Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984).

gender difference, authority, and public roles for women in mid-nineteenth-century America.

Were the challenges that Bowers, Keene, and other actress managers of the 1850s faced only about gender? Running a theater was challenging work for men and women alike. As other scholars have noted, women assuming theater management should not surprise us given that the theater industry was structured around a gendered division of labor in which women enjoyed a greater degree of wage parity than in most other available professions, even out-earned their male counterparts at the top, and likewise had significant bargaining power over the rate and allocation of their labor, particularly as they moved up the professional ladder.⁶⁰⁷ But the step from star actress to manager was as steep in some respects as it was shallow in others. Actress-managers struggled to navigate conflicts and tensions unique to the particular challenge that they posed as women who entered a position within the professional hierarchy that was almost exclusively occupied by men. It is far too tempting, when explaining the relatively short-lived managerial careers of most actress-managers, to attribute failures to gender. But gender cannot be removed from the equation— there is no question that actress-managers faced significant challenges *as women*.

Women in management challenged aspects of the theater hierarchy differently than other kinds of female authority and power. Theaters were hierarchical workshops in which managers wrangled with laborers over the allocation of their labor, and also engaged in an array of conflicts with critics, competing managers, intractable

⁶⁰⁷ Cooley, “Women in American Theatre, 1850-1870.” Though Cooley deals with actress managers in the context of a broader economic and labor history of women in the acting profession, she concludes that the acting profession provided women with varied careers and unprecedented opportunities for economic and professional autonomy.

stockholders, and those demanding specialists, touring stars. However, a stock or touring star actress in disputation with a manager was a different challenge to the implicit gender hierarchy of theatrical management than a woman in charge of every man and woman under her, who also placed demands upon her stockholders and wrangled with critics for their notice and acclaim. As the label “manageress” suggests, the most common strategy for managing the implicit challenge of this gender inversion took the form of condescension and belittling, modes of behavior that constructed the “manageress” as not really in charge, not really competent, requiring the advice of outside parties, leaning heavily upon the true authority of her leading actors, business manager or financial backers, and as figurehead rather than a “real” manager of the day-to-day.

The managerial careers of actresses were frequently embattled and, like the vast majority of managerial ventures, short-lived. And yet, the history of women in theater management, which reached a historic peak in the late-1850s, provides indisputable evidence of the unique capacity of the expanding entertainment industry to support new forms of female entrepreneurship and social, cultural, and economic authority. The careers of actress-managers also tell us about larger patterns and professional realities for women in theater across the full professional hierarchy, and about the capacity of the shifting theater industry to support different professional models and career trajectories for women. In the 1860s and 70s, women in theater took advantage of and pioneered shifts in the industry to facilitate their own professional autonomy, particularly by buying copyright in plays and in some cases managing touring companies instead of attempting to secure theater leases. Far more women enjoyed success and acclaim in the 1860s and 70s as headliners and managers of touring companies, in comparison to the women who

secured theater leases and managed theaters from the 1850s onwards, though the most enduring actress-managers of the nineteenth century established theaters in the wake of Laura Keene's success—and Elizabeth Bowers's failure. In 1862, Mrs. John Drew took the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia, which she managed for over thirty years, a rare feat for any manager, particularly in such a competitive market. Sarah Crocker Conway and Frederick Conway established themselves at the head of the new Park Theatre in Brooklyn in 1864, and later built and managed the new Brooklyn Theatre. Together the Conways created a market for theater in Brooklyn's expanding middle class communities, where they managed together for a decade until their deaths. In 1863, Keene left theater management to run her own touring company, and Bowers followed suit after a stint as a touring star.

The changing locus of women's starring and managerial careers thus provides a unique perspective on the changing structure of the industry over the second half of the century. In the 1860s and 70s, as the touring company became an increasingly popular and viable model for organizing and selling theatrical and musical entertainment, more actresses and actors sought opportunities to headline and even run their own touring companies. The advent of the touring company clearly made it more possible for women to develop both starring and managerial careers. Forms of theatrical entrepreneurship for women remained linked to starring. With one known exception, all of the women in theatrical management in the 1850s transitioned from positions as lead actresses. With the advent of dramatic copyright and increase in touring companies, actresses could also obtain capital in new plays to facilitate touring careers, and contract with or even assemble their own company. Assembling a touring company and leasing a theater both

required capital outlay. In contrast to theater lessees, managers of touring companies had much more flexibility determining the model and structure of their outfit, nor were they tied to the economics and politics of a particular market. Over the second half of the century, touring companies replaced resident stock companies in all but the largest metropolitan areas. While the exact timing, scale, and causes of this shift continue to be debated by theater historians, few have emphasized the implications of dramatic copyright law for changes in starring, touring, and management.⁶⁰⁸ The Dramatic Copyright Law of 1856 and Copyright Act of 1870 made it possible for stage performers and managers to obtain copyright to a dramatic work and retain—or sell—the rights of publications and performance. The nature of these dramatic property rights were worked out in the two decades following the passage of the 1856 law, in part because of performers and managers like Miss Kimberly and Laura Keene, and playwrights like Dion Boucicault explored the ramifications of this law, particularly for professional autonomy, celebrity, and of course, wealth.

Following women's trajectories across a continuum from actress to manager to touring star and headliner of a touring company reveals the variety of models for organizing and distributing stage entertainment in the 1860s and 70s, which facilitated

⁶⁰⁸ The standard narrative, which draws on Arthur Bernheim's 1832 study *The Business of Theatre* (New York: Actor's Equity Association, 1932) can be found in Douglass McDermott, "Structure and Management in the American Theatre from the Beginning to 1870" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870*, Vol. 1, edited by Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182-215; John Frick, "A Changing Theatre: New York and Beyond" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, 1870- 1845*, Vol. 2, edited by Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196-232; Mona Brooks, "The Development of American Theatre Management Practices between 1830 and 1896" (Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Technical University, 1981); Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968); and complicating this narrative is Rosemarie Bank, "A Reconsideration of the Death of Nineteenth-Century American Repertory Companies and the Rise of the Combination," *Essays in Theatre* 5 (November 1986): 61-75; and Peter A. Davis, "From Stock to Combination: The Panic of 1873 and Its Effects on the American Theatre Industry," *Theatre History Studies* 8 (1988): 1-9.

professional collaborations between aspiring star actresses and actress-managers, and the male playwrights, managers, and agents who are all too frequently treated in professional genealogies and histories as the main producers and innovators of the theater industry. Regardless of the actual structural authority that actresses did or did not wield in “their” touring companies, by purchasing plays and linking their celebrity with a particular role, performers like Miss Kimberly, Mrs. Bowers, and Fanny Davenport acquired a new form of professional capital that they successfully deployed to market themselves across an expanding and diversifying national industry.

“Only A Woman”: Lady Managers of the 1850s

In her address for the reopening of the newly refurbished Walnut Street Theatre in August 1858, Elizabeth Bowers reflected upon her success the previous season even amidst the “then extra-ordinary monetary crisis.” Bowers honored the custom of these occasions by framing her success with a declaration of her “eternal gratitude to the Philadelphia public” for their “liberal patronage.” But Bowers was also clear about the transformation that she had achieved at the Walnut. For the forthcoming season she promised to “unite on these boards the best company of artists in every department,” to produce a season of “Novelty” that would showcase the talents of her company, gratify public tastes, and support the “pecuniary interests” of the theater. No demur here, or performance of humility: “I have absolute confidence that my flag will brave successfully

‘the battle and the breeze’ of professional competition.”⁶⁰⁹

The renovations that had been completed over the summer were considerable and revealed Bowers’s ambitious vision for her theater. The critic for the *Dispatch* admitted his astonishment. In addition to a thorough repainting—in white with gold trim that “produc[ed] an airy and cheerful effect”—Bowers ordered the first and second tiers of boxes extended forward and lowered to improve the view of the stage, the partitions between the boxes eliminated, and the “agonizing antiquities” that passed for seats replaced by numbered chairs with arms and cushioned backs.⁶¹⁰ Bowers had started introducing these changes to the seating the winter before when she first took the theater. Bills for the December opening advertised “orchestral seats, some 200 of which have been Re-modeled and Re-cushioned for Ladies.”⁶¹¹ The linguistic transformation of “pit” into “orchestra” signaled an ongoing transformation of urban theaters into spaces marketed to and constructed around the comforts and tastes of “Ladies.” Bowers made an explicit connection between her assumption of management and this increasingly successful marketing pitch. Like Cushman a decade early, Bowers presented herself as a lady manager who understood the tastes and desires of a female public.

Bowers was also following the example of Philadelphia’s new Academy of Music, a venue lavishly outfitted with cushioned chairs and arms in a “dark red plush.”⁶¹² The Academy of Music, which opened in 1856, was designed as a showplace for opera and concert music. The waves of European concert artists and opera troupes who arrived in

⁶⁰⁹ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 22 August 1858.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Mrs. D. P. Bowers’ Walnut St. Theatre, 23 December 1857, McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia.

⁶¹² *History and Description of the Opera House of the Academy of Music, in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: G. Andre & Co., 1857), 10.

America in the wake of the Revolutions of 1848 drew elite and middle-class audiences into theaters and concert halls around constructions of the superior intellectual, cultural, and spiritual value of art music. The founders of the Academy of Music envisioned this as an institution that would make European art music popular, thereby counteracting the negative influence of less edifying forms of amusement like melodrama and minstrelsy. Rather than funded as a stock company and leased for a term, the Academy was run by a board of directors who contracted with touring opera companies, concert artists, and theatrical troupes to appear for short seasons. But the Academy struggled to draw large and lucrative audiences to its 2900-capacity auditorium. Concert music and opera proved a harder sell than theater. But one Philadelphia critic observed that, in the hard times of 1857, the new dollar admission price for the choice seats in the parquet and lower boxes stretched the budgets of the “middling classes” who might otherwise have been inclined to attend the opera.⁶¹³ Bowers’s Walnut, on the other hand, advertised a general twenty-five-cent admission to the parquet, fifty cents for orchestra seats and private boxes, and thirty-seven-and-a-half cents in the dress circle in December of 1857.⁶¹⁴ The higher Academy prices had as much to do with the cost of engaging foreign opera and ballet troupes as the class appeal of the venue. Particularly in the wake of the panic, theaters struggled to manage their economics and keep themselves affordable to the “middling classes” while appealing to ideals of fashion, respectability, and gentility. Bowers’s interior alterations marked her theater as a genteel space while allowing her to maintain prices of admission that were reasonably competitive within the broader marketplace.

⁶¹³ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 9 May 1858.

⁶¹⁴ Mrs. D. P. Bowers’ Walnut St. Theatre, 23 December 1857, McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia. Compare with prices at the Academy of Music advertised in 1857 as one dollar for parquet, parquet circle, and balcony; fifty cents for family circle; and amphitheater and colored gallery twenty-five cents. Academy of Music, 5 October 1857, McAllister Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia.

Bowers also transformed her theater symbolically by installing an image of Sarah Siddons as the focal point of the auditorium. Bowers replaced the baize drop-curtain before the stage with “an artistic drapery” that was “painted to appear drawn partly aside” thus revealing a copy of Joshua Reynolds’ “familiar representation of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse.” Instead of a decorative motif or anonymous allegorical scene, Bowers chose a “familiar” painting of the lionized celebrity, who continued to be linked posthumously to the literary and moral elevation of the stage. The choice of Reynolds’s painting of Siddons signified the central role women had played in the elevation of the drama in the last half-century, and marked Bowers’s theater as a particularly feminized space in which audience and manager were connected through Siddons’s posthumous celebrity.

The extent of these renovations was a daring investment coming so soon after the panic the year before. Bowers was ambitious. The panic had created the opening through which she assumed the lease and management of the theater, and she was determined to fully realize her vision. The 1857 financial panic, like its predecessors of the late 1830s and early 1840s, created openings for women who may have harbored managerial ambitions far longer. Bowers was not alone in taking advantage of the crisis to move into highly competitive markets usually closed to women. In December of 1857, the *New York Herald* followed its announcement that Mrs. Bowers had taken over the lease of the Walnut from E. A. Marshall with a notice that “Miss Kimberly advertised to open the theatre” in Pittsburgh on the 12 December.⁶¹⁵ Kimberly secured the lease following the departure of J. C. Foster, who had held the Pittsburgh Theatre for the last

⁶¹⁵ *New York Herald*, 13 December 1857.

decade. Kimberly attempted to maintain a stock company and bring in touring stars, but struggled to establish authority over her stock company: when J. C. Foster opened a new theater in Youngstown, Kimberly discovered she had lost half her company and on the eve of Cushman's starring engagement! Kimberly lured them back, with difficulty, for she was losing money and could not pay all the salaries. Kimberly returned to starring at the end of the season. Kimberly was not the first lady manager Pittsburgh had known.⁶¹⁶ A decade earlier, Matilda Clarendon left the hostile critics of New York to star in less competitive markets and managed the struggling Pittsburgh Theatre despite considerable opposition. In the volatile theatrical marketplace of 1857, like in the early 1840s, stockholders were more willing to gamble on the ambitions of an actress, but the extra financial difficulties of managing during a panic made it difficult for actress managers to establish their authority and legitimacy in their new line.

Laura Keene's example in New York suggested that actresses did possess the competitive savvy to run a theater. Her early career also provides an entry into the expanding markets of the 1850s and a vital introduction to Bowers's own strategies in 1857.⁶¹⁷ Keene began her acting career in London in 1851. She worked in Madame Vestris's Lyceum Theatre for a season before departing for New York with a promise of a position at the new theatre James Wallack was establishing on Broadway. Wallack's Lyceum was part of the middle-class residential and shopping districts that were colonizing the northern reaches of Broadway. Wallack envisioned building a theater

⁶¹⁶ Edward Garland Fletcher, "Records and History of Theatrical Activities in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, from their beginnings to 1861" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1931).

⁶¹⁷ Keene's life and managerial career has received a number of scholarly treatments. The most useful studies, upon which my overview of her career is drawn, are Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*; Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers*; Deutsch, "Laura Keene's Theatre Management"; Ben Henneke, *Laura Keene: A Biography* (Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1990). The following summary of Keene's early career is drawn primarily from Helen Deutsch.

devoted to the legitimate drama, one that would revive stock plays that had gone out of fashion, while also introducing a new repertoire of melodrama drawn from French stage. It was in Wallack's company that Keene met Sarah Conway, Elizabeth Bowers's younger sister, who would pursue her own managerial career in Brooklyn from 1864 to 1875. Keene left Wallack's company in November of 1853 after her negotiations to secure the lease of Baltimore's Charles Street Theatre finally succeeded. At the end of the season, Keene left Baltimore and her lease in the hands of Mr. Risley, who managed Risley's Varieties in Washington. Perhaps Risley had out-maneuvered Keene, but a more likely explanation lay in the promise of lucrative profits for touring stars in California's booming theatrical market created by the Gold Rush.

In California, Keene appeared at the theater of another actress-manager, Catherine Sinclair, who had taken San Francisco's Metropolitan Theatre in the fall of 1853. Keene again saw an opportunity to manage her own theater when the manager of the American Theatre gave up his lease to embark on a tour of Australia. Keene moved between several different theaters in San Francisco from 1854 and 1855 amidst an economic downturn caused by the end of the Gold Rush and a financial panic, before returning to New York in October 1855. Less than a month after Keene's return to New York, John Lafarge announced an available lease on the theater adjoining his new hotel on the northern reaches of Broadway, part of the gradual uptown growth of genteel residential development and new leisure districts. Keene secured the lease and began what would be eight full seasons of theater management in New York until 1863.

Keene's movement from London to New York as actress, to Baltimore, California, and ultimately back again to New York as actress and manager, should be read not as a

succession of failures that kept her in motion. Rather, Keene used expanding regional theaters to develop experience and cultivate renown within the profession.⁶¹⁸ Shifting between different markets was a strategy actors had pursued since (at least) the turn of the nineteenth century. The fundamental mobility of the acting profession and the efficacy of this for aspiring performers is often missed in the prevailing narratives of a shift over the nineteenth century from stock to touring systems, according to which the fundamental nature of the profession is seen to change from stasis to mobility. The goal of an actor in the 1820s may have been to secure a contract in a stock company, but actors frequently bounced between different cities, like Eliza Riddle, and before her, Mrs. Barnes. This movement served as an effective strategy to reconstruct a reputation, obtain a raise, or move into a new acting “line” that was already occupied. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, speculators funded the construction of theaters in expanding western cities like Chicago and San Francisco and markets became more densely populated with theaters, creating new opportunities for aspiring performers and managers, but also journalists and dramatic agents. Another way of conceptualizing these structural shifts, particularly as experienced on the ground by actors, is to think of them as an increase in the geographic range an actor might cover over a life on the stage, and in the models of contacting for employment.

Keene’s success securing the lease of LaFarge’s Metropolitan Theatre on Broadway in December 1855, and thus entering the increasingly competitive New York market, depended up the support of a male backer named John Lutz. A professional gambler

⁶¹⁸ Deutsch emphasizes the different training Keene received working with different managers and navigating new markets, treating this period as an extended “apprenticeship” that taught Keene the elements of artistic and structural management that she would bring together so successfully in New York. Deutsch, “Laura Keene’s Theatre Management,” 105.

whom Keene had met in New York in 1852 and would marry a decade later, Lutz provided Keene with capital and her creditors with assurance of her solvency. As one scholar has pointed out, given the “soaring” costs of theater management in New York in the 1850s, mounting a managerial venture depended upon access to both capital and credit.⁶¹⁹ Lutz provided Keene with the collateral she needed to enter the New York market, but Keene was also in a vulnerable position. She was estranged from her husband Henry Taylor, but presented herself as unmarried. She represented her two daughters as “nieces” and took care that Lutz appeared primarily as her business manager and partner, rather than a romantic partner. Lutz was a crucial but problematic figure. He remained in the background, serving as business manager of the theater, a necessary ally in a male-dominated business world of New York. But the male-dominated newspaper world quickly placed Keene on the defensive for assuming a position that in New York, at least, had been exclusively occupied by men.

The tenor of Keene’s dealings with an anonymous cohort of critics who used the New York press to bait and slander Keene provides an apt illustration of the gender dynamics shaping her relationship with her publics. Rather than challenge the legitimacy of attacks on her competence as a woman, Keene employed her gender to deflect attacks that came from the *Daily Express* in late December. She published a card in local dailies like the *New York Times*, along with other trade and sporting papers, in which she expressed her amazement that she should be attacked for attempting to do “precisely what was done by the gentlemen directing those Theatres,—viz.: try my powers of catering for the public.” Keene did not ignore the question of her gender entirely, but

⁶¹⁹ Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre*, 127.

used it to discredit the honor of her attackers. “I seek no newspaper warfare,” she protested; “I am a woman, and at your mercy.” Keene shifted swiftly from this initial assertion of her right to compete, to a canny rhetorical performance of humility and feminine vulnerability. Keene used genteel constructions of gender and honor against her detractors, insisting that the New York papers unmanned themselves in “endeavoring to injure the prospects of one who, as an antagonist is entirely helpless.” The objections to her endeavor were a “riddle” at best, and at worst were unmanly. Such attacks undermined the “value” of the press, but also impugned “the character” of the authors themselves.⁶²⁰ Keene’s rhetorical performance of humble, self-effacing, defenseless femininity framed a bald assertion of her right to compete as a professional equal, while also demonstrating very clearly her skill marshaling print to her own defense.

The rhetorical invocation of genteel femininity was one strategy by which women with public stage careers were able to stretch gendered boundaries of their profession while striving to appear sympathetic to an adjudicating public. Actresses and actress-managers were ladies in a different way than the women who attended their performances, but shared with this female public a recognition of the representative and material value of the performance and rhetoric of genteel femininity. As scholar Lisa Merrill has observed, the actress Charlotte Cushman “frequently deployed conventional gender tropes to defend her own unconventional position.” In her 1841 conflict with novice actress Matilda Clarendon and newspaper editor Park Benjamin, Cushman published a private letter to Benjamin in the New York *Herald*, in which Cushman accused Clarendon of “unladylike behavior” while also demanding sympathy for her

⁶²⁰ *New York Daily Times*, 24 December 1855.

“feelings as a woman.”⁶²¹ Both Cushman and Keene claimed that an *a priori* gentility through which they demanded public sympathy. Like Cushman, Keene understood the power of genteel femininity as a trope and performance that women could deploy around their public actions to stretch the boundaries of acceptable behavior. And yet, this representational strategy brought ambivalent material results. It generated increased publicity and sympathy for Keene, but also slashed scenery the night before she was to open.

Class-based conceptions of masculine honor, however, placed Keene in an awkward position relative to her critics. Consider the response to her “card” from William Porter’s *Spirit of the Times*, which applauded Keene for her “sensible, lady-like, and beautifully written answer,” but insisted, in a stubborn defense of the honor and manliness of its professional peers and associates, that Keene’s critic was clearly an “enemy to all theatrical experiments, and still more to all decent managers.” William Porter found it impossible to imagine Wallack or Burton authoring such a missive. These gentlemen could never “have any but good feelings towards another who embarks on the desperate quicksands of dramatic enterprise.”⁶²² Of course, implicit in all this was the insistence that there was nothing gendered about the tussle; it was clearly the work of an enemy of the theater more broadly. A gentleman could not object to friendly competition, nor would he stoop to attack a lady. Keene’s performance of lady-like indignation had been effective in marshaling the sympathy of the male-dominated newspaper public, but failed to successfully challenge or make visible the gendered

⁶²¹ Cushman was also using conceptions of gender to articulate a class distance between herself and Clarendon. See my discussion of this conflict in Chapter 3, which I approach somewhat differently than Merrill. Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 51.

⁶²² *Spirit of the Times*, 29 December 1855.

nature of her opposition. This sympathy quickly dissolved the following spring, when Keene again hailed her public with a more outrageous accusation of conspiracy against her success that pushed too far outside the boundaries of a performance of sympathetic femininity.

In the spring of 1856, while Keene was concluding a successful first season of what she believed to be a four-year contract, William Burton, who coveted an uptown theater, set to work on LaFarge, whom he convinced to drop Keene from the lease with a spurious charge of late rent. Burton had been losing clientele from his theater on Chambers Street to the more fashionable uptown theaters and hoped that a move there would restore his prospects. Rumors of Burton's assumption of the Metropolitan Theatre had appeared in New York papers in June—the first Keene heard of it. She responded immediately to dispel the rumors only to discover their truth. To add insult to injury, one paper suggested that Keene might be joining Burton's company as an actress.

Keene delivered her response through a curtain address on the closing performance of the season, which was also Keene's benefit night. But Keene's stirring rebuke to her enemies strayed too far outside the boundaries of gender and tasteful competition for the *New York Daily Times*, which now accused Keene of "clothing herself with the powerful panoply of her sex"—in other words, using her gender to protect herself from legitimate critique. Keene was in fact responding to newspaper critics that affected a less genteel tone than the *Whig Times*, and had continued to question her fitness for management as a woman. In her address, Keene responded in kind, attempting to play off these gendered critiques as a joke and strip them of their power. The *Times* annotated its transcription of the address with the audience reaction: "It has been positively stated that I am a woman.

[Laughter.] That I have no right to a managerial chair. ... I plead guilty to the charge of being a woman, and hope I have brought no discredit on my sex by my appearances as a manageress. [Laughter and applause.]”⁶²³ While Keene seems to have been largely successful with her audience that night, male newspaper critics took offense at her glib attempts to displace gender.

The *Times* went further in its chastisement, arguing that Keene should be grateful for the gentlemanly support of the press, which had provided “more generous consideration,” looked past Keene’s “faults,” and “swelled” her “virtues” as a manager. This was clearly a form of “partial distinction, to which she owes some at least of that prosperity which we rejoice to find have crowned her strong energy and will.” This backhanded compliment surely galled Keene by insisting that *her* triumph was no triumph at all, but the result of a magnanimous newspaper establishment that “crowned” her “will” with an outsized estimation of her proven abilities.⁶²⁴

And yet, Keene *had* triumphed with theater-going publics, particularly the middle-class and female audiences that managers of New York’s uptown theaters were actively courting. Though historian Faye Dudden is correct in noting the challenges women in management faced “securing nonprejudicial press coverage,” it is impossible to imagine contemporary discourses that would not have felt the need to trade in gendered assumptions. Keene’s gender was always marked, a question to be answered. “She” could not be a neutral figure. Keene’s challenge in communicating with her publics was to successfully deploy her position as a woman to maximize sympathy, patronage, and support from the press. She attempted to do so by marking her theater as a site of genteel

⁶²³ *New York Daily Times*, 23 June 1856.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*

femininity, before and behind the footlights. In her closing address in June 1856, Keene thanked the “ladies” for the “powerful support” won by their “gentle presence,” and the “gentlemen” for a “chivalrous appreciation of my efforts which ever distinguished the American character towards our sex, when engaged in advancing the interests of literature and art.” Keene thus positioned herself as in sympathy with her female public, and presented herself to her male publics not as a businesswoman and peer, but within the category of literary and artistic womanhood, a category of female publicness that had emerged and gained legitimacy during the eighteenth century and continued to support a range of public roles for middle-class women, predominantly in literature. Keene’s success filling her theater and establishing her legitimacy as a “manageress” also advanced her credit with the financiers on which the next phase of her career depended. That summer, Keene obtained financial support from New York hoteliers and bankers to finance a new theater by architect John Trimble, which she would manage successfully through 1863.⁶²⁵

Like Keene, Bowers wrestled with Philadelphia critics for the right kind of press support, but took a different tact in presenting herself to her publics. Bowers’s successful representational strategies ultimately floundered on her lack of expertise with finances, a skill Keene had developed in her multiple managerial stints preceding the New York venture. Bowers may have been set up by her subordinates who preyed upon her delegation of financial matters to a financial manager. If we read Bowers’s brief tenure

⁶²⁵ Burton, meanwhile, did not outlast the 1857-1858 season. His failure to successfully transition his style of comic burlesque from the intimacy of the theater on Chambers Street to the much larger Metropolitan Theatre was exacerbated by an inability of his style of low comedy to compete for the coveted uptown audience with the elaborately staged melodramas and burlesques at Wallack’s Lyceum Theatre and the newly built and christened Laura Keene’s Theatre. On Burton’s life and career see David Rinear, *Stage, Page, Scandals & Vandals: William E. Burton & Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

in management in dialogue with accounts of Keene's relationship with her company, we learn that the deciding factors for women managers frequently lay in the professional and financial networks and negotiations that occurred behind the scenes, regardless the relative success of representational politics that drew in an audience. It was her ability to manage the politics of authority behind the scenes and in the hierarchies of theater government that enabled a lady manager to maintain a foothold in her dramatic fiefdom.

From the beginning of her assumption of the lease, in December 1857, Bowers had been very clear about her role. She published a card in the Philadelphia papers in response to "various rumors in circulation" about her "projected lesseeship," in which she asserted, "I stand alone in my enterprise—having nothing to depend upon but a resolute heart, faith in the Philadelphia public, and a firm trust in God."⁶²⁶ Throughout her managerial career, Bowers, like Keene before her, used the papers to speak to her publics, both through published cards and curtain addresses that were clearly calculated to appear in print. Both women used these missives to articulate their motivations and push back against rumors and slanders that passed through male circles of managers, businessmen, and newspaper reporters. In the 1857 card, Bowers was careful to appear congenial in relation to the management of the Arch Street Theatre, where she had previously been employed as a lead actress. Perhaps she had learned from Laura Keene's example. In assembling the stock company for her first theater, Laura Keene's Varieties, in 1855, Keene hired a number of stock actors away from Burton's Chamber Street Theatre. Burton had a reputation for unscrupulous dealings with competition. When Keene's painted sets were slashed the night before her opening, Burton was widely regarded as

⁶²⁶ *The Press* [Philadelphia], 14 December 1857.

the culprit, retaliation for Keene's poaching. Keene and Bowers, meanwhile, developed a mutually advantageous and unprecedented arrangement. In the summer of 1858, following Bowers's first stint as manager, Bowers and Keene swapped theaters in an unprecedented move, bringing their entire stock companies to New York and Philadelphia, respectively. Bowers probably met Keene through her sister, Sarah Crocker Conway, who performed with Keene in Wallack's stock company in 1853 and may have helped furnish the introductions. No doubt Bowers followed Keene's career closely. But whereas Keene had deployed her gender strategically, in rhetorical performances as the "defenseless woman," attempting to subvert and undermine attacks from her critics and competitors, Bowers took a somewhat different tack, asserting her independence and authority, but around a no less salient allusion to a warrior queen.

Bowers understood the power of language and metaphor to frame her new endeavor and inspire her publics. She rechristened the theater in her name; no longer the "American Theatre" or simply the "Walnut Theatre" as of old, but rather as "Mrs. Bowers' Walnut Street Theatre." In her opening address in December 1857, Bowers dramatized her new professional role *as* a role: "To-night the actress is not seen—she gives place to the new and more impressive character in which I now stand before you—the character of a Manager!" In presenting the manageress as a character and performance, a public and professional role, Bowers created a framework in which an actress could assume and become the character of Manager, just as many an actress could assume a character of princess or queen or courtesan or princely lover. Bowers extended this metaphor further, imagining herself as a "confident and valiant Queen Semiramis," at

the head of her “little Army, now entrenched behind this curtain.”⁶²⁷ It was compelling metaphor: actress-manager as ancient queen, the theater company as her army. But it was also a metaphor that raised troubling questions about the truth and competence of the performance.

In an interview in 1894, an elderly Elizabeth Bowers alluded to her managerial career as part of a contemporary vogue for women managers. In the 1850s, she explained, it was “quite the fashion for actresses of any ability to become the lessee of the theatre in which their stock company appeared.”⁶²⁸ It is certainly possible that this was not merely a nostalgic turn of phrase, but captured an additional impact of the salience of female heroism in stage melodrama of the 1850s, which may have increased the receptiveness of theater-going publics to public roles for women—roles like a manageress who styled herself a “Queen Semiramis.” The popularity of tragic melodramas such as *Camille*, a play about a courtesan, *Adrienne LeCouvreur*, about an actress, or *Medea*, about a vengeful queen, that were built around a flawed but effectual, even powerful heroine increased the drawing power of the female star. But while the popularity of new types of female roles may have given the figure of the actress-as-manager a certain cachet, the receptiveness of theater-going publics to the actress as head of a theater did not counteract the real structural challenges women managers faced. Bowers’s telling turn of phrase, that management for actresses was a “fashion,” evoked management as a kind of performance adopted by the star actress, but one which ran aground on the actual logistics and gender politics of the burgeoning culture industries of

⁶²⁷ *Philadelphia Daily News*, 19 December 1857 quoted in Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers*, 78-79.

⁶²⁸ *Daily Picayune* [New Orleans], 8 April 1894.

the 1850s and 60s. To perform female heroism and management was one thing. To demand long-term authority over and equal competition with men was quite another.

Consider comic actor Joseph Jefferson's account of Keene's management in 1857, published in his 1903 memoir. Jefferson explained rather forthrightly his understanding of the dynamics between actor and manager, a natural enmity and struggle over power. "As an actor has a right to protect himself against the tyranny of a manager," he explained, "the manager has an equal right to guard the discipline of the theater."⁶²⁹ Keene's guardianship of discipline conferred on her the title of "The Duchess."⁶³⁰ Critic William Winter described Keene a "martinet" who only looked like an "angel." Unlike some managers, she lacked the ability to "maintain dominance...without wounding the pride or hurting the feelings" of anyone in a "subservient position."⁶³¹ Whether Keene's managerial style was in fact excessive compared to managers James Wallack or William Burton, the hyper-vigilance she exerted to maintain authority over her cast and particularly intractable actors like Jefferson was experienced by her stock actors as excessive. Jefferson's chapter about Keene is entirely built around anecdotes of his struggles with her unjust authority, in which Jefferson reveals his guile, his wit, and his superior judgment in various matters of casting or scenic effect. In this way, Jefferson managed the narrative dilemma of how to convey his budding stardom and maintain his masculine public persona. By focusing his anecdotes on a series of conflicts with a female manager, Jefferson skirted the far edges of gentlemanly behavior, but he eventually came out on top.

⁶²⁹ Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (New York: The Century Co., 1897), 198.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶³¹ William Winter, *Vagrant Memories: Being Further Recollections of Other Days* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1915), 46-47.

Other accounts of Keene's managerial style, such those which as appeared in Catherine Reignolds-Winslow's *Yesterdays With Actors* in 1887, corroborated this image of Keene as a stern authority figure. Reignolds-Winslow's youthful admiration for Keene provides a striking contrast in tone to Jefferson's. In this version of events, Keene was figured as an idol, a model, and a mentor, a figure whose intensity explicitly suited her for management.⁶³² Tellingly, Reignolds-Winslow concluded her portrait with an homage to Keene's qualities in private life. Reignolds-Winslow praised Keene for her "delightful conversation" and "rare and attractive reserve," explaining that "a woman's life, if not led in sheltered places, must lose some of its finer fibres; or they must protect themselves by deep, shrinking sensitiveness and a veil of reticence." Keene *had* managed to preserve her native femininity, though her "frail physical constitution" also signified the toll this public life had exerted. Of course, Keene's frailty aligned her with femininity even more clearly, for Reignolds-Winslow's readers, than descriptions of Keene as a "charming hostess."⁶³³

Reignolds-Winslow's concerns in 1887 picked up a persistent undercurrent in nineteenth-century discussions of women's public and professional lives in which the assessment of a woman's femininity could transform or manage the meaning of a new public role or form of authority. For Reignolds-Winslow, Keene's true intimate femininity balanced out her daringly successful performances of authority. Keene likewise deployed her femininity strategically when communicating with her publics. These dynamics, and the relationship between the representational and the material,

⁶³² Reignolds-Winslow noted that Keene was not alone among women in possessing this "executive ability," and subjoined a list that included Mrs. John Drew, Mrs. Conway, and several London managers. Catherine Reignolds-Winslow, *Yesterdays with Actors* (Boston: Cupples and Hurd, 1887), 77.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

become far more convoluted when we consider Bowers's case. Why did Bowers abdicate from her managerial role? Was it, as the gossipy columnists of the *New York Clipper* claimed, that although "the public" gave her "every encouragement," Bowers "permitted herself to be tied hands and feet, and to be used as a mere automaton in the hands of a few wire pullers"? The *Clipper* insinuated that Bowers was not a real manager, but a puppet who "had no control over her company."⁶³⁴ Such statements make it difficult to tease out an accurate explanation for why Bowers gave up the management of the Walnut Street Theatre in January 1859. But it was a compelling narrative that satisfied assumptions about feminine capacity, regardless of its accuracy or inaccuracy. Fictional or not, it surely shaped public assumptions and influenced real behavior.

This representation of Bowers as lacking in authority emerged early in her career as manager. In January 1858, the *Philadelphia Press* granted Mrs. Bowers a public talking-to by way of kindly advice. Bowers, this paper made clear, was far too aggressive in promoting the new management. *The Press* had not sent any of its critics to see the successful new production of *The Count of Monte Christo*, and "the lessee and stage manager have to be told why." The front of house staff had been particularly rude to newspaper reporters. *The Press* thus advised Bowers to look to the behavior of her "underlings," lest they do "serious injury to the interests of the principals." Furthermore, the paper felt Mrs. Bowers would do well to stop "shower[ing]" their offices with a succession of daily "puffs." Mr. Wheatley of the Arch Street Theatre had never "taken the liberty of sending us cut-and-dry notices of his performances" or endless invitations to attend. On the one hand, Bowers failed in her management by being overzealous

⁶³⁴ *New York Clipper*, 29 January 1859.

with her unscrupulous attempts to command notice and acclaim. On the other, she failed to adequately control her staff, which carried out her orders to excess and with unpardonable rudeness. While *The Press* had, on a prior occasion, expounded on the subject of theater managers pressuring newspapers for puffs, the identity of the offending “proprietors of places of public amusement” had remained anonymous in its more generalized treatise on appropriate conduct.⁶³⁵ By singling out Bowers for particular notice, *The Press* suggested that this new manager lacked the experience to liaison appropriately with a major urban newspaper office.

The desire of *The Press* to control puffery was part of ongoing debates since the 1830s about the veracity and integrity of newspaper criticism. Increasingly, dailies like the *New York Tribune*, *New York Herald* and *The Press* were attempting to inaugurate a new model of dramatic criticism, commensurate with the increasingly successful middle-class pitch of theatrical amusements. The detailed reviews of new plays in these papers demonstrate their concerted effort to move beyond the longstanding association of dramatic notices with the evils of “puffery” and newspapermen, the opinions of which were bought by complimentary tickets and the flatteries and refreshments of the green room. *The Press* restricted itself to detailed reviews of “new pieces, or revivals, or upon performers taking new characters” and declared itself under no obligation to any theater to provide regular notices. Therefore it refused the general free admission to critics practiced under the “dead-head system” of old—except, of course, on such particular occasions when a manager tendered an invitation to a new production.⁶³⁶ The rhetoric of patronage that managers deployed to hail their publics, which included an expectation of

⁶³⁵ *The Press* [Philadelphia], 7 December 1857.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*

local press support, existed uneasily along with the new ideals and protocols proclaimed by the likes of *The Press*. Furthermore, the stance of detached judgment that writers were affecting in their reviews masked the persistence of greenroom and printroom politics.

But even if these men were “incorruptible,” they remained “incorruptibly misogynistic.”⁶³⁷ In contrast to some of the grosser critiques of actress managers from less genteel papers, much of which is lost in the uneven archives of nineteenth-century newspapers, the “misogyny” of the self-consciously genteel and gentlemanly press played out as a studied surprise over the abilities of women to succeed as managers—as well as swift condemnation of their faults. Where lay the blame in Bowers’s loss of the reins? Accounts of Bowers’s ineffectual authority confirmed women’s incapacity for the management role. Though Bowers hardly supported this interpretation, she emphasized her victimization and persecution at the hands of “designing people” and false friends.⁶³⁸ Perhaps Bowers was alluding to her relationship with William Cowell, whom Bowers had hired as a dramatic author attached to the theater, but left Bowers to take a position as agent for English actor Barry Sullivan. Sullivan was engaged for the Walnut Street Theater immediately after Bowers left at the end of January 1859. Jane Curry has suggested that Bowers’s first Treasurer, James Hutchinson, a hold over from E. A. Marshall’s management, and whom Bowers replaced early in the fall of 1858, may have had a part in the anonymous letters and slanders, or fueled Bowers’s “paranoia” of a conspiracy against her management. Hutchinson wrote into the papers to defend himself. Curry also notes that Bowers, who otherwise let her treasurer handle the theater books,

⁶³⁷ Dudden, *Women in American Theatre*, 130.

⁶³⁸ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 23 January 1859.

demanded a closer examination in November, which may have incited some anger from that department.⁶³⁹

Early in February, another rumor briefly surfaced in the correspondence of the *Spirit of the Times*, about a “civil war” between the “old lessee” and her “special partner,” a Mrs. Garrettson.⁶⁴⁰ Either Mrs. Garrettson or her late husband had provided Bowers with some of the capital for her venture. Curry asserts that Garrettson took hold of the Walnut immediately after Bowers left, although Garrettson’s name first appeared on the bills for the fall 1859 season. Garrettson had no professional history in theater, but clearly developed an interest in the Walnut Street Theatre as an investment opportunity, much like the hoteliers and bankers who backed Keene three years earlier. Investment granted Garrettson an anonymity that she lost when she assumed managerial control of the Walnut, presumably after a conflict over Bowers’s financial handling of the theater led Garrettson to push Bowers out. Bowers’s relationship with Garrettson would have been much less visible to the press than Bowers’s firing of Hutchinson. Other than these cursory details, Mrs. Garrettson remains a historical cipher. Clearer is the fact that Bowers’s 1858 struggles were far more complex than a simple narrative of a manageress incapable of handling her male subordinates, or put upon by false friends and designing enemies. Clearly Bowers’s efforts to manage the Walnut on her own terms met resistance from her company and antagonism from disgruntled former employees. Clearly, too, Bowers failed to realize the financial expectations of her investor. The gender politics are unmistakable here, but woven deeply into a fabric also somewhat opaque, of alliances, feuds, and reprisals that remain hard to penetrate.

⁶³⁹ Curry, *Nineteenth-Century American Women Theatre Managers*, 80.

⁶⁴⁰ *Spirit of the Times*, 5 February 1859.

On 6 March 1859, Bowers announced that she was taking the Philadelphia Academy of Music for a brief dramatic season, with the intention of “vindicating my own professional renown.” Bowers would not let her own claims against her persecutors go to rest: “I cannot think that a social reputation and a position in my profession, attained only by years of earnest work and unceasing care to lead a blameless life, can be seriously impaired, much less over-thrown, by any possible device.” Because he was “unwilling to depart from this city with poison left in the ears of my friends,” Bowers had turned down an engagement to tour England with her sister and brother-in-law, Sarah Crocker Conway and Frederick Conway, to present a series of dramas and tragedies.⁶⁴¹ These were only moderately successful. Despite the superior acoustics of the Academy, one critic regretted that the staging and acting style to which Bowes was accustomed in smaller theaters did not suit the 2900-seat Academy.⁶⁴² Bowers might have weathered these lukewarm reviews, and departed from Philadelphia with some sense of dignity, character, and honor restored. But additional scandal was still to come.

That same week, the nature of Bowers’s relationship with her business agent, the married Mr. Brown, was dragged before the public eye when her estranged brother Francis Crocker discovered Bowers and Brown tête-à-tête in Bowers’s hotel rooms. Or perhaps not *quite* tête-à-tête. The account of the arrest written up in *The Press* contained a detail omitted from subsequent newspaper accounts: Bowers and Brown were accompanied by her three children, who witnessed Crocker’s attack. Crocker was arrested and tried for assault against Brown, but insisted, in cards published in the Philadelphia papers and the *New York Clipper*, that he was only defending his own honor

⁶⁴¹ *Sunday Dispatch* [Philadelphia], 13 March 1859.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*

and the honor of his sister. The Brown-Crocker incident thus exposed a key component of Bowers's vulnerability as a manager. Bowers was undefended, a woman alone. The *Spirit of the Times* noted the problem matter-of-factly: "it appears every body will take advantage of a widow."⁶⁴³

In fact, Bowers was not wholly "unprotected." Her relationship with Brown endured, and several years later they married. But both Bowers and Keene were potentially vulnerable to gendered attacks on their virtue, honor, and character. Keene, after all, was a woman estranged from her husband and engaged in a covert romantic relationship with her business manager. Of course, both men and women in management were expected to maintain a performance of public character, which was based on assurances of their character in private life. But unlike men in management, a woman's ability to meet and work closely with male associates was hampered by gendered conventions that cast interactions between unmarried and unrelated men and women under suspicions of moral and sexual impropriety. An unmarried woman's tête-à-tête with her business manager was still that of a woman alone with an unrelated man. Thus women who succeeded in management relied on close professional and familial alliances to navigate the male-dominated business and legal aspects of the theater industry. A successful public performance as "manageress" depended upon the readiness of financial backers, support and trustworthiness of staff, and successful liaison with the press. While representational politics were important, success navigating structural and professional networks and hierarchies mattered far more.

⁶⁴³ *Spirit of the Times*, 29 January 1859.

Of Rights, Royalties, and Long Runs in the 1860s and 1870s

In January 1860, Miss Kimberly took out a “Card to Managers” in the major metropolitan newspapers announcing that she had “purchased the exclusive rights to produce the highly successful play, THE OCTOROON, in certain portions of the United States and Canada.” Kimberly’s correspondence with the play’s author, Dion Boucicault, appeared below, indicating that while Boucicault retained the rights to perform his play in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans, Kimberly had approached and been granted productions rights for remaining cities in the South and West, and was “prepared to receive proposals from managers” across her tour. Kimberly had already secured engagements in the cities of Western New York—Troy, Albany, Rochester, and Buffalo—followed by a debut at McVicker’s Theatre in the booming young city of Chicago, and from thence to Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis.⁶⁴⁴ Kimberly had purchased the rights from Boucicault for one thousand dollars. The *New York Clipper*, a sporting and trade paper, judged this a “shrewd and highly successful arrangement for her,” the cost and hassle of a succession of lawsuits notwithstanding.⁶⁴⁵

Dion Boucicault was already mired in a series of legal battles against managers who had produced pirated versions of his hit play, which debuted at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York 6 December 1859. In the course of her 1860 tour, Kimberly brought suit against parties for production in cities for which she held the exclusive license. In March 1860, for example, she won an injunction against a performance of *The Octoroon* in Cleveland, Ohio and again took out a card publishing the results as a

⁶⁴⁴ *New York Herald*, 2 January 1860.

⁶⁴⁵ *New York Clipper*, 14 January 1860.

warning that “every manager, actor or actress producing or aiding in the performance of ‘The Octoroon’ without her written consent participates in a dishonorable as well as illegal effort to deprive her of the benefits arising from her liberal purchase from the author—the only party having the legal right to sell it.”⁶⁴⁶ Kimberly made good on her promise and continued to sue violators for damages upwards of \$2000 and in one case, received \$1000 in damages from H. A. Weaver, J. A. Johnson, and Ada Plunket of Cleveland for their unlawful performance of Boucicault’s play.⁶⁴⁷

Boucicault and Kimberly’s litigiousness was part of growing body of cases through which actors, actresses, managers and playwrights attempted to work out the implications of the Dramatic Copyright Law of 1856. In 1855, Boucicault joined the lobbying efforts begun in 1853 by Robert Bird, a playwright, journalist, and active Whig politician, and playwright and poet George Henry Booker to get a law concerning dramatic copyright passed by Congress. Bird had first attempted to get a law passed in 1841, but the proposed legislation was tabled and forgotten. Bird and Booker counted on the apathy of most Congressmen towards the question of dramatic copyright, but believed that the law would benefit all members of the theatrical profession, even if royalties took a bite out of manager profits, because the injection of native plays into the market would stimulate the industry.⁶⁴⁸ These arguments differed little from those of the early 1840s, and were also bolstered by concerns with the recent influx of French melodramas. Newspaper critics rallied around the law; it didn’t hurt that many dramatic critics harbored literary aspirations of their own.

⁶⁴⁶ *New York Herald*, 15 March 1860.

⁶⁴⁷ “‘The Octoroon’ in Court,” *Daily Cleveland Herald*, 9 May 1860.

⁶⁴⁸ Oren Bracha, “Commentary on the U.S. Copyright Act Amendment 1856,” (2008), *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900)*, eds L. Bently & M. Kretschmer, <http://www.copyrighthistory.org>.

The law, passed 16 July 1856, declared that an “author or proprietor of any dramatic composition, designed or suited for public representation” retained the “sole right to print or publish the said composition, the sole right also to act or perform, or represent the same, or cause it to be acted, performed, or represented” and any other person “acting, performing, or representing the said composition, without or against the consent of the said author or proprietor” would be “liable for damages.”⁶⁴⁹ The 1856 law transformed the financial stakes of dramatic production, making it possible for playwrights to profit from their texts. But performers and managers also seized the opportunity to possess and profit from their own stake in a new play. Thus the implications of this rather vague new law were worked out on the ground by managers and performers who realized that they could acquire a new form of mobile capital in the copyright and license of new plays. Actors could align their celebrity with a particular character by holding exclusive rights to a new production, as Kimberly sought to do with her performance of Zoe in the production of *The Octoroon*. In late December, while corresponding with Boucicault for limited production rights, Kimberly assembled a company that would exclusively perform *The Octoroon*. Of course, in order to ensure her profits, Kimberly had to be vigilant by continuing to bring suits to protect her exclusive rights to perform the play. It was exhausting and expensive work, the potential promise of damages notwithstanding.

Kimberly’s use of dramatic copyright was part of the ongoing experimentation during the 1850s and 60s with form and structure for presenting and profiting from theatrical amusements. While Laura Keane and Dion Boucicault are quite correctly

⁶⁴⁹ Copyright Act Amendment (1856), *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900)*, eds. L. Bentley & M. Kretschmer, <http://www.copyrighthistory.org>.

celebrated for successfully introducing the long run and the touring combination company—a touring company that performed a single production rather than a repertory—identifying and celebrating the “first” misses the fundamental character of this period. Theater historians have repeated—with varying degrees of skepticism—Boucicault’s claim that he invented the combination company (though he actually stated he that he introduced that combination company *in England*). After Keene presented Boucicault’s play *The Colleen Bawn* at her own theater in 1860, Boucicault took it across the Atlantic with a company.⁶⁵⁰ Perhaps Boucicault’s arrangement with Kimberly in December 1859 had also suggested the lucrative possibilities of taking a single production on the road. Another way to push back against the preoccupation with origin stories is to remember that these experimentations grew out of extremely competitive and expanding markets in which managers, playwrights, and performers collaborated. Boucicault brought *The Colleen Bawn* to Laura Keene’s Theatre in early 1860 following a conflict with his partners at the Winter Garden Theatre, which Boucicault had taken in September 1859 and where he presented *The Octoroon*.⁶⁵¹ Keene had produced other plays written and adapted by Boucicault when she accepted his offer to join her company and he offered her *The Colleen Bawn*. Less famous and less visible figures like Kimberly who lacked the professional capital to star or manage in increasingly saturated markets like New York were part of vast networks of mobile performers who took metropolitan successes like *The Octoroon*, placed a comparatively small investment in them, and

⁶⁵⁰ Gary A. Richardson, “Plays and Playwrights: 1800-1865” in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, Beginnings to 1870*, Vol. 1, edited by Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 250-302, esp. 293-297; Bernheim, *The Business of Theater*; Poggi, *Theater in America*. Apparently Joseph Jefferson also claimed to have inaugurated the practice, dating its origin to 1868.

⁶⁵¹ This was originally the Metropolitan Theater, which Keene had lost to William Burton in 1856.

brought the touring combination company to western cities like Buffalo, St. Louis, and Cleveland. Significantly, while *The Octoroon* reached Cleveland before Kimberly, her success in court proved the value of her new and daring investment.

The ensuing decades witnessed a proliferation of touring companies that supported female star and brought new plays into regional theaters across the continental United States. The importance of a starring actress to new plays and productions remained a steady constant in this period, but the model around which new plays were presented and companies organized shifted and diversified. Canonical narratives of theater history identify the 1870s as a pivotal period in which the theater industry shifted from a residential stock company system to a combination system. Or did it? Models for marketing and distributing stage entertainment were far more diverse and experimental than the narrative of a shift from stock to combination suggests.⁶⁵² This experimentation, of course, was possible because of improvements in the geographic range and speed of railroad and steam transport. But it was also made possible by the altered terms according to which managers and female performers introduced plays into the market under the new dramatic copyright law, which developed between the 1856 Dramatic

⁶⁵² Theater historian Rosemarie Bank questions the sources scholars have used to make these claims, particularly Bernheim's oft-cited 1932 study. Bank argues that a more careful tabulating is necessary before we can truly understand what this structural change looked like or identify a cause. Bank is also wary of the heavy emphasis on economic and business factors—a product of Bernheim's training as a labor historian and statistician—and argues that economics alone cannot account for changes in the structure and content of theater. Bank's point is well-taken, but there are additional economic factors that theater historians have yet to address, such as the Panic of 1873, which theater historian Peter Davis points out has been almost completely ignored in the theater history. When the Panic is taken into account, claims that the combination company took over from the stock company as the model for entertainment distribution in the 1870s begins to make more historical sense, not because the combination system replaced a stock, but rather because the Panic was a "catalyst" for forces already in motion by the mid-1860s. In fact, experiments with combination companies dated back to the 1850s, as I likewise show below, but it was only in the 1870s that a growing volume of out-of-work stock actors established touring theatrical troupes and rode the vast network of American railroads to bring their product into new markets. Bank, "A Reconsideration of the Death of Nineteenth-Century American Repertory Companies and the Rise of the Combination"; Davis, "From Stock to Combination."

Copyright Law and the 1870 Copyright Act revising the terms of dramatic copyright.

Though the law 1856 protected dramatic composition as such, the relationship between the original copyright manuscript of a play and its production, which might involve considerable alterations to and deviations from the original text and often incorporated bits of stage business or pantomime not laid out by the author, remained ambiguous. In 1860, these ambiguities in the law were being addressed in the landmark Philadelphia District Court case of *Keene v. Wheatley & Clarke*. This case focused on Laura Keene's rights in her production of Tom Taylor's play *Our American Cousin*, a production Keene introduced in October 1858 and which ran for a consecutive 140 performances. Keene sued to obtain an injunction against and damages for a production of *Our American Cousin* mounted by William Wheatley and John Clarke at the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia. The Arch Street production followed the heavily altered version of Taylor's original script developed by Keene and her company, which included distinctive characterizations of the Yankee hero Asa Trenchard by Joseph Jefferson. It later emerged in the course of the trial that Jefferson provided Wheatley and Clarke with copies of his stage notes, which supplemented the Philadelphia managers' own transcriptions of the play.⁶⁵³ However, Wheatley and Clarke claimed that they possessed a prior version of the manuscript obtained from John Silsbee, the English actor for whom Tom Taylor had originally intended the play.

⁶⁵³ Biographers have been kind to Jefferson. For example, Benjamin Arthur suggests that Jefferson misunderstood the implications of the new law for the relationship between managers, actors, and dramatic texts and gave the part to Wheatley in their shared capacity as low comedians only after he had left Keene's employ. Henneke explains that Jefferson did not see this as a professional breach because he had not understood that the value and popularity of the play lay in the *original* production, that Jefferson's actions had threatened Keene's interests in preserving the originality of that first production and protecting it from imitation. Benjamin Arthur, *The Man Who Was Rip Van Winkle: Joseph Jefferson and Nineteenth-Century American Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 159; Henneke, *Laura Keene*, 106.

The question of whether Keene possessed a right to damages here ultimately turned upon the relationship between the manuscript Keene obtained from Taylor (on which she claimed copyright), the production developed and mounted by Keene, and the later production mounted by Wheatley and Clarke. Judge Cadwalader challenged the legality of Keene's copyright because it was obtained from a "non-resident, alien author." Tom Taylor was a citizen of the Commonwealth, and in the absence of an international dramatic copyright law, his play was not protected under the United States statute. However, Cadwalader determined that Keene's "literary property" in the play was distinct from copyright protection under United States Dramatic Copyright Law. Nor had Wheatley and Clarke come by the play legally (obtaining it, rather, from Silsbee's widow and through Joe Jefferson); thus they defied Keene's literary property in the play manuscript. Literary property was distinct from dramatic copyright, so this was not a case of copyright piracy. Ultimately, Cadwalader ruled that Wheatley and Clarke had defied Keene's literary property, but not copyright. In an ironic twist, Cadwalader also determined that "the representation of the play by the complainant at her theater was equivalent to publication."⁶⁵⁴ Therefore, Keene could not be granted an injunction.⁶⁵⁵

It is not incidental that the play widely regarded by historians as introducing the long run also produced one of the first significant tests of the 1856 copyright law. Most

⁶⁵⁴ *New York Times*, 9 April 1860.

⁶⁵⁵ Yet, because "Miss Keene's own theatrical representations of it were not the means through which [Wheatley and Clarke] were fairly enabled to represent it" their performance of *Our American Cousin* was considered an infraction of Keene's property in the play. If Wheatley and Clarke paid Keene the \$1000 license fee they could then legally produce the play. *New York Times*, 5 November 1860. For the complete text of Judge Cadwalader's decision in the case see "In the Circuit Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. In Equity. Laura Keene vs. Wheatley & Clarke" *The American Law Register* 9, no.1/2 (November-December 1860) 33-103. Henneke's discussion of the case is particularly helpful. See especially Henneke, *Laura Keene* 132-133; and Deutsch, "Laura Keene's Theatre Management," 232-233.

theaters in the 1830s through the 1850s presented nightly changes of bill, with occasional disruptions for long runs of highly successful productions, like *Our American Cousin*, which ran for 140 consecutive nights. The growing popularity of long runs gradually transformed casting practices as well. Initially, these productions followed casting practices according to dramatic lines, in which the hierarchy of stock performers corresponded with a hierarchy of dramatic lines and determined how parts were assigned. Laura Keene broke both of these precedents in her productions of the late 1850s, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Keene took the role of Puck and assigned Ada Clifton the part of Helena. Clifton withdrew from her contract and sued Keene for the season's wages, because as "second lady" Clifton should have played Puck or Oberon, rather than a part suited to the line of walking lady or "singing chambermaid," as retired stock actor William Davidge explained in his testimony on Clifton's behalf. Keene's biographer notes that such a suit would have been unlikely two years earlier, when Clifton might have waited out an untraditional casting with the expectation of getting a better part in the next repertory production. But the growing advent of long runs disrupted an actor's expectations about casting over a season. Clifton withdrew from the company and sued because she feared her talents as "second lady" would be wasted playing Helena for weeks, even months.⁶⁵⁶ Ultimately, long runs that broke with conventions in casting increasingly conferred value on the first production of a dramatic work, value that was in principle protected by dramatic copyright, even though the relationship between the dramatic production and the copyright in the dramatic text remained ill-defined until 1870. The distinctive quality of an original dramatic production that had made *Our*

⁶⁵⁶ Henneke, *Laura Keene*, 115.

American Cousin a successful long run was not protected by the judge's decision in *Keene v. Wheatley and Clarke*. In response to Keene's appeals, judges consistently upheld Cadwalader's ruling that performance was a form of publication, against which managers could only protect themselves by putting up placards prohibiting transcription and memorization for the purposes of production. But over the 1860s, litigation over accusations of dramatic piracy gradually expanded the definition of material covered by dramatic copyright to include performative aspects of a play, in addition to the text and the idea of a play.

Despite the ambiguities of the 1856 law, performers and managers used it as the basis upon which they pioneered new artistic and economic models, and women in particular carved out marketing niches attached to a particular play and starring role. Women dominated starring in this period, and dramatic copyright gave them a legally protected stake in a new production. For example, Kimberly's 1860 tour, which included "over 600 nights" as Zoe, proved a more lasting and lucrative investment than her 1857 tenure as manager in Pittsburgh. Kimberly's cards to managers, especially, suggest a strategic deployment of her knowledge and interpretation of the law at the precise moment that it was being fine tuned, adjudicated, and publicized through cases like *Keene v. Wheatley & Clarke*. Actress Julia Daly chose another strategy. In November 1865, she published a "Caution to Managers" in the advertising columns of the *New York Clipper*, warning of an infringement to her copyright by "a certain actress" who recently "attempted to play a piratical and unauthorized copy of an entirely original American company, entitled OUR FEMALE AMERICAN COUSIN, written expressly for me by Charles Gaylor." Daly was less explicit than Kimberly in outlining her rights and course

of action, but instead called upon a professional solidarity, insisting that managers of “honor and integrity” would “not countenance or permit such an outrage” upon her “rights and property.” Otherwise, Daly might just sue.⁶⁵⁷ Though Daly did not directly threaten a suit, she used the nationally circulating trade paper to establish that *Our Female American Cousin* was her legal property to produce. Copyright infringement was not just the practice of theater managers like Wheatley and Clarke, but also included aspiring star performers like Helen Western, the “certain actress” who hoped to piggyback on Daly’s success and presented *Our Female American Cousin* for her benefit night at the Howard Athenaeum in November 1865.⁶⁵⁸ But the expanding regional and national circulation of news media meant that a pirated production could not hide for long. Western did not repeat the performance.

Actresses, in particular, used the dramatic copyright law as an opportunity to transform their careers across different markets. Avonia Jones rose to stardom in western theaters in the 1850s, while still a teenager, and in 1859 traveled to Australia, an emerging market for American and European performers. Two years in Australia were followed by a debut in London, and two more years touring Great Britain, which Jones surely hoped would secure for her a position as a starring actress upon her return to America. When Jones finally did return to America in 1863, she contacted journalist and playwright Augustin Daly, whose play *Leah the Forsaken* had made a great success for its starring actress, Kate Bateman, in New York. Jones wanted Daly to write her a play suited to her own abilities as an actress. She had brought several German and French dramas back with her and hoped to have them adapted. Meanwhile, she asked Daly

⁶⁵⁷ *New York Clipper*, 25 November 1865.

⁶⁵⁸ *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 10 November 1865.

whether he was “at liberty to sell a copy” of *Leah the Forsaken*. “I do not care much to act a play which is already a specialty of another, preferring for myself original parts,” Jones explained, “but I must have a good drama to fill up the time until I have several written expressly for me.”⁶⁵⁹ In contrast to star actresses entering the field twenty or even ten years earlier, who would have been expected to know a wide range of roles in a particular dramatic line, Jones expected to tour with a much smaller repertoire of parts “written expressly for me” along with established hits like *Leah the Forsaken*. While Daly worked on adapting these foreign plays for Jones’s forthcoming debut at the Winter Garden Theater in New York in April 1864, Jones appeared in Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, and Washington in new plays, like an adaptation of the Mary Elizabeth Braddon novel *Aurora Floyd*; recent hits like *Medea*, which Matilda Heron had presented in New York in 1857; as well as standard dramatic repertoire including *Fazio* of Fanny Kemble fame.⁶⁶⁰ Jones also paid Augustin Daly ten dollars a performance for the right to produce *Leah* in Washington, but she would not—or perhaps could not, according to the terms of her arrangement with Daly—perform *Leah* in New York. Rather, Jones opened at the Winter Garden in April 1864 in the play of *Judith, the Daughter of Merari* that Daly had adapted for her.⁶⁶¹ Daly had made similar arrangements for *Leah* with other actors and manager. By 1864, both Jones and Daly were active in a market in which originality of part and originality of play were increasingly protected and desirable. Dramatic copyright

⁶⁵⁹ Albert Asermely, “Daly’s Initial Decade in the American Theatre, 1860-1869” (Ph.D. dissertation, The City University of New York, 1973), 54.

⁶⁶⁰ See advertisements in the *North American* [Philadelphia] and *Boston Daily Advertiser*.

⁶⁶¹ Asermely, “Daly’s Initial Decade,” 56. Jones hired Daly to manage her tour of the South in 1864-1865 and selections from Daly’s correspondence are included in Joseph Daly, *The Life of Augustin Daly* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917). Also see Kim Marra, *Strange Duets: Impresarios and Actresses in the American Theatre, 1865-1914* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2006); and Don Wilmeth and Rosemary Cullen, “Introduction,” in Augustin Daly, *Plays*, edited by Don Wilmeth and Rosemary Cullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-41.

law encouraged dramatic authors, but also helped transform the meaning and nature of starring, enhancing the professional opportunities for starring actresses and creating new entrepreneurial opportunities for aspiring managers in addition to establishing the profitability of playwriting. In November 1863, Daly granted James Mead the rights to “perform and produce” *Leah* for one year in “every city, town, or village” in the United States *except* New York, Boston, or Washington, with the exception of six nights at Grovers’ Theater in Washington. Mead was to pay Daly \$90 for the first six nights and \$10 per night for every night thereafter, and suffer damages of \$50 a night for selling or transferring the rights to a third party.⁶⁶² Daly made the same arrangement allowing Sarah Conway to produce *Leah* at her theater in Brooklyn in 1865.⁶⁶³

Dramatic copyright protected the long run while also making it possible to take successful productions on the road. The number of touring companies headlined by women proliferated in the 1860s, many based around the star power of actresses who had hitherto toured as stars but like Kimberly, assembled companies and toured in productions that had brought them the most success. Touring companies set their own repertoire and sought out different markets, and were not hampered by the tastes, demands, or politics of a single market. This may have suited the entrepreneurial interests of women in particular. A cursory glance through the columns of the *New York Clipper*, which followed the movements of performers, productions, and companies around the country, reveals the many different models of touring and starring practiced by actresses in the mid-1860s. While some women formed their own touring companies,

⁶⁶² Agreement with James M. Mead, 10 November 1863, Augustin Daly Letters and Papers, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁶⁶³ Agreement with Sarah G. Conway, 30 March 1865, Augustin Daly Letters and Papers, Folger Shakespeare Library.

others found headlining positions with companies created by businessmen for the purpose of touring. Items in October 1864 noted that “Laura Keene’s Comedy Company” had taken the Brooklyn Academy of Music for four days, while “Kate Fisher and her dramatic company” were introducing “Yankees” to her version of the equestrian drama *Mazeppa*. On the other hand, Western star actress Anna Ince, who began touring since the mid-1850s, had joined up with a “Dramatic Company...under the management of Mr. Ward” for a tour of Canada.⁶⁶⁴ Mrs. Emily Jordan was also touring California “with a dramatic company under Charles Tibbetts’ management.”⁶⁶⁵

Some managers attempted to establish dramatic companies linked to their name and forgo stars altogether, like J. C. Myers, who had managed the National Theatre in Boston from 1860-1861, but in October 1864 “J. C. Myers’ Dramatic Company was doing an excellent business in Toronto.”⁶⁶⁶ It was more common for a company to attempt to link up with a star. C. R. Ford published an advertisement in December 1865 hoping for a “lady star” with a “good wardrobe.” He had a “full Dramatic Company of first class people” and wanted someone to tour with the company for a salary.⁶⁶⁷ Perhaps his “lady star” would bring with her a new production to which she held the rights—or claimed she did. Frank Rivers, the agent for Miss Florence Temple, an “Equestrienne, Comedienne, and Melo-dramati Artiste,” took out an advertisement in November 1866 informing managers that Temple had “added to her already extensive repertoire two entirely new Equestrian Dramas...the copyright of which she has purchased from the author, Mr. John F. Poole.” Managers “prepared to treat” with her could anticipate completely original

⁶⁶⁴ *New York Clipper*, 22 October 1864.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5 November 1864.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22 October 1864.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 December 1865.

productions.⁶⁶⁸

Other actresses continued to tour alone or in partnership with a supporting star actor and booked to appear with resident stock companies. Susan Denin advertised her availability to “negotiate with first class managers” for December 1865. Her advertisement included an endorsement from Annie Eberlie, the “Lessee and Manageress” of the Pittsburgh Opera House, attesting to the success of Denin’s recent engagement.⁶⁶⁹ Miss Alice Kingsbury took out an advertisement in late November 1865 directing “managers wishing to engage this popular artiste” to address her agent in Rochester, New York.⁶⁷⁰ Increasingly, all touring performers enlisted the services of a business agent to handle bookings and arrangements for tours. Charles Parsloe announced to managers in the November 1866 pages of the *Clipper* that he would serve as agent for the forthcoming starring tour of our Mrs. J. H. Allen and D. H. Harkins.⁶⁷¹

The expanded geography of touring and proliferation of touring units, ranging from an individual star like Elizabeth Bowers to a complete production like *The Colleen Bawn*, created the demand for a class of middle managers, also known as dramatic agents, who handled bookings and touring logistics and connected managers with performers. An aspiring performer might hire a dramatic agent to find her a job with a stock or touring company, while a touring star would hire an agent to arrange her bookings for her tour.⁶⁷² Yet most of these new managerial jobs seem to have been closed to women. In his 1912

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 25 November 1866.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 2 December 1865.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 25 November 1865.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² On dramatic agents see Brooks, “The Development of American Theatre Management Practices”; on the new class of middlemen in the context of the circus see Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

memoir of the show trade, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management*, Michael Leavitt listed one hundred and eighty of the “most prominent” advance and business agents—all men—and noted two women who formed dramatic agencies.⁶⁷³ While men with no prior connection to theater secured employment as booking and advance agents, the managerial authority women were able to wield remained connected to their credentials as actresses. Women *were* active in all aspects of the expanding industry, as playwrights, agents, as well as performers, but the division of labor between management and performance was increasingly gendered. This does not mean that female performers were passive products of male businessmen.⁶⁷⁴ Female performers hired and collaborated with male performers, playwrights, and managers to produce the dominant product of the mid- to late-nineteenth century: the leading lady. On the one hand, female performers had to navigate increasingly saturated and competitive markets. But they also had far more options than a half-century earlier when the primary model for a career was a position as a stock actress within a hierarchal urban theater company.

Consider the many forms that Elizabeth Bowers’s acting career took in her half century on American stages, in comparison and collaboration with her sister Sarah Conway. After she gave up the Walnut, Elizabeth Bowers secured the Academy of Music for two short seasons of drama, in March 1859 and again in September 1859,

⁶⁷³ Michael Leavitt, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management* (New York: Broadway Pub. Co., 1912), 272-273. To Leavitt, management was a masculine preserve, and wives were particularly unwelcome. For example, Leavitt was annoyed that French magician Bautier de Kolta established his new wife Alice Allen as his “business manageress.” Allen “demanded so many changes” to Leavitt’s 1887 contract that Leavitt had to “call [it] off.” While this may have been an extreme case that led an agent to drop a prospective foreign star, it again demonstrates how family relationships could effectively shield women’s entrepreneurial and managerial activity. Leavitt, 515.

⁶⁷⁴ For an additional discussion of women’s behind-the-scenes collaborations, as playwrights, agents, and performers, see Sara Lampert, “Fanny Davenport, Frances Aymar Mathews, and the Play That Failed,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* (Expected August 2012).

when she presented her original drama of *The Black Agate*.⁶⁷⁵ *The Black Agate* was not deemed a success. But Bowers had risen too far in the professional hierarchy to return to stock work, even if she could not obtain another theater to manage. She commenced touring as a star while attempting to build her own theater in Philadelphia. The fall of 1860 found her at the Winter Garden Theatre acting Juliet opposite Charlotte Cushman. All efforts to erect a new theater having fallen through, Bowers finally left for a European tour in the fall of 1861, a tour that she had announced but then put on hold in early 1859 when she gave up the Walnut. Although the right theater in the right market never materialized for Bowers, while she was in Europe the longstanding lead actress of the Arch Street Theatre, Mrs. John Drew took over as manager, a position she occupied successfully for the next three decades.

Bowers remained a starring actress. Dramatic copyright provided her with the ability to secure capital in new productions and new roles with which she aligned her celebrity. This shift occurred over the 1860s. In April 1863, she appeared at Mrs. John Drew's Arch in a new version of *Camille*, written for her by Irish playwright Edward Falconer, and supported by the resident stock company. Bowers toured as a star through the 1860s, securing the ownership and copyright of new plays like Falconer's *Peep O'Day*, which she toured with in the fall of 1863. In the mid-1860s, Bowers began appearing in combination with actor J. C. McCollum, who supported her in her starring tragic roles.⁶⁷⁶ In the early 1870s, Bowers and McCollum were touring with their own

⁶⁷⁵ Elizabeth Bowers, *The Black Agate, or Old Foes with New Faces* (Philadelphia: U.S. Steam-Power Book and Job Printing Establishment 1859). *The Black Agate* was based on Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia*.

⁶⁷⁶ Bowers married McCollum in 1870, several years after the death of her second husband, Dr. Brown.

dramatic company, probably managed by a third party.⁶⁷⁷ Bowers experimented with a range of different touring arrangements over the years, such as the Bowers-Thompson Combination for 1879-1880, which featured Bowers and Charlotte Thompson supported by J. C. McCollum and W. H. Powers, with Powers as manager.⁶⁷⁸ After McCollum's death in 1883, Bowers toured with Mrs. Bowers' Dramatic Company, also probably run by a manager.

Bowers continued to introduce new plays into her repertoire, several of which she owned jointly with her sister, capitalizing on their complementary interests: while Bowers focused on touring, Conway managed Brooklyn's Park Theatre. In 1857 and 1858, Sarah Conway and her husband Frederick Conway starred in Bowers's theater as part of her "Great Star Company." They accompanied Bowers to Europe in 1861 and like Bowers, continued to tour the United States upon their return, even though they shared Bowers's aspirations to manage their own theater. In 1864, the Conways obtained the lease of the new Park Theatre in Brooklyn and established a stock company. While Bowers would gradually embrace the model of the touring combination company, building upon her mounting reputation as a tragedienne, the Conways were committed to maintaining a theater according to the stock company model. But the meanings of running a stock company could not be separated from the new implications and financial opportunities of dramatic copyright. The Conways developed contractual relationships

⁶⁷⁷ The precise genealogy of the company is difficult to tease out from advertisements, but it appears that Bowers and McCollum began experimenting with taking a full company on the road in 1871, if not earlier. In June 1871, they appeared at the New Academy of Music in Akron, Ohio "supported by a Full Dramatic Company from Pittsburgh Opera House" under the management of J. E. Irving. A year later, a Wisconsin paper listed Mrs. Bowers' Dramatic Company as one of the combinations that would be traveling the country that fall season. *Cleveland Morning Herald*, 13 June and 16 June 1871; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 25 July 1872.

⁶⁷⁸ Undated programme fragment, Mrs. D. P. Bowers Portfolio, Players' Collection, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Library.

with managers in other cities and transacted for the license to produce new plays. In October 1866, Frederick Conway replied to a request from R. M. Field, manager of the Boston Museum, for the manuscript, music, and rights to perform *Peep O' Day*. Unfortunately, Conway explained, the play “belongs jointly to Mrs. Conway and Mrs. D. P. Bowers” and as Mrs. Conway had yet to obtain the “consent of her sister,” Mr. Conway could not furnish Field with the rights to produce *Peep O' Day* himself.⁶⁷⁹ Later than month, after Conway had obtained permission from Bowers, he awaited payment from Field for the music and manuscript. Conway had sold them to Field for seventy-five dollars, a hefty sum, but it is unclear from correspondence whether the license agreement also included fixed royalty payments per performance, an arrangement that was worked out over the 1860s, enabling proprietors of copyright, whether the original playwright or a manager or performer, to share in the profit from productions licensed to managers and performers in other cities.⁶⁸⁰

This system had become standard practice in the 1870s, further protected by the revised language of the 1870 Copyright Act. The 1870 Copyright Act redefined dramatic copyright with a new emphasis on performance rather than printing or publication, as in the 1856 law. Thus according to the 1870 law, “any person publicly performing or representing any dramatic composition for which a copyright has been obtained, without

⁶⁷⁹ F. B. Conway to R. M. Field, 5 October 1866, Boston Museum Correspondence, Harvard Theatre Collection.

⁶⁸⁰ F. B. Conway to R. M. Field, 22 October 1866, Boston Museum Correspondence, Harvard Theatre Collection. By 1867, Augustin Daly was drawing up these arrangements on printed forms designed for the purpose of licensing production rights to a second or third party. See for example Articles of Agreement, 28 October 1867, Augustin Daly Theatrical Papers, Folger Shakespeare Library, which conferred license to J. B. Booth of Boston to produce *Under the Gaslight* in Providence, Lowell, Salem, and Portland, for which Booth paid Daly \$70 for each performance in addition to \$50 for the models and music.

the consent of the proprietor thereof...shall be liable for damages.”⁶⁸¹ This revision to the law followed the gradual articulation of copyright as a right that governed profits accrued from the *use* of a copyrighted work, rather than simply connected to literary property and rights of reproduction.⁶⁸² Sarah Conway’s arrangement with Field for the production of Boucicault’s *Led Astray*, the “entire right of which” Conway had purchased from Boucicault, represents how these arrangements between managers worked in the 1870s. In January 1874, Conway offered Field terms of “Fifty Dollars per night and half for Matinee’s” to perform Boucicault’s *Led Astray* at the Boston Museum.⁶⁸³ Conway had presented *Led Astray* at her own theater the year before, then mounted a touring company. Negotiations with Field dragged into February. Conway wrote to Field from Buffalo debating the merits of coming to Boston and presenting the piece herself with her own company, and thus contracting with Field for a rent of the Museum or a percentage of nightly receipts, or alternately selling the rights to Field to mount the piece himself at her best offer—a royalty of thirty-five dollars per night and thirty for matinees, or half for two matinees per week. “This is the best I can do,” she explained, and “unless you make me an offer for the night for this regular season - I should prefer the royalty!”⁶⁸⁴ Field and Conway settled on the royalty, but when Field withdrew the piece in April, Conway wrote Field, furious. She had just finished up a “most successful run” of *Led Astray* at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia and could not understand Field’s decision,

⁶⁸¹ Copyright Act (1870), *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900)*, eds. L. Bently & M. Kretschmer, <http://www.copyrighthistory.org/>

⁶⁸² Legal historian Oren Bracha argues that the 1856 law was actually crucial in instigating an “abstraction process” whereby the concept of copyright became unmoored from the physical object. Bracha, “Commentary on the U.S. Copyright Act Amendment of 1856.”

⁶⁸³ Sarah G. Conway to R. M. Field, January 1874, Boston Museum Correspondence, Harvard Theatre Collection.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 February 1874.

especially after hearing reports of crowded houses in Boston. Conway reminded Field that “according to the understanding between us, you were to play it as long as it proved attractive” and Conway had likewise lowered her terms based on her assumption that it would play for a least eight weeks, rather than a mere five.⁶⁸⁵ Field’s response clearly satisfied Conway, who assured him that she did not consider him “false, to your agreement.”⁶⁸⁶ Conway merely hoped that together she and Field could obtain the most lucrative return on their respective investments in the production.

Theater historians have characterized this kind of experimentation as a capitulation of the idealistic stock company manager to the relentless pull of the market.⁶⁸⁷ Augustin Daly is celebrated as both the reformer and lone champion of the possibilities of the stock company, resisting economic motivations that proved the enemy of artistic integrity. After nearly a decade of working primarily as a playwright, Daly finally opened his Fifth Avenue Theatre in 1869 with the support of his new father-in-law, theater manager John Duff. Daly also experimented in the mid-1870s with sending out a touring company with his most recent hit production, but Don Wilmeth protests that “unlike the usual combination system, Daly always sent out the same or an equal company and production that had been at his theatre,” thereby maintaining the integrity of his productions in contrast to the rest of New York managers, who had learned that their “coffers could grow even fatter if they had one or more companies on the road while the home company

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 27 April 1874.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 29 April 1874.

⁶⁸⁷ For example see Curry’s discussion of Conway in *American Women Theatre Managers*, 104; or on Daly see Wilmeth and Cullen, “Introduction.” Bank complicates such readings of Mrs. John Drew’s career in Bank, “A Reconsideration of the Death of Nineteenth-Century American Repertory Companies.”

continued with the initial production.”⁶⁸⁸ This framing of economic motivations pitted against artistic integrity misses the crucial importance of this experimentation for expanding entrepreneurial opportunities for stage performers, particularly women, like Daly star actress of the 1870s, Fanny Davenport, who turned eight years as a stock actress with Daly into two decades of touring with her own dramatic company.

Daly also enjoyed a reputation as a maker of female stars, first as a playwright, and then as a manager. Scholars have contrasted the early plays Daly wrote for starring actresses like Avonia Jones or Kate Bateman in the 1860s with the ideals he was working out in his dramatic criticism, and would employ as a theater manager in the 1870s. Daly envisioned a model of theater in which all the elements of cast, scenic production, and music were designed for a particular play that would be presented as an artistic whole, rather than a vehicle for a star.⁶⁸⁹ Scholar Kim Marra notes that in his early years as a playwright working for star actresses, the “fiercely ambitious” Daly was frustrated and “disadvantaged in an industry still driven largely by the popularity of stars.”⁶⁹⁰ It was only once he acquired the lease of the Fifth Avenue Theatre that Daly could pursue his vision of a hierarchical theater built around new aesthetic ideals. Once Daly rejected the practice of casting according to lines of business, Daly was able to write plays without regard for dramatic lines and cast according to his creative vision.⁶⁹¹ Daly’s reputation as a maker of female stars during his period as manager was connected with his rigid maintenance of the professional hierarchy of the theater. Daly’s relationship with his

⁶⁸⁸ Wilmeth and Cullen, “Introduction,” 12, 5.

⁶⁸⁹ Asermerly, “Daly’s Initial Decade”; Marra, *Strange Duets*.

⁶⁹⁰ Marra, *Strange Duets*, 28.

⁶⁹¹ Marra is of course sensitive to the gendered politics of Daly’s relationships with his starring actresses in her study of the gender politics at work in the relationships between late-nineteenth-century impresarios and star actresses.

starring actresses of the 1870s, Ada Rehan, Clara Morris, and Fanny Davenport, demonstrates that while the centrality of female celebrity to the theater gave women unprecedented opportunities for cultural prominence and economic power, these women were expected to honor their male patrons, even while male captains of industry were celebrated as heroic individualists. Thus Clara Morris's struggles with Daly over salary and casting decisions, and her ultimate defection, mid-season, from the Fifth Avenue Theatre were figured by the press as gross ingratitude, and framed in a narrative of the betrayal by a star of her maker.⁶⁹² Fanny Davenport, on the other hand, proved adept at navigating the complex representational politics of female entrepreneurship. She kept her patron-client relationship with Daly intact and parlayed her starring roles with Daly's company into a career as manager of her own company, leasing the rights to tour with the plays in which she had originally starred under Daly's management.

Davenport struggled with Daly. In January 1870, after a half season acting under Daly opposite her father, Davenport wrote refusing to take the part of a second chambermaid, which she declared inappropriate for a "lady who has played three leading parts, & is looked upon by the company & public as your leading woman."⁶⁹³ While Davenport ultimately submitted to Daly's reasons and took the part, but demanded a raise in salary from \$75 to \$100 a week in order to purchase the new wardrobe that would allow her to move out of the soubrette line and establish herself as a leading lady with his company.⁶⁹⁴ In October 1875, Daly sent Davenport on her first " 'starring' trial trip" to

⁶⁹² Marra, *Strange Duets*; Barbara Grossman, *A Spectacle of Suffering: Clara Morris on the American Stage* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

⁶⁹³ Fanny Davenport to Augustin Daly, 31 January 1870, Augustin Daly Letters and Papers, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 February 1870.

St. Louis, Missouri and Cincinnati, Ohio with the play *Divorce*.⁶⁹⁵ When she returned to New York in November, Davenport sustained her biggest dramatic hit as Mabel Renfrew in *Pique*, which became Daly's longest running play to date. *Pique* was a play ripped from the headlines, the sensationalistic story of a spurned beauty who marries a man she doesn't love "out of pique," and is tricked into kidnapping her own child away from its father when her former lover returns to claim her.⁶⁹⁶ Davenport's success in *Pique* and as headliner of Daly's touring company no doubt bolstered her determination to strike out for herself as manager with the production that had made her famous in New York and the Midwest and established her reputation as a tragic actress. In 1877, she had raised enough of her own capital to purchase her theatrical wardrobe from Daly, leased both *Pique* and *Divorce*, and went on the road with her own company.⁶⁹⁷ Davenport now took her salary from the profits—the majority to reinvest in new productions—whereas before she had headlined Daly's traveling company, making only a weekly salary. Davenport was now primary investor, star, and headliner of her own company, now hired her own business manager to take on day-to-day logistics of a touring company, which toured for the next two decades.

In an 1897 interview, Davenport's longtime business manager Ben Stern declared, "Miss Davenport has always done her own business."⁶⁹⁸ Stern was referring to Davenport's battle against the Theatrical Syndicate, an organization of theater managers and agents that sought to consolidate their ownership and affiliation with theaters

⁶⁹⁵ Daly's Fifth Avenue Theatre Box Office Receipts, New York, 3 August 1875 to 29 July 1876, Daly's Theatre Records, Columbia University Library.

⁶⁹⁶ See press clippings for *Pique* and from Davenport's other starring trips of the 1870s in Scrapbook, William Seymour Papers, Princeton University Library.

⁶⁹⁷ Agreements 1877, Fanny Davenport to Augustin Daly, Augustin Daly Letters and Papers, Folger Shakespeare Library.

⁶⁹⁸ *Morning Oregonian*, 8 April 1897.

throughout the nation into a monopoly that would allow them to control the theater booking system nationally. For Stern and Davenport, doing “her own business” meant determining where she booked, with what theater, and negotiating the terms on a case-by-case basis, as well as hiring her company and selecting the plays in which she would star and tour. The fact that Stern handled these logistics should not lead us to assume that Davenport was merely the figurehead of a manager’s operation.⁶⁹⁹ Dramatic copyright provided women with a new form of mobile capital, but women’s entrepreneurship remained tied to their status and celebrity as performers, even as dramatic copyright and the long run provided women with a form of capital that enabled some to leave stock work, hire a manager, assemble a company and take a play and a rising career out on the uncertain road.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

Epilogue

In 1869, the actress Olive Logan turned critic and lecturer, parlaying her capital as an actress “belonging, root and branch, to a theatrical family” in order to mount a critique of the state of stage entertainment.⁷⁰⁰ Logan was particularly alarmed by the rising popularity of a new form of female burlesque involving breeches-clad damsels playing banjos and delivering saucy double entendres to the respectable audiences of Niblo’s Garden, which was popularized by Lydia Thompson’s *British Blondes* in 1869. Logan insisted that her critique of the “leg business” did not extend to the hard-working, modest ballet girl.⁷⁰¹ Rather, Logan was concerned that the popularity of burlesque was demoralizing stage work, a profession struggling to establish its respectability. “If the stage could be rid of the ‘leg business’ scourge, there is no reason why it should not form a worthy channel for gifted, intelligent, and virtuous young women to gain a livelihood through,” Logan declared, echoing sentiments expressed by Anna Mowatt fifteen years earlier. “Openings for women are few enough, as governesses, and schoolmistresses, and shirtmakers, and hoopskirt drudges, generally, will testify.” And yet, “overrun as it is by

⁷⁰⁰ Olive Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres* (New York: Carleton Publishers, 1969), 86.

⁷⁰¹ Logan’s first article on the “leg business,” which she published in *The Galaxy* in 1867, was actually directed at the Mazeppa craze following Adah Issacs Menken’s “nude” performance as Prince Mazeppa in the famous scene in which the prince rides across the stage lashed to a horse. Robert J. Wills, “The Riddle of Olive Logan: A Biographical Profile” (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1971), 131; on Menken’s career see Renee Sentilles, *Performing Menken* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and additional discussion of Logan’s crusade against the “leg business” can be found in Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Faye Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

troops of immodest women—there is, alas! but little encouragement to any woman who respects herself to turn to the stage for support.”⁷⁰² Though Logan presented herself as a defender of the humble ballet girl, Logan followed the tenor of most nineteenth-century reform discourses, invoking her own social status to lay out the moral codes that other women *should* follow.

According to Logan, the “nude drama” changed the terms of employment for women seeking the stage, devaluing other forms of stage labor like the position of “walking lady.” Why would a woman take a salary of only twenty-five dollars a week when she could “strip herself almost naked, and be thus qualified to go upon the stage of two-thirds of our theatres at a salary of one hundred dollars and upwards”? But was the problem that women were being pressured against their own desires to take these jobs, or that women *were* rushing to take these jobs? “Clothed in the dress of an honest woman, she is worth nothing to a manager. Stripped as naked as she dare”—in fleshlings, a padded knit suit that under stage lights read as bare flesh—“she becomes a prize to her manager, who knows that crowds will rush to see her, and who pays her a salary accordingly.”⁷⁰³ Was Logan frustrated that she could not realize this salary as an actress in the legitimate drama? Did she resent that her own skills, the hundreds of plays she had committed to memory, repertoire of gestures and attitudes that she had studied and perfected over her lifetime, not to mention elaborate stage costumes in which she had invested were devalued relative to a pretty woman’s ability to sing “vulgar, senseless” songs, dance a jig, play the banjo and bugle—instruments that should “look queer in a woman’s hands”—and finally leer and wink delivering “double entendres the likes of

⁷⁰² Logan, *Apropos of Women and Theatres*, 121.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 129.

which “minstrels would not dare [to] utter”?⁷⁰⁴ Perhaps.

But Logan also raised troubling questions that we must take seriously. Would the ongoing influx of female stage performers devalue women’s stage labor? Putting aside the values Logan attached to different kinds of skills and performances, might the ranks of stage performance become, like the ranks of “governesses, and schoolmistresses, and shirtmakers, and hoopskirt drudges,” saturated and consequently devalued? Was female stage labor being devalued because of increased competition and saturation, or was the changing structure of the industry creating a perception of instability and uncertainty in stage work? It is this deeper layer of Logan’s critique that we should be careful not to miss, a frustration with the potential asymmetries and shifting expectations of an industry that looked very different than it had during her first experience as a stock actress and touring star in the 1850s. As the show trade became increasingly mobile, but also regulated from new centralized bureaus and agencies, and as the rotating repertoire of the stock company was replaced by long runs, what kinds of job security could stage performers enjoy? Would they have to go from theater to theater, manager to manager, speculation to speculation, navigating new levels of bureaucracy and middlemen, all while keeping up with new performance trends?

In Chapter 6, I argued that this experimentation with different forms of stage entertainment in the 1850s onward created some promising opportunities for women’s entrepreneurship and professional independence. But what of the performer on the ground who lacked the professional and economic capital that starring actresses would deploy to launch their own touring ventures with dramatic companies? What about

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., 130-133.

Gertrude Kellogg, whose story began this dissertation? Kellogg is not entirely representative of the mass of women who took positions as walking ladies or purchased fleshlings and blond wigs to practice the “nude drama” or found acting positions in stock and touring companies. But Kellogg’s story does indicate that an expanding show trade in which women increasingly dominated both as laborers and publics would continue to produce new models and modes of performance. The choice was not as Logan had framed it, between the “virtuous” ballet girl and the lewd “nude woman.” Logan, after all, would find money and fame writing and speaking about the stage on the lecture circuit (as would her sister, Eliza Logan), and also writing and adapting plays. Kellogg used her skills as an elocutionist to work multiple markets and publics, shifting between reading and acting engagements throughout the 1860s and 70s, though she was not always successful juggling both sides of her career.

Kellogg rarely managed to secure steady employment for an entire season, which reflected Kellogg’s particular ambitions and scruples as well as the increasingly short-term contractual nature of stage labor. The comfort of her middle-class upbringing meant that Kellogg did not have to work to support herself, and much of the money she earned from her reading engagements and actress salary went right back into paying for her wardrobe and the travel costs for her reading engagements. Her initial success securing engagements as an elocutionist created some unrealistic expectations about the kinds of positions she should have been able to secure as an actress. Kellogg wanted to star. In 1868 she turned down an auxiliary corps position with Edwin Booth’s stock company, hoping to secure a leading position with a touring company. The touring gig never materialized and instead Kellogg focused on her reading engagements. By 1870, she was

more willing to take a lower position. In May she signed a contract with Augustin Daly for the coming season at Daly's Fifth Avenue Theatre, noting that "[he] offers me the lowest place but will advance me if I improve and show talent."⁷⁰⁵ Daly also promised to let her leave in December to give readings in western New York.

During her season with Daly, Kellogg attended rehearsals daily, and performed in matinee and evening production. For this she received a salary of \$10 a week out of which she was expected to furnish her own wardrobe and cover streetcar fare. Reading engagements paid as much as \$100 a night, but Kellogg again had to cover her own travel costs for train and steamer and maintain the costly wardrobe also expected of a platform performer. That fall, she spent close to half her earnings on dress and travel. Kellogg's attempt to maintain her career as an elocutionist while holding down a salaried position as an actress proved to be her undoing. Despite Daly's initial promise to accommodate her December engagements, in January 1871, Kellogg fell out with Daly over nonpayment of her salary during an absence. Daly refused to take her on for the next season, dismissing Kellogg at the end of May.

Over the next decade, Kellogg worked tirelessly to secure reading engagements, while moving between different acting engagements. In the spring of 1872 she toured with Edwin Forrest's company playing ingénue roles opposite the aging star. In 1873, she secured a coveted position performing leading business at Mrs. Conway's Theatre in Brooklyn, but Conway refused to sign her for a second year because Kellogg took too many days due to ill health. In the summer of 1874, she got the part of Laura Hawkins in Mark Twain's play *The Gilded Age*, which was being mounted at the Park Theatre, but it

⁷⁰⁵ Gertrude Kellogg Diaries, 15 April 1870, New York Historical Society. The following summary of Kellogg's career is drawn from these diaries.

did not turn into a permanent stock position as she had hoped. In 1878, she found a place in the Redpath's Lyceum Bureau roster of dramatic readers and so decided to devote herself entirely to her reading career.

Kellogg was not alone in her ambition to become a dramatic reader. In 1882, George Hathaway of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau published an editorial in the *Lyceum Magazine* about the ubiquity of women readers, noting how in “the past few years a very few ladies have been successful as public readers,—and the greatly exaggerated statements of their annual earnings...have tended to produce a most erroneous impression in the minds of many young girls, and to lead them to suppose that by becoming ‘public readers,’ large fortunes are actually within their grasp.” Hathaway was eager to disabuse them of this notion. He recounted the volume of applications from women all over the country begging the Bureau for a place on the lists, indeed, “almost begging us to procure engagements for them.” For one engagement, Hathaway explained, “there are at least fifty struggling applicants.” While Hathaway was glad for women to pursue elocution as an “elegant accomplishment,” as a profession it required considerable exertion for little reward. “If these lines should be read by any young lady who contemplates studying for this profession, we hope she will take warning before devoting herself to a helpless pursuit.”⁷⁰⁶ A competitive, coveted, and challenging pursuit it certainly was, no more so than the dramatic stage.

But while Hathaway insisted upon constructing elocution as a novelty pursuit for leisured ladies who exasperated him with their refusal to restrict their ambitions to the drawing room, Logan at least recognized the legitimate economic motivations behind

⁷⁰⁶ Excerpted in Marjorie Eubank, “The Redpath Lyceum Bureau from 1868 to 1901” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1968), 202-203.

women's pursuit of stage careers. And the question of motivation was of course the heart of her despair at the "leg business." Logan wanted a form of artistic labor for women that conformed to her ideals of feminine respectability, honorable labor, and artistry. Logan made explicit a connecting thread in the careers and writings of Fanny Kemble, Charlotte Cushman, Anna Mowatt, Matilda Heron, Elizabeth Greenfield, and Mary Webb: the nature of women's work on the stage mattered because it raised enduring questions about the relationship between work and feminine virtues and character that established and refined the terms of public womanhood. The conversation that Logan picked up in 1869 began decades earlier. And yet, historians have failed to see stage labor as a culturally salient site in which these questions were worked out over the first half of the nineteenth century. To the contrary, as I have shown, from the beginnings of the show trade, the stage served as a site around which women's public roles and identities were continually negotiated and expanded.

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